**Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal – Vol.2, No.10**
**Publication Date:** Oct. 25, 2015
**DoI**:10.14738/assrj.210.1562.
Malik, M. A., & Hassan, R. (2015). An Analysis of Parallel Education System in Pakistan, and the Challenges They Pose in Education Research. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal,* 2*(10)* 191-198.

# An Analysis of Parallel Education Systems in Pakistan, and the Challenges They Pose in Education Research

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## Abstract

**Education system in Pakistan is complex. Unlike most of the other education systems in the world which can easily be divided on the basis of urban and rural, or public and private; Pakistan also has parallel education systems with their own distinctive, sometimes contrasting curriculum, teaching methodologies, examination systems, education culture and boards/ organizations that regulate and conduct exams in them. Although there are many, the most important ones are government boards affiliated (leading to SSC- Secondary School Certificate- and HSSC- Higher Secondary School Certificate), deeni madaris/ religious schools (either working independently or controlled by independent boards/ waqfs) and British Council affiliated schools (leading to GCE- General Certificate of Education/ GCSE -General Certificate of Secondary Education). Although many other countries in the world also have parallel education systems, their numbers and influence is not as high as in Pakistan. The presence of these systems also causes confusions in the findings of the research as the findings of one education system is taken as the finding of all. In some cases, the data is also mixed, causing confusions with findings. This papers looks at the parallel education systems in Pakistan, their spread, characteristics, merits and demerits. It also looks at the possible challenges and confusions that such education systems can cause in educatin research. It also suggests ways to help overcome the challenges.**

**Keywords:** parallel education system in Pakistan, deeni madaris, confusion in research findings, O level schools,

## INTRODUCTION

Education system in Pakistan is not homogeneous in its structure and settings. Pakistan has parallel education systems which includes government boards (divisional/ provincial/ federal) affiliated schools (leading to SSC- Secondary School Certificate and HSSC- Higher Secondary School Certificate), British Council affiliated schools (leading to GCE- General Certificate of Education, and GCSE- General Certificate of Secondary Education aka Ordinary and Advance level) and deeni madaris. Although, some other education systems also work in the country, their number and influence is not significant. These three big education systems are highly diverse in nature, setting and characteristics; and at times, even contrasting and conflicting in ideology and approach. These systems have their own books and syllabus, boards/ bodies that regulate and conduct examinations, use different pedagogies, examination systems, and school and classroom culture [1][2]. Most of the times, the research that is conducted about the education system in Pakistan does not consider these diverse and parallel systems and settings. Often the schools are grouped based on location (urban or rural) or ownership (public or private). This division is not illogical, but it fails to show a proper and clear picture as public

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or private schools can be deeni madrisa (religious school), government boards or British Council affiliated schools. Urban and rural division also faces the same problem as the above mentioned school systems can be located in both urban and rural areas.

This paper discusses parallel education system in Pakistan, their characteristics, settlings and spread. It also analyses their merits and demerits. It further points out the challenges and confusions that can be caused due to this parallel setting in Pakistan's education system.

## EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PAKISTAN

At school level, education system in Pakistan can be divided into five levels: pre-primary, primary (grade 1 to 5), middle (grade 6 to 8), secondary (grade 9 and 10) and higher secondary (grade 11 and 12) [1][3]. This division is for the schools that follow government boards affiliated schools system (curriculum set by provisional governments, and exams carried out by divisional/ provincial boards). British Council affiliated schools, and deeni madaris (religious schools) have their own names for these levels; but by and large, divisions for the levels are quite similar.

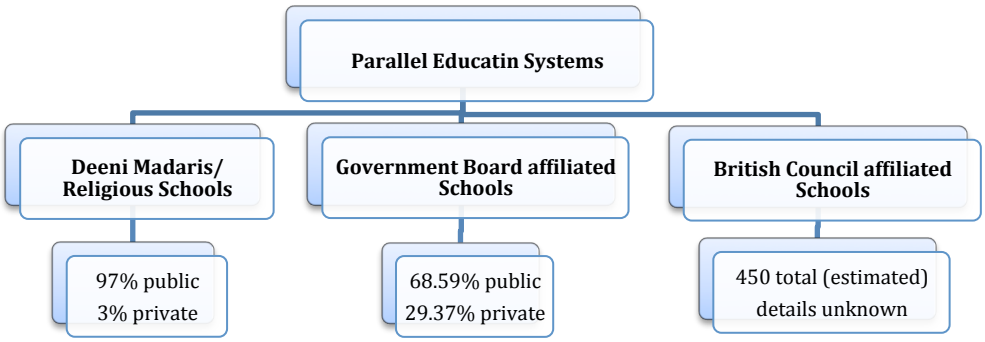
According to Pakistan Education Statistics (2015, p. 6) [3], there are 260,568 educational institutions in Pakistan. This number includes all public and private schools, colleges, universities, religious schools, and training and vocational institutions. Out of them, 69% are located in public sector while 31% are in private sector. These institutions cater the needs of 42.92 million students all over the country. 63% of these students go to public schools while 37% attend different kinds of private institutions [3]. As per location, 49,191 institutions (22% of all) are located in urban areas whereas 175,846 (78%) are in rural areas. Private sector makes up for 63% of the institutions in the urban and 20% in the rural areas respectively [3]. These figures are till degree college level (grade 14).

Along with the common problems and challenges that education in Pakistan is facing such as financial constraints, issues pertaining to teachers' training and qualification, ghost schools, lack of proper infrastructure and basic needs in the schools, outdated curriculum, gender issues and parents' want of awareness about the importance of education [4][5][6]; Pakistan education system also faces the dilemma of parallel education system which causes various problems and confusions.

## PARALLEL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PAKISTAN

Parallel education system does not mean a private school or a chain of private schools that are affiliated with government board, It means that the school or the chain of schools has its own curriculum, examination system (those examinations might be conducted by the school itself or board/ body that organizes them) and degrees/ certificates. There are many private schools in Pakistan which are governed by and affiliated with international school systems, but at the same time are affiliated and registered with government boards (Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education) and their students appear in SSC and HSSC examinations held by these boards.

**Figure i. Parallel Education Systems in Pakistan**




The most wide spread education system in Pakistan is government boards affiliated system which caters the needs of majority of the students in Pakistan; but along with it, there are a number of education systems in the country which either work independently or are affiliated with international networks in other countries. Some of such parallel education systems have their own independent regulating bodies or boards. Three of the biggest and most influential education systems are government boards affiliated schools, British Council affiliated schools and deeni madaris (figure i). They have their own unique characteristics and settings.

## Deeni Madaris/ Religious Schools

**Table i. Total Number of Deeni Madaris/ Religious Schools in Pakistan and Enrollment in them**

| | Public | Other Public* | Private |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Total Number** | 345 | 48 | 13012 |
| **Total (Public + Other Public + Private)** | | | **13,405** |
| **Enrolment** | 47,750 | 6,230 | 1,782,163 |
| **Total Enrolment (Public + Other Public + Private)** | | | **1,836,143** |

Deeni Madaris provide religious education or education with predominant religious curriculum to the students. As table i shows, there are 13,405 deeni madaris all over the country [3]. A vast majority of them (13,012) are private. There are five governing and regulating boards in Pakistan called waqfs (seminary boards). Each waqf is governing body for the madaris belonging to its school of thought or sect. Most of these madaris are affiliated with one of these waqfs. Ittehad Tanzimat Madaris-e-Deeniya is the apex committee of these waqfs [14]. Only 345 mardaris are governed and regulated by government controlled bodies. Yet there is a very large number of madaris (3,889) which work independently and are not regulated and controlled by any body or waqf. Still another 827 madaris were not repoted as per Pakistan Education Statistics (2015, p. 72) [3]. All of these madaris provide education to 1,836,143 students. These madaris strictly follow segregated education system for boys and girls. They have separate madaris for them.

Most of these madaris provide exclusively religious education about the knowledge of Quran, hadith (sayings of the prophet Muhammad S.A.W), Islamic Jurisprudence and its principles, Arabic language and its grammar and some other subjects related to them. Although, in the recent years, there has been a campaign by the government of Pakistan to modernize madaris and include the subjects of different branches of science (or general science) and English, these efforts have not been able to meet the desired results due to resistance from the madaris and Waqfs [9] [10]. Certificates and degrees are awarded by these Waqfs or madrasa itself if it is working independently.

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These deeni madaris usually provide free education and books. The boarding students are also provided with lodging and meal free of cost. Some madaris also give a meager stipend to the students [14]. As a result, they have great appeal to poor classes of the society who cannot afford to pay tuition fee (in case of private schools) or any other expenses (uniform, books, stationary etc.). Those families do not have to worry about their food or other daily expenses even. They also have great attraction for religious minded segment of the society. Most of them are situated in rural or underdeveloped areas of the country.

Deeni madaris are one of the biggest welfare networks in the field of education as they provide free of cost education and adequate living to those who would have not been able to get it otherwise, but the drawbacks and negatives outweigh the positives. Most of these madaris provide only religious education without the knowledge of English, science and mathematics; strongly hampering the students' chances to find suitable jobs and positions in the society once they leave the madaris. At the most, they can be Imam in a mosque (a person who leads the prayers) or a teacher in the same kind of madrasa. They cannot find a professional, highly paid or white collar job based on their education. Some of them do their own business, but as most of the deeni madaris students themselves belong to poor families, they more often than not do not have the capital to start a good business. Often these students would also send their children to deeni madaris for education continuing that vicious circle of poverty and backwardness. They often create a class in the society which is different in their mindset and suffers financially.

## Government Boards affiliated School System (Leading to SSC- Secondary School Certificate/ HSSC- Higher Secondary School Certificate)

**Table ii. Total Number of Pre-primary to Higher Secondary Schools in Pakistan (affiliated with government boards).**

| | Public | Other Public* | Private** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-primary Schools** | - | - | 422 |
| **Primary Schools** | 124,284 | 3,586 | 17,621 |
| **Middle Schools** | 16,242 | 396 | 26,282 |
| **Secondary Schools** | 11,934 | 442 | 18,237 |
| **Higher Secondary Schools** | 1,621 | 147 | 3,411 |
| **Total** | **154,081** | **4,571** | **65,973** |
| **Total (public + other public + private)** | | | **224,625** |

**Table iii. Total Enrollment in Pre-primary to Higher Secondary in Pakistan (affiliated with government boards).**

| | Public | Other Public* | Private** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-primary** | 4,725,007 | 116,489 | 3,716,470 |
| **Primary** | 10,973,729 | 360,145 | 6,535,985 |
| **Middle** | 3,992,374 | 126,512 | 2,176,585 |
| **Secondary** | 1,309,514 | 63,338 | 940,988 |
| **Higher Secondary** | 901,471 | 20,961 | 302,049 |
| **Total** | **21,902,095** | **687,445** | **13,672,077** |
| **Total (public + other public + private)** | | | **36,261,617** |

Most of the schools in the country follow government boards affiliated school system. That means that they are registered and affiliated with different government boards according to their level. These schools are found in every nook and corner of the country, and are easily accessible for every student. According to the latest data released by Pakistan Education

Statistics (2015), there are 224,625 schools in both public and private sector (up to higher secondary level) [3]. Most of them are in public sector (154,081) while private sector also contributes substantially (65,973) (Table ii.). The numbers given here are a little mixed as they also include GCE and GCSE (pre-O -Ordinary, O- Ordinary, and A- Advance Level) schools. As the Table iii. shows, these schools cater the needs of a large number of students (36,261,617) in both public and private sector. Most of these schools offer separate education for boys and girls in both public and private sector. Some schools in in private sector offer co-education.

These schools mostly follow the books and curriculum designed by the national and provincial curriculum and text books boards (formerly known as text book boards) [7]. National curriculum and text book board is the apex body whereas the provincial boards are responsible for the publication of textbooks in their respective provinces. Some private schools use books published by private or foreign publishers (e.g. Oxford) as course books at primary and middle level, but at secondary and higher secondary level, almost all the schools use books published by the provincial boards. Curriculum is quite balanced including English, Urdu, social studies/ Pakistan studies and sciences (chemistry, biology, physics, computer science and general science, depending if the student takes science subjects or arts); but it is outdated especially in reference to science subject and does not meet the demands of evolving times [11]. Exams are conducted by various boards for different levels, but the most important ones- SSC (secondary school certificate) and HSSC (Higher Secondary School Certificate)- are conducted by boards of intermediate and secondary education established at federal, provincial and divisional level.

The public schools are almost free [8], but in some provinces a very small amount is charged from the students as education fund. For example in Punjab, a petty amount of 20 Pakistani rupees (equal to 0.2 US$ as of September 2015) is charged from every student on monthly basis as faroogh-e-taleem fund (Fund for the spread/ growth of education). The fee structure in the private schools is comparatively higher but mostly ranges from 200 to 2,000 Pakistani rupees depending on the level and the school (equal to 2 to 20 US$). In public schools, the students are also provided with free course books. In some areas where the girls are lagging behind, special scholarships are also announced for them to encourage them to attend the school. Majority of the students in these schools come from lower, middle and upper middle class families.

Although, this education system serves the needs of more than 90% of the nation; it has many flaws and shortcomings. The overall standard of education in most of the schools (in both public and private sector) is not up to the mark. The students might obtain certificates after completing their education, but they are not equipped with necessary skills and knowledge. Many schools do not have proper infrastructure, and lack even the basic needs such as boundary walls, clean drinking water and toilets [3][12]. The examination system is mostly based on rote learning and cramming, and does not improve creative skills of the students [13]. Most of the teachers do not know how to make full use of the curriculum and teach it to enhance students' skills [11]. In villages and far off places, there are a number of ghost schools in the public sector. In this situation, either the building does not exist at all or is used by local landlords and other influential figures for their own personal use.

**British Council affiliated GCE/ GCSE School**

The third most important and influential education system in the country consists of those schools which provide pre-O, O and A (pre-Ordinary, Ordinary and Advance) level education.

Most of these schools are affiliated with the British Council, Pakistan which is responsible for the supervision of the schools, conducting examinations and teachers' training etc. There are more than 450 pre-O, O and A level schools in the country with more than 1,70,000 students in them (Pakistan Times, 14 January 2012). After the United Kingdom, Pakistan has world's second largest number of students following this education system. A very large percentage of these schools are situated in big cities or well-off areas. With the exception of a few public or other public, almost all of these schools are private (either working independently or as a part of large network). Pakistan Education Statistics Report and other data usually do not mention them separately, and they are part of "public", "other public" or "private' category. As a result, their exact number is not known. A vast majority of these schools offer co-education with boys and girls studying in the same class.

These schools use the curriculum and syllabus set by either edexcel or CIE (Cambridge International Examinations). The medium of instructions is English, and other than Urdu, all the subjects are taught and examined in English. In most of the schools, Urdu is taught as second language. As a result, a large number of the students can read and write better English than Urdu. The examination system is more conceptual than textbooks-based rote learning.

These schools charge very high fee. Some of them charge as much as 50,000 Pak rupees per month (equal to 500 US$). An average school charges 10,000 to 15,000 Pak rupees per month (100 to 150 US$) for O level classes. This fee structure is huge keeping in mind that a common person earns around 35,000 Pak rupees in a month. The students also have to pay huge sums of money as examination fee for O and A level examinations (more than 20,000 Pak rupees-200 US$ per paper for O levels). As the result, this system of education is only affordable to the students belonging to well-off and posh families.

Like deeni madaris, these schools also produce a class which is much different than majority of the population. The environment and culture in the school is much more liberal and open than the rest of the society. Similarity, many students are not able to use Urdu as comfortably as they can use English (especially in reading and writing), further separating that distinctive and elite class from the rest.

## CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION RESEARCH AND SUGGESTIONS

This parallel education system and its contrasting and conflicting characteristics raise a lot of challenges in education research and confusion in its findings.

- Some of the researchers, even from Pakistan cannot distinguish the parallel education system and mix them up. Some confuse them with private and public, urban and rural divide. One researcher in a paper stated that there are three types of schools in Pakistan: public, private and deeni madaris.

- The data compiled by Pakistan Education Statistics and other organizations mention deeni madaris separately, but put British Council affiliated schools along with government boards affiliated schools (dividing them on the basis of urban and rural, and public and private). These schools have their own unique settings and characteristics and stand poles apart from government boards affiliated schools. It would be much better and clearer if British Council affiliated schools are also mentioned separately.

- Even the researcher who write papers, most of them divide the data on the basis of those two lines (urban and rural, public and private). As a result, the findings can be ambiguous and confusing as any of this division can contain government board affiliated school, British Council affiliated school, deeni madrasa or all. It would be much better to conduct research on the bases of parallel education system. It can further be divided on the basis of urban and rural, or public and private schools if the research question requires so. In this way, the findings would be more representative and clear.

- These parallel education systems cause problems in data collection as well. As the environment and the culture of each system is different and pose its own unique challenges. Due to the recent operation against Taliban and their supporters, deeni madaris have "besieged mentality", and looks at everyone looking to get information about them suspiciously. Similarly, the attacks on schools from Taliban, have forced the schools to beef up security measures, making any attempt to gather primary data more difficult. As a result if someone wants to get data from all systems, he needs to be prepared for different kind of reactions and challenges.

- Most of the students of the deeni madaris cannot read and write English (most from government boards affiliated schools are also not very good at it). On the other hand, the students of British Council affiliated schools feel less comfortable reading and writing Urdu. As a result to gather data from all education systems, one will have to give questionnaires to them in different languages, causing some problems. It might be better to have a bilingual questionnaire for more general use.

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