

THE POLITICS **OF EDUCATION REFORM**

Towards a Theory of Change for
Education in Pakistan

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Published by the Pakistan Education Task Force as part of its March for Education campaign, raising the profile of the education emergency in Pakistan.

Copies of this pamphlet can be downloaded from <http://educationemergency.com.pk/> or <http://pakistaneducationtaskforce.com/>

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One

Education as a Political Issue

Have you ever heard anyone make an argument against education in Pakistan? Of course not. Nobody has. Education is the consensus. It is decidedly uncontroversial. It is unthinkable to speak against it. All agree education is something that every child should have and that quality education is central to the future of Pakistan.

So what then is there to argue about?

This is part of the problem. It is so easy to endorse the need for education that it becomes impossible to articulate the contours of the change that is needed to make education for all a reality. In being all things to all people, education becomes nothing, to anyone. Instead of a comprehensive and urgent to-do list, the conversation descends into an amorphous mass of clichés and platitudes, most of which are based on

conjecture and gut-feeling. And as a result, nothing happens.

There is only one way this will change. Politics.

Transforming the amorphous idea of 'better education' from a slogan to a practical reality is an arduous political process. Converting an ineffectual consensus into an incisive debate that can drive

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concrete reform is also a political process. And unless we learn to map, navigate and negotiate that process much better than we do today, we will never shift education outcomes in Pakistan from its sorry - or better put, scandalous - starting point.

Two

The Anti-Education State

It is no accident that the education debate encompasses everything in general, but nothing in particular. The current situation is the product of a conspiracy between the pursuit of elite self-interest, and the sustained negligence of what is needed to develop a working system of education in the country.

The pursuit of self-interest is the work of two elite groups. The first is the military elite, made up of the generals that make decisions on behalf of the rest of the armed forces. The second is the political elite: the top echelons of the parties that dominate electoral politics in the country. Together they are overlords of our dysfunctional education system. While neither may have gone out of its way to deliberately make the education system worse, both have contributed to its current state of disrepair.

When the military intervenes, it does so promising change. Yet no military government has made education a priority. The most recent one is widely credited with articulating the need for comprehensive reform, summarised by General Pervez Musharraf's seven point agenda. Tellingly, however, the agenda did not address the issue of education. Nor, indeed, did any part of the speech made by Musharraf when he announced the agenda. Education was not on his radar, and it remains off the radar of the military leadership of the country.

The political elite is no different. Whether at federal or provincial levels, the education ministry (or department) is not a prized cabinet slot. One way to tell whether a politician's stock is rising or falling is which ministry he or she has been awarded. The education slot is a 'khudday-line' ministry: unimportant and sidelined. The same holds for the bureaucracy. Rising stars are seldom keen to be posted as education secretaries, with many fearing such a posting will have an adverse impact on their career.

Political parties also pay lip service to education, addressing the issue with a depressing lack of focus and clarity. In a detailed study of the election

manifestoes of the five largest parties (PPP, PML-N PML-Q, MQM and ANP) for the 2008 elections, the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) finds that all the parties mention their commitment to 'education for all'. Beyond this overarching commitment however, parties offer scant details of their vision. Only two parties mention girls' education as a specific area needing attention. Just two mention their commitment to increased funding for education. And only one addresses the issue of language of instruction.

Most tellingly, none talk about governance and administrative issues within the sector - no discussion of teacher absenteeism, no discussion of training and capacity, no discussion of the need for solid data on education, and no discussion of the system's accountability to the taxpayer and the parent.

This is the beating heart of the anti-education conspiracy in Pakistan: an unaccountable, and unaccounted for Pakistani state that pumps insufficient funds, and insufficient lip-service, into an ineffective system of education.

By their negligence, the military and political elite

stand accused as the chief conspirators in producing a failed system of education in the country. The primary instrument of the conspiracy against education has become the Pakistani state.

Patronising teachers

The anti-education conspiracy has its roots in two kinds of analysis. The first is historical: the role played by the events of 1971 and the rise of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as national leader. In this view, the nationalisation of education is a seminal event. It led to teaching becoming the single largest source of public sector employment in the country. This has had a huge bearing on the politics of education.

The Pakistani elite, both military and political, depends on the distribution of patronage to sustain, deepen and build power. The state offers a deep pool of resources that can be distributed as patronage. Money - tax and non-tax revenues - is the most prized resource. However, neither the military nor the political elite have devised a way to directly distribute national revenue to their clients. Instead, patronage is distributed indirectly, mostly through the provision of jobs. Since the largest pool of employment is in

education, teachers have become the primary beneficiaries of elite patronage. And in such a system, it is only natural that the primary victims become the children that are entrusted to such teachers.

Each day in Pakistan, one out of five government school teachers do not show up for work. But this is not an education sector problem, it is an accountability problem. It may manifest itself most sharply in our schools, but absenteeism scars

every sector, at every tier of government, for every generation of Pakistanis. Teachers are overwhelmingly hired as a function of politics. Why would the very politicians that got the teachers their jobs, then ever have an incentive to hold those very teachers to account? They would not.

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Within the education sector, the problem of accountability is not just manifested through teachers. It is aggregated at the level of the school as well. Thousands of ghost schools in Pakistan exist, with no staff, and no students, but a building and a budget. How does this happen and how does this keep happening? The same way that tens of thousands of teachers do not show up to work, and keep not showing up to work - without sanction, or fear for their jobs.

The lack of accountability in the system is a function of a systemic flaw in the way in which the state is viewed and used by the military and political elite. The natural question this raises is of demand. Where is the demand for accountability? Why don't Pakistanis do something about this travesty? Since the 1980s, this question has been answered emphatically, but just not in the way most commentators expected (or have even noticed).

Indomitable spirit

The state's failure to provide decent education has not been met with silence. Instead, it has awoken

the indomitable Pakistani spirit of problem-solving and resilience. Pakistanis do not wait around for government. As state schools have failed to deliver, the solution many parents have devised is simple: flight to the private sector.

As a result, the second analysis of the anti-education conspiracy must be an ideological one, rooted in the changing position of the state in Pakistan's economy and society. There are those who have political reasons for wanting the state's role to be limited. Since the late 1970s, the Washington Consensus has insisted that the market is a better provider of goods and services than the government. For neoliberals and monetarists, this argument stretches all the way to education. In Pakistan, however, the argument has not been conceptual, it has been practical. Since 1980, when the private sector provided less than one percent of education, there has been a dramatic shift in educational delivery. Today, more than a third of education is provided by non-state actors, including charities, NGOs and most commonly, for-profit businesses.

The question of whether the private sector offers an answer to Pakistan's education problems is therefore

not up for debate at all. Private schools are already providing a substantial portion of the answer.

The massive growth in non-state delivery of education is not an endorsement of the philosophical foundations of neoliberal economics. It is a direct response to the unaccountable system of governance in the country. Pakistanis are voting with their feet not only by choosing private schools; they do the same, en masse, by choosing bottled water, private clinics and hospitals, gated housing communities, and private security guards. That is why there is no robust debate about education in the national assembly and the provincial assemblies. Pakistanis have no confidence that their voices will make any difference. Instead of debating the issue, those who can, are simply opting out of the system.

Going private

If the shift from government schools into private schools was meeting two crucial criteria, perhaps the debate about education reform would be over. But neither of them are being met.

First, there is no quality assurance or standardisation

of the quality of education being provided by the private, non- state schools. Though there is some evidence that private schools provide cheaper and better quality education, that they do so is an accident, not a function of their adherence to a set of verifiable standards.

Second, private schools are simply not absorbing the numbers of students necessary to qualify as a viable substitute to government schools, especially at middle and secondary levels. Of all the Pakistani children covered by Article 25a of the amended Constitution of Pakistan - which guarantees the right to education - nearly half are out of school. That is 25 million kids between the ages of six and sixteen.

So we are left in a bind. Elite self-interest has converted the state into a machine for delivering patronage, and left many teachers with little sense of accountability for their behaviour. This has forced a stream of parents both rich and poor, to look to the private sector to solve their problems. But it has also left behind a massive pool of parents who are served by neither public nor private sectors.

Unfortunately, those left behind have little voice.

Private delivery of education has acted as a pressure release valve. The most able among Pakistani parents - those that can afford to send their children to private school - simply walk away from the government school their child has been attending. This removes the pressure that would have built up for changes to that government school.

As a result, at national level, the mobilisation of demand for change is weak. So if we want to change, we have to ask the question: how do we make politics, and politicians, care about education again?

Three

Changing Education

Politics responds to demand, rather than to need. The need for education sector reform is clear, but without someone to articulate this need clearly, and without others to echo it, the status quo remains unchallenged. So what can be done to make education politically relevant? For clues, we need to examine what politics in Pakistan does care about.

At a global level, the most noticeable aspect of Pakistani politics is national security. Pakistan has suffered repeated national security crises, and has endured armed conflict with neighbours and with non-state actors. Without question, politics in Pakistan is responsive to issues of national security.

Beyond the issue of national security is the issue of national self-confidence. So deep has the narrative

of failure been embedded, that success seems out of reach. As a young country with an ideological history and conflict, Pakistani politics is sensitive to issues of identity and culture. Like in any other country, rigorous debate and arguments ensue when Pakistani identity is under threat or questioned, regardless of which version of identity we are speaking of. In other words, Pakistani self-confidence is an important political marker.

Thirdly, international pressure is a vital part of the political discourse in Pakistan. Regionally and internationally, security and stability objectives stimulate the interest of international actors, both bilateral and multilateral. If it can be channelled constructively, international attention, whether it is accompanied by material support or not, can be instrumental in inspiring and supporting reform.

Finally, economic and fiscal pressures are important landmarks in Pakistan's political landscape. Even the most predatory elite requires a minimum baseline of resources to pursue elite interests. Those resources cannot be collected unless a robust economic framework is in place. Money matters. Economic stability matters too. And where revenues come from,

and where they go to, will always dominate political debate.

Education reform, then, will only ever become a political priority if it stimulates one of these four political “acupressure points.”

Education champions must, once and for all, make the case that reform is critical to national security. They need to address the challenge of self-confidence by affirming that change is possible, despite past failures, by pointing to those examples of success that have thrived in an otherwise barren landscape. They must leverage international experience, and potentially international support, in favour of local and organic efforts for reform. And they must turn education into an economic issue describing the cost of educational failure and the dividend that can be expected from education success.

Winning the argument

Fortunately, all four points can be made with authority and authenticity, offering the chance, finally, to create a politically viable discourse on education in Pakistan.

A lack of education is a clear and present threat to national security for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the danger of an illiterate and under-trained police, paramilitary and military force. National security is undermined by an economy that does not have a sufficient baseline of skilled workers, while ill-educated, unemployed young men are a threat to any state, however robust. Most of all, national security is threatened by the injustice inherent in a political system that fails to provide opportunities to all citizens for their economic advancement and social mobility. This alone puts education at the very heart of national security.

Pakistan is also lucky to have some outstanding examples of innovation in the education sector, demonstrating that success is possible, and helping fight the notion that change for the better is somehow out of reach. The Punjab Education Foundation, Care Pakistan, the Citizens' Foundation and READ Foundation are directly educating, or helping with the education of, more than a million children. They show that effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability can be achieved.

International experience, meanwhile, shows that

Pakistan is not the only country to have been failed by its elite *and* that others have found the will to surmount this problem. By looking overseas - to those who have made dramatic improvements to their education systems over the past generation - we can change the narrative of failure into one of success, while gathering the raw material for creating models for our own education reforms.

The most important argument of all, though, is about money. Not simply that economic growth cannot be achieved without education, but that the cost of failing to invest in education is many times greater than the price of deep-seated educational reforms. We need our economists to take a long hard look at Pakistan's need for human capital investment, developing the analysis that will definitively make the case to Ministers of Finance and the country's powerful and influential business community.

Winning the argument is only the start, of course. Once the case for education reform has been reframed in this manner, we still need to articulate what needs to change. A reform agenda that lacks clarity about the implementation of specific reforms is destined to fail. This is why Pakistan is in urgent

need of a theory of change for education.

Towards a theory of change

In a democratic system of governance, enduring changes bring together popular will, with the elite interests that dominate everyday politics.

The popular will for better education in Pakistan already exists. This is evident from the massive growth of private education and survey results that confirm a huge demand for education. Re-stating the urgency of education reform - making it a national security, identity, and economic imperative, while drawing on international inspiration - will assert this will more forcefully and more politically. Change will become more likely as the voice of the ordinary parent is translated into a language that Pakistan's elite understands.

To have a lasting impact however, the agenda for education reform must also have a clear theory of how it plans to achieve change. So what is a theory of change?

A theory of change is "a tool for developing solutions

to complex social problems.”¹ It sets out how a series of small steps can deliver the big change we want to see, while setting out the assumptions through which we expect one step to lead to another. It also sets out a plan for how, at each stage, desired results will be delivered.

The steps required to create a theory of change are:

1. Identify a long-term goal.
2. Map backwards to identify the pre-conditions needed to achieve that goal.
3. Identify the intervention that will create each of these pre-conditions.
4. Develop indicators for each pre-condition to see if each intervention is proving successful.
5. Write a narrative that explains how change is supposed to happen.²

¹ Adapted from: www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue- archive/evaluation-methodology/an-introduction-to-theory-of-change where it was adapted from Anderson, A. (2005). *The community builder's approach to theory of change: A practical guide to theory and development*. New York: The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change.

² Adapted from www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue- archive/evaluation-methodology/an-introduction-to-theory-of-change where it was adapted from www.theoryofchange.org

Of course the big question is, whose job is it to actually prepare a theory of change for education in Pakistan. Who will specify the long-term goal? Who will map the starting point for achieving that goal? Who will design interventions to achieve these pre-conditions? Who will monitor progress? And who will tell a story of change that is sufficiently compelling to turn a pipedream into a movement?

Where will change come from?

There can only be one answer to these questions. The theory of change for education must come from the representatives of the people: Pakistani politicians. Without politicians being the owners, stewards and guardians of the agenda, any potential for meaningful change in education is limited.

We know this because, for at least two generations, a de-politicised policy community has been trying to achieve reform. They have treated education as a technical issue and tried to extract it from politics. And their failure is there for all to witness. Technocrats have helped sustain and deepen Pakistan's education emergency.

That is not to sideline educationalists. The policy community is, of course, a vital source of information, data, assumption, fact-checking and implementation for the theory of change. But the actual articulation of what must change and how it must change needs to be politically owned.

Moreover, political ownership must reflect the reality that education reform is not a one-term issue. While politicians can hope to see results within a single political cycle, a transformation in the provision of quality education will take a generation. Real reform cannot be achieved in a vacuum of political power or if political parties have very different visions of the change that is needed. Broad ownership of any theory of change is needed by a large cross-section of the political class.

So how could a theory of change be developed? What are the pre-conditions for achieving the goal of quality education for all?

First, it would begin with a campaign to establish a baseline on which a new discourse on education can be based. The Pakistan Education Task Force has published its report on the education emergency,

beginning this task. This pamphlet is the first in a series that I am editing, that adds to this campaign, by throwing new light on our education challenges.

Second, new energy released by this campaign must be used to secure high-level political commitment to education at

national and provincial levels. The focus for this commitment should be Article 25-a, which guarantees the right to an education. The President, Prime Minister, and Chief Ministers should each set out publicly how they plan to

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provide all children with their constitutional right to an education. The Council of Common Interests must then be charged with leading a response to the education emergency, given that the Constitution demands that governments and parliaments at both national and provincial levels ensure delivery of all

fundamental rights.

Third, all political parties must come together in a forum that will allow them to develop a consensus on how to make the constitutional right to an education a reality. A newly formed political task force, with representatives from each party, could also be tasked with expanding ownership of the urgent need for transformational reform of education - in the military, judiciary, bureaucracy, civil society, business, among ulema and across the media.

Fourth, each province needs a core group that will get under the hood of education issues, exploring the technical aspects of what needs fixing and how. This would require a process of identification and costing of a set of priorities - related to enrolment, quality, accountability of teachers, data/monitoring, and other key areas. These groups will also need to identify the political drivers of, and obstacles to, change in each province. The national Task Force should then bring the findings of each group together, while looking at key cross-cutting issues, such as finance.

Fifth, the Task Force would then submit something

akin to a consensus document representing both dramatic change, and serious political commitment to a transformed education landscape - a Charter for Education, perhaps. This long term, cross provincial, cross party, financial and political commitment would become the “plan”.

Finally, with the plan in hand, implementation in the four provinces, Azad Kashmir, FATA and Gilgit Baltistan would begin. The Council of Common Interests would need to clarify the national mechanism that will ensure compliance with the Constitution (and with Pakistan’s international commitments to provide education). This mechanism would become the guardian and steward of the effort, enabling the sharing of experience between provinces, while fulfilling the monitoring and evaluation function.

This is a daunting set of steps or pre-conditions. But this provides an initial sketch of the roadmap that is needed to transform Pakistan’s hackneyed narrative of education reform into one that unleashes a new era of action and achievement.

In the past, Pakistan’s political class, despite its venality, has demonstrated the ability to reach

conclusive consensus on issues of urgent national interest. Once education is framed as an issue where survival is at stake, they will too finally start to take it seriously. Once that begins to happen, leaders will want to know what they need to do to make change happen.

Those of us who care about education need to be ready. And we need to escape from our technocratic comfort zone to start thinking and acting politically. Because a more urgent and immediate agenda there could not be.

About the Author

Mosharraf Zaidi is a strategist and adviser to governments and international organisations. He helps formulate policy, law and positions on fundamental change processes across institutions, agencies and organisations.

He has supported local government reform in New York City, administrative reform in the Government of the Punjab, and numerous reform efforts including technology policy, higher education and capital markets reform for the Government of Pakistan.

Mosharraf writes a weekly column for The News in Pakistan. His articles also appear in a variety of publications including Al-Shorouk in Egypt (in Arabic), the Nation, the Times of India, the Mumbai Mirror, the National, and the Wall Street Journal. He is a frequent contributor to television and radio, including CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera English, National Public Radio, PTV, Geo News and Express 24/7.

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Pakistan's failure to educate its children is not an accident and it is not inevitable. Education is a victim of the patronage politics that defines public policy in Pakistan. The unaccountable Pakistani state is the instrument of this patronage.

A viable and effective theory of change for education in Pakistan begins and ends with politicians. Without political ownership of the education emergency in Pakistan, the status quo will continue to haunt future generations of Pakistanis. Politics is the only way to achieve transformational change in education in Pakistan.

Mosharraf Zaidi is a strategist and adviser to governments and international organisations.



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Published by
The Pakistan Education Task Force