The Educational Chaos and the Role of SNC

Introduction

Primarily, education is seen as a motivator that can bring about positive changes in society and contribute to its development in the economic, political and moral sense. However, since the inception of Pakistan, education here has been used as a tool to define and mould the national psyche to a singular religio-political identity— a desire of the state that does not entirely take into account the diverse aspirations of many population groups of Pakistani citizenry.

Various experiments on homogenizing national identity have been made that somehow conflated the true purpose and spirit of education. In her paper, Rubina Saigol explained how dimensions of time have been used to determine "national identity", systematically propagated through the education system envisaged in the President and Field Marshal Ayub Khan era of the 60's.

The idea for homogeneity rose out of discontent with old times and diversity, regionalism and political differences. In other words, diversity back then was implied to be challenging the idea of the single notion of "Muslim Nationhood:, which was considered the basic premise for the founding of Pakistan. The perpetuating idea of a "single nation" became even stronger after Pakistan lost East Pakistan.

The attempts at curtailing and diminishing diversity through different times in our 70+ years of history have had a profound impact on our learning environments and the society on the whole, which is evident in the constant and consistent deterioration in the quality of our education in terms of schooling & infrastructure, teaching & pedagogies, curriculum development, textbooks and syllabus. They have resulted in destroying conducive academic environments where freedom of expression and natural intrigue are constantly undermined by growing intolerance on campuses.

This is compounded by the fall in quality of knowledge received by the students from their educators, whose performance is directly impacted by inadequacy of

policies and resources at both federal and provincial levels. It seems that the focus on education has shifted to political doctrines. Hence, the multiple education policies, some very comprehensive and some not, are reflective of the varying priorities of the state/governments of the time in educating its people.

Although the first national education policy conference was held in 1947 the year of Pakistan's birth – the country lacked a state organization or dedicated education department for years. There were about 9 educational policies in all, yet they all suffered implementation and monitoring problems and did not provide substantial direction to the next policy. Also, throughout history of education policies, there always has been an underlying effort to re-define a national identity based on religion.

In 2020, the incumbent government announced a Single National Curriculum policy, the first phase of which has already been rolled out in 2021. The Federal Ministry for Education and Profession Training laid out its vision for SNC in the following words:

"One system of Education for all, in terms of curriculum, medium of instruction and a common platform of assessment so that all children have a fair and equal opportunity to receive high quality education. Single National Curriculum is a step in that direction."

The ministry has also laid out 7 objectives that aspire to provide fair and equal opportunities to all children to receive higher education; to alleviate disparities in educational content across the multiple streams of education; to foster equal opportunities for upward social mobility; to bring about equity in education; to ensure smooth inter-provincial mobility of teachers and students; to ensure holistic development of children in light of international trends and local aspirations and most notably, it hopes to foster Social Cohesion and National Integration.

The website also mentions 14 key considerations that were undertaken while developing this curriculum, with teachings from Quran and Sunnah, and the vision of national poet, Allama Iqbal and, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan topping the list.

The announcement prompted vociferous debate, both in appraisal and criticism, of its salient features, which in turn raised concerns regarding the processes involved in developing a consensus among education policy stakeholders. Several new revelations about this policy have emerged from these debates, which continue to carry important and valuable lessons for our education policy stakeholders.

We aimed to capture and document these important learnings from our specifically designed in-depth interviews with education experts, journalists, human rights professionals, former madrassah students, teachers, academic historians, gender experts, a relevant politician and lawyers, over Zoom or camera recordings. And, to further develop a wholesome understanding of what education policies have been in the past, how they are evolving, what present challenges are, and what ideal recommendations for education are advised, we categorized and assorted each talk according to their topics and identified common themes, or the expressed concerns, that kept surfacing over and again by different speakers.

Some unique experiences of speakers with Madrassa background also came to light and got specially mentioned in the context of academic challenges they face while transitioning from one religious educational system to another for formal, higher studies. This helped us deduce urgent matters for education policies and document them here based on how many speakers emphasized those urgencies, during their interviews.

We hope that documentation of the findings gleaned from our renowned education experts and human rights defenders will help our education stakeholders understand key issues with our curriculum and the direct implication they have on our children and society in general. Based on our findings, we present a set of recommendations and advice that can help steer the education process by addressing economic, social and political concerns that have been accumulating over the years.

Who are the Speakers?

Dr. Abul Hameed Nayyer, Peter Jacob, Saroop Ijaz and Hina Pervaiz Butt spoke on education curricula in light of constitutional guarantees, politics, administrative practices and violations.

Dr. Irfan Shahzad, Dr. Israr Madni, Hafiz Awaiz, Jawad Ahmad, Waqas Khan, Muhammad Husnain Ashraf and Usman Rimzi, having direct and interchangeable experiences between madrassah and conventional education systems spoke on the challenges faced by students when shifting to madrassah or conventional academic institutions for higher education.

Baela Raza Jamil, Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy and Dr. Monazza Aslam spoke on the status of learning quality and how economic circumstances affect education access for many communities.

Late Dr. Rubina Sohail and Dr. Naeem Baloch further gave their important perspectives on social and cultural sensitivity of language and vocabulary used in textbooks that children inhibit when reading their lessons.

Key Findings

In the light of the debates, discussions and discourse on the SNC, the key findings seek to contribute to more informed policy discourse on the issue. Possible revisions can therefore be facilitated in a more nuanced and disaggregated sense helping a transformative process in how we now think of our education policy. Highlighting the key findings we look at the following:
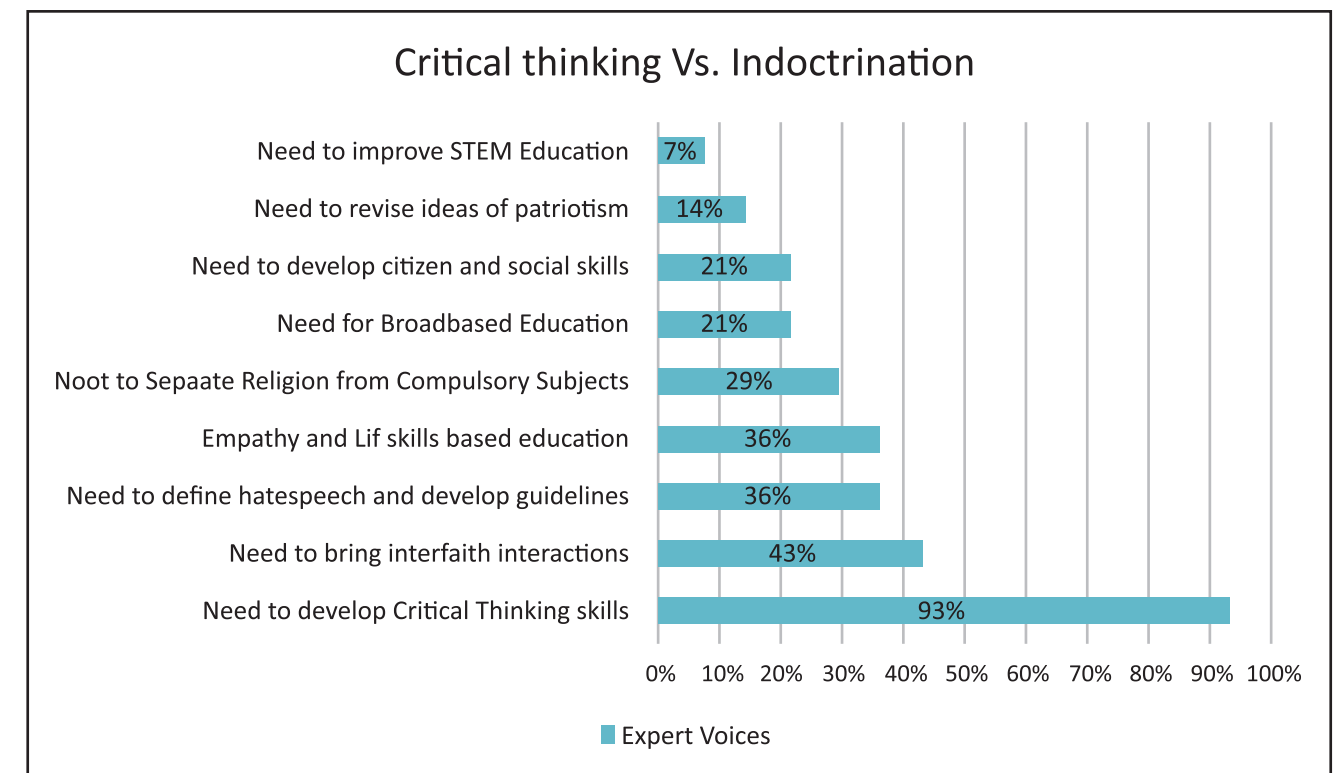
Indoctrination vs. Critical Thinking

An overwhelming ninety-three percent of interviewees expressed concern that the current curriculum will lead to indoctrination, and recommended that critical thinking be essentially integrated into teaching methodologies. They stressed the dangerous consequences of rampant indoctrination, drawing on examples

from recent politics such as Mashal Khan's lynching. The interviewees argued that progressive, critical-thinking teaching methodologies are possible within the madrassah setting too, highlighting that the syllabus is regressively taught and dogmatic content deliberately prioritized.

History textbooks were particularly lambasted; the omission of "history from below" i.e., of social movements, builds fractured visions of our collective potential. Stereotypes of women and religious minorities discourage critical thinking. Interviewees argued that systematic exclusion of critical thinking limits creative innovations in teaching pedagogies, resulting in disjointed syllabi of limited practical and social utility.

A pertinent example of such evolutions was sex education, which even though thought to be taboo, can teach students to protect themselves against sexual harm and trauma. It is noteworthy that 29 percent of the interviewees argued for separation of religion from the educational curriculum. 14% of the speakers expressed concerns over generating sentiments on "sacrifice" of lives against "the enemy" in young children.

Critical thinking Vs. Indoctrination

Category	Expert Voices
Need to improve STEM Education	7%
Need to revise ideas of patriotism	14%
Need to develop citizen and social skills	21%
Need for Broadbased Education	21%
Noot to Sepaate Religion from Compulsory Subjects	29%
Empathy and Lif skills based education	36%
Need to define hatespeech and develop guidelines	36%
Need to bring interfaith interactions	43%
Need to develop Critical Thinking skills	93%

This theme was echoed in eighty percent of interviews with former madrassa students and madrassa reform experts when they championed broad-based education. Broad-based education refers to the first twelve years of education that does not include religious education. Contrary to mainstream understanding, madrassas offer specialized education and, therefore, is suitable for children with an aptitude for it. The aptitude can only be realized by offering a wider range of options via broad-based education.

36 percent of the interviewees expressed the need to set a purposefully progressive direction of educational curriculum; leaving it open-ended renders it vulnerable to fundamentalist biases and acts contrary to equitable education. Similarly, 36 percent of the interviewees argued for the explicit inclusion of empathy and life-based skills within the school learning environment, arguing that developing emotional intelligence is essential to promote critical thinking. 7 percent believed that the direction for education should actively include STEM education, aimed at curating state-of-the-art skills within the students.

Academic freedom

Sixty four percent stressed the need for freedom of expression, thought and conscience to be part of the education system. They argued for education as an essential avenue to critically evaluate and express various worldviews, and considered it an instrumental tenet in improving the quality of education. They underscored that education cannot be systematically improved without accounting for greater academic freedom; diversity begets creativity and excellence which cannot exist without the freedom to criticize.

Twenty one percent of the interviewees pointed out that students and teachers across the board should be provided more academic freedom. They argued that greater academic freedom would inevitably lead to nuanced understandings of social issues, creating more room of multi-stakeholder inclusion at every stage of research and decision-making. Academic freedom safeguards equitable representation. The speakers also elaborated the link between greater academic freedom and meaningful interest in the classroom, arguing that teachers should have autonomy within the classroom so that they feel invested in their curriculum.

The speakers pointed out that academic freedom should include the ability to deviate from the syllabus to introduce subaltern history and perspectives in the classroom. Extending this argument, the interviewees drew out the multi-varied benefits of institutionalizing freedom of expression; it will lead to inclusive classrooms, tolerance for opposing views, role models from minority faiths and will counter violent subcultures. Freedom of expression was reframed as the ultimate goal of education, with academic freedom identified as its defining trait.

Exam and Board Systems: assessment tools and unhealthy learning habits

43 percent of the interviewees remarked that status-quo examination methods were outdated and unsustainable. They encourage rote-learning, actively preventing robust learning environments. Its structural impact was noted, with the examination criteria deeply impacting teaching methodologies and student attitudes. A distinction between public and private schooling was also made, and comparatives between O/A Level and Matriculation education were drawn to emphasize the differing learning outcomes.
Interviewees reframed the dissatisfaction with examination methods as a class question, arguing that it births greater disparity between students availing public and expensive private education.

The speakers pointed out that institutional change within the education system is impossible without restructuring the Board system. Therefore, SNC's proposed changes cannot be actualized without restructuring the exam system. They underscored that reforming examination criteria is the most effective top-down
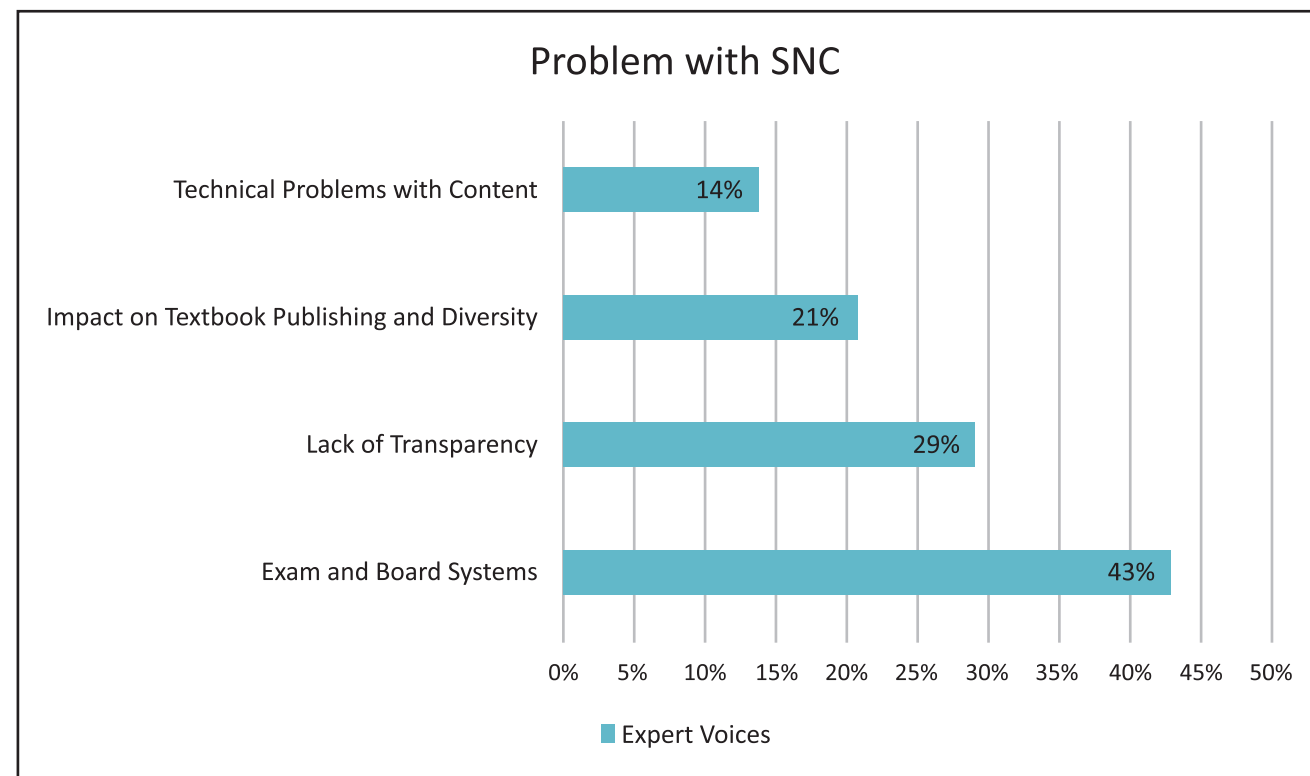
change, inevitably translating into changes within teaching methodologies and student priorities.

It should be emphasized that reforms diverged from borrowed Western models such as the O/A Level curriculum. The interviewees highlighted a gradual transition from mother tongue to English, need for greater check and balances and practices that encourage conceptual learning.

36 percent opposed the unhealthy competition generated within the classroom setting and beyond it, arguing that rigid criteria stamp out creativity and critical thinking within the students. The interviewees noted the role of parents in promoting unhealthy competition, its detrimental impacts on students' self-esteem and its limited academic utility. They punctuated the wide-ranging causes of unhealthy competition e.g., exclusively prioritizing certain subjects.

Performance in one subject shouldn't dictate overall performance of the student since it hinders self-exploration of students' aptitude. Some interviewees pointed out that religious and gender minorities are doubly affected by the unhealthy competition, since they are already working twice as hard as their fellow students, resulting in greater stress.

Problem with SNC

Category	Expert Voices
Technical Problems with Content	14%
Impact on Textbook Publishing and Diversity	21%
Lack of Transparency	29%
Exam and Board Systems	43%

■ Expert Voices

Curriculum Rationalization

Interviewees delved into detailed discussions of curriculum failings, seeking to unpack sites of potential reform. Fourteen percent talked about the lack of scope and sequence of topics and subject. Madrassah reformists argued that students within those institutions are not offered innovative and effective ways to integrate into the mainstream job market, and this disparity is reflected in the scope of offered subjects.

29 percent shared that the SNC's curriculum development process lacked transparency; it was decorative inclusion. Meeting minutes were not shared with all the participants, and none of their recommendations included. Many interviewees expressed surprise that despite their names included in the list of consultants, they were never invited. Their signatures were taken but they were never called to the meetings.

It was pointed out that feedback by many minority stakeholders was also routinely dismissed. The list of consultants also lacked diversity, consisting of few experts from minority religions despite the SNC deeply impacting them. Interviewees emphasized that the systemic exclusion is reflected in classroom settings too, and the SNC was an extension of those systems. Not all provinces were included in the supposedly exhaustive feedback process.

21 percent pointed out that a key failing in SNC was the lack of textbook publishing and diversity. They highlighted gender and religious stereotypes within the SNC textbooks, documenting various biases within them. The textbooks lack gender balance, and the directives to stick to specified textbooks failed to inspire learning within the student body. Limitations on textbook publishing would further cement the status-quo and limit the available pool further.

Allowing the Ulema Board in Punjab to vet the textbooks before publication will harm the education system. The interviewees expressed that ulema (Islamic scholars) are experts in their respective fields, and lack the knowledge base to fairly adjudicate. It will further sideline non-Muslim and gendered representation. They underscored that the development of textbooks is an exhaustive, participatory process that should be led by relevant experts to ensure evolution of the education system.

Hate speech

36 percent of the interviewees underscored the need to keep literature free from political narratives, arguing for holistic overviews that are inherently inclusive. History and Social Studies textbooks were especially highlighted, and examples of historical invisibilization of pre-Islamic history recalled to emphasize their role in myopic state-building efforts.

Similarly, 36 percent of interviewees said there was a need to include minority heroes and women as role models. They argued that it was essential for minorities to feel ownership towards the country, and cited the many minority parliamentarians and lawmakers who were key to the Pakistan Freedom Movement. Interviewees also pointed out that working class women heroes are excluded from textbooks, and collective movements led by grassroot activists never portrayed as role models. Model minorities were represented, and therefore, weren't diverse or relatable.

43 percent of interviewees charted the urgent need to integrate interfaith harmony within the curriculum, and 36 percent pointed out that understanding and creating sensitization of rampant hate speech was part and parcel of that. They argued that interfaith harmony, at all levels, makes the minority children feel safer, and promotes tolerance.
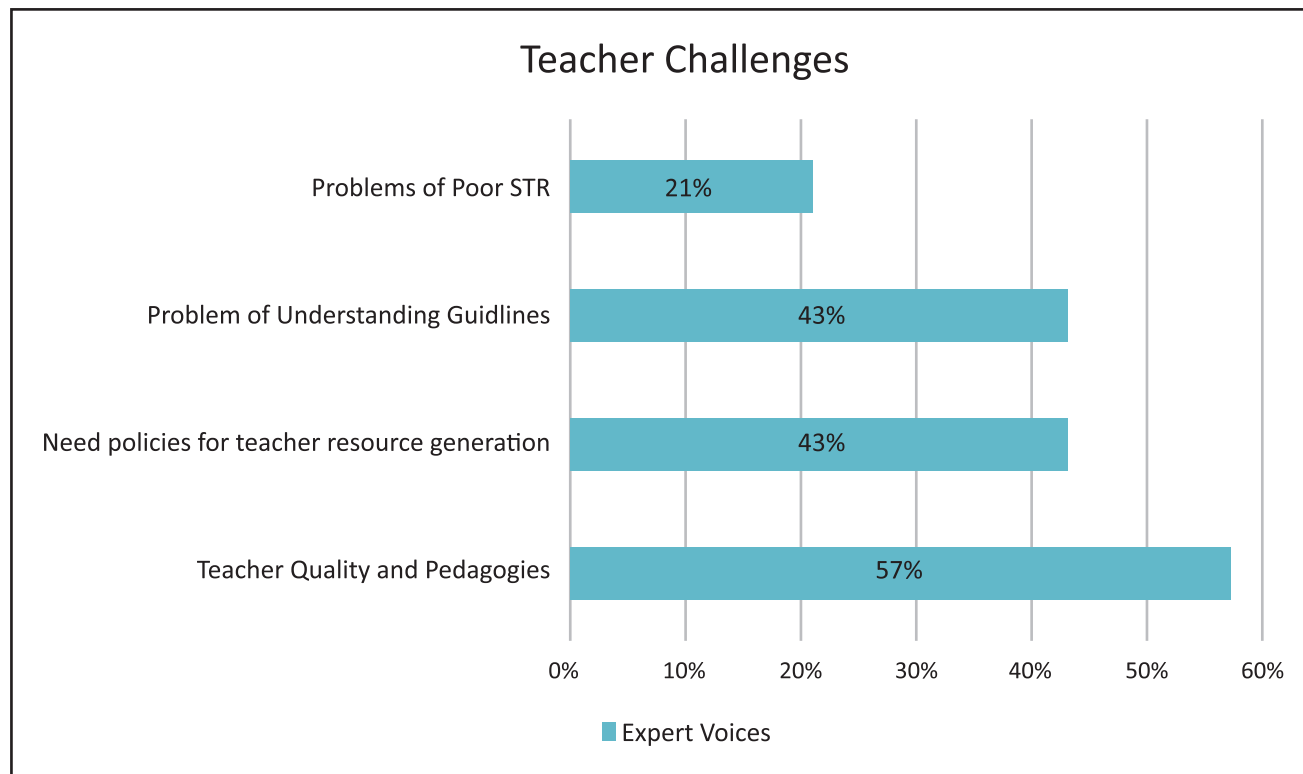
29 percent of the interviewees underscored the need to promote democratic values in textbooks, arguing that it was essential to present a counter narrative to the dictatorship that Pakistan's history was rife with. They argued that rights-based issues should be reframed as challenges to democracy within the classroom for equitable nation building efforts.

21 percent pointed out and admonished the dictation of good behavior in textbooks, whereby such conversations are less dialogic. Values are imposed, and therefore uncritically adopted. Citizenship ethics should be integrated into educational curriculum, and cannot be meaningfully taught without larger gender and religious inclusion.

Teaching quality; and pedagogies

Fifty seven percent argued for a qualitative improvement in teacher pedagogies, recognizing that values of critical values and freedom of expression need to be institutionalized into teacher trainings. They highlighted that teacher trainings were not sufficient in isolation, and should be meaningfully supported by changes in curriculum and examination methods. They linked improving teacher pedagogies with guaranteeing autonomy within the classroom, and diversifying the syllabi. The interviewees put considerable effort into highlighting how status-quo teacher trainings were ineffective, and its failings would be exacerbated under the standardized SNC.

One of the hurdles pointed out was the poor adaptation and understanding of curriculum rules by the teachers (highlighted by 57 percent of interviewees). They argued that since the teachers were, too, a product of rote-learning based education system, their implementation of curriculum rules were limited too. The learning environment is curated by the teachers, but remains chronically limited on many fronts.

Teacher Challenges

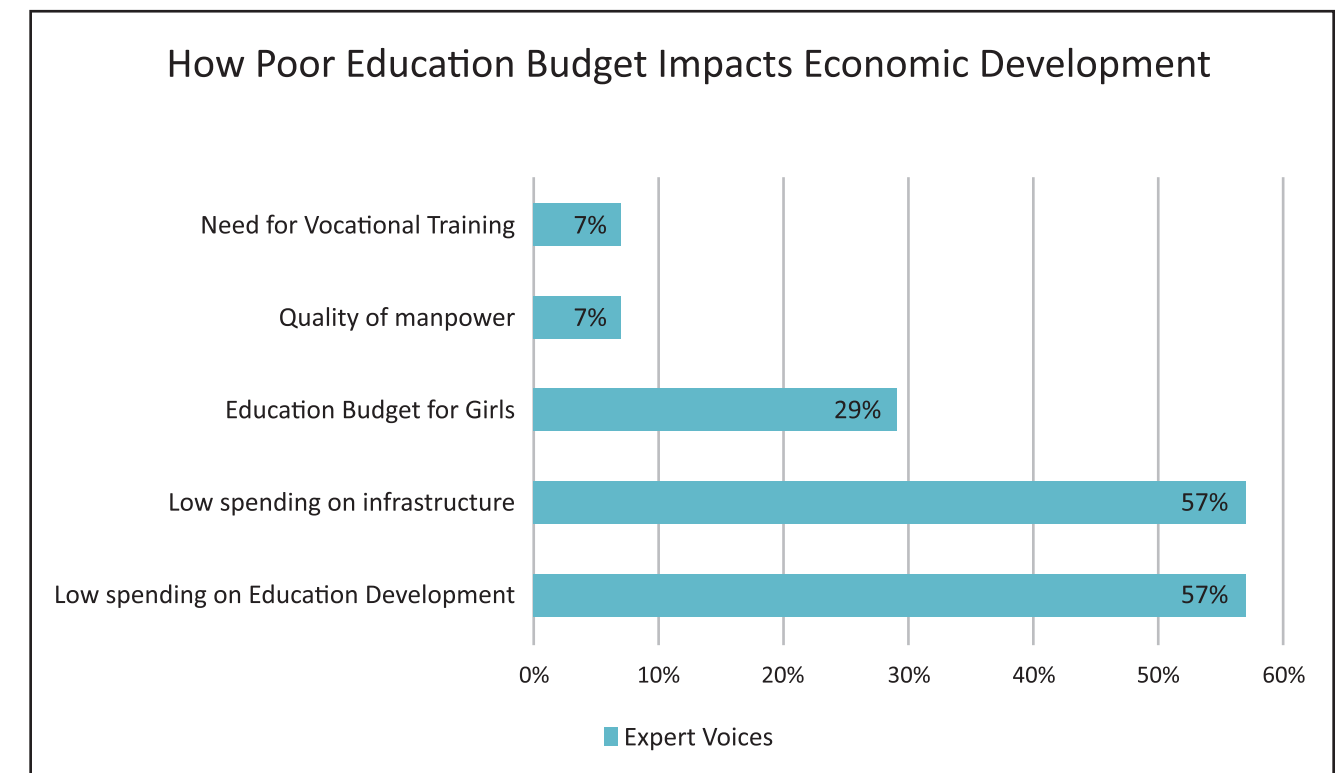| Challenge	Expert Voices
Problems of Poor STR	21%
Problem of Understanding Guidlines	43%
Need policies for teacher resource generation	43%
Teacher Quality and Pedagogies	57%

■ Expert Voices

21 percent of the speakers highlighted the dire need to increase student-teacher ratios, arguing that public schools are markedly understaffed, depersonalizing the education system. They argued that government schools have around fifty students in each class, necessarily dividing the teachers' attention. Not only is there a shortage of teachers, but the few there are, are underpaid, leading to inevitable disinterest in the curriculum and students.

Education Budget and Economy, enrolment & progression rates/outputs (quality of human capital)

Fifty seven percent of the speakers highlighted the low spending on education, and demanded that it be raised to a minimum of 4 to 6 percent of the GDP in line with international recommendations. The speakers noted the many impacts of an abysmally low budget, from an increase in unskilled labour, digital divide, vulnerability to job frustration and radicalization. The budget allocation was highlighted as another problem too; the interviewees implied that money isn't spent strategically.

57 percent of the speakers also pointed out that little effort and money is spent on maintaining and constructing school infrastructure.

29 percent of the interviewees felt a need to point out that a separate portion of the budget should be set aside for girls' education at every level, whether it be primary, secondary or tertiary. The economic and social cost of inaccessibility of education for girls was reiterated; patriarchal barriers cannot be overcome without research-based, contextual efforts by the government. Girls' education was linked to structural factors, and therefore, serving as a timely reminder to not evaluate access to education as an isolated problem. Policy makers must engage relevant community stakeholders when strategizing their education.

How Poor Education Budget Impacts Economic Development

Category	Expert Voices
Need for Vocational Training	7%
Quality of manpower	7%
Education Budget for Girls	29%
Low spending on infrastructure	57%
Low spending on Education Development	57%

■ Expert Voices

43 percent of the speakers underscored the need for multi-sectoral planning for teacher resource generation. 7 percent noted that the quality of teachers superseded the need for more teachers. They felt the education budget should prioritize quality over quantity of educational institutions and teaching staff, adding a disclaimer acknowledging that it's a difficult trade-off. Teacher trainings should be multi-faceted, holistic and adaptive to the group being addressed. A

generalized approach has proven, time and time again, to be counterproductive. 29 percent noted the need for digital learning, pointing out that syllabii should adapt to global changes in a fundamentally technology-driven job market. Educational budget should be spent on digital learning since this skill will become increasingly important in the future. It opens avenues for information gathering and inculcating democratic values. Digital learning will improve future outcomes and opportunities for all students, especially those from low-income families.

Challenges faced by madrassa students

Speakers highlighted the failure of government institutions to integrate madrassa-going students into mainstream education and job market. They pointed out that the madrassas are linked to different governmental sectors, creating confusion and dissatisfaction within the madrassa community, and making it harder to standardize them. By abolishing the previous system of madrassa registration, many remain unregistered, creating difficulty in opening business bank accounts and thus, creating a logistical nightmare.

They reiterated that the government's pace in transferring the madrassas to the educational sector has been remarkably slow. Discourse on madrassas' content regulation will not evolve until registration is managed adequately. Anytime a new government comes to power, progress on madrassa registration is lost and policies change yet again.
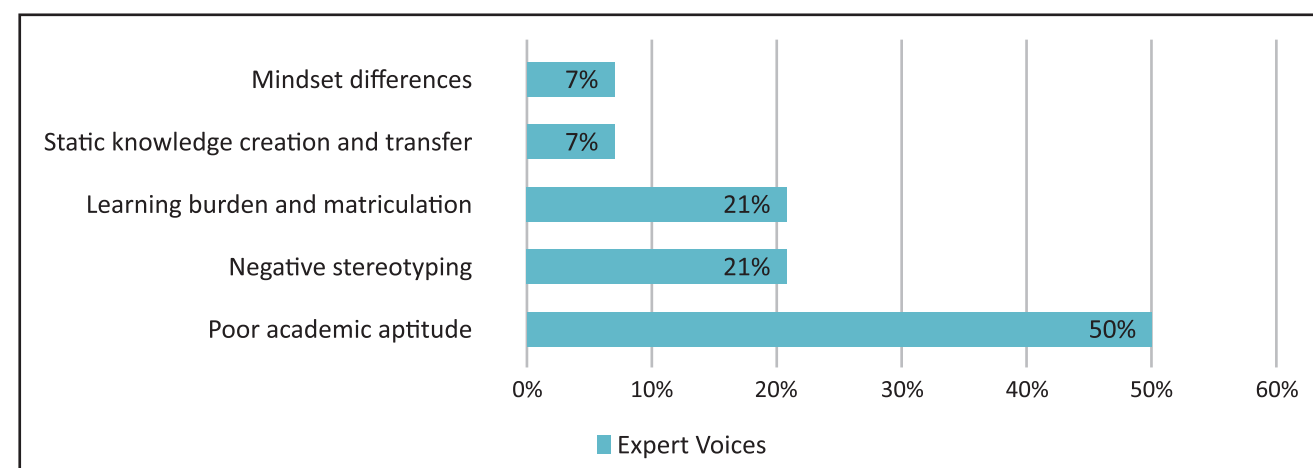
Three of the four madrassa-reformers or former students of madrassas opposed the stereotype of their teaching priming students for extremism any more than the average college student. The madrassa syllabus has potential to be progressive but the teaching methodologies remain regressive. Speakers also noted the rifts between students from madrassas of different sects, and recommended inter-madrassa exchange programs to promote tolerance.

They also recommended that stories of Hindu and other minority leaders who have notably serviced Muslims should be made part of the syllabus. The current syllabus has not been changed since decades and remains essentially dogmatic. Madrassa reforms should prioritize adaptive and modern religious syllabus, as done by many other Muslim countries such as Iran and Turkey.

21 percent of the speakers recommended innovative solutions to integrate madrassa-going students into mainstream job market such as offering online FA and Bachelor exams. These guarantee more skilled graduates. They also pointed towards some status-quo mechanisms within madaris that can be implemented all across the country such as some madaris in Peshawar increasing the number of educational subjects, compensated by overall increasing the number of years. Solutions like these guarantee more income to the madrassas too.
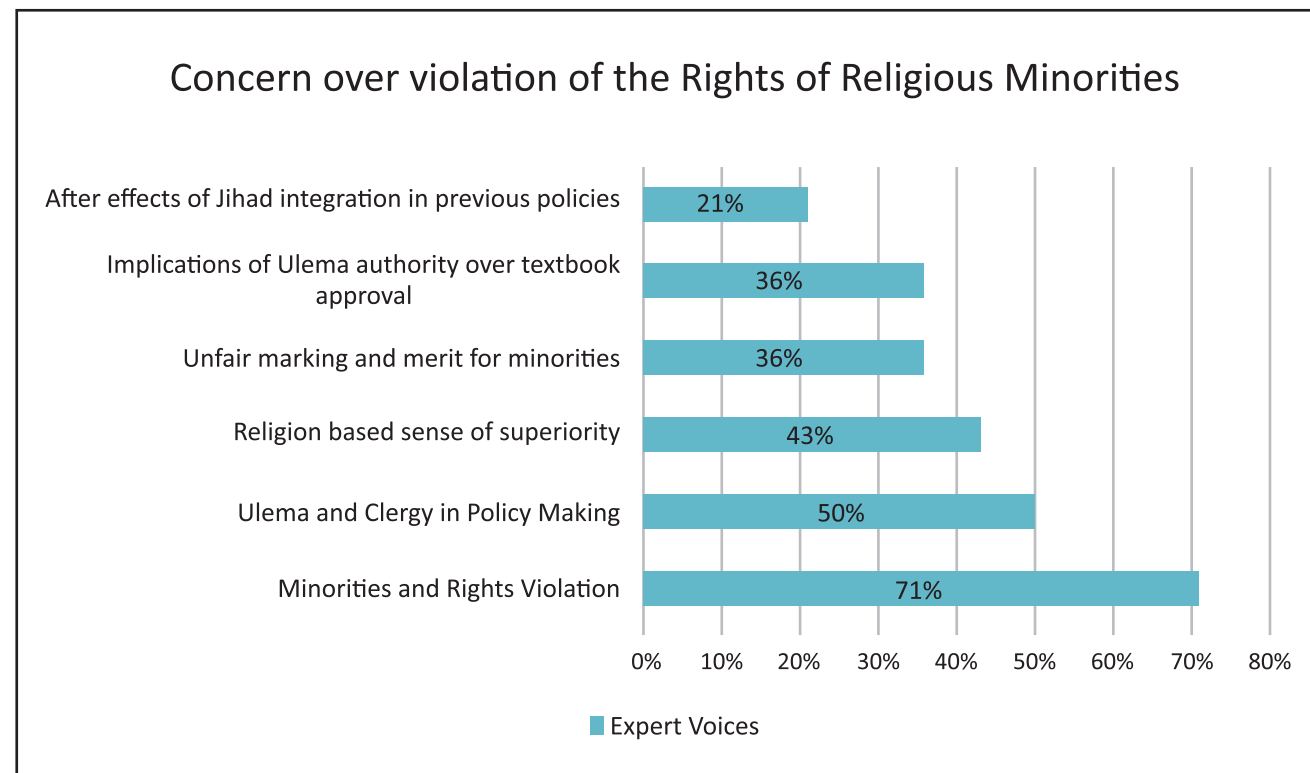
50 percent of the speakers also highlighted concerns over the madrassa-going students' aptitude, pointing out that primary level syllabi are too advanced and mature for the students. They also recommended broad based education for the first 12 years so that students can ascertain aptitude for the madrassas' specialized education before committing to it.

Increase in religiosity and structural integration into curriculum

71 percent of the speakers pointed out myriad minority rights violations within the SNC curriculum. It leads to minority children's classroom experience being

vastly different, compounded by discriminatory teachers and societal prejudice. Many minority children don't feel comfortable in their educational institution.

Speakers pointed out that only the Sunni Muslim faith is taught in Islamiyat and in other subjects like general knowledge, taking away minority faith students' constitutional right to be taught their own religion. Grace marks are given upon learning the Quran when applying for a Masters degree course or civilian jobs, giving an inherent unfair advantage to Muslims. The speakers emphasized that minority children have to be twice as accomplished to be given the respect and protection that the academic achievement would accord to the Muslim child/person.

Concern over violation of the Rights of Religious Minorities

Category	Percentage
After effects of Jihad integration in previous policies	21%
Implications of Ulema authority over textbook approval	36%
Unfair marking and merit for minorities	36%
Religion based sense of superiority	43%
Ulema and Clergy in Policy Making	50%
Minorities and Rights Violation	71%

■ Expert Voices

The speakers noted that textbook material should be premised on scientific and inclusive reasoning, offering the students a wide range of perspectives to encourage informed opinions. Religious bias within textbooks is didactic and actively counteracts critical thinking. 36 percent of the participants stressed that lack of bias was insufficient- the textbooks should also equip students with

cognitive tools to identify and address hate speech. Classroom environments should seek to redress structural bias, not exacerbate it.

21 percent of the interviewees expressed concern about jihad propaganda in textbooks. They traced it back to General Zia's Islamization policies, arguing that fundamentalist education continues to widen the gap between global transformations in the job market and Pakistan's skill levels.
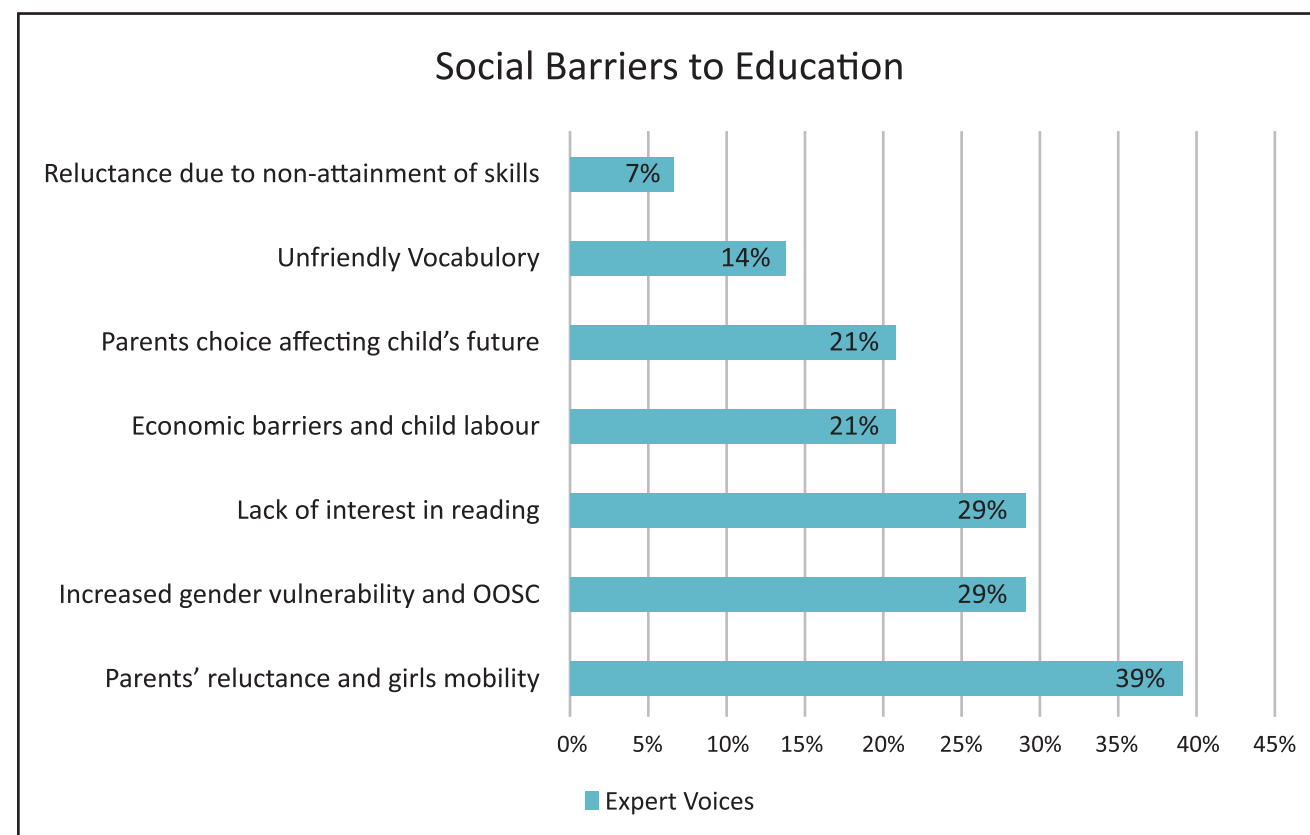
Cultural barriers and social practices/preferences in education

Speakers referenced several social practices that contribute to inaccessibility of education. 29 percent of the interviewees noted that education is not considered an inalienable right of the girl child, and is determinant on economic and patriarchal factors. Girls are discouraged from further education, especially in villages, because of lack of safe transportation (39 percent), insufficient allocation of resources and schools that are too far away.

21 percent also pointed out child labour's effect on educational access. They problematized the larger economic structures that render it an unfeasible choice for parents to send their children to school. Many cannot afford to send their children - especially daughters - because of the opportunity cost involved. They also don't believe the returns are meaningful enough beyond basic literacy levels, which reflects the quality of education. They underscored that child labour cannot be problematized without a contextual understanding of what gave rise to it, and the commitment to address those structural issues.

Speakers also pointed out parents' choice of subjects and school unhealthily affect the children's future, limiting the diversity of accessible options and creating a non-conducive learning environment (21 percent). Parents often end up determining career options for their children, resulting in a mismatch between their aptitude

and learning opportunities. Good quality education should aim to address these biases since they affect the children academically.

Social Barriers to Education

Barrier	Expert Voices
Reluctance due to non-attainment of skills	7%
Unfriendly Vocabulory	14%
Parents choice affecting child's future	21%
Economic barriers and child labour	21%
Lack of interest in reading	29%
Increased gender vulnerability and OOSC	29%
Parents' reluctance and girls mobility	39%

14 percent of the speakers cited lack of child-friendly vocabulary and text books as a hindrance towards creating quality education. 29 percent noted a lack of concern for children's reading habits and diversity, stunting their personality development and academic potential. They are not encouraged to explore, make mistakes and be creative. These are essential to cultivating promising learning outcomes.
Political will and policy shortfall on education/not learning from lessons

50 percent of speakers expressed concerns about lack of political will to address the various issues plaguing Pakistan's education sector. Even though education is, time and time again, centred in electoral politics and development programs, there is no meaningful change due to lack of accountability. Accountability demands that the education budget be increased and article 25-A's rule of business be drafted and implemented. Bureaucratic hurdles prevent effective reform and reflect the lack of political will across the board.

They noted that political parties include education in their manifestos, promising its accessibility for low-income families but almost never follow through. Lack of political accountability reflects a wider problem; therefore, the speakers once again noted that education is a structural issue, and cannot be meaningfully addressed without being perceived as such. 36 percent of the speakers pointed out the Single National Curriculum as a notable example of such lack of diversity in policy making.

50 percent of the speakers highlighted the need to include multiple stakeholders to provide information and guide on required educational policies. They noted that the stakeholders should be diverse and include NGOs, since many work at grassroot level. Research based policies should be adaptive to context, and for that, it is necessary to consult community experts.

7 percent also noted the lack of informed decision making for Madrassah enhancement, leading to policies that lead to national blunders. They pointed out that the education system is key to shaping Pakistan's future citizens, and therefore shouldn't be deprioritized and used for political expediency purposes. Madrassa reforms have been unduly politicised, meaning the government should actively try to implement policies that are in the best interest of its students, not only curry political favour.

Legal judgements on education and fundamental rights

57 percent of the interviewees noted that the Single National Curriculum was a fundamental constitutional violation of the 18th Amendment. They expressed that it conflicts with provincial autonomy under the 18th Amendment; the standardization functioned contrarily to the devolution clause.

Secondly, it violated Article 22(1), which guarantees rights to minority citizens.

Without taking the cultural and religious diversities into account, the Single National Curriculum promoted a nationalist, rigid education guidelines. Flexible systems of education are central to actualizing this right.

Recommendations

Upholding the spirit of learning and critical thinking

a. Unless critical thinking is encouraged, no direction can be set for education. What we found most interesting in our conversations is the desire for a "broad-based education" has been strongly expressed mostly by former Madrassah students and Madrassah reforms experts. By the broad-based education here, they mean 12-year education that's free from all sort of religious indoctrination. Some participants in our conversations were of the view that the religious concepts being introduced at primary level are too advanced even for a religious seminary student. Such complex religious concepts should only be introduced as a specialized course after a child has undergone 12 years of basic education. They had recommended focussing on foundational skills with general academic concepts.

b. There is a need to focus more on STEM and provide skills in this domain. The reason behind this idea is to encourage critical thinking in the fields demanding a learner's argumentation and critique, which will no longer be a possibility if the religious element stays there because no one can argue over it amidst the fear of religious backlash.

c. The social practices and behaviours towards critical enquiry and dissent are putting serious hurdles in intellectual and academic growth needed for any nation to progress. The speakers have recommended that safety must be ensured by the government at educational institutes where students and teachers feel safe in expressing their knowledge and ideas without feeling intimidated. Issues of biases, discrimination and lack of tolerance must be addressed while framing educational policies.

Inculcating civic values in the curriculum

a. There is a need to integrate the values based on interfaith harmony to promote a culture of peace in our learning environments. This should inspire in our learners an appreciation of other religions and ethnicities, orient them to diverse lifestyles and other customs and are able to understand the meaning and importance of equal citizenship. Pakistani textbooks, teacher resources and environments should be optimized in attracting interfaith or intercommunal learning activities and interactions.

b. There is a need to keep textbooks and all learning resources free from biased political narratives. The material to be included in textbooks should be based on objective reasoning leading towards the students forming their informed-opinions over matters affecting them.

c. The speakers also expressed that inclusion of minority heroes and women as role models in our curriculum might help inculcate more pluralistic values in the minds of the learners.

d. The participants of this series have laid stress on the need for sensitization on hate-speech in textbooks and its implications (36%). The sensitization can be materialized if definition of hate speech is embedded in guidelines and instructions for teachers and textbook writers and developers.

e. There is a need to inculcate values of ideal citizenry in our learners (expressed by 21% of the speakers). The speakers also spoke on the need to give out more practical examples for promoting democratic values. This is an important recommendation, as in recent history and current circumstances, we have seen little respect for rule of law and zero understanding of constitutionalism, the governance structure and role of democracy in affairs of the state. These are important concepts to provide our students with an enabling environment where they can make informed decisions and navigate through social dilemmas by their applying a rational approach to such circumstance, for example—

how best to behave with others and law enforcement during calamities and other emergencies, what responsible behaviour should be expected to keep others safe, what conservatism traits should be identified to preserve natural resources and keep the environment and wildlife protected, what can a citizen do to raise their concerns peacefully and meaningfully when it concerns human rights violations etc. are all important relevant issues that every citizen faces.

f.   The ideas of patriotism should instead be based on values of social justice and human rights, with emphasis on peace-building in society. A sense of heroism and bravado in the textbooks is based on military combatant actions, whereas more emphasis is needed on heroes striving for peace, education, health, justice, science, culture, environment and human rights.

Critical madrassa policy reforms

a.   Many young learners studying in madrassas (Islamic seminaries) feel trapped or deprived of their right to choose their preferred education or career once they reach their decision-making age. This issue can be supplemented by their further insistence on the compulsory education for all children aged 5-16 years being broad-based, and not specialized as in religious instruction at madrassas. In other words, the focus of compulsory education should mainly be on children attaining the academic competencies which they can apply in whatever field of education they want to choose for themselves when ready for higher education. The need here is to unburden education systems of subject complexities to help children progress into advanced classes without bearing learning losses caused by content that's not age appropriate for them.

b.   An interesting aspect that surfaced during one conversation with the experts is that the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student is old and static and no new knowledge has been created in madrassas. The archaic literature that is still part of the madrassa curriculum is a problem in itself, unlike in other Muslim countries such as Malaysia and Turkey, where madrassas have

adopted modernity and are competing with the conventional education system. This is the reason why in Pakistan we see differences in mindset between a conventional student and a madrassa student, as the latter have not adopted the much-needed change. This can also be corelated with the fact the madrassa students face scholastic challenges when they switch over to learning for matriculation exams. The reason this difficulty exists is because madrassa orientation of learning is different from school orientation of learning. The policy makers and implementers must keep this in mind before devising strategies for curriculum. Interlinking two very distinct streams of education (madrassa and conventional), instead of focusing on challenges madrassa students face and providing solutions, may end up causing more confusion and chaos for students in both streams.

Removing cultural and social barriers to education

a.   Speakers were of the view that parents are primarily concerned about their girls having no proper school facility (e.g lack of toilets, long distances, improper infrastructure etc.), thus highlighting the hard cultural barriers that would require extensive, rigorous actions in generating demand for education for girls among their caregivers.

b.   To address parents' reluctance, more self-reflection is needed on is going wrong with our schools where skills and competencies are not provided that could be of practical value to all economically struggling communities here. Vocational and skills training should be inculcated in schools whereas tailormade programs, financial skills and adult literacy programs can help make education more appealing and meaningful for individual communities. This is the reason why we need more than one system of education, so it is able to address concerns and demands of diverse communities.

c.   Another interesting reason for students turning away from reading habits, that has come to light during our conversations, is the lack of sensitivity to

child's psychological and physical needs in a learning environment. One of the reasons could be that textbooks lack child-friendly or amicable vocabulary that can make learning a keen experience. Lack of diverse portrayals of our characters and use of material that's inappropriate for the age of the child make for a socially regressive mindset. One way to tackle this problem is to sensibly develop a curriculum that can inspire a child to learn more, and not just remain constrained to a single textbook. Developing reading habits and inclusion of age-appropriate content in syllabus and textbooks in liaison with child experts and education psychologists can help make the learning experience pleasant for our poverty-stricken and stressed children.

Addressing Economic Challenges

a. Low spending on education development, and little effort in enhancing school infrastructure can have consequences in poor quality of labour who have had not been able to meet the industry and market demand. This impacts industrial and work outcome disastrously, a problem that can be addressed by upping the education budget to a minimum 4% to 6% of the GDP as recommended by UNICEF, and the quality of labour can be addressed by appropriate skill development programs in schools, where rote learning has taken over competencies and skills enhancement critical to the economy.

b. The economic loss of keeping women unqualified or uneducated is tremendous, and the problem further gets compounded by cultural barriers and rigidity in social attitudes towards women. Sensitivity to gender dynamics and facilitating girl children and women in accessing education should be a major consideration for education budget architects. There are many examples of communities and civil societies that have managed programs by making education a possibility for girls who otherwise felt deprived of it. Policy makers can learn from such solutions and replicate workable models that could generate demand for girls' education and remove apprehensions and fears of girls going to school.

Enhancing teacher capacity

a. A solution presented on improving capacity of a teacher is to adopt examples from neighbouring countries where the shortfall has been addressed through community models, where degree-seeking graduates from universities are temporarily employed at primary schools. Different models from within private and civil society organizations need to be looked into to replicate across Pakistan.

Political will to address the education crisis

a. Serious concerns have been expressed for the lack of political will to fix problems with the education sector. One speaker also mentioned making education an electoral issue so that politicians making tall claims on education can be held accountable once voted into power. The lack of seriousness at state level regarding the importance of education can also be gauged from the fact that Article 25-A of Pakistan's Constitution still lacks a mechanism and none of the provinces, except for Sindh, have yet devised rules of business. Political manifestoes on education must require serious commitment to education with a model for accountability devised.

b. The policies on education so far remain inadequate to address enrolment retentions at schools. There are inadequate reforms to address rise in dropout ratios and out of school children. There is also a lack of policy to sustain progression rates, where girls mainly fail to continue higher level education due to many social and economic barriers they face. In post pandemic situation, there is a dire need to asses education losses and make up for that by bringing meaningful, rigorous actions to fix economic downturn of education. Our speakers have recommended multisectoral consultations to remove serious shortages of quality teachers at schools. They have also recommended more adequate reforms to remove digital access barriers — the only bridge between

the learner and teacher where schools are inaccessible.

c. Experts have also lamented lack of policy to address problems faced by the mushrooming growth of budget schools.

Acknowledgements: