

## Education in Pakistan: The Need for Greater Alignment between Policy and Praxis

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### **Abstract:**

*The Government of Pakistan has a primary obligation to establish and maintain quality public schools for its citizens. The education policies and documents of the government of Pakistan (see 1973 constitution of Pakistan) not only recognizes education as a public good, but also expresses commitment to establish an equitable education system. Nonetheless, the element of conceptualized 'equality' looks a far cry in real sense. This paper, hence, realizing on-ground situation, examines empirically the contradictions that exist between government rhetoric of egalitarianism in education and the extent to which the gap exists between policy intention and policy implementation. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 28 educationists, this article asserts that the government's dual policy towards education (ignoring public education and encouraging private education) has tacitly legitimized the sale and purchase of education as commodity. This shift, in the perception of education from a public good to a private commodity, seriously brings disadvantages to working class pupils in the competition for earning valuable educational credentials and trading upon them. Treating education as private good contributes to perpetuation of class hierarchies in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** *Public goods, private commodity, equitable education, educational credentials, egalitarianism.*

### **Introduction:**

The past three decades have borne witness to a dramatic loss in the quality of public education in Pakistan. People, including those running the public education system, have been seeking alternative to the public school system. The lack of government commitment to improve public education system and the unprecedented growth of private educational institutions make it necessary to critically examine education policy and praxis in Pakistan. This paper, thus, provides an overview of the current state of public and private education in Pakistan, citing findings and arguments from other research studies and relevant documents of the government. The paper, based on qualitative interviews with educationists, argues that unequal availability of educational resources clearly

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gives privilege to ruling elites and the professional middle classes over working and lower middle classes. To facilitate the reader(s) to understand the overall situation, the paper is divided into three parts.

Part one reflects upon the government's official commitment to equitable education system. Part two seeks an explanation for the unsatisfactory performance of public schools in guaranteeing equal education opportunities. It further delineates the anxieties and vigilance of the educationists (curriculum designers, subject experts, executive district education officers, schools heads/principals) for their children's educational success and careers through educational credentials in contemporary society. It explains how different educational systems have been established to maintain the existing class hierarchies, creating working and lower middle class children as the 'Other' of the elite and professional middle classes' children. Part three concludes the overall study and links the findings with the theoretical and empirical scholarship in sociology of education. The conclusion (evaluation) raises serious questions about the government's genuine commitment to the establishment of equitable education system in Pakistan.

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## **Part One**

### **Education in Pakistan: Public Good or a Private commodity:**

Successive governments in Pakistan have placed an emphasis on quality education for all. Several documents (i.e. constitution of Pakistan and national education policies) acknowledge that Government of Pakistan has a primary obligation to establish and maintain quality government schools for all citizens. Government education policies recognize education as a public good <sup>[1, 2]</sup>. The Constitution of Pakistan in its articles 37 (b) 38 (d), and 34 sets out a broad based egalitarian view of education. The National Education Policy 2009 clearly writes that education is a categorical imperative for national development that should enable all individuals to reach their maximum human potential <sup>[1-3]</sup>. The National Education Policy (NEP) 1972 clearly outlines an equal access to education with a stress for the provision of extra resources and facilities for women, people from low socio-economic background, and people with mental & physical disabilities <sup>[4, 5]</sup>. Similarly,<sup>[4]</sup> it asserts that different governments at different times constituted different education commissions to re-visit the existing education policies and suggest practical steps for an egalitarian and a just education system. It reflects strong commitment of the government of Pakistan to ensure quality education for all and making education a public good and key driver of economic growth and social mobility <sup>[1]</sup>.

To make education a public good for different social groups, the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) launched a major campaign to nationalize educational institutions in the early 70s. A total of 3,334 private schools and 175 private colleges were nationalized in different phases <sup>[4, 6]</sup>. This revolutionary

step was highly appreciated by academics, civil society and mass media. It was considered a positive move towards equal access to education and increasing chances of social mobility for underprivileged groups <sup>[4, 7]</sup>. Analyzing Bhutto's nationalization policy with a critical lens, it may be argued that the nationalization of education was never implemented in true spirit as hundreds of high fee charging elite private schools were saved from nationalization with the justification that they will reserve 20 percent seats for poor students. It was also claimed that they will not discriminate poor students in admission provided that they meet the merit standards <sup>[7, 8]</sup>.

We believe that the discourses of meritocracy and reserve seats were tacitly biased against underprivileged children. Lower-class students, who generally study in Urdu-medium public schools do not generally possess proficiency in English language, so failure of the majority of lower class-pupils in the entry test was/is inevitable. Thus, the elite educational institutions' commitments (reserving 20 percent seats and awarding admission to poor students on merit) were vividly discriminatory. In Rahman's <sup>[9]</sup> views, such elite schools were allowed to exist and flourish their business by serving the interests of the elites. He further asserts that such schools maintain(ed) the status quo by sustaining the powers and wealth of elites' in Pakistan (ibid).

Examining the history and current situation of education in Pakistan, it can be argued that despite public rhetoric and official commitment to equality of educational opportunities, government's policy of allowing private educational institutions has made education a private commodity rather than a public good. In 1980, the government of Pakistan officially accepted lack of resources and expertise to address low educational indicators. The government invited private sector organizations to deliver education services in the country <sup>[4]</sup>. This decision resulted in the commercialization of education and distracted the government from making public education a public good for the underprivileged children.

The new trend-making education as a private commodity-opened an avenue to a new wave of private English-medium schools for the middle class children. Starting in the early 1980s, the number of new non-elite private schools increased ten-fold since 1983 <sup>[10]</sup>. The main reason for this unprecedented growth of non-elite private English-medium schools was and is the eminence and guarantee of English language in future success and profitable job opportunities. Without competency in English, it is almost, impossible to get good job in the public/private sectors organizations. The explicit and implicit message communicated herein is that Urdu-medium public schools are poor to teach English language effectively and, therefore, leave working-class pupils unprepared for tertiary education and good credentials <sup>[1]</sup>. Academicians and education policy makers were/are divided when it comes to private sector involvement in the provision of education.

The government of Pakistan claims that the involvement of private sector has improved educational opportunities for people. The private sector education has

provided people with multiple option and choices. Contrary to these claims, various research studies reveal that the private sector involvement has seriously limited the capacity of the public schools to educate working and lower middle class children to acquire good credentials/jobs <sup>[1, 4, 11]</sup>. What is truly shocking about the current deplorable status of public schooling and disinvestment in it is that those who are responsible for the improvement of public schooling do not bother because their own children are either enrolled in elite English medium private schools or new English medium private schools <sup>[1]</sup>.

The concern we express here is that the wave of Neoliberalism has far-reaching implications for the nature and quality of the educational experience of all citizens. The persistent negligence of public schools has reduced public schooling to what McLaren calls ‘ritual performance’<sup>[12]</sup>. It will not be unjustified to argue that education in public schools has been reduced to learning basic writing, reading and mathematical skills to meet the global demand of 100 percent literacy<sup>[1]</sup>. The question is that the disinvestment in public education and the promotion of education as a private commodity have seriously undermined the quality of public education and the governments’ commitment to establish an equitable education system. The paper claims that the neoliberal education policies have created massive educational inequalities and educational divide. Because the existing discriminatory education system is an important part of a complex structure through which social classes are given ‘legitimacy and through which social and cultural ideologies are recreated, maintained, and continuously built <sup>[13]</sup>. ‘Education is, in fact, one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one’ <sup>[14]</sup>. Drawing on Bourdieu, <sup>[14-16]</sup>, it can be argued that the existing stratified education system in Pakistan has a key role in maintaining the existing class hierarchies.

### **Methodology:**

This study employs qualitative methodology so that the underlying ground realities are properly unearthed and the answer to the question raised is properly addressed. The question that this study focused on, as has been hinted above, was to explore how educationists understand the commodification of education and falling standards of public schooling in Pakistan? To answer the question and explore the perspectives of the educationists regarding the falling standard of public schooling and neoliberal shift in Pakistani education, 28 educationists (curriculum designers, subject experts, executive district education officers, schools heads/ principals), who have held responsible positions in educational bureaucracy, were selected as sample size of the study. We deem it important to mention here that Executive District Education Officers and Schools Heads were the main sources of information due to their stated responsibility of maintaining quality in the public schooling. It is also pertinent to mention that curriculum designers and subject experts who design, author and approve textbooks for the

public schools carry great influence on the contents and substance of knowledge. Curriculum designers and subject experts are perceived as intellectual guardians of society who carry the authority to decide what should and what should not be taught to public school pupils. The selected educationists were interviewed in a series of face to face interview sessions. The interviews were carried out exactly in line with the code for in-depth interviews. The interviews represent the experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge of the educationists about the current status of education in the study area. The respondents (educationists) selected for interviews held extensive relevant experience in education sector and understood the current trends in education.

We analysed the collected empirical data in line with the standards of qualitative analysis. The process of analysis allowed us to reach meaningful themes.

### **Part Two: Findings**

In this section, we are going to present the main findings from this research. The main findings may be summarized as:

- Stratified school systems in Pakistan are used to reproduce class inequalities.
- Falling standards of public schooling is due to politicians and people holding responsible positions in educational bureaucracy.
- Multiple systems of education are a form of apartheid and discursive legitimization of the same.

#### **Poor Public Schooling: reproduction of class inequalities:**

Different research studies <sup>[1, 4, 17, 18]</sup> have continuously highlighted that public schools in Pakistan are too poor to perform their ideal role. The Economist Intelligence Unit <sup>[17]</sup> in its assessment claimed that Pakistan's public education system is among the most deficient and backward system in Asia. It ranks too low in the scale/list of education indicators in South Asia <sup>[18]</sup>. The National Education Policy Document (2009) acknowledges the lack of commitment on part of Federal and Provincial Education Ministries to achieve goals of quality public schooling and egalitarian education and, likewise, the drop-out rate and rural-urban disparities in education continue to remain high. The National Education Policy Document highlights that due to poor standard of public schooling, elite and professional middle class send their children to privately run English medium schools. Public schools enroll the children of those who are too poor to send their children to English medium private schools. It can be argued that the lack of commitment on part of government to the egalitarian goal of education has worsened public education. Public schools have stuffy classrooms, insufficient furniture, equipment and inadequate washrooms/toilets for students. The teachers mostly lack the commitment to deliver quality teaching and avoid

any healthy collaborative effort aimed at improving their performance. Majority of them are untrained and follow the century old pedagogical practices<sup>[9, 11]</sup>.

The aforementioned pathetic situation of public schools was also testified by the empirical data. Almost all of the responsible educationists in educational bureaucracy admitted that public schools failed to educate and prepare children to realize the philosophy of ‘knowledge economy’ in true sense. They held different reasons responsible for this state of affairs. One of the senior educationists, while referring to the current deplorable situation of public schools stated that:

The government system is extremely poor and the people with political authority – such as education ministers, Members of National Assembly (MNAs), Members of Provincial Assembly (MPAs)-don’t bother to correct it due to their vested interest: a) they appoint school teachers to get votes for them and run their political campaigns in the area; b) everyone knows that these illegally appointed teachers do not perform their duties due to the support of political leaders.

This quote is indicative of the political intervention in education. The respondent clearly states that politicians appoint teachers in public schools to enhance their vote-bank. They sacrifice the merit policy and utilize the services of their appointees for their political campaigns. Hence, the teachers appointed in this way fail to perform their duty as desired and resultantly the quality of education and the learning efficiency of pupils suffer. The important point that emerges as a corollary of this process of political patronization of the public school teachers is that those who are illegally appointed as teachers mostly belong to working and lower middle class. Therefore, neither they (teachers) nor other members of their class would ever criticize the substandard education imparted in public schools. Therefore, it can be safely deduced that the economic dependency of the working and lower middle class people on political elites. In addition to other factors, it perpetuates substandard public schooling in Pakistan.

The same version was also reinforced by a high school Principal in an interview who referred to the way the political intervention influences the performance of the public schools. He in this way emphatically stated that:

Education ministers, MNAs and MPAs use public schools for their vested interests. They play politics in transferring executive education officers and pressurize them to support their appointed teachers anyway. They are not serious to improve the quality of public education. The people in authority don’t do anything practically to improve education because their own children study either abroad or in the exclusive elite schools in Pakistan.

This statement, when read in conjunction with the previous one, clearly highlights the way politicians adversely affect the schooling of working class children through the appointment of incapable educational administrators

(executive education officers) and transferring those who refuse to serve their political interests. It is this unnecessary and dishonest intervention of politicians which, according to a senior educationist has converted public schools into “garbage drum”. The respondents mainly considered the element of corruption as one of the main reasons responsible for encouraging poor quality of public schooling. One of the government school principals, who remained Assistant Education Officer, in this respect, unhesitantly stated that:

The persistent prevalence of corruption in education department, which involves the will of political leaders, executive education officers and other influential officers and people, is the key factor for poor standard of public education.

Commenting further on the current status of public schools, a senior professor and member of school curriculum team held that:

The current pathetic condition of government schools compels people to educate their children in private schools....We all know that government education has been continuously neglected by almost all governments in Pakistan. I don't see any serious commitment on part of the state authority for improving public schools. This is a common sense fact that teaching staff is irregular and incompetent due to political appointments and transfers.

Similarly, a female executive education officer, having vast experience in teaching at school level, not only endorsed the dirty role of influential people in sabotaging public schools but also referred to their complete cognizance of the situation. She held that:

The affluent people, including educationists - public schools' teachers, curriculum designers, and education policy makers - send their children to private schools as they are aware of the internal weaknesses and irregularities in public schools. They also understand that there are very little serious efforts for its improvement.

The same deplorable position of public schools was also uttered by a senior educationist who held that public schools definitely spoil pupils. He further argued that:

I am sure you know that education in public schools is pathetic. No sane person will ever risk the future of his/her child by throwing him/her into a ‘garbage drum’ ... [taking a pause] public schools are nowadays not less than ‘garbage drums’.

The above explanation of the senior educationist is not an individual opinion rather it is a reality which is testified by different research studies <sup>[1, 11, 19]</sup>. The above quote, when linked with the official reports and educational statistics, affirms how public schools' students are being spoiled. Ministry of Education's

report reveals that the drop-out rate is persistently on increase: more than 31% drop out at primary level; almost 16% after middle level; another 16% after secondary level/phase and almost 16% during the higher secondary level/phase<sup>[20]</sup>. These statistics show that 79% children drop out from public schools before acquiring their FA/FSC certificate. This means that majority of the children end up their education journey without earning any marketable credentials. These statistics and empirical data allow us to argue that almost 80% of the working and lower middle class children are spoiled by the existing neglected public sector education.

This deplorable status of public schooling explicitly and tacitly serves the Neoliberal agenda - shifting education from public good to private good and available in the market to be purchased by the affluent class. The poor public education provides convincing ground to people at the helm of affairs to justify the alternative private education as the need of the time.

### **Part Three: Discussion and Conclusion:**

The overall conclusion that we derive from the study's findings is that education in Pakistan has become a private commodity and not a public good. Only parents with sufficient resources (economic and cultural capitals) and dominant *habitus* can ensure quality education for their children in private schools/educational institutions. The availability of unequal education - poor public schooling for the working class pupils and quality private education for the ruling elite and professional middle class children is seriously disadvantageous to working class pupils in the competition for educational credentials<sup>[14]</sup>. The study leads us to argue that the stratified schools system produces and reproduces class hierarchies in Pakistan. Draining on the educationists' responses and<sup>[20]</sup> statistics regarding drop-out from public schools, it can be asserted that the stratified education school system with hierarchical standards is the sophisticated way of marginalizing working class education in the contemporary credential-based society.

The highly stratified nature of the education systems (i.e., Urdu medium public schools, new private English medium schools, and elite-English medium) provides different curricula and classroom experiences to students<sup>[1, 4, 11]</sup>. Ruling elites and professional middle class, including educationists, carefully sculpt and construct the lives of their children within carefully selected locations (private schools) protected and shielded from 'others' (working class children). The elite and professional middle class ensures effective schooling of their children from reputed institutions - where average achievement is higher than the good results of the public schools. The point that needs to be pondered upon is that ruling elites and professional middle class "ensure the transfer of their power and privilege to their children by providing them with quality education in elite-English-medium school"<sup>[4]</sup>. The findings of the study clearly unfold that private schools are fortified locations (sites) within stratified schools system that support

the class structure of society by pushing children of professional middle class and ruling elite to bright future.

On the contrary, the disinvestment in public education and indifferent attitude of the educationists towards public schooling as well as the communication of inadequate knowledge and skills waste the talent of many working and lower middle class children. The deplorable status of public schooling, described by educationists and previous studies<sup>[11, 19, 20]</sup>, endorse that public education is not more than a ritual performance between teachers and students. Thus, poor public education rarely enables the working class children to earn and acquire some good marketable credentials. Graduates of the public schools and colleges confront limited occupational choices<sup>[21]</sup>. Their life chances are just a cut above those students who do not complete high school or college<sup>[22]</sup>. Taking into account the increasing emphasis on educational credentials as the key to successes in contemporary society, poor public schooling may affect the future of working class children in many ways: a) they may be discriminated during jobs selection due to their perceived inferior credentials; b) the growing stigma being attached with public schools can give birth to a new dimension of self-fulfilling prophecy<sup>23</sup>-public school graduate are dumb. The findings of this study, when read in conjunction with previous research studies<sup>[1, 4, 11]</sup>, give strong grounds to claim that government's rhetoric of equality of educational opportunity is deceptive. In short, it can be summed up that an equitable society requires a system of education that curbs the reproduction of social inequalities through the provision of equal opportunities to all children irrespective of their economic status etc.

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