

# Understanding conflicts faced by teachers and pupils at formal public schools in Pakistan

An IFE Perspective on Peace Integration in Schools



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**Abstract:** This article covers the historical perspective of politicization of multiple education systems in Pakistan which has been detrimental in gradually changing social mindsets through formal schools. It also discusses the political response to different education systems working in Pakistan to address challenges to incorporating peace at schools. These challenges need to be addressed in countering misinformation and intolerance through textbooks and other literature exposed to children. It carries review of different literature on education reforms in Pakistan; interviews with different school community members on human rights challenges they face on campuses; and, finally, the interviews with different educators on how realistically they are integrating education challenges through their capacity-enhancing peace integration trainings. Recommendations for peace integration trainings for teachers along the lines of religious tolerance, social justice, and inclusiveness with are also mentioned based on the experiences shared by the teaching community with this author.

## **Common Assumptions about Extremism at Schools**

While conflict in Pakistan's turbulent history has remained a constant factor in shaping political views, the fall-out of which has left denting impacts on the society. The causes of social disharmony are owed to the mainstream knowledge sources which have a vested political agenda. These political sentiments are then further reflected in the textbooks which ultimately results in the young minds getting exposed to such political propaganda early on in their lives.

At present, there are parallel education systems at work in Pakistan, which are formal public schools, private schools, low budget public-private partnership schools and the informal *Madrassa* or *Maktab* school systems. The *Madrassas* are further branched into two categories, i.e. registered and unregistered. While the formal education systems (both private and public) have government prescribed curriculum, the un-registered, unregulated *madrassah* systems pose a potential threat to social harmony because of their ideology-based curricula. The common perception is that the rate of enrollment is increasing in *madrassahs* as opposed to formal schooling, however a study conducted in 2006 showed contrary results with evidence based on out the data available with government departments<sup>i</sup>. The total number of *Deeni Madaris*, or religious schools, in Pakistan amounts to almost 10% of all educational institutes, with only a minority i.e. 3%, falling in the public sector domain (Pakistan Education Statistics 2015-16)<sup>ii</sup>. It is also important to mention that intelligence reports, often cited in research papers, point towards the psychological impacts these *madrassahs* have on the students. The problem is further compounded by the rigid attitudes of religious teachers, as they remain outside the domain of formal education system.

However, the roots of extremism are not always found in the *Madrassahs*, as commonly assumed. The state endorsed political narrative in public schools is also playing its crucial part in polarizing the mind of a child during their formative years.

## **Origin and Manifestation of Conflicts at Schools**

The current complex education system has its origin in the formal British colonial policies which created a strong sense of “Westernization” and was seen by many as an attempt to dissuade children from their pre-existing social value systems. Centuries later, the right-wing attitudes towards modernity remain rigid and therefore require a strong political response with an understanding of current realities.<sup>iii</sup> Geopolitical influences have also led to an increase in public apprehensions towards new ideas, which ultimately translate in the present-day classrooms becoming vulnerable to dogmas. Politically, a redress has been a difficult venture of tackling intolerance at schools. The reasons for this can be attributed to using religion and nationalism as a state policy of Pakistan to address the global influences it sees with suspicion.

Another factor that has contributed immensely towards regressive trends in the education systems are the nationalist policies introduced by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which accorded all education institutes to be standardized with an aim to singularize the national identity. This came

as an attempt to undermine regional dynamics and diverse demographics of Pakistan. Bhutto's national program on ideological indoctrination was further advanced by General Zia ul Haq, the then Islamic radical Commander in Chief and President of Pakistan who took over through unconstitutional means. To ally with the US against the Russian influence, he introduced a militant version of Islam to encourage *Jihad*, holy war. This deeply impacted the intellectual potential of the students who were indoctrinated with radical ideology in place of scientific enquiry and liberal education. Since the introduction of religion-centered education policies at national level, little was done to address the issue of intolerance which have penetrated the public-school systems.

Though the scope of terrorism and militant conflicts is limited in Pakistan, it is the surge in violent religious extremism which should be a worrisome sign for the policy makers. A harrowing case of mob lynching of blasphemy accused Mashal Khan at a university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is a stark reminder of how hate is being manifested in our academic spaces. Implying that this violent tendency is now commonly found at our educational campuses would not be an over-exaggeration, because even if the schools are not directly producing violent students, their campuses are conveniently used by the religious organizations for new recruits and preaching.

It is pertinent to mention here that there had been reforms in the education system in the past, but hardly with a view to limit the scope of extremism on campuses. However, the extent to which extremism has spread cannot be attributed to the education system alone. The governing players of the society in general are also responsible for accepting the elements responsible for creating a certain mindset. A case in point is how Pakistan's Nobel Laureates like Malala, a girls' education activist and late Dr. Abdus Salam, a globally respected physicist, are being discredited and condemned for their progressive views or their religious sect. The intolerance for dissenting view is also propagated by education influencers, as the Chairman of All Private Schools Federation, Kashif Mirza, himself initiated a toxic campaign against Malala for expressing her liberal views.

### **Indoctrination through Textbooks**

In 2012, a not-for-profit organization, National Commission for Peace and Justice, Pakistan disseminated a thorough report in which it highlighted the problematic material in the textbooks responsible for instilling negative sentiments towards religious minorities, especially the Hindus and the Christians.<sup>iv</sup>

One of the many examples this report cited is the text from a class 4 school book  
*"Hindus will not allow Islamic rule after Englishmen leaves. They will not allow such God's rule but instead of Hindus laws and where Muslims would be socially discriminated"*.

In another example, it cited a class 5 Islamic Studies book which lays stress on religious differences in the following derogatory words:

*“The creeds of Muslims and Hindus are totally different. Hindus have many gods and idols, whereas Muslims believe in one God, who is the creator of this Universe and Muslims worship Him. Hindu religion has divided human beings in different castes and women have no dignity.”*

The schools have been used as political instruments by the state to justify the state-engineered two-nation theory which asserts that the creation of Pakistan was inevitable because of irreconcilable religious differences between Hindu and Muslim communities. Despite the counter-narrative literature published by notable historians who objected to such state-endorsed narratives, children remain largely restricted to limited history. The two-nation theory was incorporated into our curricula and textbooks years after the creation of Pakistan, with a strong emphasis that the foundation of this country was laid in the name of Islam. The differentiation between “For Islam” and “For Muslims” was conflated because the latter showed that a major minority demanded for a homeland to have their political and social rights safeguarded, not because their religion was endangered.

Reforms in education were based on historical manipulations or omissions and were strategically meant to inculcate a narrative in the youth to serve a political agenda. It also helped the state to later initiate a wave of distrust for the neighboring country, where “Hindus” were commonly referred to as “Indians”, without realizing that Pakistan has its own indigenous Hindu population.

An eminent historian, K.K Aziz in his book, *Murder of History*, questions the wisdom behind asking 5-year-old children questions as “*who created Pakistan?*” in textbooks and wondered how such impressionable minds would be able to process the complexities of our history.<sup>v</sup>

## **Education and Politics**

At the state level, there is a consensus among stakeholders on not just address education outreach, but also the quality of education to improve learning outcomes. The issues of hate-speech are being reported through media and internal reports, however, there is a lack of political will or enthusiasm to review the content of schoolbooks to make them more inclusive, diverse, and modern.

Education became a direct provincial subject after a landmark amendment in the constitution in 2010, which gave autonomous powers to the provincial governments which allowed them space to improve education standards. However, with a new government in power, the controversially elected Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has urged for a National Curriculum Council to homogenize educational standards in schools across the country. Huma Yusuf, in her column questions what the definition of “Pakistanis” that this initiative plans to produce.<sup>vi</sup>

Prior to the general elections held in July, 2018, many political parties rallied against the previous government and its corruption, but little did they focus on the much-needed education reforms and on how they planned to implement those. Except for a few project-led

organizations, like Alif Ailan, there is a little sense of placing effective accountability measures, such as the report cards on education promises and commitments made by the elected representatives in previous governments. It is important to mention here that even though not many political parties proactively talked about their education policies during their election campaigns, they are nonetheless mentioned in their manifestoes.

The three main political parties of Pakistan are Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf, Pakistan Muslim League (N), and Pakistan People's Party. While all parties have talked on financial modalities, school infrastructure, teachers' capacity enhancement and linking vocational training with education, only PPP, and PML (N) to some extent, talked about incorporating civic education, inclusiveness and diversity in the curriculum. However, how they perform on education in their respective provincial governments is yet to be assessed.

### **Mediating Peace**

Many teachers and educationists are showing concerns and willingness to play their role in eliminating extremist tendencies. To understand their coping strategies, an exercise was conducted by NCJP in Murree where the following text was shared with the teachers:

*"For non-Muslims, being honest is a matter of policy, whereas for Muslims, it is a matter of faith"*

There was a unanimous agreement that this content was hurtful to children belonging to the minority groups. The teachers made their way to limit the scope of this text by preparing a suitable lesson-plan to reduce psychological impacts of discrimination and disrespect consequently faced by the minority children.<sup>vii</sup>

A voluntary international consortium for peace activists, think tanks and organizations across the globe, Peace Direct has recently published its insights from consultations it hosted for 94 countries.<sup>viii</sup> All participating countries laid out ways for atrocity prevention, which is loosely defined as using the broad range of tools that can be used to prevent violence or undermining of human rights.

In academic terms, peace education entails three theories namely:

1. Social Interdependence Theory (emphasis on relationship based on cooperation and mutual trust)
2. Constructive Controversy Theory (operational dialogue to solve issues)
3. Integrative Negotiations Theory (neutralizing disagreements for mutual gains)

Researchers of the field (Mahsud & Taimoor,2014) have proposed that peace education should not be taught as a separate subject, but as an integrated approach covering all aspects of teaching and lesson planning and their application on campuses.<sup>ix</sup> According to them, each subject should clarify its objectives that inspire constructivism and mutual concerns for human rights in both teachers and students.

Another way to look towards peace education is generating civic rights aspirations through practical learning. This is the philosophy adopted by NISA (National Independent School Alliance) in India through its novel citizenship learning modules for schools initiated as *Desh Apnay* project.<sup>x</sup> The major component of this program is to engage children and community in identifying pertinent issues and present practical solutions by actively taking part in it. Through this project, the learners came to know about ways to officially address social issues through social mobilizations. The other component of this project is DISHA, which has developed an online portal for more than 300 NISA schools engaged in civic education and is designed to work as a democratic governing body composed of the students who elect their own presidents and vice presidents. Though it is too early to assess the sustainability of this project, however, it does lay a framework for schools to engage in practical civic education, without being overtly specific on technical terms that may be too complex for students or teachers or the community to understand otherwise.

In Pakistan, Peace and Human Rights Education programs are in place in collaboration with PEAD Foundation and UNESCO with an intention to help open up minds of the learners and the school communities through advocacy with provincial education departments and teachers' trainings. Though teacher trainings on peace education is not imparted at the mainstream level, however, a few civil society organizations are currently engaged with training of the teachers on ways to incorporate their teaching methods to inspire empathy and diversity in students. There are also many individual civil society projects that are aiming at youth engagement for peace and dialogue, however, they are not enough to cover the complex topics of conflicts that are emanating from school campuses.

## **Conclusion**

With a growing youth bulge (representing more than 60% of the population), an invasive and impactful education policy is required to cater to the needs of the young population to enable their participation towards a progressive society. However, while keeping in mind the political trends, there is also an urgency to address the attitudes the society which it itself has allowed to develop over the recent years, thanks to some political forces that have appeased and compromised with the extreme right-wing to further their agendas. This continues to come at a great cost of politicizing the young minds through schools. Progressive educationists have already expressed their concern over burdening the children in early years of education with ideological narratives, thus affecting their cognitive dissonance. The narratives endorsed at schools have not only impacted the minds of the students, but also the teachers who have a direct relation with their pupils and their parents. The strong perpetuation of an unchallenged nationalist narrative has resulted in hardening of social behaviors and is partly responsible for growing intolerance towards diversity. Any liberal reform is met with a strong political response by the right wing. In Pakistan, an enabling environment for the right-wing parties provided by the state plays a significant role in forming public opinions based on ideological divisions.

For ingrained ideologies inserted in school textbooks, there is a need to undo the damage caused by previous state policies. However, this can never be done unless there is a strong, unanimous political will to address troubling textbooks and contain its consequent hate-speech. Although there is an undeclared admission by the state of why the textbooks were greatly

polarized during cold-war, yet little efforts are being done to undo that. Which is exactly why the political parties, in the interest of the people and the future of the children, need to take initiatives to reduce any potential for extremism. Concrete public accountability on matters of education in a democratic set-up is direly needed.

The civil society is also making individual efforts in countering violent extremism at schools by engaging teachers as peace agents. It, however, remains a challenging task to convince the teachers of the problematic texts they come across in schoolbooks. Practical examples need to be shown on how speech affects a child psychologically and inspire in them to develop meaningful coping strategies. For a peace educator, it is of high importance that the political interests in textbooks be known to them before they can strategize a course of action to counter hate-speech that has been systematically placed in the state-prescribed curricula.

### **Recommendations**

- There is a need to link formal education with imparting civic sense at an early age for children that can encourage empathy in them.
- Democratic values and their workability should be introduced in teachers training programs. In many cases it has been observed that teachers are not aware about their own rights and responsibilities.
- Teachers need to be more exposed to troubling texts in schoolbooks and should be quizzed on ways with which they can reduce or limit psychological impacts through lesson planning.
- The school community (teachers, students, parents and neighbors) should all be engaged in devising an indigenous mechanism that can detect and prevent conflict in schools.
- A complaint mechanism system for schools should be introduced by the government to deal with conflicts on campus instantly.
- Teachers training should be accompanied by extensive subject reading by other authors to improve their unbiased understanding of subjects that can help them provide more diverse perspectives to students.

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<sup>i</sup>Tahir Andrabi; Jishnu Das; Asim Ijaz; and Tristan Zajonc "Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan A Look at the Data, Comparative Education Review, August, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Pakistan Education Statistics, 2015-2016

<sup>iii</sup>Anjum Altaf, "Education and Politics" Daily Dawn, December 10, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup>Teaching Hate: Punjab Textbooks spreading bigotry, hate says NCJP, Express Tribune 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2012.

<sup>v</sup>K.K Aziz, Murder of History, a critique of history textbooks used in Pakistan (Sang e Meel Publications, 2010). Pg. 3.

<sup>vi</sup>Huma Yusuf, "Curricula reform", The Dawn, November 19, 2018

<sup>vii</sup>NCJP Training on Peace Education, Murree, Pakistan, 2018.

<sup>viii</sup>Atrocity Prevention and Peacebuilding: key insights and lessons from a global consultation convened by Peace Direct. 2018. Article Retrieved from: [https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Atrocity-Prevention-Executive-Summary-Report\\_PD.pdf](https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Atrocity-Prevention-Executive-Summary-Report_PD.pdf)



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<sup>ix</sup>Mahsud; Azhar, Taimoor Hassan, *Educating Peace in Pakistan Journal of Education and Practice* Vol. 5, No. 17, (2014)

<sup>x</sup>Private Interview Kulbhusan Sharma, President, NISA, 2018.