RESEARCH PAPER

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 traces the historical politicization of Pakistan's multiple education systems and its detrimental effect in gradually changing social mindsets through formal schools. It examines the political response to these parallel systems and the challenges of incorporating peace in schools, particularly in countering the misinformation and intolerance that reach children through textbooks and other literature. The article draws on a review of literature on education reform in Pakistan; interviews with school community members on the human rights challenges they face on campuses; and interviews with educators on how realistically they are addressing these challenges through capacity-enhancing peace integration trainings. Based on the experiences the teaching community shared with the author, it closes with recommendations for peace integration trainings for teachers along the lines of religious tolerance, social justice and inclusiveness.

Keywords: *peace education; textbooks; intolerance; curriculum reform; teacher training; Pakistan*

1. Common Assumptions about Extremism at Schools

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

At present, there are parallel education systems at work in Pakistan: 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 a government-prescribed curriculum, the unregistered, 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 the data available with government departments.[i] 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).[ii] It is also important to mention that intelligence reports, often cited in research papers, point towards the psychological impacts these madrassahs have on students. The problem is further compounded by the rigid attitudes of religious teachers, as they remain outside the domain of the formal education system.

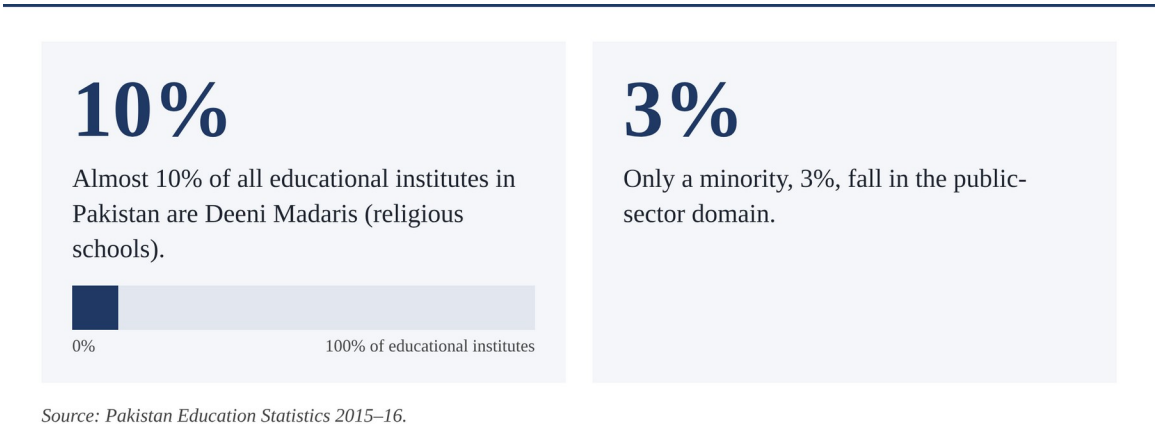

Figure 1. Religious schools in Pakistan's education system

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.

2. 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 were seen by many as an attempt to dissuade children from their pre-existing social value systems. Nearly two centuries later, right-wing attitudes towards modernity remain rigid and therefore require a strong political response with an understanding of current realities.[iii] Geopolitical influences have also led to an increase in public apprehension towards new ideas, which ultimately translates into present-day classrooms becoming vulnerable to dogmas. Politically, redress has been a difficult venture in tackling intolerance at schools. The reasons for this can be attributed to the use of 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 is the nationalist policies introduced by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, which required all educational institutes to be standardized with the aim of singularizing the national identity. This came as an attempt to undermine the regional dynamics and diverse demographics of Pakistan. Bhutto's national program of 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 Russian influence, he introduced a militant version of Islam to encourage Jihad, or 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 the national level, little has been done to address the issue of intolerance, which has 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 that should be a worrisome sign for policymakers. The harrowing 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. Saying that this violent tendency is now commonly found on our educational campuses would not be an exaggeration, because even if the schools are not directly producing violent students, their campuses are conveniently used by religious organizations for new recruits and preaching.

It is pertinent to mention here that there have been reforms in the education system in the past, but hardly with a view to limiting 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 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, Malala, a girls' education activist, and the late Dr. Abdus Salam, a globally respected physicist, are being discredited and condemned for their progressive views or their religious sect. Intolerance of dissenting views is also propagated by education influencers, as the President of the All Pakistan Private Schools

Federation, Kashif Mirza, himself initiated a toxic campaign against Malala for expressing her liberal views.

3. Indoctrination through Textbooks

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

One of the many examples this report cited is the following text from a Class 4 schoolbook:

> "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 a 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. "For Islam" and "For Muslims" were conflated, because the latter showed that a major minority demanded a homeland to have its political and social rights safeguarded, not because its 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. They also helped the state to later initiate a wave of distrust of the neighboring country, in which "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 The Murder of History, questions the wisdom behind asking 5-year-old children questions such as "Who created Pakistan?" in textbooks, and wonders how such impressionable minds would be able to process the complexities of our history.[v]

4. Education and Politics

At the state level, there is a consensus among stakeholders on addressing not just education outreach, but also the quality of education to improve learning outcomes. Issues of hate speech are being reported through the 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 to the constitution in 2010, which gave autonomous powers to the provincial governments and allowed them space to improve education standards. However, with a new government in power, the controversially elected Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has called for a National Curriculum Council to homogenize educational standards in schools across the country. Huma Yusuf, in her column, questions the definition of the "Pakistanis" that this initiative plans to produce.[vi]

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 them. Except for a few project-led organizations, like Alif Ailaan, there is little sense of placing effective accountability measures, such as report cards on the education promises and commitments made by 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, these policies are nonetheless mentioned in their manifestoes.

The three main political parties of Pakistan are Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Pakistan Muslim League (N), and Pakistan Peoples Party. While all parties have talked about financial modalities, school infrastructure, teachers' capacity enhancement and linking vocational training with education, only the PPP, and the 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.

5. Mediating Peace

Many teachers and educationists are showing concern and a willingness to play their role in eliminating extremist tendencies. To understand their coping strategies, an exercise was conducted by the 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 unanimous agreement that this content was hurtful to children belonging to minority groups. The teachers found a way to limit the scope of this text by preparing a suitable

lesson plan to reduce the psychological impacts of the discrimination and disrespect consequently faced by minority children.[vii]

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

In academic terms, peace education entails three theories, namely:

1. Social Interdependence Theory (emphasis on relationships 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 in 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.[ix] According to them, each subject should clarify its objectives in ways that inspire constructivism and mutual concern for human rights in both teachers and students.

Another way to look at peace education is through 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 the Desh Apnay project.[x] The major component of this program is to engage children and the community in identifying pertinent issues and presenting practical solutions by actively taking part in them. Through this project, the learners came to know about ways to officially address social issues through social mobilization. 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 students who elect their own presidents and vice presidents. Though it is too early to assess the sustainability of this project, it does lay a framework for schools to engage in practical civic education, without being overly specific on technical terms that may otherwise be too complex for students, teachers or the community to understand.

In Pakistan, Peace and Human Rights Education programs are in place in collaboration with the PEAD Foundation and UNESCO, with the intention of helping to open up the minds of learners and school communities through advocacy with provincial education departments and teachers' trainings. Though teacher training on peace education is not imparted at the mainstream level, a few civil society organizations are currently engaged in training teachers on ways to adapt their teaching methods to inspire empathy and diversity in students. There are also many individual

civil society projects aiming at youth engagement for peace and dialogue; however, they are not enough to cover the complex topics of conflict that are emanating from school campuses.

6. Conclusion

With a growing youth bulge (representing more than 60% of the population),[xi] a pervasive and impactful education policy is required to cater to the needs of the young population and enable their participation in a progressive society. However, while keeping in mind the political trends, there is also an urgency to address the attitudes that society itself has allowed to develop over 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 the great cost of politicizing young minds through schools. Progressive educationists have already expressed their concern over burdening children in the early years of education with ideological narratives, thus causing cognitive dissonance. The narratives endorsed at schools have impacted the minds not only of the students, but also of the teachers, who have a direct relationship with their pupils and their parents. The strong perpetuation of an unchallenged nationalist narrative has resulted in the 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 right-wing parties provided by the state plays a significant role in forming public opinions based on ideological divisions.



Source: UNDP Pakistan, National Human Development Report 2017.

Figure 2. Pakistan's youth bulge

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 their consequent hate speech. Although there is an undeclared admission by the state of why the textbooks were greatly polarized during the Cold War, little effort is being made to undo that. This 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.

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 of how speech affects a child psychologically, to inspire teachers 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 the hate speech that has been systematically placed in the state-prescribed curricula.

7. Recommendations

- There is a need to link formal education with imparting civic sense to children at an early age, which can encourage empathy in them.
- Democratic values and their workability should be introduced in teacher training programs. In many cases, it has been observed that teachers are not aware of their own rights and responsibilities.
- Teachers need to be more exposed to troubling texts in schoolbooks and should be quizzed on ways in 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 for schools should be introduced by the government to deal with conflicts on campus instantly.
- Teacher training should be accompanied by extensive subject reading of other authors to improve teachers' unbiased understanding of subjects, which can help them provide more diverse perspectives to students.

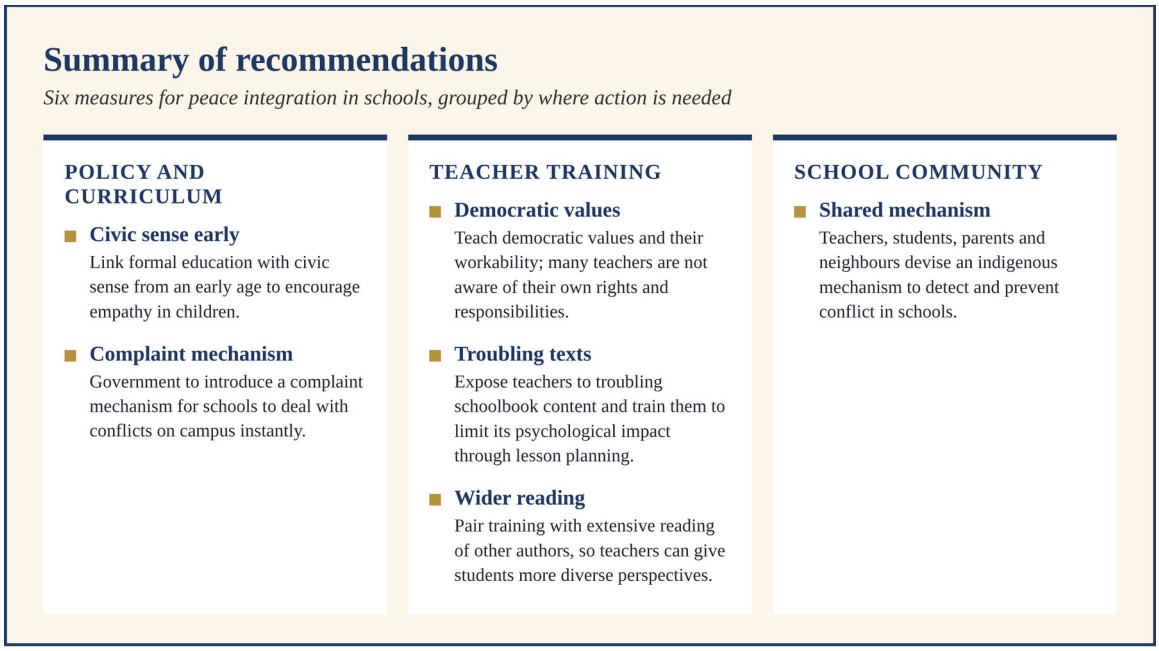

Figure 3. Summary of recommendations

Notes

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