

PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITY: A SWOT ANALYSIS FROM RURAL PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20179438>

Received	Accepted	Published
16 March 2026	26 April 2026	14 May 2026

ABSTRACT

School privatization has emerged as a major education policy strategy in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab, where thousands of public schools have been shifted to private management under Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models. While privatization is often justified as a mechanism to improve efficiency, infrastructure, and learning outcomes, concerns remain regarding equity, affordability, and the actual quality of education delivered at the primary level. This study examined the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of privatizing public primary schools in Tehsil Pindi Bhattian, District Hafizabad, with a specific focus on educational quality. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed. Data were collected from 112 teachers working in Punjab Education Commission (PEC) schools selected from a total population of 156 teachers. A structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale was used, and the instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability. Findings revealed that inappropriate student-teacher ratio (Mean = 3.61), commercialization of education (Mean = 3.64), and low teacher performance (Mean = 3.62) were major drivers of privatization. Teachers also identified better performance of private schools and improved market responsiveness as key strengths, while affordability concerns and social inequality were perceived as major threats. The study concludes that privatization may improve operational efficiency and school performance; however, without strong regulation and equity safeguards, it risks widening educational disparities. Policymakers must ensure that quality improvement does not compromise universal access to primary education.

Keywords: Privatization, Public schools, Quality of education, Funding constraints, Government educational policies

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as the foundation of human development, social mobility, and national progress. In developing countries such as Pakistan, primary education serves as the most critical stage for ensuring equitable access to lifelong learning opportunities. Traditionally, public schools have carried the major

responsibility for delivering primary education, particularly in rural and low-income communities. However, persistent concerns regarding poor infrastructure, weak governance, low teacher accountability, and unsatisfactory learning outcomes have intensified debates around the privatization of public schools (Yesim, 2014; Ashok, 2020).

Privatization of government educational institutions refers to the transfer of responsibilities, management, and assets from public entities to private actors. This process can take various forms, including the establishment of private schools, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and the outsourcing of educational services. The underlying rationale for privatization often includes the belief that private entities can deliver education more efficiently and effectively than public institutions (Yesim, 2014). Governments frequently face budgetary pressures that limit their ability to adequately fund public education. In response, policymakers advocate privatization as a strategy to reduce the financial burden on the state while maintaining educational service delivery (Alarcón & Martínez, 2015).

In Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, school privatization has increasingly become a central policy strategy under Public-Private Partnership (PPP) arrangements. The provincial government initiated large-scale reforms by transferring thousands of government schools to private operators, NGOs, and educational foundations to improve efficiency and reduce fiscal pressure. According to Kanwal et al. (2023), approximately 13,219 public schools were planned for privatization in three phases, with a further target of privatizing an additional 15,000 schools by 2025. These reforms reflect broader neoliberal policy trends that promote reduced state intervention and increased private sector participation in public service delivery (Baltodano, 2023; Fjellman et al., 2023). Supporters of privatization argue that private institutions improve educational quality through better administrative practices, stronger accountability mechanisms, innovative teaching methods, and enhanced infrastructure. Studies indicate that private schools often demonstrate better teacher attendance, stronger discipline, smaller class sizes, and more effective instructional practices compared to many public schools (Afnan, 2023; Hayat, 2019; Khizer, 2024). In Punjab, organizations such as Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), CARE Foundation, and other NGOs have contributed significantly to improving school performance, laboratories, sanitation, and general school infrastructure under privatization

arrangements (Idrees et al., 2021; Shahid et al., 2023).

Despite these perceived benefits, privatization remains highly controversial, especially at the primary education level where universal access and equity are fundamental policy concerns. Privatization often introduces tuition fees and hidden educational costs that disproportionately affect low-income households. Kumar (2014) reported that nearly 34% of Pakistanis live on less than Rs. 588 per day, raising serious concerns about how many children can afford schooling when fees are introduced or increased. This creates the risk of a two-tier education system in which quality education becomes accessible primarily to wealthier families, while disadvantaged children remain in under-resourced schools or drop out entirely (Hogan & Thompson, 2020; Panda, 2019; Liz, 2024). Teachers also face significant uncertainty under privatized systems. Research shows that privatization can reduce job security, weaken pension structures, lower salaries, and restrict professional autonomy. Verger et al. (2017) found that privatization often creates instability in the teaching workforce due to frequent transfers and unclear employment futures. Similarly, Kanwal et al. (2023) reported that teachers in Punjab experienced financial stress and job insecurity despite improvements in school resources and infrastructure. Such concerns directly affect teacher motivation and ultimately influence the quality of education delivered to students.

The issue becomes particularly important in rural areas such as Tehsil Pindi Bhattian, where public schools remain the main source of education for low-income families. If privatization improves school facilities but simultaneously increases exclusion due to cost and access barriers, the broader goal of educational justice may be compromised. As Farid et al. (2024) noted, Pakistan spends less than 2% of GDP on education, while literacy rates remain significantly lower in rural areas due to inadequate facilities, underqualified teachers, and limited awareness of educational importance. In such contexts, privatization must be assessed not only in terms of efficiency but also through the lens of equity and social justice. Although substantial literature exists

on educational privatization globally, limited empirical evidence is available from rural Punjab regarding how teachers perceive the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of privatization in relation to primary education quality. Most previous studies focus on policy outcomes, enrollment patterns, or institutional efficiency, while fewer studies examine the practical experiences of frontline stakeholders such as teachers. Siyab and Ghafoor (2024) specifically highlighted the lack of research on teachers' and parents' unique experiences regarding government school privatization in Punjab.

This study addresses that gap by conducting a SWOT analysis of privatization of public primary schools in Tehsil Pindi Bhattian, District Hafizabad, with a specific focus on educational quality. By examining teachers' perceptions, the study contributes to a more grounded understanding of privatization policy in Pakistan and provides evidence for policymakers seeking to balance efficiency, accountability, and educational equity.

Methodology

The present study was conducted in District Hafizabad, Punjab, Pakistan, which consists of two tehsils: Hafizabad and Pindi Bhattian, only Tehsil Pindi Bhattian was selected as the study area. The research specifically focused on Punjab Education Commission (PEC) primary schools operating in this tehsil. Tehsil Pindi Bhattian represents a relevant context for examining school privatization because a considerable number of public primary schools in this area were transferred under privatization and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) arrangements. These schools serve predominantly rural and semi-urban populations where access to quality education remains a major concern.

The study employed a quantitative research approach using a descriptive survey design. Quantitative research was considered appropriate because the study aimed to measure teachers' perceptions regarding the causes, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of privatization of public primary schools. A descriptive design was selected to systematically

collect numerical data and describe existing conditions without manipulating any variables. This design enabled the researcher to establish patterns, frequencies, and relationships among variables related to educational quality and privatization (Patton, 2019). The target population comprised all teachers working in PEC primary schools of Tehsil Pindi Bhattian. According to the School Information System (SIS), there were 39 PEC primary schools in the study area, including 16 male primary schools and 23 female primary schools. These schools had become part of PEC in 2017. A total of 156 teachers were serving in these schools, and all were considered as the study population. From this population, a sample of 112 teachers was selected. By keeping a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. This sample size was considered statistically adequate to ensure representativeness and reliability of the findings (Kothari, 2014). The study used a convenient sampling technique for selecting respondents. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to collect data efficiently from teachers who were accessible and available during the data collection period. Although convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method, it was considered suitable due to practical limitations of time, accessibility, and administrative feasibility within the selected schools. The respondents were selected from the available teaching staff across PEC schools in Tehsil Pindi Bhattian. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed in accordance with the study objectives and relevant literature. The questionnaire consisted of 21 sections covering demographic characteristics and the major dimensions of SWOT analysis related to privatization of public schools. Both closed-ended and limited open-ended questions were included. The demographic variables were measured using a dichotomous and categorical scale, while the independent and dependent variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). This structure enabled the researcher to quantify teachers' perceptions regarding the causes of privatization, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with privatized primary schools.

The reliability of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's Alpha through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The obtained Cronbach Alpha value was 0.820, indicating a satisfactory level of internal consistency and confirming that the questionnaire was reliable for data collection. According to Taherdoost (2016), a reliability coefficient above 0.70 is considered acceptable for social science research; therefore, the instrument used in this study demonstrated strong reliability. After data collection, the responses were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistical techniques were used to interpret the findings. Simple descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages, weighted score, mean values, standard deviation, and rank order were calculated. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe demographic characteristics of respondents, while weighted scores, mean values, and standard deviations were used to analyze perceptions related to the SWOT dimensions of privatization. Rank order was applied to prioritize the major causes, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified by teachers. The use of mean and standard deviation allowed the researcher to determine the level of agreement

and variability among respondents, while ranking helped identify the most influential factors affecting the quality of education in privatized public primary schools (Bell, 2016).

Results

The findings of the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics including weighted score, mean, standard deviation (SD), and rank order. The results are presented according to the major dimensions of the study: causes of privatization, dissatisfaction with public schools, school conditions, and SWOT components of privatization. The analysis focuses particularly on quality of education indicators such as teaching quality, infrastructure, student performance, and institutional efficiency.

Teachers identified several institutional and instructional deficiencies in public schools that accelerate privatization. The most strongly perceived cause (Table 1) was the inappropriate student-teacher ratio ($M = 3.61$), followed by limited access to computers in computer laboratories ($M = 3.52$) and lack of access to advanced academic material ($M = 3.44$). These findings indicate that overcrowded classrooms and poor academic resources are major contributors to declining confidence in public schools.

Table 1: Causes of Rapid Privatization of Public Schools

Cause	Weighted Score	Mean	SD
Student-teacher ratio is not appropriate	405	3.61	1.15
Students do not have easy access to computers in computer labs	395	3.52	1.18
Students do not have easy access to advanced academic material	386	3.44	1.21
Teachers cannot focus on large classrooms	382	3.41	1.29
Teachers use traditional teaching methods	379	3.38	1.17
School environment is not conducive for learning	312	2.78	1.13
Punishment rate is high in public schools	296	2.64	1.17

The results suggest that teaching quality is closely associated with class size and instructional methods. Limited use of technology and outdated pedagogical practices weaken educational quality and encourage the shift toward private schooling. Dissatisfaction with public schools was strongly linked to teacher performance, weak regulation,

and educational commercialization. The highest-ranked factor (Table 2) was commercialization of education in the private sector ($M = 3.64$), followed by low teacher performance affecting student achievement ($M = 3.62$) and rural disparities ($M = 3.62$).

Table 2: Dissatisfaction with Public Schools as a Cause of Privatization

Factor	Weighted Score	Mean	SD
Commercialization of education in private sector	408	3.64	0.99
Low teacher performance affecting student achievement	406	3.62	0.98
Rural disparities in society	406	3.62	1.04
Lack of regulation deteriorates educational decorum	402	3.58	1.02
Lack of teacher commitment to students' educational needs	382	3.41	1.17
Poor educational quality of public schools	359	3.20	1.12
Public schools fail to meet parental expectations	356	3.17	1.26

These findings demonstrate that educational quality is not viewed solely as infrastructure-related but also strongly linked to professional accountability and institutional governance. Physical school conditions also emerged as important drivers of privatization (Table 3).

Inadequate electricity supply ranked first ($M = 3.37$), followed by unclean washrooms ($M = 3.34$) and poorly maintained classrooms ($M = 3.33$). These indicators reflect infrastructural weaknesses that directly affect the teaching-learning environment.

Table 3: School Conditions Contributing to Privatization

Condition	Weighted Score	Mean	SD
Electricity is not available all the time	378	3.37	1.22
Unavailability of neat and clean washrooms	375	3.34	1.25
Less neat and clean classrooms	373	3.33	1.23
Clean drinking water is not available	368	3.28	1.22
Poor condition of the cafeteria	367	3.27	1.17
Noise-free environment is not available	361	3.22	1.23
First aid kit is unavailable	359	3.20	1.16

Infrastructure quality strongly influences parental trust and students' school experience, particularly at the primary level where safe and supportive environments are essential.

The SWOT analysis revealed mixed perceptions regarding privatization. Teachers recognized improved performance and market responsiveness as major strengths of private schools. Better school performance and stronger responsiveness to educational demands were positively associated with private management. However, funding constraints, policy instability, less interactive teaching methods, and underqualified staff were viewed as serious weaknesses and threats within the public system that drive privatization. Overall, the findings indicate that privatization is perceived as a response to quality deficits in teaching and

infrastructure rather than simply a policy preference.

Discussion

The study demonstrates that privatization of public primary schools in Punjab is largely driven by quality deficits in public education rather than ideological preference for private provision. Teachers identified overcrowded classrooms, weak infrastructure, low teacher performance, and inadequate learning resources as major reasons for the shift toward private management. These findings support Afnan (2023), who argued that governments pursue privatization primarily to improve efficiency and address persistent underperformance in public schools. Similarly, Hayat (2019) found that private schools in

Pakistan attract parents because of stronger administration, improved facilities, and more effective instructional practices.

The inappropriate student–teacher ratio ranked highest among causes of privatization, indicating that teaching quality remains central to perceptions of educational effectiveness. Large classrooms reduce individual attention, weaken classroom management, and limit student engagement. This finding is consistent with Verger et al. (2024), who reported that competition introduced by privatization often pushes schools to improve classroom effectiveness and responsiveness to parental expectations. In many developing countries, especially in South Asia, private schools are preferred because they are perceived to provide more disciplined and academically focused learning environments.

Infrastructure deficiencies such as unreliable electricity, poor sanitation, and lack of drinking water were also significant predictors of privatization. These findings align with Shah (2021), who emphasized that funding inequalities and weak maintenance systems in public schools reduce the quality of educational delivery. In rural Pakistan, infrastructure quality often serves as a visible marker of school quality for parents, influencing enrollment decisions even before academic performance is considered. However, the findings also reveal a major contradiction: while privatization is expected to improve quality, it simultaneously risks worsening educational inequality. Teachers acknowledged that private schools often perform better and respond more effectively to market demands, yet they also recognized commercialization of education as the strongest dissatisfaction factor. This supports Hogan and Thompson (2020), who warned that privatization often creates a two-tier system where quality education becomes available mainly to wealthier families. Similar concerns were raised by Panda (2019), who found that privatization disproportionately excludes low-income and rural children due to tuition fees and indirect educational costs.

This quality-versus-access trade-off is particularly important in Punjab. Public schools are not only educational institutions but also mechanisms of social inclusion for disadvantaged communities. If

privatization improves academic standards while reducing affordability, then educational quality becomes socially selective rather than universally accessible. Liz (2024) argues that educational reform must be assessed through the lens of social justice, where equity is as important as efficiency. The present findings strongly support this perspective. Teacher-related concerns further complicate the privatization debate. Low teacher performance was identified as a major dissatisfaction factor, yet privatization itself may weaken teacher motivation through job insecurity, salary instability, and reduced professional autonomy. Kanwal et al. (2023) found that teachers in privatized schools in Punjab experienced significant financial stress despite improvements in school resources. Verger et al. (2017) similarly reported that privatization often increases teacher turnover and reduces long-term professional commitment. Therefore, improving educational quality requires not only better school management but also stronger teacher welfare policies. The SWOT analysis confirms that privatization should not be viewed as a complete substitute for public education but rather as a policy instrument requiring strong regulation. Without effective government oversight, privatization may prioritize efficiency over equity and profit over pedagogy. This finding supports Bohlmark and Lindahl (2020), who concluded that privatization can improve innovation and institutional performance only when accompanied by robust accountability frameworks and inclusive policy safeguards.

In the Pakistani context, particularly in rural Punjab, the challenge is not simply whether schools should be public or private, but how educational quality can be improved without excluding the most vulnerable learners. Privatization may offer operational efficiency, but sustainable educational reform requires balancing quality improvement with universal access, affordability, and teacher stability. The findings therefore suggest that policymakers should adopt a regulated partnership model rather than full market-driven privatization, ensuring that educational excellence remains a public right rather than a private privilege.

Conclusion

This study examined the privatization of public primary schools in Tehsil Pindi Bhattian, District Hafizabad, through a SWOT analysis with a particular focus on the quality of education. The findings reveal that privatization is largely driven by persistent weaknesses within the public education system, especially overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, poor access to learning resources, weak teacher performance, and limited institutional accountability. Teachers perceived inappropriate student-teacher ratio, lack of computer access, insufficient academic materials, and poor school facilities as major causes behind the growing shift toward privatized schooling. The study further shows that private sector involvement is often associated with better school performance, stronger market responsiveness, improved infrastructure, and greater operational efficiency. These factors contribute positively to perceptions of educational quality, particularly in terms of discipline, administrative effectiveness, and student achievement. However, the findings also highlight serious concerns regarding the commercialization of education, affordability barriers, rural inequalities, teacher job insecurity, and reduced professional autonomy. Privatization can improve certain dimensions of educational quality, but without strong public regulation, it risks deepening educational inequality and weakening the principle of education as a public good. Quality improvement should not be achieved at the expense of equitable access, especially at the primary level where universal education is both a constitutional and developmental priority. Privatization should therefore be approached as a carefully regulated partnership rather than a complete transfer of state responsibility.

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