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Education Policy in Pakistan: National Challenges, Global Commitments

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Abstract

This article explores the main issues facing education policy in Pakistan, a relatively new country, still seeking to find its feet in terms of educating its future generations. The article highlights Pakistan's intentions reflected in the commitments it makes on the world stage and the challenges of implementation at nation state level. A disparity between these two levels highlights why education in Pakistan remains sporadic and poor quality, against a backdrop of international interest in terms of the 'war on terror' and the perceived rising of madrassas and extremism. The article concludes with some practical recommendations of how global commitments could be used to address national challenges by shaping policy and importantly its implementation at ground level. One of these is to focus on educational research, within and by Pakistanis themselves, to understand their own educational needs more fully and consequently be able to construct policy more reflective of national challenges and feed into global commitments.

Keywords: Pakistan education policy, education research, international policy, nation state education, policy making,

Education Policy in Pakistan National challenges, Global Commitments

Introduction

For a paper on education policy it would be pertinent to define the meaning of education and also that of policy. In its broadest form one definition refers to education as the 'human activity of preparation for life' (Winch & Gingell, 2004, p.6). But even a limited definition like this has to allow for the values which underpin the meaning of 'preparation of life', such as preparation for family life, civic participation or to be economically active and independent when adult. More recently, education could refer to personal development as part of human rights approach to education (Tikly, 2011).

Continuing with the 'education as a preparation for life' definition and recognising societal values, policy might be defined as the stated aims and implementation of that which is of value to society in terms of preparing for adult life. In that case, education policy according to Harman, (1984, p13) is '*the implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive action being following or to be followed in dealing with a recognised problem or matter of concern, and directed towards an accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals*'. In this sense, policy is a means by which a society attempts to address an issue in some kind of formal way while implementing its values. Again there are many ways of defining policy and this definition by no means encompasses all that is meant by policy. As pointed out by Taylor et al (1997) this definition makes several assumptions which make it a rather simplistic one, such as that it assumes policy making is reached by the general consensus of those involved without fully appreciating that most often policy making is a *process* that is usually reached by compromise and conflict between all the



interested parties and that a policy is never complete and finite. Taylor et al further suggest that *'policy is developed in a more disjointed, less rational and more political fashion'* (Taylor et al, 1997, p.25). This is an important point because it highlights the political nature of policy making with power and control being central tenets and is as such very value laden - most often with the values of those of the political elite. This is described as the *Elitist model* and especially relevant for the context for this essay which will examine the education policy development in Pakistan.

A brief history of education in Pakistan: policy and reality

Pakistan is a relatively new country at just 65 years old, having gained independence from India in 1947, as a land for the large number of Muslims in India - indeed the very *idea* of Pakistan is only 80 years old. Pakistan's education policy held much hope in terms of building the nation and the founding father of Pakistan, Mohamed Ali Jinnah made poignant statements at independence which echoed the words of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) such as *'without education it is complete darkness and with education it is light'*. Such words set the scene for an education policy that would have an Islamic ethos to encompass a sense of national unity, pride and patriotism as the values underpinning its education policy. Mohammed Ali Jinnah also warned that *'Education is a matter of life and death for Pakistan. The world is progressing so rapidly that without the requisite advance in education, not only shall we be left behind, but that we shall be wiped out altogether'* (24th Sept 1947). The discourse thereby stressing the importance of education in playing a vital role in the sustaining and developing of this new country on the world stage, as well as nationally. Pakistan, with genuine intent, duly signed the United Nations Declaration of Human rights (UNDHR) in 1948 within which education was a right for all, one of Pakistan's first international commitments as a nation.

At the time of independence in 1947, education was provided mainly locally and privately overseen by district and municipal governments, but in 1962 central and provincial control began. In 1972, there began a mass nationalisation of schools (bar a few elite private schools) coming under the control of central Government with the introduction of Martial Law. But in 1979 with a change of government, schools were once again allowed

to become private providing they did not compromise quality of provision. Indeed, privatisation was encouraged as was decentralisation through ‘grants in aid’ particularly for primary or basic education (Jimenez & Tan, 1987). The change in policy by the new Government was in recognition that the nationalisation programme prompted the decline in the provision and quality of education partly because of the huge financial burden placed on the State, particularly for primary provision . Further exacerbating the problem, an increase in spending on colleges and universities resulted in a disproportionate misallocation of resources (Government of Pakistan, 1983b) which pandered to the needs of the articulate elite and the interests of policy makers themselves (Jimenez & Tan, 1987). This illustrates the earlier point of policies with an *elitist approach* where demands of the elite are those most reflected in policy making (Taylor, 1997) despite the rhetoric that ‘*The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by the law.*’ (Article 25-A, Constitution of Pakistan, Ministry of Education, 2010).



Fig.1 Map of Pakistan



However, despite the shortcomings given that Pakistan is a new country, it could be said that Pakistan's education system is where the British or European education systems were as they were developing in the late 1800s (Osborn et al, 2003), where education was sporadic with little coherence and where central government influence or interest was minimal. However, in those times the evolving of the education systems of, for example, France or Britain, were more the realm of nation states and not necessarily the business of world organisations as is the case now. In the case of newly formed Pakistan, not only does it have to deal with the issue of provision across a large country with different ethnic and cultural landscapes and coupled with a strained budget, but it has to deal with international commitments. These place intense pressure to produce the appropriate discourse and rhetoric and hence policies which reflect these pressures. It is also important not to ignore, as pointed out by Tikly (2001), the neo-imperial influences of policy making in low income countries to which Pakistan is not immune.

Resultant policy is not necessarily matched with domestic policy infrastructure nor the political will required to translate into implementation. As identified by Osborn et al (2003) comparing policy and agendas cross nationally and cross culturally involves many challenges including the recognition of the ideological, social and economic issues which influence each society and which mean that simple comparisons and expectations of vastly different countries and their education systems is not an easy task.

International promises

The new collective world pursuit of investing in human capital has been one of the key theories in explaining the growing interest of the World Bank in education which has been the most influential multilateral organisation in shaping education policy in low income countries for the last 50 years (Jones, 2006). The World Bank's interest in education comes from the idea that education and the economy have an interdependent relationship and that to invest in human capital will contribute and shape economic growth and especially in low income countries (Spring, 1998). Investment in human capital is significant in Pakistan, especially as human resource is in plentiful supply with a



population of £180 million and rising (Barber, 2010) and opportunity for economic growth.

As part of the international interest and drive for education, Pakistan was also one of the 155 countries which attended and signed the Jomtien agreement in Thailand in 1990 at the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) and then again in 2000 ratified Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2) and the Dakar Framework of Action for Education for All, thereby committing itself to providing universal primary education by 2015. This reflects the consequent pressure on Pakistan internationally to make education a greater focus and to produce tangible results within a said timeline, with little recognition of the nation's own domestic challenges. Such international pressures reinforce the point put forward by Rosenau (1999, 2007) about Spheres of Authority (SoA)- that the independence and autonomy of individual states in making their own education policies has been curtailed by the impact of 'globalisation' which Mann (1997) argued has reduced the authority of the nation state in policy making in their own country and this includes Pakistan (Ali, 2009). Nevertheless, Pakistan did proceed to construct a National Plan of Action 2001-2015 (Ministry of Education) which was followed by a fairly comprehensive White Paper in 2007, culminating in the National Education Plan (NEP) in 2008 in order to achieve the goals signed up to with EFA and MDG2, in some ways reflecting intent.

Domestic realities

Clearly Pakistan had much to address through this NEP where as recently as 2010, Pakistan was shown to have the highest out of school population at 7.3 million or 34% children not in school of which 57% are girls of primary age (EFA Monitoring Report, 2011). Furthermore, in Karachi, the most populated of its cities with 4 million children, even optimistic figures suggest at least 25% are not in school (Barber, 2010). Furthermore, many of these figures do not distinguish between children enrolled and those who actually completed their schooling (Holmes, 2003). Additionally, there are much regional differences in provision of education where of the 4 provinces, Punjab is



the most educated for both genders with the Sindh and Balochistan provinces being the least educated (See Fig.1). As well as this disparity in provision, many government school buildings are dilapidated and without basic amenities such as water, sanitation or electricity. This is hardly surprising since now only 2.2% of GDP is spent on education – lower than the average for similar countries in that region, and of this only 67% is actually spent (Sattar, Yasin, & Afzal, 2011). Thus, the picture of education in Pakistan 60 years since its inception does not make comfortable reading and stresses the urgency of having a fully implemented NEP.

A recent change in the Constitution has made education completely provincially controlled after Amendment 18 Article 25a to the Constitution in April 2010. Consequently, there exists no central Ministry of Education which might have acted as a body which oversaw the implementation of the NEP in the four Provinces. In fact, a brief overview of the four Provincial Government websites indicate considerable differences in the implementation of education policy where only the Government of Punjab, admittedly the most populated and indeed the most educated of the Provinces, has any detailed information on education, provision, policy or vision on its web pages. Devolving the responsibility entirely to provinces seems to have resulted in disparate education policies in all four. Although the aim of regional policy differences is to attempt to address and reduce regional disparity, it is often found that it perpetuates disparity and takes up greater amount of resources (Fuente & Vives, 1995).

Perhaps the most significant impact of the outcomes of periods of declining state educational provision in Pakistan has been the ‘mushrooming’ of low cost rural private schools which have grown enormously in the last 2 decades (see Fig. 2) – in excess of 50,000 in 2005 (Andrabi, 2010). This was following the decentralisation of education when prohibitions on private school provision were lifted (Jimenez & Tan, 1987).

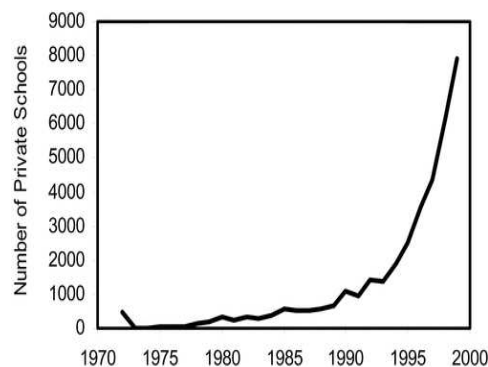


Fig.2 Andrabi, 2010 – The growth of private schools in Pakistan in a 15 year period

Andrabi, Das, & Khwaja, (2002, 2008, 2011) reiterate that contrary to popular belief these private schools were not catering to the urban elite (Tooley & Dixon, 2005; 2012) but a response to the State's failure to provide basic education. They tend to be located in rural areas with a good proportion of female enrolment, lower student-teacher ratios and a range of fees including very low cost depending on the demographic area. They concluded that regions with a supply of educated females but of low geographical mobility were appropriately able to respond to the demand for education in their regions. Additionally, they stated that such a situation meant that the wages of these teachers were lower which enabled a lower cost of education for low and middle income families. Indeed as pointed out by Niaz (2009) students with a private rather than public education tended to have higher earnings suggesting an advantage of even a low cost private school education to be more advantageous than a government run school education..

The unprecedented rise of low cost private schools could be considered as one of the unintended consequences of a policy (Taylor et al, 1997) or in this case the unintended consequences of the failure to implement policy. Ali (2011) explored the reasons why policy was not implemented at the policy to practice level. As part of the devolution programme in 2001, a USAID programme funded an Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) programme and a research project was launched to assess the capacity building initiatives for district managers. He found that the primary reason why policy failed to be properly implemented was that there was insufficient communication or even awareness

of policy at district level. This has grave implications for policy implementation and is significant for policy makers and international agencies funding initiatives for policy implementation, because communication through to all levels is vital for a policy to have genuine impact.

Policy to practice

There is much literature which discusses the issues of policy implementation. For example, Ball (1992) points out that policy is formulated and reformulated as a continuous process as it goes through the policy cycle which includes implementation. Taylor et al (1997) also argue that it is not easy to distinctly separate policy and implementation. However, in the case of Pakistan, such policy cycle models are not entirely applicable because policy consultation and implementation is a core issue in these models. Lack of consultation and consequent implementation could be considered to be a major contributory factor in the dismal educational statistics in Pakistan, but also that the problem of implementation in particular, is not the same as for western contexts. Levin (1998) makes the point that when countries in the name of '*mutual learning*' pick up or borrow popular policy ideas from other nations, it results in what Levin called an *epidemic* of policy making. However, he argues that this has implications for individual nations because the local circumstances of each country then come into play. He gives the example of how what works in a country like Canada may not work in the UK because the countries have different social, geographic, political and cultural circumstances which mean that policy implementation is not always successful in all contexts. For example, the policy of school choice in the UK is influenced by social class and in US school choice is very much affected by race. Therefore, similar policy ideas must be relevant to the national contexts in their implementation if they are to yield success.

Similarly, policies made with global influence for implementation in Pakistani contexts with the demographic and geographic heterogeneity is going to incur considerable implementation issues as many of the policies advocated by, for example, UNESCO, EFA or the World Bank have been developed usually by Western ideology and usually applied in a blanket manner for all low income countries (Tooley & Dixon, 2005, 2012). In the



paper discussed earlier by Ali, he suggests that at the most basic level, the communication of a policy could simply be a circulation of it, because as Ali found, over half of district level practitioners in his study in Sindh Province, simply were not aware of many of the policies which the government wished to implement. Subsequent training and capacity building would thus be more likely to be well received as argued by Warwick et al (1992) if implementers are aware of what needs to be implemented and the potential benefits of the new initiatives. If they are not even aware of a policy, its intention, its goals, then there is little need to engage with it – which is what Ali found to be the case. A further suggestion is to publicise major policy initiatives via the national media to make parents and communities aware of policy and thus to expect a level of implementation. However, there is of course, a danger in the media ‘interpretation’ of policy which could distort perception and hence expectation and potentially implementation (Lingard & Rowolle, 2004). Nevertheless, the point being made is that of effective communication between policy makers and those that have to implement it as a major challenge in the Pakistani context.

Thus, if Pakistan is making efforts in constructing an NEP and ratifying international agreements, then it also needs to focus in more closely on implementation since such efforts are clearly fruitless if they are not reaching the policy to practice level. Indeed as argued by Ali, the main issue of lack of implementation is poor communication and simple as it might seem, is not entirely surprising as the bureaucracy and a lack of infrastructure means that this is a very likely culprit in the lack of proper implementation of any policy in Pakistan. Therefore, in the context of Ball’s ‘reinterpretation’ of policy, policy is not even given the chance to reach the ‘street level’ for interpretation much less ‘re-interpretation and so such policy literature does not seem relevant to the context of policy making in Pakistan.

On the other hand, formulation of policy is easier to relate to Western contexts and literature as it is much more open and susceptible to be influenced by international agencies such as UNESCO and World Bank. In the case of Pakistan with the current issues of the ‘War on Terror’ even other nations such as the USA have an interest in the



formulation of Pakistan's education policies. Pressure is high from the USA on Pakistan's government to reform education, partly because of the level of aid given by the USA (\$35 million to reform education). An example of this is the pressure on Pakistan to regulate *madrassas* (religious schools) which have been portrayed in the Western media and some research (Blanchard, 2008; Singer, 2001) as growing in numbers and as '*potential breeding grounds for terrorism*' (Riaz, 2005). Other research suggests this is not the case but heightened international interest and media representation perpetuate this myth (Andrabi, et al 2005, 2009; Looney, 2003). However, Kevin et al (2009) make the point that some of the policy pressure to regulate *madrassas* is based upon misinformation and misrepresentation of the actual realities of *madrassa* education as a choice for parents. He urges Western governments to focus on supporting Pakistan to formulate and implement policies which are relevant to the realities on the ground. For example, much of the research related to the perceived increase in *madrassa* education portrays it as an educational choice made by parents. In reality, parents making a genuine choice is a myth (Irvine, 2004). Because *madrassas* provide free board and education it becomes the *only* choice for poor parents, rather than a genuine desire to send their children for religious education (although that is not considered a bad thing). Nevertheless, *madrassa* education has a long historical and cultural relevance in Pakistan and other Muslim countries as a means of preserving Quranic teachings with a focus on tradition rather than change and this is an important reality to recognise when formulating policy on *madrassas*. Such policies also do not appreciate the resistance and demands by the *madrassas* themselves to the changes imposed upon them (Inamullah et al, 2010). Consequently, the implementation of a policy of requiring registering, regulating and eradicating those *madrassas* that do not meet criteria is not going to be successful.

Such global pressures placed on Pakistan, whether through the signing treaties or agreements or by accepting overseas aid, mean that the education policy developed is one which is challenging to implement at the national level. This coupled with the leaning influence of the elite within the country itself, often means that the policy is too abstract to be properly implemented at ground level where it is going to have the main impact for achieving its aims. Given these complicated demands on policy making, implementation



is the poor relative and given little attention and resources. The figures show the amount spent on education is low at 2.2% of GDP resulting in low staff training, bureaucratic bottlenecks, corruption, appointing of teachers by patronage, little regulation, little focus on a curriculum which can be adequately delivered or monitored and poor quality facilities (Warwick & Reimers, 1995) - all of which are, not surprisingly, additional hindering factors for policy implementation.

The way forward

For Pakistan's education policy to be one that is implemented at both national, provincial and district level, it is vitally important that the policy recognises the challenges of implementation. This is despite policy being formulated with global and international influences, where it is often abstract from the challenges of implementation, and focussing greater efforts on what a policy seeks to achieve rather than how to. One way in which the international community and the Pakistan government can work on is developing an appropriate educational infrastructure for education policy based on sound independent domestic educational research (Memon, 2007). Currently, the structures that are in place are not subject to adequate monitoring or regulation, both of which are imperative partners to effective implementation of policy (Ali, 2011). An effective infrastructure that enables those at provincial and district levels (micro levels) of government to feedback to policy makers (macro levels) is an important part of the policy cycle and its implementation (McLaughlin, 1987). Pakistan's policy making and development may be more akin to the Linear Model of policy development (Jennings, 1977) where policy making follows a set stage process and is almost finite. But all models need to involve local stakeholders if policy is to lead to practice, rather than a policy documents which are formulated for the international community when required for donor support (Milligan, 2011).

Effective research on policy formation to allow for a '*cross-fertilisation*' of ideas so they are not constrained by the narrow ideas of an elite few (Memon, 2007) is a key to



achieving this. Although additional challenges in Pakistan brought about by its geographical location next to Afghanistan and the political and international pressures on the government to play a pivotal role in America's War on Terror and the consequent domestic upheaval resulting in instability in many regions have demanded the attention of the government to maintain a level of security within the country and to focus its resources there (Murshed and Mamoon, 2010). Without security, the chances of parents even sending children to school diminishes (Lloyd, Mete, & Grant, 2002). Policy development and implementation in particular has to be aware of these challenges during formulation.

A further and significant issue for Pakistan and its implementation of education policy is that of teachers. Internationally, the discourse has begun to focus on the governance of teachers (Robertson, 2011). The issue of teachers is of significance in Pakistan where as many as 25% teachers are absent every day (Barber, 2010) and where many teachers do not have access to books or resources nor have adequate training in the curriculum. (Crossley and Murby, 1994). Additionally, teachers are not assessed according to outcomes and a lack of accountability to the government or parents is another major challenge in achieving policy objectives. Consequently, teachers have little motivation to attend school or ensure that their students are achieving a minimum standard. Nevertheless, research has shown that the teachers in Pakistan State provision tend to be better educated than those in low cost private schools, (Aslam, 2011). However, the linking pay to outcomes approach is subject to the assumption that teachers are the only impact on student achievement (Aslam, 2011) which is not the case in Pakistan nor even in Western contexts.

Teachers and head teachers are crucial resources in ensuring effective policy implementation as it is they who have the direct contact with the beneficiaries of all educational endeavours ie the children (Andrabi, 2010). Thus, focussing on teachers as policy implementers would be a worthy objective for policy makers. Outcome based salaries and accountability to parents would be a way of ensuring that children are achieving a basic standard when enrolled in a school. But as pointed Aslam (2011) there



remains a grave issue of teachers, principals and other significant personnel able to 'bribe' or buy effective results or documentation, thereby 'playing the system' where higher salaries do not always mean genuine better student achievement.

The challenges for Pakistan's education are well documented both internationally (UNESCO, 2009; EFA, 2010) and nationally (National Education Policy, 2009; Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, 2010; Pakistan Education Taskforce, 2011). These include effective leadership and vision as a major issue (Education Emergency, 2011) as well as the construction of infrastructure through which communication of policy can flow in both ways. In terms of achieving the MDG2 and EFA goals, at the current rate, by Pakistan's own estimates, the earliest will be mid-century before Pakistan gives all children their constitutional rights to education. Pakistan could do well to take strategic advantage and negotiate the international interest it currently receives to create a solid infrastructure for education that allows for consultation and communication, a rigorous accountability and monitoring programme, as well as establish an independent educational research base to avoid pandering to the domestic elite or the less contextually informed international pressures.

Memon (2007) points out the dearth of education research in Pakistan conducted by Pakistanis themselves. Much of the research on Pakistan's education is carried out by external organisations (such as UNESCO, World Bank and others) reflecting their own perspective of education and often lumped together with other low income countries. But not all low income countries face the same domestic challenges and therefore, this research too is limiting in terms of what is actually happening in Pakistan. Education research in Pakistan needs to be conducted by Pakistanis who understand the cultural and contextual issues within Pakistan and recognise its own challenges. Such research is vital for Pakistan and its government to understand its needs and tailor policy making accordingly. At present, policy making is very much tailored to Pakistan's international commitments or to satisfy donor countries (Milligan, 2011). Investing in educational research would give Pakistan, at the very least, an intimate knowledge of the problems from within, rather than an external perspective and perhaps trigger greater intrinsic



motivation to address the issues. Thus, as well as investing in education provision, a concerted effort to initiate domestic educational research is an essential element to the way forward. However, whilst domestic education research is important, who carries out that research is also significant. As pointed out earlier, Pakistan operates very much within the Elitist model of policy making and there is every danger that research, if it is not conducted by a range of institutions and at different levels, it will suffer the same fate of reflecting the needs of the elite rather than the country as a whole.

Nevertheless, whilst the past has been rather bleak, the challenges overwhelming and the pressure from global commitments all encompassing, it is not impossible to work towards achieving the objectives. Other countries such as Chile have taken a concerted national drive in their education policies and have achieved considerably in just two years in terms of provision and quality of education (Brandt, 2010). The optimists believe the same can be achieved by Pakistan if effective leadership is at the helm (Mourshad et al, 2010) and education is made a national priority at all levels: starting with education research, policy making, implementation and effective dissemination, which should all feed into provision as well as quality of provision. No doubt this all requires a redistribution of resources towards this national priority, but the very nature of 'national priority' has to mean priority of budget and other resources directed towards it to achieve the aims – otherwise it is not priority, and which has been the case thus far.

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