



Every Child's Right to Primary Education: Examining the Progress from Mdg-2 to SDG 4 In Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Article 25A of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan requires that the state will provide free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of five to sixteen. However, despite the passage of 14 years since the above article was introduced, Pakistan still has more than 10 million children of primary education age group that is out of school. Further, the children who fortunately are enrolled in the schools are not getting quality education as is evident from the results of the proficiency tests that measure the learning outcomes of these children. Given this grim scenario, this paper attempts to analyze Pakistan's progress with respect to Millennium Development Goal 2 and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which relates to education. While examining Pakistan's progress, the study focuses on the three main indicators relating to the above goal namely, proficiency of primary school children in subjects of English and Mathematics, the completion rates of primary education and out-of-school children of primary education age group. The paper using mainly qualitative research has identified important factors such as insufficient spending on the educational sector due to government budgetary constraints, sub-optimal teaching quality due to lack of good teachers and natural disruptions like Covid and floods that have hampered Pakistan's quest for providing quality education to all primary school age children. The paper also suggests practical measures like Public-Private Partnerships, emphasis on the training of teachers and adopting digital means to achieve the goal of free quality primary education by the year 2030 as required under the Sustainable Development Framework.

Keywords:

Millennium Development Goal 2, Sustainable Development Goal 4, Public-Private Partnerships, Sustainable Development Framework, Constitution

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan today stands at a crossroads with respect to all the critical areas of human development and economic progress. The story of education is no different. With an ever-increasing population, there is always the question of whether our education sector has the capability and capacity to absorb the addition in the number of children that each passing year brings with itself. According to the population census of 2023, Pakistan's population has grown at a rate of 2.55% in the last five years and presently out of a total population of 241 million, an estimated 71 million children are of school going age which is the age bracket of 5-16 years. Out of these 71 million children, 32 million children are of the primary education age group i.e., the age bracket of 5 to 9 years (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, [2023](#)). The first step in the educational journey of the child are the formative years of primary education which starts from Grade One and culminate at Grade five. The foundation laid in these years largely determines the future success and failure of any child in the later stages of his education career.

MDGs were formulated in the year 2000 by the UN to address several global issues like poverty, education, health, and hunger. These MDGs urged the member countries to achieve certain milestones by the year 2015 with respect to the areas identified in each of the seven MDGs. MDG-2 dealt with education and its main aim was to achieve universal primary education by the year 2015.

In September 2015 the UN adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as successor of MDGs. These SDGs came into force on 1st January 2016 and aim to build on the progress achieved under the MDGs and to further address those goals which could not be achieved under the latter. These SDGs are part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and encompass 17 goals and 169 targets to be achieved by the year 2030. SDG-4 is titled 'Quality Education' and it aims to '*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'.

Pakistan had adopted both the MDGs and SDGs as part of its own national development agenda. In 2018 Pakistan designed and approved a National SDGs Framework that outlines the national vision to prioritize and localize SDGs UNDP ([2024](#)). Further, to monitor the progress of these SDGs, support units have been established at both the federal and provincial levels.



1.2. Statement of Problem

Article 25A of the 1973 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan provides that the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen in such manner as may be determined by law. Pakistan has also adopted the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN as its own national development agenda. Through a unanimous National Assembly resolution on 19th February 2016. SDG-4, among other targets, requires Pakistan to ensure free, equitable and quality primary education for all children by the year 2030. However, to date, Pakistan is significantly behind with respect to SDG-4 targets as is evident from the SDG dashboard for Pakistan (SDG Dashboards and Trends Pakistan Profile, [2024](#)). wherein SDG-4 is marked in red, due to the country's worsening performance with respect to the education sector. Whether Pakistan can achieve SDG-4 targets by the year 2030 will depend on the identification and resolution of the various resource and capacity constraints that are acting as an obstacle in the way of ensuring that every child born in Pakistan has access to free quality primary education.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What has been the progress of Pakistan with respect to the achievement of MDG-2 and target 4.1 of SDG-4 that relates to primary education?
2. What challenges are acting as an obstacle in the satisfactory achievement of benchmarks specified in target 4.1 of SDG-4?

1.4. Scope of Research

The scope of the research will be restricted to analyzing the performance of Pakistan with respect to MDG-2 and SDG-4. With respect to SDG-4, the scope will be restricted to Target 4.1 only as this is the target that deals with primary education.

Target 4.1 is further divided into seven indicators. However, the scope of this study will be further restricted to indicators 4.1.1, 4.1.2 and 4.1.4 as these are the indicators given priority by the government in the National SDG framework of 2018. Indicator 4.1.1 looks at the minimum proficiency level with respect to reading and mathematics achieved by the students by the end of primary education. Indicator 4.1.2 is concerned with the quantification of students who are able to complete primary education while indicator 4.1.4 is concerned with the number of children who are out of school. Together all the above indicators provide a comprehensive

picture with respect to the status and quality of primary education being given in the country.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The subject of education has always remained an area of concern for both the policy makers and the academicians in Pakistan. Diemer et al., (2022) looks at SDG-4 and tries to link it with other SDGs like SDG-1 Poverty and SDG-13 Climate change. The authors note that Pakistan has not been able to achieve the targets of universal primary education enshrined in the MDG-2. Primary school enrolment rates increased until the mid-2000s but then they tapered off at 50% in 2011-2012. The authors note that in the year 2013, a national action plan was introduced by the government, to achieve the targets of MDG-2 by 2015, however, the same could not achieve its intended purposes due to various factors. The authors also note that though SDG-4 is on the priority list of the government, no proper framework has been devised to achieve the targets of SDG-4 within a reasonable timeframe.

Khushik & Diemer (2020) observes that in the context of Pakistan where issues of basic educational access are still unresolved, achieving the targets of SDG-4 till 2030 will be very difficult. The authors observe that a number of children are out of school in Pakistan due to various reasons such as poor quality of education, lack of facilities in schools like clean water and proper toilets, rude teachers and the need for children to work and supplement the income of their parents. The authors further try to examine the dynamics of poor-quality education using a Casual Loops Diagram.

Haroon (2019) has evaluated the availability of data with respect to the SDG-4 framework targets and indicators for Pakistan and has observed that for 5 indicators data is not at all available while for 3 indicators data is partially available. Complete data is available for 3 indicators. The author has also proposed an indicator framework for Pakistan comprising seven indicators and has suggested that data for these indicators should come from the Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement Survey and Pakistan Education Statistics.

The above studies, though, they analyze the various issues that are acting as an impediment, for Pakistan, in achieving the desired progress in relation to the learning outcomes envisaged under MDG-2 and SDG-4, yet their analysis is limited in the sense, that the same has been done at a macro



level and does not necessarily delve deeper into the issues specific to various stages of education such as primary, secondary, and higher education. Infact most of the studies done on the said topic do not conduct a target, micro level analysis, deciphering Pakistan's progress with respect to different targets, indicators and learning outcomes that together constitute the various goals that are intended to be achieved under SDG-4. This study is, therefore, unique in the sense that it focuses on a specific target, which is Target 4.1, that deals with primary education in the SDG-4 framework. Within the above target, the focus of the research is narrowed down to three indicators which have been given preference by the Government in the National SDG framework. By focusing exclusively on a subset of the educational journey of a child, the study, therefore, addresses an important gap that presently exists in the existing literature on the topic.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for the purpose of the paper was mainly qualitative research. Due to the paucity of time and given the fact that topic entailed examining the progress with regard to MDG-2 and SDG-4 for the whole of Pakistan, rather than just once particular province or geographical area, it was not possible to design, formulate and execute a quantitative based research framework. Another reason for using the qualitative research method was the fact that a wealth of data was already available in different secondary sources with respect to Pakistan's progress in relation to MDG-2 and SDG-4. Sources such as '*Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23*' published by the Pakistan Institute of Education (2023) and various '*Annual Status of Education Reports*' (ASER) published by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) contain a range of data regarding Pakistan's progress with respect to different indicators and learning outcomes related to SDG-4. It is pertinent to mention that ASER is a flagship program of ITA and is officially recognized by the Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, as the largest household-based national learning assessment survey to ascertain the foundational literacy numeracy proficiency of children in Pakistan between the ages of five and sixteen. For the 2023 ASER's survey the sample size included 123 urban districts and 151 rural districts. Given the representative nature of the above sample, the results of the survey were only a logical and natural choice for analysis and drawing conclusion for the present research. Apart from the above, several other sources were used for building up the analytical blocks of this qualitative approach. These included the use of

the NIM library, the Internet, Google Scholar and different reports published by government departments and organizations working in the education sector.

The main and most critical sources of data for the, reasons explained above, came from secondary sources. Important sources relied in this regard for the bulk of data used and analyzed in this paper are the '*Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23*', '*SDG-4 (2024) Midterm review of Pakistan*' published by the Pakistan Institute of Education, Government of Pakistan and '*Annual Status of Education Report 2023*'. Apart from these sources, data has also been used from various other sources such as the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and Economic Surveys of Pakistan published by the Ministry of Finance. One important source that has been relied upon to depict proficiency levels of children of primary education age group, is the National Achievement Test (NAT), which is a sample-based assessment test developed by the National Assessment Wing of Pakistan Institute of Education. The said test evaluates the proficiency levels of Class 4 students in subjects of English and Mathematics and given its broad-based sample size, is a fairly accurate indicator for measuring Pakistan's progress with regard to achievement of desired proficiency levels under SDG-4.

3.1. MDG-2 & Pakistan

3.1.1. Achievement of Targets

The purpose of MDG-2 was to urge member countries to improve access to primary education and to achieve Universal Primary Education by the year 2015. This goal was further segregated into three indicators namely: net primary enrolment ratio, completion rate from Grade 1 to 5 and literacy rate. The performance of Pakistan with respect to the above indicators till the year 2013 is given below:

Table 1

Indicators of MDG-2 with the Targets & Achievements

Indicators	Latest National Value	Target	Status
Net primary enrolment ratio (%)	57	100	Off-track
Completion/survival rate Grade 1 to 5 (%)	50	100	Off-track
Literacy rate (%)	58	88	Off-track

Note: (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, [2013](#))

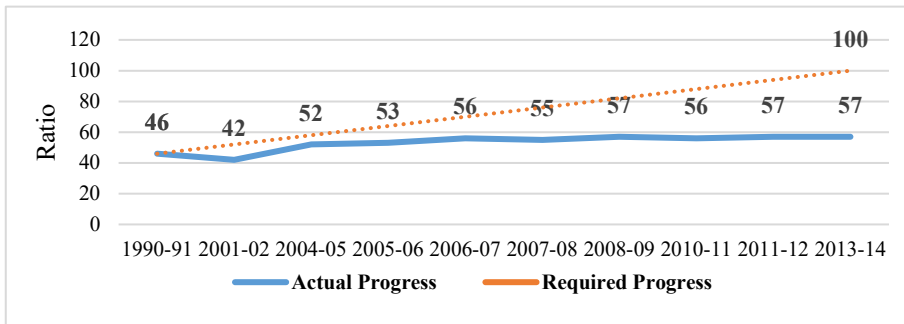


As can be seen from the figures given above even by the year 2013, Pakistan was off-track with respect to all the indicators relating to MDG-2 as only 57% of children were enrolled in primary schools and even among those who got enrolled the rate of completion of primary education was only 50%, meaning only half of the students enrolled could successfully complete their primary years of education. Similarly, the literacy rate was recorded at 58% only against the target of 88%.

Figure 1 below shows the trend of net primary enrolment ratios. As can be seen from the figure below, there has been no significant improvement in the net primary enrolment rates for primary education from 2004-2005 to 2013-2014 with respect to the target of 100% set by the MDG-2.

Figure 1

Net Primary Enrolment Ratio Targets and Achievements

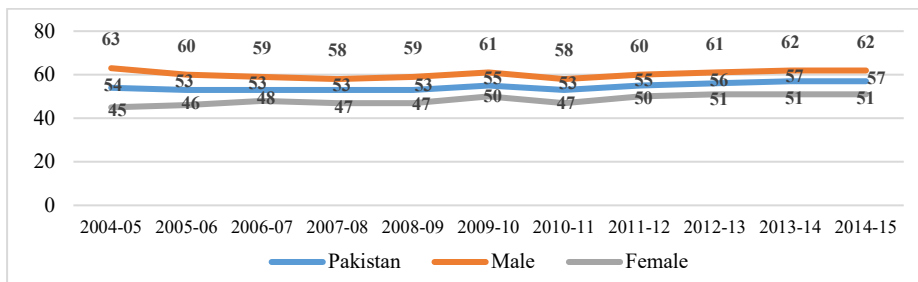


Note: (Pakistan Millennium Development Goals Report, [2013](#))

Not only Pakistan has failed to enroll all the primary school age children in the schools, children who got enrolled were not able to complete their primary education as can be seen from the figure below:

Figure 2

Primary Completion Rates (%)



Note: World Bank Group ([2024](#))

3.2. Reasons for Non-Achievement

The following reasons can be ascribed to the failure of Pakistan to achieve the targets of MDG-2:

3.2.1. Natural disasters

Natural disasters have played a significant role in Pakistan's failure to achieve the desired results under MDG-2. On October 8th, 2005, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake devastated Pakistan, especially its northern areas. The results of this earth-shattering event were colossal with more than 70,000 lives lost while economic losses caused because of the earthquake amounted to billions of dollars. According to a needs assessment study conducted by the ADB and World Bank, the education sector of Pakistan suffered losses of Rs 24 billion due to the earthquake, with recovery costs estimated at Rs. 28 billion (Asian Development Bank & World Bank, [2005](#)). The educational infrastructure of the country was also badly hit by this devastating earthquake as a number of schools were destroyed, especially in the badly hit areas of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Around 7,669 schools were damaged as a consequence of the earthquake. Out of the above 5,690 schools were either primary or middle schools. Most of the schools damaged either needed major repair or had to be rebuilt altogether. Further, the losses were not just contained to the physical infrastructure as around 18,095 students and 853 teachers and educational staff died across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Asian Development Bank & World Bank, ([2005](#)) report showed the loss of livelihood and property due to the earthquake further impacted the education of many children as parents were now forced to send them to work so that they augment the family's income. It is estimated that the children impacted by the earthquake suffered a 15 to 18% reduction in their earning potential over their lifetime due to learning losses caused by this tragedy (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, [2024](#)) Similarly, floods of 2009 and 2012 also damaged the educational infrastructure of the country making the achievement of targets of MDG-2 more difficult.

3.2.2. Educational infrastructure

Lack of proper educational infrastructure is another reason for not achieving the target of universal primary education under MDG-2. Pakistan has been merely spending around 2% of its GDP on education (Shaukat et al., [2017](#)). The majority of the amounts allocated for the



educational sector are spent on current administrative expenditures, like teacher salaries, meaning thereby that not much is left to be spent on building new schools or improving the facilities at the existing schools. Due to the above reason, many schools in Pakistan especially the government schools lack basic facilities like clean drinking water, proper toilet and sanitation facilities, provision of electricity and boundary walls for the security of the students. The lack of such basic facilities discourages parents from sending their children to school.

3.2.3. Poverty

Poverty is another major factor that compels parents to send their children, especially males, to work to augment the income of the family rather than sending them to school. This economic factor of not sending children to school becomes more pronounced in the face of natural calamities like earthquakes and floods when the income and employment opportunities of the parents are put under greater stress. In a survey of 510 educationists conducted by Mahmood et al., (2019), it was observed that 73% of the respondents rated poverty as one of the reasons for Pakistan not been able to achieve its targets of MDG-2.

3.2.4. Others

Socio-cultural factors have also played their part in the non-achievement of universal primary education in Pakistan. This is especially true for females as their education is not considered a priority by the parents who are more eager to get them married at an early age then to send them to schools. Further, due to financial constraints of the governments, the number of schools for girls is also not sufficient. A lesser number of schools for girls means that usually, these schools are far off from the place of residence. This again discourages the parents from sending their daughters to schools as the greater the distance to school, the greater the security and transport issues for both the students and the parents.

Post 18th Amendment, education became the responsibility of the provinces. However, the provinces were not well prepared to assume this new responsibility. In the survey conducted by Mahmood et al., (2019) it was observed that 63% of the respondents listed the lack of coordination among provinces as one of the reasons for the non-achievement of targets of MDG-2. Poor quality education and lack of teacher training and assessment have also contributed to the failure of Pakistan to achieve the targets of MDG-2. If the child is not learning anything meaningful in school, parents of low-income families would rather have them school,

working to support the family's income than continuing them at the school.

3.3. SDG-4 & Pakistan

3.3.1. Target 4.1

SDG-4 outlines a total of ten main targets to be achieved by the year 2030 by the member UN countries. Out of these 10 targets, target 4.1 deals with primary education and it gives the following goal to member countries like Pakistan (United Nations, [2024](#)):

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes.'

Target 4.1 is further divided into seven indicators, however as explained in the scope section, this study will analyze the performance of Pakistan with respect to the indicators 4.1.1, 4.1.2 and 4.1.4. The above indicators are discussed in detail below.

3.3.2. Indicator 4.1.1: Proficiency Levels

This indicator measures the proportion of children who have achieved a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics by the end of their primary education. The National Assessment Wing (NAW) of the Pakistan Institute of Education. [2023](#) has adopted the Global Proficiency Framework (United Nations Pakistan, [2024](#)) which specifies the minimum proficiency levels expected globally from students across various grades in reading and mathematics. This framework has been developed mutually by various international stakeholders like the World Bank, UN and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and it ranks proficiency levels in the following four categories.

Table 2:
Global Proficiency Levels

Global Minimum Proficiency Level	Definition
Below Partially Meets	Learners lack the most basic knowledge and skills. As a result, they generally cannot complete the most basic grade level tasks.
Partially Meets	Learners have limited knowledge and skills. As a result, they can partially complete basic grade-level tasks



Global Minimum Proficiency Level	Definition
Meets	Learners have developed sufficient knowledge and skills. As a result, they can successfully complete the most basic grade-level tasks
Exceeds Global Minimum Proficiency	Learners have developed superior knowledge and skills. As a result, they can complete complex grade-level tasks.

Note: Global Proficiency Framework ([2020](#))

According to Pakistan’s Midterm Review for SDG-4, issued by the PIE, only 30% of the children in English Reading and only 27% in Mathematics at the end of grade 4 had achieved the minimum global proficiency level required from Grade 4 students (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, [2024](#)) by the year 2019.

3.3.3. National Achievement Test

Another very important indicator of the quality of education is the National Achievement Test (NAT) which is a sample-based assessment test developed by the NAW of PIE. This test is conducted every two years for students of grades 4 & 8 to assess their proficiency in subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science and Urdu. NAT provides the stakeholders with a reliable means of evaluating student attainment and gives high-quality, data driven information that can then be used for improving the quality of education in the country. The assessment data gathered through these tests helps in answering the question, ‘Is the quality of education improving or deteriorating with respect to the different learning outcomes?’

NAT 2023 is the latest such test that was developed and conducted by NAW with the technical assistance of Cambridge University Press & Assessment which was contracted by the World Bank for the said purpose. The concepts tested in NAT correspond to the learning outcomes specified in the curriculum of the respective grades. For the purpose of designing and administering NAT 2023 a total of 1304 schools (652 schools for Grade 4 and Grade 8 each) were selected using scientific sampling techniques to ensure that the sample size was representative across provincial and national level (National Achievement Test, 2023). The test results with respect to grade 4 Mathematics and English are given below:

Table 3
NAT 2023 scores

Subject	Number of Students who took the test	Total Marks	Mean Score	Median Score
Grade 4 English	10591	48	26.9	27
Grade 4 Maths	10578	48	23.7	22

Note: (National Achievement Test , 2023)

The results given in the table show that for the subject of English on average the students answered just over half of the questions correctly. However, for the subject of Mathematics, the students on average were able to only answer less the half of the questions correctly. These results show that students are falling short of the required standards with respect to the learning outcomes required to be achieved at the primary level.

3.4. Annual Status of Education Report 2023

ASER is Pakistan's most comprehensive and largest citizen led household based educational survey that is undertaken to assess the level of proficiency of children in various areas such as reading and arithmetic. The data obtained in these surveys provides useful insights regarding the status of learning outcomes with respect to different grade levels. The latest of these surveys was conducted in 2023. The sample size included 272,370 children between the ages of 3 and 16 belonging to 123 urban districts and 151 rural districts of Pakistan (ASER Pakistan, [2023](#)). Some of the important results with respect to rural areas of Pakistan are given in the Figures 3 and 4 below in relation to English and Mathematics.

As is evident from the figures below that child in rural areas suffer from severe learning deficiencies. Schools in rural areas are often without experienced well trained teachers that can impart quality education to the children. Rural schools also suffer more than the urban schools with respect to basic infrastructure facilities. All these factors lead to poor learning outcomes for the children of the rural areas.

The below results from the ASER survey paint a dismal picture with regard to the learning outcomes of different classes. In 2023, only 54% of the students of class 5 could read class 2 level sentences down from 56% in 2021. For mathematics, the picture is even more grim, with only 46% of class 5 students able to do two-digit division, down from 51% in 2021.

There are also significant variations between the provinces with regard to English and mathematics literacy as can be seen from the Figure 4



below. Students of class 5 in the provinces of Balochistan and Sindh are significantly behind in English and Maths literacy as compared to their counterparts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. For instance, in Balochistan and Sindh less than 33% of class 5 students were able to read class 2 level English texts while for Punjab and Sindh the same percentage ranged between 40-50% and 60-70% respectively. Similarly, in Balochistan and Sindh, less than 40% of class 5 students were able to do class 3 divisions as compared to more than 40% for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and more than 60% for Punjab.

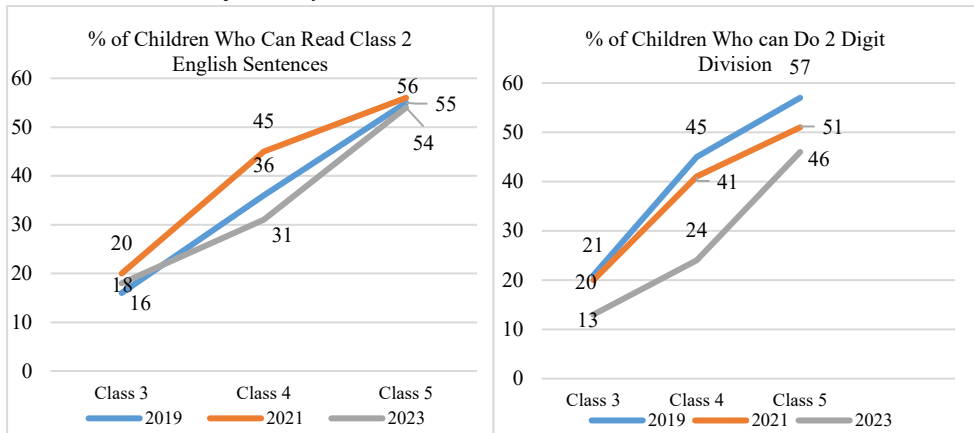
3.4.1. Indicator 4.1.2: Completion Rates

This indicator measures the proportion of children who were able to successfully complete their first five years of primary education starting from Grade 1 to Grade five. A higher completion rate implies that more children are able to complete their primary education without dropping out of school. It also signifies the efficacy of the education system in retaining its students. The figure below presents provincial and national completion rates in this regard:

As can be seen from the figure above, in Pakistan, primary completion rate has still not touched the desired level of 100%. For the year 2022-2023, only 80% percent of students were able to complete their primary education in the country. There are substantial variations across provinces with only 52% of the children able to complete their primary education in Balochistan as compared to 85% in KP, 88% in Sindh and 78% in Punjab.

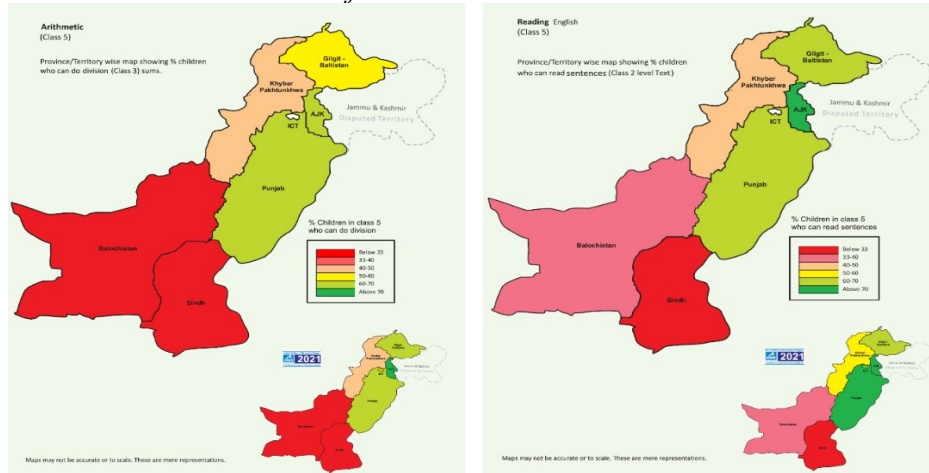
Figure 3

ASEAR 2023 Proficiency Results



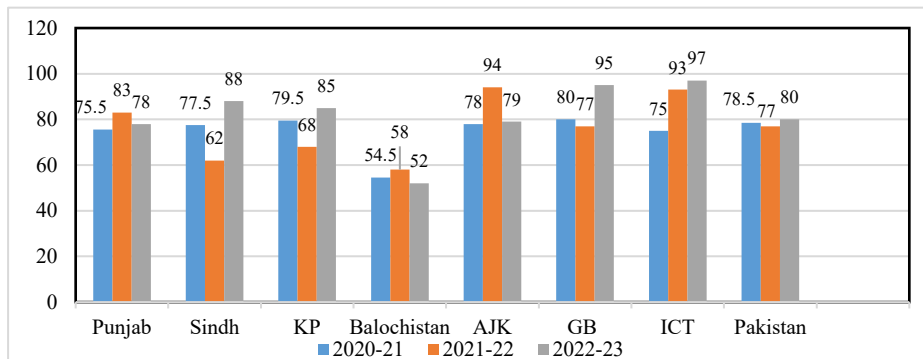
Note: (ASER Pakistan, [2023](#))

Figure 4:
Province Wise Grade 5 Proficiencies



Note: (ASER Pakistan, [2023](#))

Figure 5
Completion Rates of Primary Education (%)



Note: (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2023)

3.4.2 Indicator 4.1.4: Out of School Children

This indicator measures the number of children in the primary education age group i.e., ages 5 to 9 that are out of school. It is estimated that a total of 26 million children belonging to the school going age group of 5 to 16 years are not attending schools (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2023). The position with respect to primary education is given in the figure below.

As can be seen from the figure above, a total of 10.85 million (females: 5.795m, males: 5.06m) children of the primary education age group are

out of school in Pakistan in the year 2022-23 as compared to 10.77 in the year 2021-22. Across the provinces, Punjab being the most populous province has the highest number of out of school children amounting to 4.31 million followed by Sindh with 3.58 million. Also in Sindh, KP and Balochistan more females are out of school than males with respect to primary education.

3.5. Challenges

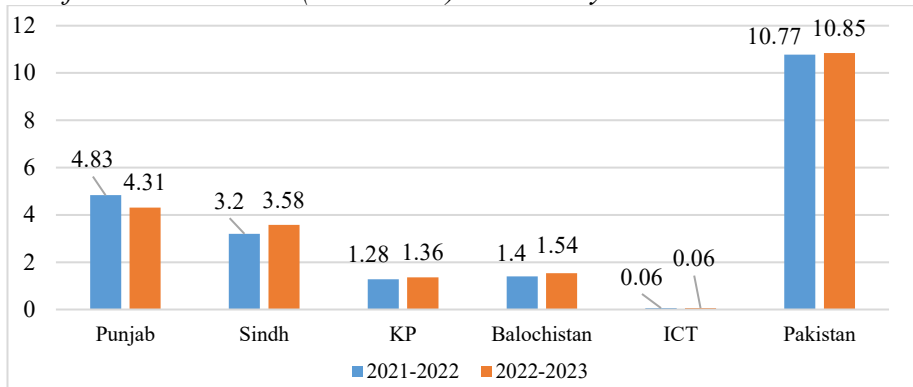
This section will discuss the important issues and challenges that are hampering Pakistan’s efforts in achieving the goals of quality universal primary education for all.

3.5.1. Spending on Education

Any country that wants all its children of primary education age group to not only attend school but also to receive quality education needs to invest a significant amount of its resources in improving its educational infrastructure both in terms of quantity and quality. Unfortunately, Pakistan has been lacking on this account due to insufficient funding for the education sector as is being discussed below.

Figure 6

Out of School Children (in millions) in Primary Education



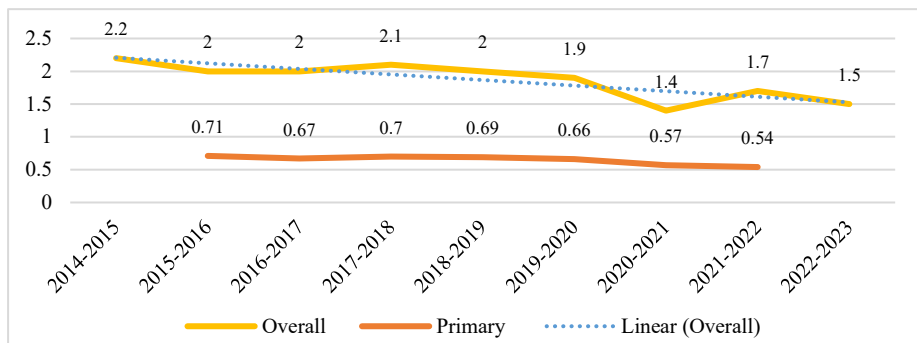
Note: (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2023)

3.5.2. Trends of Education Expenditure

Providing quality education is an expensive endeavor. Construction of school buildings, provision of basic infrastructure facilities, hiring and training of teachers and preparation of necessary teaching materials all cost a substantial amount. More funds are needed for both improving access to education and for improving the quality of education. There is

an argument among certain education experts that the issue is not of allocating more funds to the education sector but rather the issue is of ensuring that funds allotted are spent efficiently. However, eminent educationists like Professor Faisal Bari do not subscribe to this view. According to Bari (2024), even if all wastages and poor allocations are accounted for, Pakistan still needs more resources for providing education to all the children who are out of school and for providing quality education to all those who are or will be in school in the future. Professor Faisal Bari further argues that no matter how efficiently the education budget is spent, education for all cannot be guaranteed if we are only allocating just 2 to 2.5% of the GDP towards the education sector. Pakistan has historically been spending only a small proportion of its GDP on education and even this small proportion has been decreasing over a period of time as can be seen from the figure below:

Figure 7
Expenditure on Education as a % of GDP



Note: (Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, 2024)

As compared to the dismal figures for education spending given above other regional countries are spending much more on education. For instance, India spends 4.6% of its GDP on education while for Iran the same figure is 3.2% (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2023). According to IMF estimates, Pakistan needs to increase its education spending to 7.7% of the GDP by the year 2030 in order to meet the targets of SDG-4 (Brollo et al., 2021)

3.5.3. Efficiency of Spending

Pakistan's spending on education is not only less but is also inefficient and does not result in optimum outcomes. This can be gauged from Pakistan's low percentile ranking of 30.7% for the year 2023 with respect to the



government effectiveness index of the World Bank (Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2024). According to Bari (2024), though non-development expenditures are well utilized by the provinces, the same is not the case with the utilization of development funds as only 50 to 70 percent of these funds are actually spent while the rest of them get lapsed. Further according to him the increased expenditures on education by provinces observed in the last five to seven years will not help in addressing the issues in education due to (a) these increases are small compared to the scale of the problem, (b) development funds are not utilized fully and (c) government priorities with respect to spending are misplaced like spending education budget on buying laptops. Another issue of concern regarding spending on education is that the majority of the education budget is allocated to current expenditure items, with little is left for development activities like building of new schools and improving facilities in the existing schools as can be seen from the figure below:

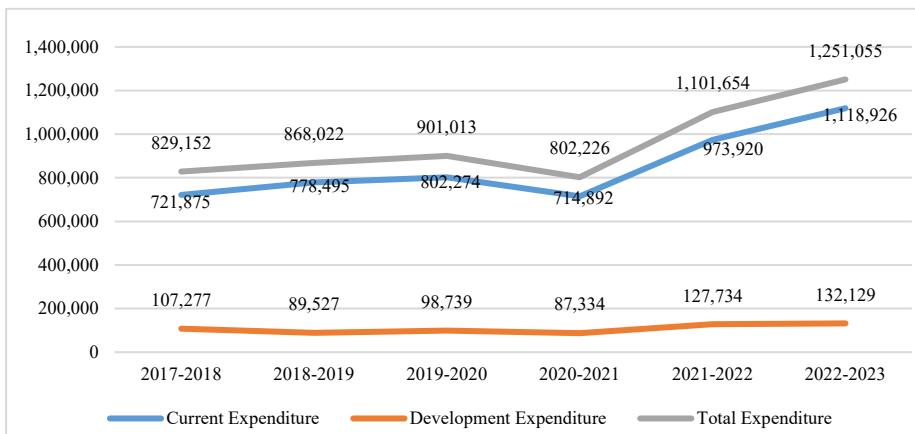
Figure 8

Current and Development Education Expenditures (Rs in Million)

Note (Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, 2024):

3.5.4. School Infrastructure

In order to provide good quality education, schools need to have a safe and secure environment on their campuses to ensure that students feel comfortable and protected while coming to their classes. In this regard, it is important that schools have the basic infrastructure in place where the

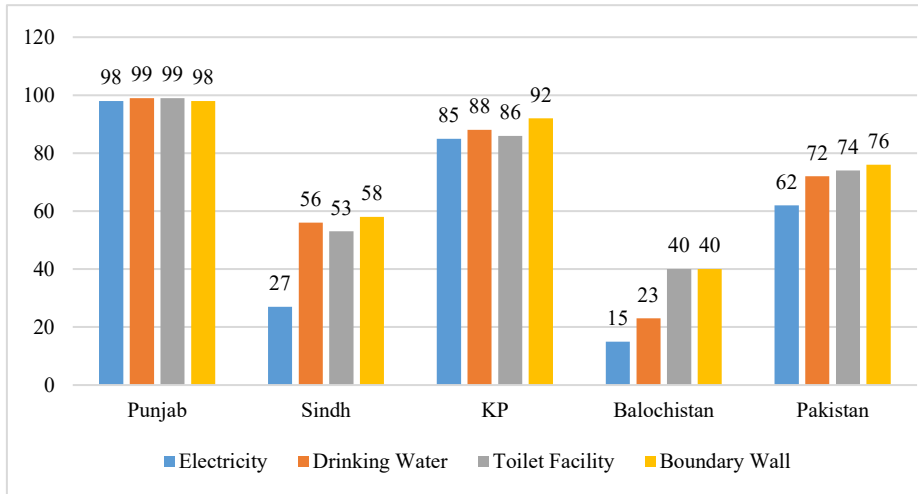


availability of essential facilities such as electricity, drinking water,

adequate toilet facilities and proper boundary walls are ensured. The figure below provides data with respect to the above facilities in relation to the primary schools in Pakistan.

Figure 9

% Of Primary Schools with Basic Facilities for 2022-2023



Note: (Pakistan Education Statistics [2022-2023](#))

From the data given in the figure above, the impact of reduced funding for the education sector on the availability of basic facilities in our primary schools can be gauged. In no category, the primary schools in Pakistan have a score of 100% meaning that we have not been able to ensure even one basic facility, such as clean drinking water, across all of the 136,687 primary schools operating in Pakistan. This is an alarming situation that needs to be addressed on a war footing if we want to ensure good quality education for all of our children.

There are also significant variations with respect to the availability of basic facilities in primary schools across provinces. In Punjab, almost all primary schools have access to basic facilities with percentages in each of the above four categories close to 100%. KP comes in second place with percentages in each of the above four categories ranging in the 80s. However, other provinces like Sindh and Balochistan are lagging far behind when it comes to the provision of basic facilities in primary schools. In Sindh, only 27% of the primary schools have electricity, while in Balochistan the same percentage is only 15%. Similarly, regarding drinking water, only 56% of primary schools in Sindh and 23% of primary



schools in Balochistan have access to drinking water. The percentage of primary schools with toilet facilities is only 53% for Sindh and 40% for Balochistan. With respect to the presence of boundary walls, in Sindh, 58% of the primary schools have boundary walls while the percentage is only 40% for Balochistan.

3.5.5. Infrastructure and Learning Outcomes

It is pertinent to note that variations in the availability of school facilities across provinces correlate with variations in the proficiency levels of children across provinces. Comparison of Figure 8 with Figure 4 reveals that Balochistan and Sindh which lag behind KP and Punjab with respect to the availability of school facilities, are also behind these provinces with respect to learning outcomes for the subjects of English and Mathematics as can be seen in Figure 4.

3.5.6. Teachers' Quality

Imparting quality education to children is not possible without having well trained quality teachers who can not only teach effectively but can also serve as role models for their students. Literature on education shows that good teachers matter when it comes to student learning. According to Goldhaber (1999) variations in teacher quality can explain between 7.5% to 8.5% of the total variation in student achievement, a far greater amount than any other school-level input. Similarly, according to Hanushek (2004), consistent access to high quality teachers can help the students belonging to low-income groups to catch up academically with the students belonging to the high-income groups.

The evidence quoted above shows that having good quality teachers is essential for imparting quality education to students and for improving their academic results. Keeping in view the proficiency levels as demonstrated by the low NAT Scores and the significant deficiencies in learning outcomes highlighted by the ASEAR report as explained above, it can be inferred that Pakistan is failing in fulfilling the above necessary conditions for quality education. There are many issues that impact the quality of our teachers ranging from recruitment to training to their accountability.

Firstly, hiring good teachers is a difficult task. Teachers in Pakistan are recruited on the basis of objective criteria like level of professional and academic qualification, past academic performance record and marks obtained on the recruitment tests. In the last few years, more weightages

have been given to such objective factors, while the weightages have been reduced for evaluation tools like interview performances in order to reduce the chances of candidates being selected due to nepotism or corruption. Though this method of selection is praiseworthy so as to ensure that teachers are not selected on the basis of favoritism and political leanings, this objective criterion does not guarantee that we are hiring necessarily good quality teachers. In fact, Bari (2024), has argued that what makes a good teacher are the subjective qualities like personality traits that can be better judged not by academic qualifications but through other tools such as interviews, personality tests and evaluation of how the teacher can teach and communicate in a class. Whether a teacher is good or not though can be determined later through post recruitment evaluations which are unfortunately missing in Pakistan.

Once the teachers are selected, they go through a probation period and are confirmed at the end of such period, simply if they don't have disciplinary proceedings pending against them. However, the probation period is not used as a means to evaluate the performance of the teachers with the purpose of retaining only those, at the end of the said period, who have shown better performance in terms of providing quality teaching to their students. Due to this absence of 'quality teaching' being a criterion for evaluating the performance of the teachers in the probation period, we end up with low quality teachers who ideally should have been weeded out from the system rather than being confirmed into service after the end of their probation periods.

Secondly, once recruited the teachers are not exposed to constant in-service training that can help them in improving their craft. The lack of budgetary resources for developing effective teacher training programs and shortages of good teacher trainers act as significant barriers to providing quality training to teachers.

Thirdly, the financial and promotional structure of the teacher in the public school system is such that it does not encourage or incentivize our teachers to improve their quality of teaching. Rather than linking career advancement to the performance that is measured by the learning outcomes of the students, the principle of 'Seniority' still reigns supreme in the promotion of teachers. The security of job tenure provided by the public sector means that underperforming teachers continue in their professions rather than being terminated. The salaries of public primary teachers are often less than their counterparts in middle and high schools.



This disparity leads to a high turnover of teachers at the primary level (Rizwan & Taniguchi, [2023](#)). The outcome of all these issues above is, therefore, an education system in which the learning outcomes of the students are affected adversely as poor quality teachers remain engaged in teaching till their retirement.

3.5.7. Disruptions to Learning

The quest for quality education in Pakistan has been severely affected by disruption to learning in the form of events like Covid-19, the devastating floods of 2022, and more recently Smog. During the two years of Covid-19 existence, schools remained closed fully for 37 weeks and partially for 27 weeks (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, [2024](#)), leading to significant learning losses. Though the elite private schools were able to provide online classes to their students, the same facility could not be provided by most of the public and low fee private schools. Even with online education, the level of understanding that teachers can impart in a physical setting, cannot be guaranteed especially with respect to students of primary classes who are too young to grasp the concepts through the online medium. Many students also had to drop out of school during Covid-19, as their families suffered economically due to loss in income, and unemployment.

The effects of Covid-19 persisted even once the restrictions were lifted. Many students did not join back their schools and even those who did suffered from substantial learning losses as they had either forgotten what they had learned before, or they needed massive repetition/reinforcement of their curriculum. The problems created by Covid-19 for the education sector were further exacerbated by the massive floods of 2022 that destroyed many schools in Pakistan and led to significant learning losses. It is estimated that these floods impacted 17205 public sector educational institutions, 94,478 teachers and 2.6 million enrolled students in a total of 94 districts with overall damages with respect to the education sector amounting to 559 million US dollars (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, [2022](#)). Moreover, the return of children to school, once these are rebuilt, is also not certain given the economic losses suffered by the families due to these floods.

More recently in the province of Punjab, primary schools remained closed for two weeks in several districts like Lahore and Multan due to the increasing level of Smog, causing further disruptions in the learning

process of the students. Though schools switched to online learning during the closures, however, some of the primary schools in Lahore decided to postpone the December examinations as the school administration felt the need to allocate additional contact hours for the students to help them fully grasp the content of their curriculum, as mastering some concepts is not always possible through the online medium, especially at the primary level.

4. CONCLUSION

Pakistan's progress both with respect to MDG-2 and SDG-4 has been far from satisfactory as is evident from our failure to enroll all children of primary education age group in schools and from our inability to provide quality education to those who are already attending school. With respect to MDG-4 Pakistan failed to achieve the goal of 100% net primary enrolment and 100% completion rate for primary education by the target year of 2015. Similarly, despite the passage of eight years since SDG-4 was adopted, Pakistan still has a considerable ground to cover with respect to the provision of quality education at the primary level. Deteriorating standards of education are reflected in the results from the National Achievement Test 2023 and Annual Status of Education Report 2023 which reveal severe deficiencies in learning outcomes at the primary level. The quest for quality education has been hampered by challenges such as a lack of sufficient spending on the educational sector, poor standards of teaching and disruptions to learning due to events like Covid-19 and the floods of 2022. Going forward, Pakistan will have to devise effective strategies for meeting the above challenges, in order to meet the objectives of SDG-4 by the target year of 2030.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Public Private Partnership

Pakistan spends much less on education as compared to other regional countries and this trend is expected to continue in the foreseeable future unless the economic growth rate picks up miraculously enabling the government to spend more on education. As has already been mentioned, the IMF has estimated that Pakistan needs to raise its spending on education to 7.7% of the GDP in order to meet the targets of SDG-4 by the year 2030. This amounts in rupee terms come to roughly Rs. 8,165 billion, given our current GDP of Rs. 106,045 billion (Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, [2024](#)). However, given the low economic



growth scenario in the context of strict conditionalities of the IMF loan program and given the fact that most of our revenues get absorbed in debt servicing and defence spending, it is difficult to foresee how we can increase our spending on education substantially.

Till the time government can afford to spend more on education, Public-Private Partnership method can be used as a way of ensuring that all children of primary school age are getting free quality primary education. Infact, there is a realization by the UN itself that developing economies like Pakistan cannot meet the SDG goals solely by relying on government resources as the said resources are not sufficient to finance the huge investments required for meeting the development goals. Keeping in view these budgetary constraints, UNDP in Pakistan now publishes the SDG Investor Map 2023 (Pakistan's SDG Investor Map 2023, 2024) which identifies the SDG aligned areas in which the private sector can invest its resources.

The advantages of the PPP model can also be leveraged for the education sector also. In this regard, a commendable example is that of Tareen Education Foundation (2024) which is a non-profit organization which strives to provide quality education for students belonging to low-income families. TEF has, to date, established 5 modern schools in the district Lodhran in collaboration with the district government. These schools have either been constructed on the vacant land of existing public schools or the already existing buildings of the public school have been totally upgraded and modernized.

One such school is the Government Amina Girls School which was visited as part of the Inland Study Tour. This school has been built by TEF on the premises of an existing government primary school for boys in an area of 4400 sq ft. The school provides education from primary to higher secondary level and boasts modern facilities such as a Computer Lab, Library, Art Room, Science Lab, AVR room and a conference room (Tareen Education Foundation, 2024). To impart quality education TEF hires qualified teachers whose skills are supplemented through ongoing training programs. The government prescribed curriculum is taught, however, the same is supplemented through additional teaching material. During the visit, it was witnessed that concepts of algebra were being taught through educational videos and that students were keenly taking part in both academic and extra-curricular activities. Since the government is not expected to be able to dedicate more resources in the near future for education, more public-private initiatives like the one explained above

need to be replicated across the country in order to ensure free primary quality education for our children.

5.2. Improving Quality of Teachers

To improve the learning outcomes of the students, more emphasis and attention needs to be paid to the training of the teachers. At the time of recruitment, apart from objective factors like academic qualifications, emphasis should also be given to factors such as the personality traits of the potential teachers. Further teaching demonstration tests should be conducted to see whether the aspirants can effectively communicate with the students or not.

During the probation period, the teachers' performance should be observed minutely and those lacking behind should be given additional training. At the end of the probation period, only those teachers should be retained who have improved their skills because of the training received, while those who had failed to improve should be sent home. Using the probation period as a means of improving the quality of teaching and weeding our bad teachers is essential if we want to improve learning outcomes for children of the primary education age group.

Once the teachers have been confirmed into their service, the focus should be on regular trainings and on continuous capacity development for these teachers, so they remain in touch with the latest developments in the fields of education and teaching. With respect to training the focus should not be just on providing general training but more importantly emphasis should be on training that provides targeted support to the teachers so that their specific weaknesses can be addressed.

Rather than seniority being the most important criterion for promotion, the effectiveness and performance of the teachers with respect to improving the learning outcomes of their students should be made the key factor for determining the promotion prospects of our educators. The government needs to dedicate more resources to enhance the capacity of teacher training institutions by hiring expert teacher trainers in sufficient numbers. Further active collaboration between universities that offer degrees in education and the government departments that are responsible for teacher training is needed. This collaboration can be in the shape of university professors acting as mentors for teachers in the school. Further, there is an urgent need to incentivize improved performance, by linking financial incentives for the teachers to their performance.



As has been shown in Figure 4 of this paper, the children in rural areas suffer from severe deficiencies with respect to their learning outcomes. In order to encourage more experienced and highly trained teachers to serve in the rural areas, attractive monetary incentives should be provided to such teachers. Experience from countries like Korea and Gambia lend support in favor of the above policy measure (Rizwan & Taniguchi, [2023](#)).

5.3. Lessons from Singapore

Pakistan can also learn from some international best practices when it comes to improving the quality of teachers. In this regard example of Singapore can be given which has implemented effective policies with regard to the recruitment and training of teachers (World Bank, [2015](#)). In Singapore, the National Institute of Education is responsible for the training of teachers. The institute offers a four-year undergraduate program in education. Admission to this program is highly competitive and the students admitted are from the top 30% of their respective graduating class at school. In order to attract top talent and to make the teaching profession attractive for graduates, Singapore offers competitive salaries that are comparable to those in other professions. Further performance bonuses are offered up to 30% of the basic salary to encourage teachers to perform better.

Once recruited, teachers in Singapore are exposed to constant training and chances for professional development. In 1998, Singapore created a network of Teachers that has now become the Academy of Singapore Teachers. The aim of this platform is to encourage collaboration between schools and teachers with the purpose of learning from each other's knowledge and experience and using that learning to develop innovative teaching practices. To deliver training and support to teachers that are suited and tailored to their individual needs, classroom observation visits are undertaken in Singapore schools to identify specific weaknesses in the teachers who are evaluated across a range of criteria like knowledge of the particular subject, effectiveness of various teaching methodologies and assessment tools that are being used by them in the classroom. Training modules are then developed keeping in view the weaknesses and gaps identified during these visits.

To improve the quality of teaching, teachers in Singapore are required to distribute their working hours in a week in the following manner. As can be seen from the table, teaching and planning for the lessons are given equal time so that the quality of teaching can be maintained at a high level.

Table 4
Distribution of Hours of Singapore Teachers

Sr. No	Activity	No of Hours a Week
1	Teaching	17
2	Planning for Lessons	17
3	Student Counselling and Others	13

Note: (World Bank, [2015](#)).

5.4. Lessons from Sri Lanka

When it comes to achievement of goals under SDG-4, Sri Lanka has shown substantial improvement and, in some cases, better performance than other South Asian countries like Pakistan and India. For instance, the primary completion rate for Sri Lanka is 99.5% as compared to 80% percent for Pakistan. Similarly in respect of proficiency levels of children of primary education age group, Sri Lanka has shown impressive results with 87% of the children able to read effectively and 75% showing proficiency in mathematical concepts (UNESCO, [2015](#))

The significant achievements shown by Sri Lanka with regard to SDG-4, as shown above, can in part be attributed to an ambitious and all-encompassing teacher training program called '*Improving Teacher Education in Sri Lanka Project*'. The said project aimed at improving the quality of teacher training for subjects like Mathematics, English and Science (Wyburn, [2020](#)) The project imparted training, to over 100 teacher educators, in latest teaching methodologies with regard to the above subjects. These master trainers, equipped with latest teaching instructions, then proceeded further to conduct training sessions for the school teachers. In addition to the above project and as part of its efforts to enhance quality of education in the country, Sri Lanka has also embarked on a World Bank Funded '*General Education Modernization Project*' (World bank group, [2018](#)). One of the main components of this project is to improve the quality of primary and secondary education, through several initiatives, one of which is teacher development.

The above measures taken by Sri Lanka for improving the quality of teachers and enhancing their capacity, through effective training methodologies, have resulted in rich dividends, when it comes to improving learning outcomes for the primary school children. This is



evident from the statistics discussed above and shows that other countries can also reap similar benefits by giving due importance to the training and development of teachers.

5.5. Digital Learning

If the government can't allocate more resources to build new modern primary schools and to upgrade the existing schools by equipping them with necessary facilities, then it must invest in building digital learning platforms and in providing digital resources like tablets, laptops, and better internet connectivity for both the teachers and the students. Such digital platforms along with the necessary resources can be an effective way of reaching out to children who are out of school and are not willing to rejoin back due to various social and economic factors. Further, such digital learning will also be useful for those who are already enrolled in schools but face disruptions in learning when schools close due to pandemics and natural calamities like earthquakes and floods. Digital learning platforms like the Khan Academy, which provides free world class education across different subjects and levels (Khan Academy, [2024](#)) can be emulated for making quality online instructional material.

Environmental issues like Smog are becoming a regular feature every year in Pakistan causing primary schools to shut for weeks as children of primary education age group between the ages of 5 to 9 are at greater risk of health hazards posed by the polluted air. It is therefore necessary that digital learning platforms are placed to ensure that these school closures don't result in learning losses for the students.

Both government and private schools can also use digital means for training their teachers by making quality training content available on the net. Training teachers in such a way will be cost effective, sustainable, and can cover a greater proportion of teachers as compared to the traditional methods of training.

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