

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN GOVERNMENT AND PEF-SUPPORTED PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A COMPARISON BASED ON SDG-4 STANDARDS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HEAD TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed and compared the quality of education provided in government schools and PEF-supported schools in Bahawalpur district, Punjab, from the perspective of Head Teachers. The research focused on key dimensions of SDG-4 quality education standards, including standards for learners, curriculum, textbooks and other learning materials, teacher standards, assessment standards, early learning and development standards, and school environment standards. A quantitative research design was adopted, utilizing a survey method to collect data from a sample of 372 Head Teachers. Statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics and t-tests, was performed to assess and compare the two groups of schools. The study hypothesized that government schools would provide a higher standard of education compared to PEF-supported schools across these dimensions. The findings revealed significant differences, with government schools performing better in all SDG-4 dimensions. The study concludes with recommendations for improving the quality of education in PEF-supported schools, including enhancing teacher training, aligning curricula, and improving school infrastructure.

Keywords: Quality education, SDG-4, government schools, PEF-supported schools, Head Teachers, primary education, Punjab, curriculum standards, early learning, school environment.

INTRODUCTION

Quality education is a critical foundation for individual and national development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), established by the United Nations (UN), focuses on ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). However, achieving this goal in developing countries, such as Pakistan, presents significant challenges, particularly in rural areas where government schools struggle with issues such as limited resources, outdated curricula, and insufficient teacher training.

The provision of equitable and inclusive quality education is a global imperative, prominently articulated through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Kyambadde & Khumalo, 2023, p. 148). This goal emphasizes the acquisition of essential skills and aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all individuals (Qangule & Letuma, 2025). In this context, the cultivation of 21st-century skills is increasingly recognized as a crucial component for delivering high-quality educational experiences.

In response to these challenges, the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) was established to promote education in underprivileged areas through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). PEF-supported schools are private schools that receive subsidies from the government to provide affordable education to marginalized communities. While these schools have increased enrollment in remote areas, there are concerns about their educational quality compared to government schools.

This study analyzed the quality of education in government schools and PEF-supported schools in Bahawalpur, Punjab, focusing on several key educational standards as outlined by SDG-4. The perspective of Head Teachers was sought, as they have a comprehensive understanding of school operations and educational quality. The study aimed to assess whether there are significant differences between the two types of schools in terms of learner standards, curriculum and learning materials, teacher standards, assessment practices, early learning and development, and the school environment.

Statement of the Problem

The quality of primary education in Pakistan, particularly in rural and underserved areas, remains a significant challenge despite efforts to improve access. The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) supports low-cost private schools through a public-private partnership model aimed at addressing educational gaps. However, concerns persist regarding the quality of education in PEF-supported schools when compared to government schools, particularly in terms of learner preparedness, curriculum, teacher competence, assessment standards, early learning, and school environment. While PEF-supported schools have increased access to education, there is limited research that compares the quality of education in these schools with government schools. This study seeks to address this gap by comparing the quality of education in government and PEF-supported primary schools in Bahawalpur district, Punjab, from the perspective of Head Teachers. The research aims to assess differences in educational practices based on SDG-4 standards and provide recommendations for improving educational quality in both sectors

Objectives of the Study

To analyze the quality of education in government and PEF-supported primary schools regarding standards for learners, curriculum, textbooks and other learning materials, standards for teachers, assessment standards, early learning and development standards, and standards for the school environment from the viewpoint of the head teachers.

Research Questions

1. How do government and PEF-supported primary schools in Bahawalpur compare in terms of learner preparedness and overall learning outcomes, as perceived by Head Teachers?
2. Are there significant differences in the quality of curriculum, textbooks, and other learning materials used in government and PEF-supported schools?
3. How do teacher qualifications and professional development in government schools compare with those in PEF-supported schools, according to Head Teachers?
4. What are the differences in assessment standards between government and PEF-supported primary schools in Bahawalpur?
5. How do early learning and development programs in government schools compare to those in PEF-supported schools?
6. What differences exist in the overall school environment (safety, inclusivity, infrastructure) between government and PEF-supported schools?

Hypothesis

- 1) Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant difference between the quality of education in government and PEF-supported primary schools in Bahawalpur, as perceived by Head Teachers.
- 2) Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): There is a significant difference between the quality of education in government and PEF-supported primary schools in Bahawalpur, with government schools performing better across SDG-4 standards.

Literature Review

SDG-4 and Quality Education Standards

SDG-4 outlines several dimensions of quality education, all of which are critical in ensuring that every child is provided with the opportunity to succeed academically. These include:

- a. **Learner Standards:** Ensuring all students achieve foundational learning skills such as literacy and numeracy and are prepared for lifelong learning and employment (UNESCO, 2017).
- b. **Curriculum and Learning Materials:** The curriculum should be up-to-date, inclusive, and relevant to students' needs. Learning materials must align with national and international standards (World Bank, 2018).
- c. **Teacher Standards:** Teachers must be well-trained, qualified, and supported through ongoing professional development to ensure effective teaching methods (OECD, 2016).
- d. **Assessment Standards:** Assessments should accurately reflect student learning and be aligned with instructional practices that foster critical thinking and creativity (UNESCO, 2015).
- e. **Early Learning and Development:** Quality early childhood education is essential for building a strong foundation for learning in later years (UNICEF, 2017).
- f. **School Environment:** Schools must provide a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment, with adequate infrastructure, to foster the learning and well-being of all students (UNICEF, 2018).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 underscores the significance of quality education for all, emphasizing inclusive and equitable learning opportunities that foster lifelong learning and the acquisition of essential capabilities (Adeoye et al., 2024). This ambitious goal seeks to address the significant challenges prevalent in primary education worldwide, where a substantial number of children and adolescents still lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills necessary for a productive life (Lurvink & Pitchford, 2023). This global commitment necessitates a critical examination of educational systems, particularly in regions where disparities in

access and quality persist, to ensure that educational investments translate into tangible improvements in student outcomes and societal progress (Shahzadi et al., 2023; Sindhu et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2023; Hussain & Khoso, 2021; Laghari et al., 2024; Sabir et al., 2024; Hussain, 2024; Hussain, 2023; Fetene, 2024, p. 5). In Pakistan, specifically in Punjab, the education system operates with significant funding from the government, overseeing various institutions including those run by the Punjab School Education Department and the Punjab Education Foundation (Hussain & Khoso, 2022; Hussain & Abbas, 2023); Perveen & Hussain, 2023; Hussain et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2023, p. 332). The diverse operational frameworks of these institutions necessitate a comparative analysis to ascertain the effectiveness of different educational models in achieving SDG-4 targets, particularly from the perspective of head teachers who possess intimate knowledge of daily school functions and challenges (Ahad et al., 2025).

Government Schools vs. PEF-Supported Schools in Pakistan

In Pakistan, government schools are typically the primary providers of education, especially in rural areas. Despite receiving public funding and adhering to national curricula, they face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, and outdated teaching materials. However, they are generally expected to meet higher educational standards as set by the Ministry of Education and other regulatory bodies (Government of Pakistan, 2017).

On the other hand, PEF-supported schools are part of a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model. These schools aim to provide education to children in underserved communities by partnering with private school operators who are subsidized by the government. While these schools have significantly increased access to education, there are concerns about the quality of education they provide. Studies have shown that PEF-supported schools often lack uniformity in their teaching quality, teacher qualifications, and learning resources, which may lead to inconsistent educational outcomes (Bashir & Zaki, 2016).

The Role of Head Teachers in Quality Education

Head Teachers play a pivotal role in maintaining educational quality within schools. They are responsible for overseeing curriculum implementation, teacher performance, student progress, and school management. As school leaders, they also have a critical role in implementing educational reforms and ensuring that the school meets national and international educational standards (Punjab Education Sector Plan, 2016).

In this study, the perceptions of Head Teachers were crucial for understanding the practical differences in the quality of education offered by government schools and PEF-supported schools. Their insights into the quality of teaching, student outcomes, curriculum quality, and school

environments will provide valuable data for assessing the alignment of these schools with SDG-4 standards.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design with a comparative approach to evaluate and compare the quality of education in government and PEF-supported schools. The study utilized a survey method to collect data from Head Teachers of both types of schools. This design was chosen to quantify the perceptions of Head Teachers regarding the quality of education across different SDG-4 dimensions.

Table 1: Population and Sample

School Type	Male Schools	Female Schools	Total Schools
Government Schools	792	695	1,487
PEF-Supported Schools	540	402	942

Population: The population of the study includes all primary schools in Bahawalpur district, which consists of 1,487 government schools and 942 PEF-supported schools.

Sample: A total of 372 Head Teachers were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure proper representation from both government and PEF-supported schools, and to ensure gender and geographic diversity.

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed, consisting of sections aligned with the SDG-4 standards:

- 1) Section 1: Demographic information (e.g., Head Teacher role, years of experience)
- 2) Section 2: Learner preparedness and quality
- 3) Section 3: Curriculum and learning materials evaluation

4) Section 4: Teacher qualifications and development

5) Section 5: Assessment practices and standards

6) Section 6: Early learning and development

7) Section 7: School environment (safety, inclusivity, infrastructure)

Data Analysis

- i. Descriptive Statistics: Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were calculated for each quality dimension in both school types.
- ii. Inferential Statistics: Independent t-tests were conducted to determine if there were significant differences between government and PEF-supported schools across the SDG-4 dimensions.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Quality Dimension	Government Schools	Government Schools	PEF Schools	PEF Schools
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Learner Readiness	4.3	0.6	3.8	0.9
Curriculum Quality	4.6	0.5	4.1	0.8
Teacher Competence	4.5	0.4	4.0	0.9
Assessment Standards	4.4	0.5	3.9	0.8
School Environment	4.7	0.5	4.2	1.0

The descriptive statistics show the mean scores and standard deviations for each quality dimension, providing an overview of how Head

Teachers perceive the educational quality in both government and PEF-supported schools.

Table 3: T-Test Results

Quality Dimension	t-value	p-value
Learner Readiness	3.95	0.01
Curriculum Quality	4.20	0.01
Teacher Competence	3.80	0.02
Assessment Standards	3.45	0.03
School Environment	4.10	0.01

The t-test results show statistically significant differences between government and PEF-supported schools for all SDG-4 dimensions.

learner readiness, higher-quality curricula, more competent teachers, better assessment standards, and a superior school environment.

Discussion

This study employed a quantitative methodology, utilizing a positivist paradigm to analyze the effects of various factors on the quality of education within primary schools. Specifically, it aimed to quantify the variances in educational outcomes and operational efficiencies between government-funded and PEF-supported primary schools by examining key indicators aligned with SDG-4 standards. This comparative analysis systematically examined curriculum implementation, teacher pedagogical practices, and student learning outcomes across both educational models, aiming to identify discrepancies and best practices in achieving SDG-4 objectives.

The analysis of the t-test results reveals that government schools outperform PEF-supported schools on all SDG-4 dimensions, with p-values less than 0.05, indicating significant differences. Government schools were found to have better

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study concluded that government schools in Bahawalpur district deliver significantly better-quality education compared to PEF-supported schools, as perceived by Head Teachers. The findings suggest the need for policy interventions to improve the quality of education in PEF-supported schools, particularly in areas like teacher training, curriculum improvement, and school infrastructure.

This comprehensive analysis provides empirical data to inform policy recommendations aimed at enhancing primary education, particularly in contexts where government and public-private partnership models coexist. Moreover, the findings offer valuable insights into the resource allocation strategies and pedagogical adjustments required to elevate educational standards across all primary institutions, aligning them with global benchmarks for quality and equity. This research also highlights the importance of sustained

investment in teacher training and professional development, recognizing that proficient educators are pivotal to bridging the gap between current educational practices and the aspirational targets of SDG-4.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Enhance teacher training and professional development for PEF-supported schools.
2. Improve the curriculum alignment and learning materials in PEF-supported schools.
3. Increase investments in school infrastructure to ensure a better learning environment.
4. Develop a standardized assessment framework to measure student progress in both school types.

Limitations

This study had several limitations:

- a. The use of self-reported data from Head Teachers may have introduced some bias.
- b. The cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to track changes over time.
- c. The sample size may not fully represent the diversity of schools in Bahawalpur.

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