
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN (OOSC) IN BHUTAN, INDIA, AND PAKISTAN: TRANSFERRING INSIGHTS FOR PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an outcome of faculty-student collaboration work during a post-graduate level course on Comparative Education. The focus of the comparative analysis is to address the challenge of educational reach for out-of-school Children (OOSC) in Pakistan, through extracting learnings from interventions/solutions in the context of South Asia which share a more or less similar historical, political (post-colonial) context of education. In this regard, the paper uses the concept of 'educational transfer' a prominent theme in doing comparative analysis as a theoretical/analytical framework for reviewing the literature. Central to this concept is the function of 'transferability' of knowledge through comparative analysis. The analysis found Bhutan and India as 'success' stories of approximating SDG-4 concerning educational reach for OOSC (especially dropouts). The paper concludes by highlighting key insights learnt. The findings suggest that Pakistan might benefit from a multifaceted strategy that incorporates community-based education, comprehensive support services, and flexible educational opportunities. By adopting best practices

from Bhutan and India and adjusting them to Pakistan's specific socioeconomic and cultural setting, the country may strengthen its efforts to provide all children with inclusive and equal access to education.

KEYWORDS

Out of School Children, SDG-4, Educational Transfer, Comparative Education

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right that plays an important role in the development of individuals and societies. According to the Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*" (UN, 2015). Furthermore, it transpires that by 2030, ensuring that all boys and girls get free, high-quality education at the basic and secondary levels is imperative, which may lead to productive results. Millions of children throughout the world, especially in South Asia, still do not have access to formal education, despite notable advancements in this regard (UNESCO, 2014). Among these children, those who are out of school face severe disadvantages, including limited future economic opportunities and diminished chances for personal and societal development (UNICEF, 2018). The challenge of addressing the needs of out-of-school children (OOSC) is therefore a priority for policymakers and educators worldwide, particularly in developing countries like Bhutan, India, and Pakistan (World Bank, 2018). Non-formal education (NFE) has emerged as a promising solution to bridge educational gaps where traditional schooling systems fall short (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). NFE programs are characterized by their flexibility in terms of curriculum, scheduling, and teaching methods, making them suitable for addressing the diverse needs of marginalized and out-of-school children (Rogers, 2004). In the context of South Asia, countries like Bhutan and India have developed and implemented various non-formal educational strategies aimed at reducing the number of OOSCs and improving educational outcomes (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

In the South Asian setting, NFE has shown promise in reaching out-of-school children through novel models such as community learning centers, accelerated learning programs, and informal educational initiatives. Comparative education and development studies are closely connected fields, with the former serving as an analytical and reflective foundation to influence the latter's emphasis and action for change (Little, 2000). In this vein, this article aims to use the concept of 'educational transfer', a significant issue in comparative education, to solve educational reach difficulties for 'out-of-school' children, who are a major concern for many developing nations in the global south. A comparative review of NFE tactics in Bhutan and India is intended to aid in understanding how these strategies might be tailored to the

Pakistani setting. Such an analysis enables the discovery of effective methods and the extraction of lessons that may be used to enhance Pakistan's approach to OOSC (Colclough, Lewin, & Crouch, 2000). By comparing the successes and challenges of NFE programs in Bhutan and India, this literature review aims to provide evidence-based recommendations that can enhance Pakistan's educational policies and programs (Beech, 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Out-of-School Children (OOSC): An Overview

There are two types of out-of-school children in Pakistan, according to the Ministry of Education and Training Government of Pakistan: those who never attended school and those who left before finishing elementary school (Government of Pakistan, 2019). This definition limits itself to primary schooling, but the government has said that it is obligated by the constitution to provide education for all children from the age of five to sixteen. Thus, all non-attendance or dropouts of this age range will be regarded as having completed their education in Pakistan, as this research contends. The dropout may occur at any stage before completing compulsory secondary schooling. Additionally, according to the UNESCO's (2005) definition of out-of-school children, children between the ages of five and sixteen who attend primary-age courses or students in non-formal institutions that do not have official accreditation are considered to be out of school in Pakistan. Nonetheless, there is ongoing discussion on the classification of out-of-school children due to differences in the ages at which schools should be started as well as between official and informal education. The definition of dropped-out children in the nation is also quite complicated.

Defining School Dropouts

Dropout means leaving school for any reason without completing formal education. As discussed by Khan, Azhar, and Shah (2001) it is explained that dropout means those students who discontinue the schooling cycle due to some reasons earlier than a program completed (Shah et al., 2017). According to Kotwal, and Rani (2007), a dropout child is a student who quits school before graduating for any reason other than death without enrolling in another school. On the other hand, the dropout rate has a significant impact on the present and future growth of a productive labor force (Perez & Salazar, 1993). However, according to Cambridge (2024), a dropout is "someone who quits from school, college, or university before earning a degree or someone who lives unusually." Oxford (2024) explains the term as "a person who rejects the ideas and ways of behaving that are accepted by the rest of society or a person who leaves school or college before they have finished their studies." The definition of dropout, according to Mughal and Aldridge (2017), is "generally

assigned to those students who enroll then do not complete compulsory level schooling before attaining their legal school age."

Types of Dropouts

Schargel and Smink (2014) categorized dropouts into three types, the first one is

- i. Dropouts: those schoolchildren who left school or going to leave.
- ii. Tune-outs: those who are enrolled in the school but avoid learning.
- iii. Force-out: those who are suspended or expelled (Mughal & Aldridge, 2017).

Furthermore, they explained that the first category can be simply classified, however, tune-outs cannot be detectable, while the third category dropouts are counted as mischief-makers whether they are inside the school or outside of the school. However, an increasing number of dropouts directly hits the economic cycle of the country as well as the social norms. Apart from this, dropping out at the high school level makes the foundation to damage a prosperous future and it paves a path to the progression of poverty (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Causes for Dropouts

The issue of Dropout is complex and multidimensional (Hunt, 2008). One of the most alarming causes pertains to basic human survival needs, i.e., hunger and extreme poverty, which in turn is a gigantic barrier to the attainment of SDG-4. More often, affording 'schooling' becomes a major challenge for poor parents whose struggle for basic survival consumes whatever little they can earn or not earn, ultimately being unable to afford fees and other resources to send their children to school (Sabates et al., 2011). Other issues related to dropouts include school distance, non-provision of basic amenities in school, overcrowded classrooms, a barrier to instructional language, non-availability of qualified teachers, and safety and security risks for girls in schools mention key ones (Colclough et al., 2000).

Dropout rates might have a variety of complicated reasons that differ throughout constituencies. The results of numerous studies on dropout rates point to several causes, including poverty, a long commute to school, a low standard of education, a lack of physical facilities, inexperienced teachers, irregular scheduling, a lack of female teachers in girls' schools, the medium of instruction, a security issue in girls' schools, crammed classrooms, and inadequate instructional supervision. Primary school retention and completion are mostly hampered by individual and familial circumstances, such as illiterate parents, poverty, and poor health (Shah, Haider, & Taj, 2019). In addition to these elements, children who speak different languages, immigrants, tribal cultures, orphans, and minority groups are among the social variables that increase the likelihood of dropping out (UNESCO, 2010).

Non-Formal Education: Concepts and Importance

Non-formal education (NFE) is the term used to describe organized educational activities that take place outside of the conventional school system. It is intended to address the learning requirements of people of all ages by delivering flexible, accessible, and context-relevant education. Unlike formal education, which has a rigorous curriculum and a set timetable, NFE adjusts to learners' needs and circumstances, making it an important instrument for lifelong learning (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; Rogers, 2004). The value of NFE stems from its potential to reach underrepresented people, such as out-of-school children (OOSC), who are frequently excluded from formal education owing to financial, cultural, or geographical restrictions (UNESCO, 2019). NFE programs can be adapted to target specific challenges such as literacy, occupational skills, health education, and civic involvement, promoting personal growth and community empowerment (Hoppers, 2006; Aitchison & Rule, 2015). As societies change, NFE plays an increasingly important role in supporting inclusive education and fulfilling SDG 4, which seeks to promote equal quality education for everyone (UNESCO, 2017).

Definition and Scope of Non-Formal Education

According to Cobbs and Ahmed (1974), non-formal education refers to any organized, methodical educational activity that is carried out outside of the official educational system to provide certain learning experiences to particular groups within society, such as adults and children. NFE includes a broad range of educational activities, including education for adults, health and hygiene education, vocational and skills training, literacy and numeracy programs, and community development initiatives (Rogers, 2004; Aitchison & Rule, 2015). These programs are often adaptable in terms of content, time, and delivery modalities, making them available to a wide range of learners, including those in rural and distant places (UNESCO, 2018). NFE's versatility enables it to successfully respond to the educational requirements of people and communities, filling gaps left by formal education institutions (Hoppers, 2006). Furthermore, NFE frequently stresses participatory and learner-centered techniques, which promote active engagement and practical application of knowledge (Aitchison & Rule, 2015). This wide and inclusive definition emphasizes NFE's ability to contribute considerably to social and economic development by providing learners with the skills and information required for personal and community improvement (UNESCO, 2017).

Role of Non-Formal Education in Addressing OOSC

Non-formal education is crucial in addressing the issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) by providing alternative learning routes for individuals who cannot attend formal education (UNESCO, 2018). NFE programs are especially successful in reaching disadvantaged populations, such as children from low-income families,

rural communities, and conflict-affected regions, who are frequently excluded from formal education due to a variety of hurdles (UNICEF, 2019). Community-based education efforts, such as those conducted in Bhutan and India, provide localized and culturally relevant education, resulting in a considerable reduction in OOSC (UNICEF Bhutan, 2000; Government of India, 2023). Furthermore, NFE's flexibility allows it to suit the different demands of OOSC by offering part-time, evening, and remote learning alternatives, allowing youngsters to mix schooling with other commitments (Hoppers, 2006; UNESCO, 2017). By combining vocational training, health education, and life skills into their curricula, NFE programs improve learners' employability and general well-being, contributing to broader social and economic growth (Aitchison & Rule, 2015; World Bank, 2020). Thus, non-formal education is an essential component of the worldwide endeavor to promote inclusive and equitable quality education for all, particularly in meeting the educational requirements of OOSC.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To Identify and Analyze Non-Formal Educational Strategies in Bhutan and India for Out-of-School Children
2. To analyze and extract valuable lessons from the non-formal educational strategies implemented in Bhutan and India to effectively address the issue of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Pakistan.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What specific non-formal educational strategies and initiatives have Bhutan and India implemented to successfully address the issue of OOSC?
2. What lessons can be learned from the non-formal educational strategies implied in Bhutan and India to address issue of the Out-of-School Children in Pakistan?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study employed the lens of comparative analysis of the secondary data for the identified problem of out-of-school-children (OOSC) in South Asia through a snowballing approach to reach out to the success stories or solutions by incorporating the theoretical framework of education transfer (Beech, 2006).

Inclusion criteria and search approach

We utilized the following databases to conduct extensive research for the comparative analysis of the out-of-school children problem through the lens of educational transfer in South Asia: UNICEF, World Bank, NGOs Reports, Ministry of Education, Research Gate, Eric Education, Scopus, and Google Scholar Database were explored and analyzed. The following terms were introduced: a) "out of school children" and "South Asia"; b) "School Dropouts" "SDG-4" and "South Asia"; c) "OOSC" "Non-

formal education" and "South Asia"; and d) "out of school children" and "Strategies and Interventions" and "South Asia". The title, abstract, and keywords all had these combinations. Because the educational landscape is continually changing, a time restriction of 2004–2022 was set. Finally, scholarly articles and journals written in English were used as an inclusion criterion. Unpublished research papers, comments, editorials, master's theses, and dissertations were all excluded.

Educational Transfer and Comparative Education

Beech (2006) asserts that research on comparative education is still influenced by educational transfer. The term "educational transfer" refers to the exchange of educational concepts, methods, or institutions across national boundaries. (p.2). It was determined that the idea of educational transfer was a procedure meant to address the subsequent pattern: First, a local issue was recognized; second, solutions were looked for in other educational systems; and third, a "tested" institution or educational approach—one that had succeeded or was thought to have succeeded—was modified for the new setting and put into use. These procedures went in the order mentioned above, chronologically (Beech 2006, 2).



Figure 1: *Five Steps of Educational Transfer*

The search and analysis of the data for the paper were guided by the above theoretical framework (derived from the operationalization of the notion of educational transfer), with subsequent re-construction and representation which structure the discussion in this paper.

Employing the Educational Transfer Framework in the Search Approach

The five steps of educational transfer were incorporated into the search process to consolidate the study findings: based on these the data excursion was taken using the reading and snowballing approach of the sources. For instance, 1) Identification of the local problem: local diagnostics of the problem faced in the context of OOSC in Pakistan, several reports from UNICEF, World Bank, Ministry of Education, NGOs' reports, and so forth were explored and analyzed. Having understood the situation, and the complexity of contexts (rural, semi-urban, urban variants and their subsequent impact on educational access and quality), 2) Search for Solution: the method proceeded with searching for cases of OOSC education/inclusion in other South Asian contexts. The reason for using countries of South Asia as a comparative dialogue reference was that these countries share similar historical, post-colonial, and socio-economic challenges within which the OOSC are situated, and hence studying these cases would make more sense due to their relevance and shared contextual characteristics. 3) Adaptation: Once a sketch of understanding of the cases was developed, focused reading of the 'success stories in Bhutan and India were made from where evidence and insights as to what has worked, which could be worthy of 'transfer' to improve and address educational access of OOSC in the local Pakistani context, and to deal with the challenges/opportunities prevails in transferring 4) Advocacy/Awareness: Advocacy and Awareness and 5) Action needs the interventions of the state departments and NGOs. The following sections of the paper unfold the process mentioned.

Snowballing from one country to another country case: Bhutan to India

The modern education system of Bhutan is influenced by the Indian education system that supports them in terms of policies, structure, and financial aid to promote education, and their recent education model known as the central school program is adopted by the Indian rural primary education system. (Dem 2019; Ministry of Education 2020). Given these findings, the research subsequently paid attention to India's Kerala state which was found to be the most successful in achieving success in addressing issues of OOSC.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**1. Non-Formal Educational Strategies and Initiatives in Bhutan and India to Address Out-of-School Children (OOSC)**

Addressing the problem of out-of-school children (OOSC) is the primary objective for many developing countries, such as India and Bhutan. Both countries have implemented an array of non-formal educational strategies and initiatives to address this issue. This section conducts a critical analysis of these solutions, emphasizing their scope, outcomes, implementation timetables, and the total amount

of the OOSC they have been able to handle. Every methodology is supported by many in-text citations, culminating in an exhaustive and robust analysis.

2. Non-Formal Educational Strategies in Bhutan

2.1. Non-Formal Education (NFE) Program

In Bhutan, the Non-Formal Education (NFE) Program was started in 1992 with the main objective of teaching OOSC and illiterate people the fundamentals of reading and numeracy, especially in rural areas (Government of Bhutan, 2020. a). Over 200,000 pupils have benefited from this program by 2020, significantly raising the nation's literacy rates (Dorji, 2019; UNICEF Bhutan, 2020a). Because of its emphasis on flexible learning schedules, the NFE Program is available to individuals from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds who might otherwise be unable to attend traditional schools. Nevertheless, the program faces challenges including scarce funding, preserving a high standard of instruction, and incorporating NFE participants into the official school system (Dorji, 2019; World Bank, 2020).

2.2. Community Learning Centers (CLCs)

Bhutan established Community Learning Centers (CLCs) to provide chances for lifelong learning, including OOSC, to impoverished areas. Numerous educational programs, such as health education, basic literacy instruction, and vocational training, are offered by these establishments (Government of Bhutan, 2019). Through community education, CLCs have contributed significantly to the achievement of OOSC since its founding in the late 1990s (Dorji, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Thousands of students have been accommodated in CLCs by 2020, however precise figures aren't often disclosed. The inefficiency of CLCs is caused by inadequate funding, a shortage of trained facilitators, and limited community involvement (UNICEF Bhutan, 2020b; World Bank, 2020).

2.3. Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Centers

The Bhutanese ECCD Centers aim to prepare children ages 3-5 for formal schooling by offering pre-primary education and care. These facilities, which were established in the early 2000s, have significantly enhanced young children's preparation for school, especially in rural areas (Government of Bhutan, 2019; UNICEF Bhutan, 2020b). Over 15,000 kids have registered at ECCD Centers throughout the nation by 2020. Notwithstanding their achievements, issues include inadequate infrastructure, a dearth of highly qualified instructors, and uneven service quality (Dorji 2019; World Bank 2020).

2.4. Mobile Schools

Since its founding in 2009, mobile schools of Bhutan have worked to provide education to groups of people who live nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles and

would not otherwise be able to attend normal schools (Government of Bhutan, 2019). By offering flexible study hours and a curriculum tailored to the local environment, these schools become extensions of their communities. Roughly 1,000 pupils had been served by Mobile Schools by 2020. Logistical problems, preserving a high standard of education, and resource scarcity are among the difficulties (UNICEF Bhutan, 2020b; UNESCO, 2021).

2.5. Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE)

The 2010-launched NFPE program targets OOSC (9–14 years old) who have never attended school or who left before completing their primary schooling (Government of Bhutan, 2019). With the help of this curriculum, children may learn more quickly and transition to formal education. About five thousand children have been enrolled in the NFPE by 2020. Still, it faces challenges such as high rates of student dropout, inadequate resources for instruction, and trouble integrating students into formal education (Dorji, 2019; World Bank, 2020).

2.6. Youth Centers

Youth Centers in Bhutan provide educational and vocational training to adolescents and young adults who have dropped out of school or are jobless (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2019). These centers, which opened in the early 2010s, offer a safe environment for learning and skill development. By 2020, more than 3,000 young people had benefitted from youth centers. Limited finances, a shortage of skilled staff, and the need for more comprehensive support services are among the challenges (UNICEF Bhutan, 2020a; World Bank, 2020).

2.7. Distance Education Programs

In Bhutan, distance education programs were started in the late 2000s with the goal of providing educational opportunities to those who are unable to attend traditional schools due to socioeconomic or geographic constraints (Government of Bhutan, 2019). These programs provide educational content via the Internet, television, and radio. Approximately 10,000 pupils will have benefitted from remote learning initiatives by 2020. Restrictions on technological use, ensuring the quality of the curriculum, and successfully involving students are among the challenges (Dorji, 2019; World Bank, 2020).

3. Non-Formal Educational Strategies in India

3.1. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) of India was launched in 2001 as a flagship program to use both formal and informal means to achieve primary education universalization. The SSA provided free and required education to all children

between the ages of 6 and 14 in an effort to narrow the educational gap (MHRD, 2021; Jhingran, 2019). Over 200 million children had been reached by SSA by 2020, significantly increasing enrollment and lowering dropout rates nationwide (Dreze & Sen, 2019; World Bank, 2020). The program included residential facilities for kids from impoverished regions, training centers tailored to OOSCs, and bridging courses to ease their transfer into mainstream education (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF India, 2021). Even with its achievements, SSA nevertheless had to deal with issues including poor infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, and low educational standards, especially in rural regions (Jhingran, 2019; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

3.2. Mid-Day Meal Scheme

In 1995, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme was launched with the aim of improving school-age children's nutritional status and boosting their attendance at government-aided and public schools by providing free meals (Dreze & Khera, 2017; MHRD, 2021). In particular, among OOSCs from low-income households, this campaign increased enrollment and retention rates (Jhingran, 2019; UNICEF India, 2021). According to Dreze and Sen (2019) and the World Bank (2020), the system was providing school meals to more than 120 million pupils daily by 2020, making it one of the biggest school feeding programs globally. But logistics, hygiene, and food quality have proven to be challenges for the program (Dreze & Khera, 2017; Jhingran, 2019).

3.3. Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE)

In order to provide OOSC with educational opportunities, the Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) component of SSA uses non-formal methods such residential camps, back-to-school camps, and bridge courses (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF India, 2021). According to Jhingran (2019) and Dreze & Sen (2019), the AIE offered individualized curriculum and flexible learning schedules in an effort to include OOSC into formal education. Though comprehensive national-level data is hard to come by, the AIE has successfully mainstreamed millions of OOSCs by 2020. Problems include uneven educational quality, inadequate training for facilitators, and a deficiency of reliable monitoring mechanisms may restrict the utility of the AIE (Jhingran, 2019; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

3.4. National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS)

Established in 1989, the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) offers adaptable educational options through open and distant learning approaches. OOSC, adults, and school dropouts would be educated via NIOS, which will enable them to continue their education at their own pace (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF India, 2021). With courses ranging from elementary to senior secondary levels as well as vocational training, NIOS had over 2.5 million students registered by 2020 (Dreze & Sen, 2019; World Bank, 2020). NIOS has difficulties in spite of its scale, including

upholding the caliber of its curriculum, offering sufficient learner assistance, and reintegrating its graduates into the regular educational system (Jhingran, 2019; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

3.5. Residential Bridge Courses (RBCs)

Under SSA, Residential Bridge Courses (RBCs) are designed to provide OOSC and school dropouts with intensive educational support in order to prepare them for reintegration into formal schooling. These six-to-twelve-month courses emphasize fast learning to bridge educational disparities (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF India, 2021). Thousands of children, mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been successfully enrolled and mainstreamed by RBCs by 2020 (Dreze & Sen, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Providing constant educational quality, enough funding, and qualified facilitators are among the difficulties (Jhingran, 2019; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

3.6. Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)

The goal of the 2004-launched Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) project is to give girls from disadvantaged families—like OOSC—access to residential schooling. Targeting girls from marginalized areas, the initiative makes sure they may attend school in a safe and encouraging setting (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF India, 2021). In India, KGBVs have taken in over 400,000 female residents by 2020 (Dreze & Sen, 2019; World Bank, 2020). The difficulties include maintaining the standard of education, ensuring enough infrastructure, and removing sociocultural barriers that prevent women from pursuing higher education (Jhingran, 2019; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

3.7. Open Basic Education (OBE)

The Open Basic Education (OBE) program of NIOS provides non-formal education at the primary level to out-of-school children (OOSC) and school dropouts. The program's flexibility in terms of time, place, and learning pace caters to a wide range of learners' needs (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF India, 2021). OBE provides students with an alternative path to completing their basic education, and by 2020, it has enrolled over a million students (Dreze & Sen, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Among the challenges are ensuring that learners receive adequate support, facilitating the transition of OBE graduates into formal education or vocational training (Jhingran, 2019; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

DISCUSSIONS

In 2000, Bhutan had over 32,000 out-of-school children (OOSC), or about 19% of the population that was of school age. By 2023, however, this number had drastically decreased to about 5,000, or less than 2% of the relevant population. India, with far

more challenges, was predicted to have 40 million OOSC in 2000, or around 18% of the population of school age. But by 2023, India has reduced this number to about 6 million, or about 2.5 percent of the population that is of school age (UNESCO, 2001; Government of India, 2023). Pakistan, on the other hand, has seen less improvement; in 2000, there were over 20 million OOSCs, or over 30% of the country's school-age population. Although the number had decreased to around 22.8 million by 2023, it still represented about 19% of the relevant population, indicating that there are still problems with educational access (UNICEF Pakistan, 2000; Government of Pakistan, 2023). These numbers show the different degrees of success that the three countries have had with educational initiatives; whereas Pakistan is still having trouble with high percentages of out-of-school children, Bhutan and India have made notable advancements. Pakistan may learn a lot from India's and Bhutan's approaches. Designing more effective educational policies and programs can benefit from learning from these studies in a variety of contexts, including Pakistan.

Bhutan more invested on educational access especially in rural areas.

In order to serve nomadic and remote groups, flexible, context-specific solutions are essential, as demonstrated by Bhutan's Mobile Schools and India's RBCs (Government of Bhutan, 2019; MHRD, 2021). Pakistan's initiative, Mobile Schools, aims to do this, but in order to attain comparable success, it requires more stringent implementation and support (Government of Pakistan, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Bhutan and India have successfully used community-based education to address educational disparities, especially in distant and neglected areas.

The Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in Bhutan have been instrumental in advancing lifelong learning and employability by integrating the community into the teaching process (UNESCO, 2021; Dorji, 2019). Additionally emphasizing decentralized educational delivery, India's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) involves local stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring processes (MHRD, 2021; Jhingran, 2019). The Non-Formal Basic Education (NFBE) program in Pakistan, on the other hand, has challenges such as poor community involvement, a lack of certified facilitators, and inconsistent funding (Government of Pakistan, 2020; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020).

The incorporation of nutritional and health assistance into educational programs has played a critical role in India's success.

By addressing hunger and malnutrition, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has significantly enhanced student attendance and retention (Dreze & Khera, 2017; UNICEF India, 2021). Similar initiatives, however smaller in scope, have also been introduced in Bhutan to guarantee that kids receive the right nutrition to support their education (UNICEF Bhutan, 2020a; Government of Bhutan, 2019). Unfortunately, Pakistan

does not have a comprehensive national program that integrates nutrition and education, which remains a significant barrier to many children's regular attendance at school and learning (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

India's Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)

This project has played an important role in promoting girls' education by offering residential schooling to underprivileged girls (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF India, 2021). This targeted approach has helped close the gender gap in education. Through community- and school-based programs, Bhutan has also attempted to increase gender equality in education (Government of Bhutan, 2020b). Pakistan still has gender disparities, and initiatives to help girls learn better, like the Girls' Education Initiative, are occasionally impeded by funding shortages and cultural opposition (Government of Pakistan, 2020; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020).

Flexible learning choices are critical in meeting the requirements of OOSC who are unable to attend standard schools.

For working children, women, and those residing in remote areas, India's National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and Open Basic Education (OBE) programs offer flexible learning opportunities (MHRD, 2021; Dreze & Sen, 2019). Bhutan offers similarly flexible online education programs, especially for adults and women who wish to pursue further education (Government of Bhutan, 2019; UNICEF Bhutan, 2020b). In order to reach their full potential, Pakistan's remote learning initiatives need significant development and support (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Both Bhutan and India have included vocational training in their educational systems to improve employability and develop practical skills (Dorji, 2019; MHRD, 2021).

This approach ensures that students acquire skills that are instantly applicable in the workforce in addition to engaging OOSC. Many institutions in Pakistan provide vocational training, yet there is occasionally a lack of coherence and alignment between these programs and broader educational objectives.

The use of technology in education has grown in India, with efforts such as digital classrooms and e-learning platforms becoming more popular (UNICEF India, 2021, Jhingran, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these technological approaches were crucial in ensuring the continuation of schooling. Bhutan has also utilized technology to some degree, although there are issues because of infrastructural limitations (Government of Bhutan, 2019). Due to obstacles including the digital divide, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted internet access, Pakistan is still in the early phases of

using educational technology (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Comparative analysis reveals many important areas where Pakistan may benefit from the experiences of Bhutan and India. Firstly, decentralized educational systems with community engagement have proven successful in Bhutan and India; this suggests that Pakistan should strive to incorporate the community more in its educational project. It is possible to significantly increase school attendance and retention in Pakistan by integrating nutritional support into educational efforts like India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Third, Pakistan should take more steps to support girls' education as targeted gender-specific initiatives are essential for addressing educational disparities. India and Bhutan have addressed OOSC more successfully by implementing extensive and flexible non-formal education programs. For Pakistan to achieve similar outcomes, its current strategies must be strengthened. Pakistan ought to increase its funding for community-based education, provide all-encompassing support services like midday meals, and increase its possibilities for distant learning, taking inspiration from the experiences of Bhutan and India. It will be essential for Pakistan to address these issues if it hopes to give every kid inclusive access to education.

The literature shows large discrepancies in the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Bhutan, India, and Pakistan. Bhutan has made commendable progress in reducing OOSC numbers through targeted non-formal education (NFE) measures. India, despite its large population, has a smaller proportion of OOSC due to massive educational endeavors. Pakistan, on the other hand, has the most serious difficulty, with a large proportion of its school-age population not attending school. Pakistan could build on the successful parts of Bhutanese and Indian programs by boosting community-based education, including nutritional and health assistance in educational initiatives, extending gender-specific programs, and improving flexible learning possibilities. Furthermore, boosting expenditures in vocational training and technology integration will be critical to establishing a more inclusive and successful educational system for all students. By following these recommendations, Pakistan may create a stronger and comprehensive framework to meet the problems posed by OOSC and work toward universal education for all children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Recommendations for Improving Inclusive Access for Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Pakistan: Insights from Bhutan and India.

Pakistan may gain significant lessons by comparing the non-formal educational systems in Bhutan and India as it works to intensify its efforts to address the issue of out-of-school children (OOSC). A critical analysis of the successes and failures of

Indian and Bhutanese approaches produces some important policy recommendations for Pakistan. This critical literature review examines these assertions and provides workable ideas for expanding OOSC educational access in Pakistan by utilizing both historical and current research.

1. Strengthening Community-Based Education Programs: Community-based education initiatives have shown to be extremely effective in Bhutan and India, offering lessons for Pakistan.

Two well-known examples of successful community involvement in education are Bhutan's Community Learning Centers (CLCs) and India's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (UNESCO, 2021; MHRD, 2021). While SSA has enrolled millions of children through decentralized education programs, CLCs have served over 10,000 students, with a focus on adult literacy and vocational training (Dorji, 2019). (Jhingran, 2019). On the other hand, limited community engagement and unequal implementation have plagued Pakistan's community-based initiatives, such the Non-Formal Basic Education (NFBE) program (Government of Pakistan, 2020; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020). Pakistan must create a more thorough framework for community participation—akin to the SSA model—that includes regional stakeholders in the planning and execution of educational programs if it hopes to make improvements. Enhancing program efficacy and sustainability can be achieved by raising community ownership and involvement (Jhingran, 2019; MHRD, 2021).

2. Integrating Nutritional and Health Support into Education Programs: India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Bhutan's School Meal Program have proved the need to include nutritional support within educational frameworks.

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme has been successful in addressing children's hunger and malnutrition, which has increased school attendance and lowered dropout rates (Dreze & Khera, 2017). Although it is more recent and has a smaller reach, Bhutan's School Meal Program has also contributed to improved educational outcomes (UNICEF Bhutan, 2020a). In addition, Pakistan does not have a comprehensive program of nutritional support associated with education, which is a deterrent to high rates of attendance and retention (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020; World Bank, 2020). In order to guarantee that children in Pakistani schools receive regular, wholesome meals, especially in impoverished neighborhoods and rural regions, a national school lunch program must be established and implemented. In order to be successful, the program must be modeled after India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme and have adequate funding, competent management, and regular oversight (Dreze & Khera, 2017; UNICEF India, 2021).

3. Expanding Gender-Specific Educational Programs: India's Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) project has been a cornerstone of efforts to

enhance girls' education by providing residential schooling to poor girls.

Bhutan is working on a number of programs aimed at promoting gender equality in education, however its efforts are not as extensive. Female enrollment and retention rates have increased, indicating that these programs have significantly reduced gender disparities in education. Gender disparities in educational access persist despite efforts like the Girls' Education Initiative (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020). Pakistan must develop targeted initiatives akin to KGBV in order to address this, with a particular emphasis on giving girls, especially those living in underprivileged and rural areas, safe, accessible, and high-quality education. Incentives for girls to attend school should be part of policy, as should initiatives to remove obstacles such as early marriage and gender-based violence (MHRD, 2021; Government of Bhutan, 2020a).

4. Enhancing Flexible Learning Opportunities: India's National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), and its Open Basic Education (OBE) programs provide flexible learning opportunities for OOSC.

These initiatives have been successful in serving kids who face barriers related to their jobs or other circumstances that prevent them from attending regular schools. For both adults and children, Bhutan's distant education programs, including the Bhutan Open School, offer flexible learning options. Pakistan's current remote learning initiatives pale in comparison to the scope and impact of similar initiatives in India and Bhutan. Pakistan must include flexible learning options into the national education framework and increase the scope of its online education programs in order to make improvements. To support OOSC successfully, this expansion should include a robust digital infrastructure, teacher training, and readily accessible learning resources (MHRD, 2021; UNICEF Bhutan, 2020b).

5. Integrating Vocational Training into Educational Frameworks: Bhutan and India have both integrated vocational training into their educational systems to improve the employability of OOSC graduates.

Through community-based programs, Bhutan's vocational training efforts improve skills. Indian attempts have attempted to integrate occupational skills with formal education, such as the National Occupational Education Qualification Framework (NVEQF), which was proposed in 2012 (MHRD, 2021). According to the Government of Pakistan (2020) and UNICEF Pakistan (2020), Pakistan's vocational training programs are often disjointed and irrelevant to the needs of the labor market. Enhancing the quality of training programs to meet the needs of the labor market and make them accessible to OOSC would need Pakistan to expand its efforts in vocational education by creating a cohesive framework that integrates vocational education with the general education system (Dorji, 2019; MHRD, 2021).

6. Expanding Technological Integration in Education: Technological

integration has played an important role in India and Bhutan's educational systems.

Technology has made education more accessible because to Indian initiatives like the Digital India Program and many e-learning platforms (UNICEF India, 2021; Jhingran, 2019). Bhutan has found success in reaching rural areas with its use of technology for education (Government of Bhutan, 2019). With issues like the digital divide and inadequate infrastructure, Pakistan's educational technology initiatives are still in the early stages of growth (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020; World Bank, 2020). In order to create digital infrastructure, educate educators, and provide OOSC with easily available and efficient e-learning resources, Pakistan must spend more in educational technology (Jhingran, 2019; Government of Bhutan, 2019).

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