Challenges Faced By an NGO in Retaining Public School Students: A Case Study

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Abstract

The current study investigated the opportunities to overcome the high dropout rate from public schools. One of the public schools, which was transformed into a model school by a prominent NGO of Pakistan, was selected for the collection of data. Realizing the need to get an in-depth knowledge of the issue, qualitative study was conducted. Case study approach was used, observations and interviews were employed. Using semi structured questionnaires, interviews of administration, teachers and students were conducted. Lack of facilities at schools, poverty, illiteracy of parents, absenteeism etc. were found significant challenges in retaining students at school. The situation can be overcome by providing neat and clean environment, spacious classrooms and better furniture, well equipped labs and libraries, high quality sports and art facilities, separate toilet facilities for boys and girls and cafeteria for healthy diet or nutrition.

Keywords: Dropout, NGO, public schools, malnutrition, administrative issues

Introduction

Pakistan is confronting a major issue of high dropout rate of children from school. While considering the situation of education in Pakistan, previously, it was observed that the dropout rate in rural areas of Pakistan is increasing day by day however, it drastically increased in urban areas from 10% to 25% during 2020 (Abbasi, 2021). Presently, it has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC) with an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 not attending school, representing 44 per cent of the total population in this age group (UNICEF, 2021). Sabates (2010) states that a substantial number of children leave schools even before achieving their foundation education. The issue is very intense that only a government cannot resolve it alone, therefore civil societies, NGOs and donor agencies are striving to retain young students at school. Tandon (1988) points out the alarming situation of education and suggests the NGOs to come up to overcome it as governments cannot do it alone. NGOs face difficulties in retaining students at public schools but they have struggled immensely achieve their goals. This research project explored the challenges faced by an NGO in retaining students at primary level in a public school. This case study focused on an NGO which turned a public school into a model school. This research was conducted to investigate the challenges faced by the NGO in decreasing dropouts and retaining students at primary level. For data collection, the school was visited for observation and group interviews were conducted with teachers, students, admin staff and the principal and project director. Semi structured questionnaire and a checklist for observation were formulated.

High dropout from school is common among all underdeveloped countries but the situation is worse in Pakistan as it has the second highest number in the world only after Nigeria (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2017). According to UNICEF (2021), a report prepared by Pak Alliance for Maths and Science (PAMS, 21), Pakistan has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC) with an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 not attending school, representing 44 per cent of the total population in this age group.

To retain students at primary school is a big challenge in the countries where dropout rate is higher, and NGOs are assisting governments to overcome the situation. In Pakistan as well, NGOs are playing vital role in helping the government to spread education and to retain students at schools, but they face many challenges in it.

Literature Review

The problem of dropping out from public schools is serious in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas (Mughal A. W., 2019). Usually, underdeveloped countries are facing students' high dropout rates from schools or a s high number of children out of school. An enormous number of people on the globe has either never gone or left schools before getting the fundamental education. The society is struggling to ensure pupils to complete their education especially the foundation level. A positive sign can be seen in the increase of new students' enrollment in Pakistan but there is no significant decrease in the dropout rate. According to Sabates (2010), a substantial number of children leave schools even before achieving their foundation education. Hunt (2008) unveils the issue more that dropout is usually a procedure instead of an outcome of any one incident, and it may have more than one cause. Hence, there can possibly be various reasons of dropout, but poverty is found top of the list in all. Some reasons based on individuals, such as illness, malnourishment, getting failed in a class, losing interest in studies. Similarly, some causes relate to young students' domestic condition such as child labor, poverty, gender biasness, domestic violence, parents' illiteracy etc. Excluding individual and family aspects, schools can also be the cause of escalating percentage of dropout such as, unsatisfactory condition of teaching, teachers' culture of absenteeism, teachers' arrogance, inappropriate location of school and shortage of facilities there. Sabates (2010) describes further that education system may affect some communities' culture or beliefs that may eventually come out as a result of children's dropout from school. Colclough (2000) adds to the list for dropout and includes distance to schools, poor quality of education, inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, inappropriate language of instruction, teacher absenteeism and, in the case of girls school safety are common.

Poverty interacts with other points of social disadvantage with the interaction of factors putting further pressure on vulnerable and marginalized children to dropout (Hunt, 2008). Bhutta (2017) explains that Pakistan is facing the problem of malnutrition that is one of the biggest problems of out of school children (OOSC). According to UNESCO (2010), children who do not attend schooling after the fourth grade in both Bulgaria and Romania is estimated up to 15-20 % and 30%. The reason for this issue is poverty as the schooling expenses such as school fees and other cost towards education are high which could not be manageable by the parents. Because of the

growing cost of education, these children are forced to join the workforce to earn money for the household rather than attending school (Sabates, 2010).

Another important reason for school dropout can be the gender bias. This is mainly due to the societal practices in the families, communities, and schools' policies for giving admissions to girls and boys (Sabates, 2010). The school dropout is also common among the poor indigenous girls than the non-poor girls of Guatemala nonindigenous girls (UNESCO, 2010). In most of the circumstances, dropout rate is higher among girls as they have less access and more prone to dropping out more and more due to poverty and the urban environments.

While the gender-based practices prevailing in the society, school safety seems to be another important concern for retaining girls at schools, on the other hand the available earning opportunities with flexible seasonal schooling could maintain or promote the retention of boys at school (Colclough, 2000).

The parents' decision making of continuation of their children in primary school entirely depends on the availability of choices open to secondary school education. The perceived standard of education and the capabilities of children to make progress in an education system influence the importance placed on schools within the family (Sabates, 2010).

Another aspect on the continuity of education of children depends up on the parents' educational level and their occupation. It is an evident that children usually attend school for longer time whose parents have studied and received school education especially the female students whose mothers have some formal schooling and did not drop out from school (Lloyd, Mete & Grant, 2009).

Poor academic achievements, over age of students, repeating grades, absenteeism, withdrawal or risk of early withdrawal from school are all the reasons for school drop out in many cases (Hunt, 2008; Lewin, 2008; Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009). It is not clear that children repeating grades increases the probability of completion, however, it is evident that failing and repeating grades extends the range of age of children in a particular grade which in fact add up to the likelihood of school dropout (Sabates, 2010).

Instructing children of different age level in one grade necessitates a lot preparation in the teaching learning process as well as the curriculum (Little, 2008). Still, the age range in grade 1

could range from 4-11 years in some countries and in Grade 6 from 10 to 21 years in another country (Lewin, 2007).

Poor academic achievements, over age of students, repeating grades, absenteeism, withdrawal or risk of early withdrawal from school are all the reasons to limit the number of students in schools as the older students may face increased pressure to earn money for the family (EPDC, 2009).

Education for All (2003) meeting stated that successive government have declared numerous programs to support literacy, and specifically for women, however, these statements are yet to translated due to social, political and cultural barriers. Even though the government are working efficiently to provide good basic education to all children, it is practically not possible because of many restrictions, so the governments have to collaborate with NGOs to share the burden and to support the reason for spreading education in the country (Reba, 2011).

Tandon (1988) reveals that since emerging or developing countries have a depressing performance in the arena of education; NGOs must overcome the weaknesses or shortcomings of the government and have to develop their standing, expand their authority, and discover their possible obligations. Nevertheless, it should be taken as a responsibility by the government and NGOs to collaborate and support each other in expanding education.

Many NGOs are operating in Pakistan, particularly maintaining and promoting the quality basic education. The research study selected renowned NGOs which is functioning effectively for the past many years. The primary motive of the NGO is to deliver good quality education to the underprivileged students of the community. This NGO adopted a government school of school in Karachi and transformed it into a model school by modernizing and developing the entire system of the school. The government collaborated with the NGO so that the enrollment of the student has in fact increased while decreasing the dropout rate significantly. The research project evolved to investigate on the challenges faced by the NGOs in retaining the students at primary level.

Purpose of the study

The study was framed to find out the challenges faced by an NGO in retaining students at primary level in public schools. This study was framed to look for the difficulties in retaining students at primary level in public schools. The research project set out to find the challenges

faced by an NGO in retaining students at primary level in public schools. The research also aimed to explore how an NGO gets success in retaining primary level students at a public school in Pakistan by facing all the challenges.

Research Questions

In order to find out the challenges faced by an NGO in retaining students at primary level in public schools, and how does it get success in retaining students at primary level in public schools, this study posits and answers the following research questions:

- What are the challenges and to what extent does an NGO face them in retaining students at primary level in public schools?
- How does an NGO get success in retaining students at primary level in public schools by facing all challenges in its way?

Research Methodology

A case study approach was used to collect the data. Stake (1995) described case study methodology as a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in-depth a program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals. The study was designed to investigate the challenges faced by an NGO in retaining students at primary level in public schools. The case for the research was previously a public school of Karachi. Students enrolled in this school come from under-privileged families. The NGO has taken it over a few years back and turned it into a model school. For this study, the data was collected through in-depth interviews, and additionally the observations at the school where the study was conducted. Specifically, interviews were conducted, and video recorded, tapes were transcribed into word documents, and data were coded for emergent themes. The interviews were semi structured with open ended questions. For the further data collection, the school was visited, and observations were made. A checklist was prepared and used for the observation. The official website of the school was also used for some very basic but important information. In a case study, it is important to converge sources of data, also known as triangulation, to ensure comprehensive results that reflect the participants' understandings as accurately as possible. Yin (2009) and Stake (2000) concur that triangulation is crucial to performing a case study reliably. Therefore, the researchers have used the triangulation method to bring reliability in the study.

Tools

Three sources were used for data collection: interviews (video recorded and later transcribed), observations (general and specific observation of the whole school), and the website of the NGO (analysed for content relevant to the study). Prior permission was taken, and consent forms were sent out to the participants. Semi structured questionnaires with open ended questions were prepared for the individual interviews. A checklist was also prepared and used for the observations at the school.

Participants

The participants of the study were the project director, the school principal, the admin staff, the teachers, and the students. Random sampling was used to select four students (grade five), four teachers and four admin staff for the interviews. The selection of participants (project director and school principal) for this study was based on a strategy referred to as, "purposeful selection" which, by one definition (Maxwell, 2005), denotes that a selection strategy in which particular settings, persons or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices. Selecting project director and school principal to be interviewed for this study was purposeful as they were leading the respective school and would be able to share the administrative issues and decisions in facing the challenges to retain the primary level students at the school.

The school

A public school was selected for the study that was taken over by THE NGO in November 2007 with the aim of transforming it into a model school. Previously, there were seven different public schools which were running at the same building of THE SCHOOL. There were morning and evening shift schools from them some were co-education whereas some were separate schools for boys and girls. These were primary and secondary level schools. After taking over, they all were merged and made only girls' school from pre-primary to secondary. It is located at Garden East Karachi and surrounded with the localities of lower-class people. Most of the students at the school were coming from Garden and Lyari areas and belonged to very poor families. Their mother tongues were Urdu, Balochi, Sindhi, Pashto, Punjabi, Kachi, Gujrati etc. THE SCHOOL had more than 2300 students altogether, from which, almost 1600 students were in primary

classes and 300 students in pre-primary section. The number of enrolments had increased to 1200 in the year 2012 that was a record in the school's history.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

Prior permission was taken, and consent forms were sent out to the participants. For the protection of personal and institutional privacy, the names are not disclosed. For the current study, the names were assumed as THE SCHOOL, THE NGO and student, teacher, admin staff and principal etc.

Findings

The findings of the study can be divided into two sections: a) Observations and b) Interviews.

a) Observations

The Environment and the building.

We visited THE SCHOOL for the observation and interviews on Saturday. The Sindh government had already announced Saturdays and Sundays as holidays for all public schools, but even then the whole school was found working like a normal working day. All teachers and students were found busy in their work. The school building was neat and clean. The guards and staff were asking, checking and helping the parents and visitors. The whole environment of the school was much disciplined. The school had a big and impressive building with spacious and airy classrooms. It had fully furnished offices and teachers' staff rooms. The spacious and beautiful art room had big tables in it. The beautiful neat and clean cafeteria was found providing better food at low prices to the students. There was a big school library with thousands of books and famous students' journal.

Pre- Primary, Primary and Secondary Sections.

All three sections were separate. For pre primary, the spacious and beautiful classrooms, fully equipped with modern technology, were set up. Over 300 students of pre-primary section were provided breakfast by THE NGO daily. Almost 1600 students were studying in primary section. There were different things according to their level and interests like books in the library, sports goods area to play and separate computer lab etc.

Indoor and Outdoor Sports.

There were different playgrounds for different sports and the hockey, football and cricket grounds were in very good condition. For basketball and volleyball, there were also some separate and well constructed play areas. Some students were learning Taekwondo whereas some students were doing skating. An instructor was telling the rules of playing chess to some students that was quite surprising.

The use of modern technology.

The school is fully equipped with the modern technology. To overcome the problem of electricity load shedding, there were stand by generators. Some rooms: like offices and meeting rooms etc. were air-conditioned. There were two big and well-equipped computer labs for senior and junior class students. Big projectors were also found there. A modern and fully equipped AV room was found as one of the extraordinary features of the school. The students could watch different educational programs and movies. There were electric water coolers at different places for students of distinct sections.

Cleanliness, health, and safety.

THE SCHOOL was found neat and clean as all the classrooms, labs, library, art room, AV room, and offices even the washrooms were very clean. The grounds and the pathway had no garbage as usually found at different public schools. All students were wearing neat and clean uniforms; that is not an easy thing for poor children of Lyari and Garden areas as there is a big problem of water. For the students' better health and safety, a doctor was appointed and medical room with other essential facilities was set up.

The teaching and admin staff.

THE SCHOOL had teaching and non-teaching staff from both the government and THE NGO. A staff of more than 100 teachers was teaching at the school, from which, almost 10% teachers were appointed and designated by THE NGO whereas the 90% are government teachers. A highly educated lady, holding MBA and MA degrees, was heading the team as the project

director. Moreover, a very seasoned lady was performing her duties as the principal of the school. The cooperation of the principal and the government teachers with the team of THE NGO showed their commitment with their duties that gave complete support to make the project successful.

Books.

It was observed that the school was teaching all books of the Sindh government's prescribed course except English, mathematics, and Urdu. A renowned international publisher's books were being used for teaching these three subjects. The Sindh government was providing free books to all students at public schools. Therefore, the students were to buy notebooks and private publisher's books only.

Workshops and training sessions.

Another unique quality was observed from the notice board that the school organized different workshops and programmes not only for the teachers' training but for parents as well.

b) Interviews

From the interviews, the following themes emerged out from the responses of the students, the teachers, the admin staff, the principal and the project director:

Povertv.

Poverty came out as a major issue or a challenge for THE NGO to retain primary level students at the public school. The interview findings revealed that all the students belonged to lower class families. The major reason for leaving their previous schools was the lack of affordability of expenses occurred on education. A student asserted about the issue that she observed at her previous school, "The students were not able to afford studies as their parents were so poor". The project director and the principal asserted that there is no fee at the school; books are provided by THE NGO and the government. THE NGO helped even in paying the fees of the board's exam.

Child labour.

A student shared another student's problem that left school due to poverty. She stated, "At my previous school, one of class fellows used to work on a mechanic shop. The teachers always scolded him for not having stationery, books and notebooks".

Joblessness.

During the interview, the teachers said that some students' parents stopped them sending to the school for their poverty and joblessness. Sometimes, administration arranged jobs for the jobless parents so that their children could continue their studies. The parents are counselled successfully to send their children to school daily and THE NGO will try to ensure the availability of uniforms, books, notebooks etc.

Lack of facilities at school.

Another important challenge that an NGO faces, in retaining primary level students, is the lack of facilities at a public school. The study shows that lack of facilities at school directly affects the students' motivation.

Insufficient space/ overcrowded classrooms.

During the interview a student revealed the cause for leaving her previous school was insufficient place to sit. She asserted, "At my previous school, four or five students were forced to sit on a desk. It was very difficult to complete the work because of the shortage of space and my handwriting was very bad. Now I am happy that only two students are seated on a desk at this school. I can complete my work on time and now my handwriting has also improved."

Lack of library, labs, cafeteria, and art room.

The students shared that they had no facilities of library, labs, cafeteria, or art rooms even they had never had such concept of these things before. A student showed her likeness in this way, "I like computer lab very much. At my previous school, we were showed a computer and were asked to write some questions and memorize. I could never use computer like this before." A student appreciated all the facilities at THE SCHOOL in these words. "We have a beautiful cafeteria, an audio-visual room and a big art room here".

Lack of sports facilities.

Lack of sports facilities is another cause of students' lack of interest in school and studies. The students showed their pride that they were studying at a school that had big playgrounds and

different favourite sports for them like hockey, football, cricket, basket ball and volley ball etc. One student asserted, "I like all sports facilities like indoor and outdoor games, big playgrounds, sports goods etc." Another student said, "I never miss my school as I play interesting sports with my friends daily in our PT period or in recess time at the school."

Lack of cleanliness and maintenance.

Cleanliness is also a challenge for NGOs to retain students at a public school and ZT faced it successfully. During the interview one of the students responded over a question, "The whole building of this school is very beautiful and clean and I like it the most."

Similarly, a teacher appreciated both THE NGO and the government. She said, "The condition of the school was very bad. There was no proper system of cleanliness. The classrooms, offices, washrooms etc. were in the worst condition. The furniture, doors and windows were broken."

Lack of modern technology.

THE NGO faced the lack of modern technology at THE SCHOOL at the beginning because when they took over the school it had nothing in it; not even a single fan in the school building. The students were enjoying the facilities of fans, air conditioners, stand-by generators, computers, projectors and electric water coolers etc. The admin staff told that the facilities THE NGO provided to the students were unique. A staff member appreciated it very much. One of them said, "The students are usually regular as due to electricity load shedding they face difficulties at their houses and prefer to come to school as it has stand by generators."

Low standard of teachers.

Teachers' abilities, skills, knowledge and professional commitment are very important in retaining students at school.

Harsh attitude of teachers.

The study proves harsh attitude of teachers as another cause of dropout of students. One student revealed that she was beaten badly at the previous school by teachers, and she left the school for the same reason. She explained, "At my previous school, some teachers and specially Qari sahb used to beat us a lot and I left the school." A student shared her views about teachers with these words, "At this school, the teachers are very polite and loving."

Lack of qualification, training, and skills.

Many students leave their schools before completing education as their teachers are untrained and unskilled and such teachers can not attract students. The students seemed to be impressed from their teachers at THE SCHOOL. A student said, "If anybody asks me what you like the most at your school, I will certainly say that the best thing is our teachers".

THE NGO organized different trainings and workshops for the teachers time to time. All the teachers were B.Ed or PTC. THE NGO provided the teachers training through different workshops and the training to use computer for preparing teaching material etc.

Carelessness of teachers.

If students are irregular, there are more chances of such students to dropout but where teachers are careful they may have an eagle eye over the situation. During the interview, the teachers proudly shared that at the school all the teachers were teaching the students with so much love and care. The students wanted to see them daily and they had high regards and love for their teachers. One teacher who was representing THE NGO told us that THE NGO conducted workshops to groom and train teachers. The teachers and management always keep an eye on performance of the students.

Gender discrimination.

Gender discrimination has caused a higher dropout rate of girls than boys in Pakistan. THE SCHOOL is a complete girls' campus and there was a rapid increase in the enrolment. A teacher stated, "The father of one of our bright students was not permitting his daughter to continue the education. A teacher met with him and convinced him successfully to allow his daughter to complete the education."

Low level of parents' education.

In this study, the low level of parents' education was found a cause of students' dropout from schools. A student asserted, "Sometimes parents are not educated so they cannot check their children's homework and offcourse unable to help them in doing it". THE NGO organized different workshops for the parents as well to make them understand and realize the importance of their children's education. The teachers told that they prepared children to do their all works including home work independently.

Following are some more themes that emerged out from the data:

Family conflicts.

Family conflicts came out as another cause of the dropouts from school. The admin staff shared that sometimes the fights between the parents, their divorce or separation play a role in the discontinuation of the children's education. They shared a case in which the mother was not sending the children to the school as a reaction to her fights with the husband. Realizing the loss of the children's education, the project director intervened and discussed the matter with the parents and as a result children started coming to school again.

Lawlessness or riots.

Another important reason of dropout is lawlessness or riots in the area and the shifting of some families to the other areas due to it. Different towns of Karachi have been facing a high level of lawlessness and riots for many years. Some people left the affected area and rented the houses in far and safe places due to the bad condition in the vicinity. THE NGO contacted the families and suggested them to rent the houses in the neighbouring but safe areas so that their children could continue the studies and the parents acted upon the suggestion and started sending their children again.

Lack of good health and nutrition.

Bad health is another cause of students' irregularity and dropout from school. THE NGO faced this challenge and planned to provide nutrition and some medical facilities to the poor children. The project director asserted, "For good health and nutrition of the little children, THE NGO provides breakfast daily to over 300 students in a purposefully built separate area. We have a doctor and some medical facilities for the children. Moreover, we have a very good cafeteria, and the students may take better quality eatable things at lower prices".

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of the study was to find out the challenges faced by an NGO in retaining students at primary level in public schools. The overall result of the study suggests that an NGO faces multiple challenges to overcome dropouts of students from public schools at primary level. Poverty is the leading factor of dropouts because poor people cannot afford the expenses of their children's education. Kotwal and Rani, (2007) identified financial constraint or poverty as a major reason for dropout from school. Barton (2006) also concluded that different studies on

dropping out have attributed the phenomenon mainly to poverty. NGOs should try to provide students free and high-quality education, books and uniforms etc.

Lack of facilities is one of the most important factors of dropouts as many students leave schools due to unavailability of facilities. Rani (2011) also found lack of education facilities and lack of quality education as important reasons for dropping out. NGOs should provide neat and clean environment, spacious classrooms and better furniture, modern electric appliances, well equipped labs and libraries, high quality sports and art facilities, separate toilet facilities for boys and girls and cafeteria for healthy diet or nutrition etc. Family conflicts, fights between parents, separation and divorce are also playing roles in dropouts and this study revealed that family conflicts affect children's performance and interest at school that may cause dropout from school. Sometimes, parents ignore the children when they fight each other and do not realize that children take it seriously.

Joblessness of parents is another very important reason for their children drop out from schools. Many parents, struggling for their survival especially when they are jobless, cannot give proper attention to their children's education. Barsaga (1995) described dropouts as coming from low-income families whose parents had little or no education, and who were unemployed or had jobs that gave them little or irregular income. To overcome the problem, NGOs may turn some effected schools with high dropout rates into model schools. They should try to arrange funds or collect donations to make these schools' condition better and to provide students enhanced education facilities.

Lack of parents' interest and lower level of parents' education are big challenges for NGOs in retaining students at public schools. Many studies have revealed the fact that educated parents understand the importance of education of their children and try to provide better and all possible facilities to them. Some parents cannot give proper attention to their children and as a result they remain unaware of their children's performance and interest at school. Frendenberg and Ruglls (2007) identified several factors under each cluster as influencing student dropping out of school including low parental education, and low family support for education. As it is evident that poverty and lack of parents' education and interest are major causes of dropouts from schools so NGOs should listen the problems of the students' parents and try to solve them.

Malnutrition and bad health are also affecting factors on the continuity of education for any child and are big challenges for NGOs. Barsaga (1995) identified different reasons for dropping out including poor health due to malnutrition. Different students remain irregular for bad health condition and sometimes leave schools; NGOs should take care of their health by providing some free and healthy food, some medical facilities and a doctor at school. Bad administration is another significant cause of drop out. Teachers' carelessness, lack of interest, bad attitude and ignorance are significant challenges for NGOs. Chirtes (2010) observed factors such as teachers' bad attitude, school phobia, school violence, conflicts (with teachers, school mates) etc. Gender discrimination was also a major cause of dropout in different countries. This study also confirms that some parents do not give any importance to the education of their daughters. Kotwal and Rani (2007) explained that the parent's educational status was poor, and they did not give much importance to the education of girls as they did to their sons. They perceived that son support them in their old age. The government should make some laws to bound parents to provide education to their daughters. The NGOs should come up to spread awareness and facilitate parents to provide education to the girls.

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