

Research articles

Towards a rights-based multi-religious curriculum? The case of Pakistan

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Abstract

Islamic education is a central pivot of Pakistan's educational system; it is taught as a separate subject and purposefully included in many other subjects. The State uses Islam to manage public morality and national identity and there is a 'functionalisation' (Starrett, 1998) of religious education. A culturally lived tradition is transformed into a pedagogical practice based on narrow interpretations of sacred texts and religious doctrine. Aligning religious and national identity necessarily others those who fall outside of this nexus. The current government prioritises curricular reform predicated on a political commitment to create a unified and inclusive education system. The proposed reforms include curricula for five other religions, potentially addressing some human rights demands for educational equality for religious minorities. Unpacking the historical roots of education's Islamization and the socio-political motivations behind the current reforms, we conduct a content analysis of the draft curricula and interview stakeholders to situate the implications of these reforms for Pakistan.

Keywords

Rights-based curriculum, identity, citizenship, religious minorities, religious education, Islamic education, South Asia

Introduction

Pakistan is about to embark on an experiment. Though there is many a slip twixt cup and lip, if things go as proclaimed by the government, there soon will be a new school subject – ‘religious education’ (RE). Here, students from minority religions (in demographic terms) will, for the first time, study their own traditions, rather than face a choice between studying Islam (a subject called *Islamiyat*) and ethics (*Ikhlaqiat*). The government has drafted religious curricula for students from five minority religions and expressed its commitment to promulgating this as part of the new Single National Curriculum (SNC) (National Curriculum Council, 2020). Though religious representation within education remains skewed towards Islam in Muslim-majority Pakistan, this initiative has the potential to deliver on students’ constitutional right to study their own religions and new ground can be broken in symbolically recognising religious pluralism and equal citizenship for religious minorities. In this paper, we explore to what extent the proposed multi-religious curricula are a step towards a rights-based education, viewing this development through the lens of Pakistan’s constitutional obligations to its religious minorities and to international human rights conventions.

The United Nations (UN) conceptualises a rights-based education in the following framework:

1. The right of access to education
 - Education throughout all stages of childhood and beyond
 - Availability and accessibility of education
 - Equality of opportunity
2. The right to quality education
 - A broad, relevant and inclusive curriculum
 - Rights-based learning and assessment
 - Child-friendly, safe and healthy environments
3. The right to respect in the learning environment
 - Respect for identity
 - Respect for participation
 - Respect for integrity. (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2007, p. 28)

Applying the UN framework presented above, we identify three areas of human rights-based concerns within Pakistan’s education system. Firstly, the commitment to the right of access to education, though embodied in the Constitution, is severely undermined as millions of children do not go to school (ASER, 2019). Pakistan has the second-highest number of out-of-school children in the world - 22.7 million (as cited in Hunter, 2020). Many factors have contributed to this situation: a lack of schooling, the economic pull of child labour, a continued social acceptance of child marriages for girls, etc. (Pirzado, 2019).

Secondly, the education delivered to the majority of Pakistan's children under the umbrella of the national curriculum remains below expected standards, and this violates their right to an education that empowers them to be critical thinkers and socially productive agents (Aslam et al., 2012).

Our paper focuses on the third violation - of respect for identity and participation. In Pakistan, this is imposed specifically on children of religious minorities. To date, the country's national education system makes studying Islam mandatory for Muslims but does not have provision for children from other religions to learn their own tradition. Furthermore, Islam is taught both as a separate school subject and purposefully included in several other compulsory school subjects. This means that not only do students from minority religions not get to learn about their own religion, but they are also forced to learn about Islam. This violates Article 22(1) of the Constitution which states that:

No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.
(Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973/2012)

This also violates Article 26-3 of the UDHR, that ensures freedom of choice within education, and Article 13-3 of ICESCR, that ensures religious and moral education is provided in conformity with parental (and student) convictions (UN, 1976; UN, 1948). While explicitly violating Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in discriminating against children of religious minorities, it also violates Article 14-1 of the same document by limiting pedagogical exposure to the critical thinking that is essential to cultivating freedom of thought (UN, 1989).

Pakistan has a complicated engagement with human rights within education. Article 25-A of the Constitution guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged 5 to 16, while Article 22-1 protects the right of religious communities to study their own religions and not be forced to study religions other than their own (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973/2012; Paul, 2014). Furthermore, Pakistan has signed and ratified a variety of international human rights-related treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The list of ratified treaties is tabulated below:

Table 1

Pakistan's ratification of key human rights instruments. Source: The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations.

Treaty	Date Ratified
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	June 23, 2010
Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture	
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	June 23, 2010
Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty	
Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	
Interstate communication procedure under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	March 12, 1996
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	September 21, 1966
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	April 17, 2008
International Convention on the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	
Convention on the Rights of the Child	November 12, 1990
Optional Protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict	November 17, 2016
Optional Protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography	July 5, 2011
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability	July 5, 2011

Discussions with bureaucrats and legal experts also indicate that governmental frameworks for the implementation and evaluation of these covenants also exist.

However, while recent legal developments that explicitly protect the rights of the child have been incorporated—such as the law banning corporal punishment (Baloch, 2021)—it is widely acknowledged that as far as practice is concerned, the rights of the child are not universally viewed or protected through a human rights lens. It is important to note that while international conventions and declarations are designed to be universally applicable, their values and objectives are underwritten by western epistemological and ontological reasoning. There is thus often a tension when global conceptions and commitments are pitched against local socio-cultural traditions and practices, and this is prevalent in other non-western societies (Moinipour, 2021). Underage marriage is an example of a practice that is illegal but still commonly accepted as a cultural norm (Khan, 2021). Another such contested space is the role of religion in education.

Methodology

While the draft multi-religious curricula are a symbolic and preliminary step towards recognising the educational rights of Pakistan's religious minority students, the research question that guided our research is:

To what extent do the proposed multi-religious curricula present a pluralistic functionalisation of religion in Pakistan?

Our main sources of data were the publicly available religious education curricula on the website of the Federal Ministry of Education (National Curriculum Council, 2020). Using content analysis as the main method of data analysis, we analysed the curricula texts from the perspective of their symbolic and operational role in acknowledging and upholding religious minority rights. The curriculum for each religious tradition was analysed to see how these traditions are portrayed. The content of the texts was coded for religious beliefs and practices, the representation of internal diversity within religion and equity across religions, and the nature of value systems. Through this lens we unpacked the curricular content and objectives of the draft curricula with a view to understanding how, if at all, they represent equity in terms of recognising the identity and participation of minority religion children. The religious education curricula were also compared to the *Islamiat* curriculum, in order to explore similarities and differences in structure and style.

Since a curriculum document has both a policy and planning context as well as an implementation phase, we consider both. To understand the policy and planning context we interviewed two ministry officials involved in the drafting of the curricula as well as two civil society activists who have been campaigning for religious inclusion in education. Stakeholder interviews and contextual knowledge of both authors involved in policy advocacy provided a critical discursive lens in analysing the data (Taylor, 2006). For example, the interviewees

provided details of the negotiations between the Ministry and religious leaders of various traditions that had led to acceptable curricula frameworks. However, the ultimate provision of rights does not come by developing curricula but by their operationalisation in schools. We foresee many challenges here and engage with them to assess their proclaimed transformative potential.

Religion in schools in Pakistan

Across the world there are various models of religious education. Arguably, the most important underlying distinction is between systems that provide religious instruction and those that provide education about religion(s) - confessional and non-confessional approaches (Franken & Gent, 2021; Willaime, 2007). The former aims at passing on or inculcating particular religious teachings, be it in an exclusionary or an inclusive way. This approach is essentially theological. The ontological status of religious teaching assumed here dictates separate teaching of religion to students from different religious traditions. An example of this approach is church school education in England, where Catholic and Church of England schools give religious instruction and hence prefer to have students from their own denominations. The other approach, the non-confessional one which involves teaching about religions, aims to help students learn about religions and their histories, teachings and ethics without wanting students to accept their truth. This assumes a dialectical approach that is grounded in viewing knowledge about religion as socially constructed and personalised to provide meaning to its recipients (Grimmitt, 1973 as discussed in Engebretson, 2009). A sociological and historical, rather than a theological, approach means that children from different religious traditions can be taught together. Community schools in England, where all children are taught together about several religions, are a good example of this approach.

In Pakistan, religious education is in fact religious instruction. This requires, from a human rights perspective, the State to provide separate religious instruction to children from different backgrounds. But this is not the case. Until now, Islam has been the only religion taught in schools. Students from other religions are expected to either join in the *Islamiat* classes, which the majority do, or take a course on ethics. Not only are students from other religious traditions not provided with their own religious instruction; they are also often made to learn about Islam, as its teachings are embedded in other compulsory subjects.

There is no single classification system that can capture the complexity of Pakistan's education system. With over 22.5 million children out of school, there is firstly a divide between those who have access to school, any school, and those who do not. Of those going to school, a majority does not, by any standard, receive a quality education (ASER, 2019; Jerrard, 2016). If we think in terms of quality, one useful demarcation is between schools using Pakistani

curricula of one type or another and those using international curricula. Most schools, including public schools, madrassas and low-cost private schools, use Pakistani curricula. A small percentage of children goes to expensive private schools that use foreign curricula, most commonly the Cambridge Assessment Board, and there is a smattering of IB and US curricula schools (Academy of Educational Planning and Management, 2021). Another way to classify schools is to distinguish between those that are devoted primarily to religious formation, the madrassa systems, and the rest, which have religion as part of their education but also take a lay approach to various degrees. More recently, a new Single National Curriculum (SNC) has been introduced (about which more later) and schools can also be grouped as those adopting or not adopting the SNC.

Regardless of the classification, a few comments can be made that cut across the system. The bifurcated and uneven nature of schooling has contributed to and sustained socio-economic and linguistic hierarchies. Firstly, fluency in English functions as a repository of social and cultural capital, a leftover from the colonial education system that educated the bureaucrats who administered the post-partition subcontinent. These bureaucrats, beneficiaries of this educational system, were committed to maintaining it (Rahman, 2005). Secondly, religion plays an important part in all school systems, from being the underlying educational framework to being a compulsory subject that overflows into other subjects. Finally, the system carries systemic bias against students from minority religions as far as religious education is concerned, as noted above.

State and religious education in Pakistan

Such educational design as noted above is an outcome of decades of the State 'putting Islam at work' to build a national identity that is closely aligned with being Muslim, both in order to justify the creation of Pakistan and to manage the country's ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic diversity. Starrett (1998) has called such use of Islam 'functionalisation'. In his landmark work on the relationship between Islam and social change in the context of Egypt, Starrett observed that the Egyptian state sought to use religion, in this case Islam, to achieve its goals of 'progress' in material and moral terms. This was done by making Islam a subject of academic study in schools through textbooks and examination and by controlling the media and how Islamic values were circulated through it. The State's aim was also helped by the work of people such as Mawdudi (d. 1979) in South Asia and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) in Egypt who, in their writings, presented Islam as a system that can help solve the problems of modern times by acting as the ideology of an Islamic State. These various colonial and post-colonial developments resulted in an 'objectification' of Islam: 'the growing consciousness on the part of Muslims that Islam is a coherent system of practices and beliefs' (Starrett, 1998, pp. 8–9) rather than an unexamined collective and personally lived tradition. Over time, this resulted

in movements such as the Islamization of economics or education, or even the sciences, as a way forward for Muslims.

Such ‘functionalisation’ of religious education (Starrett, 1998) has been systematically implemented over Pakistan’s history (Chughtai, 2015; Nayyar & Salim, 2003). It was one thing to establish a new country in the name of Islam, but another to create an ‘imagined community’ out of the rich diversity of ethnic and linguistic traditions within its geographical boundaries. The State chose to use Islam to create such a national identity and to harness its potential for economic growth (Hoodbhoy, 1998). The injection of religion into the foundational discourse of Pakistan gave religious groups the opportunity to force a religio-nationalistic identity on the country. In the initial decades after independence, while there was some resistance to this trajectory and attempts to modernise various state institutions (for example the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961), there remained an increasing thrust towards a more religious national identity, first through greater concessions to, and later through the co-option of religious groups.

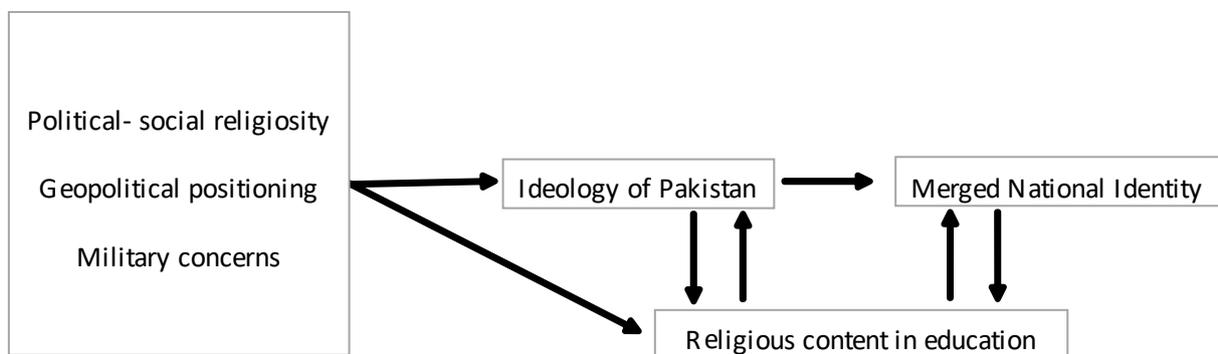
This trend was also visible in education, where the desire to see *Islamiyat* as a school subject was expressed by the first education minister of Pakistan (Fazlur Rahman), who considered it to be an important subject within the edifice of a holistic education. During the country’s first period of military rule, under Ayub Khan (1958-69), *Islamiyat* was made compulsory at the elementary level. This was reinforced in the 1973 Constitution, which also required the State to take steps to enable the Muslims of Pakistan to live a life in accordance with the teachings of Islam. By 1980s both *Islamiyat* and Pakistan Studies were made compulsory throughout the education system. General Zia ul Haq imposed martial law in 1977 and became head of state in 1978, remaining so till his death in an airplane crash in 1988. During this time Pakistan was a key US ally against the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan, which positioned the country in a key geopolitical role on the global stage. Zia legitimised his government’s crossover from a military to a so-called civilian regime by using Islam as a mantra. Jurisprudence and education were the domains of choice for an Islamisation policy that formalised exclusivist interpretations of Islam as a central governing force (Panjwani & Khimani, 2017). It was at this time that the subject of ‘ethics’ was developed and offered as an alternative to *Islamiyat* for students from other religious traditions. Grounded in broad value-based content, the subject was generally sidelined, and sometimes denigrated, by educators. The result was that many non-Muslim students selected *Islamiyat* in the pursuit of better exam results (Hussain et al., 2011; Jacob & Malik, 2020).

A desire to foster a unifying national identity, closely aligned with a Muslim identity, has thus played a pivotal and symbiotic role in the social, geopolitical, and educational development of

Pakistan. Over the country's history, the priorities of the political, bureaucratic, and military arms of the State have merged in an effort to create an 'Ideology of Pakistan', one that is informed by internal political-social religiosity, geopolitical positioning and military concerns, and serves as a blueprint for national identity creation. The need to create and reinforce such an identity explicitly feeds into educational content. It is legitimised by the language of curriculum documents, and thus included in approved textbooks. The education system is thus used by the State to 'functionalise' Islamic education (Starrett, 1998) for the multi-layered purpose of identity formation. Such functionalisation is visually presented below:

Figure 1

The 'functionalisation' of Islamic education in Pakistan



Educational reform has been highlighted by every government, with varying degrees of policy follow-up (Siddiqui, 2016). Significant curriculum changes were put in place between 2002 and 2006, as part of an agenda to improve the quality of education (Chughtai, 2015; Government of Pakistan, 2006). The 2006 National Curriculum was widely credited to be more inclusive and pluralistic in its language and learning objectives, with quantitatively less references to Islamic doctrine. Although the language of the curriculum documents and the ensuing education policy still foregrounded Islamic ideology (Aly, 2007) as essential to Pakistani identity, documents and policy were informed by a more pluralistic and reformative philosophy that recognised the country's demographic diversity (National Education Policy, 2009). Critics argued that this policy was not reformative enough. They point to its uncritical acceptance of hegemonic global discourses that position Pakistan as a radicalised state in binary terms without acknowledging complex underlying social causalities. As such the ensuing curriculum did not adequately address embedded social prejudices that can result in religious minorities in Pakistan facing social segmentation and human rights abuses (Lingard & Ali, 2009). However, policymakers continue to view the policy and curriculum as reformative in outlook and use them as a foundation for subsequent curricular and policy revisions (N. Lone & S. Aziz, personal communication, May 8, 2021).

Current reforms

Removing embedded inequalities within and by education is the proclaimed motivation for the reform measures of the current government, elected in 2018 (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2018). A key part of the reforms was a Single National Curriculum (SNC), intended to replace all other national, international and religious curricula currently in place. Nation-building is the prefaced aim of this exercise:

It is a well-established fact that the educational curriculum plays a key role in nation building... Development of the Single National Curriculum for Pre1-5 is the fulfilment of the dream of 'One Nation, One Curriculum'. (National Curriculum Council, 2020)

The Curriculum is ambitious in that it seeks to draw inspiration from a range of sources: religious guidance (the Quran, for example); current educational trends such as climate change pedagogy and 21st century skills; international commitments such as the Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goals as well as respect for societal goals and traditions. However, there is no explanation as to how demands from these various sources will be drawn upon and potential conflicts between them resolved. There is, for example, no reflection on the perennial issue of calibrating the need for a national identity and historical ethnic identities, no discourse responding to the fears of those who see SNC as yet another attempt to bolster a singular identity. Similarly, there is no reference to the ideological and material differences between various school systems and the ways in which these will be addressed through the curriculum.

The government has created a broad stakeholder base of advisors and consultants to the National Curriculum Council (NCC) consisting of educators (both secular and religious, from elite and lower-cost private schools), members of civil society (including representatives of religious minority associations), and education bureaucrats (The Express Tribune, 2020). While the list of stakeholders received some criticism, as many members were like-minded public servants, having a broad-based NCC did help diffuse some concerns that had mired previous curriculum-making exercises (Vazir, 2003).

The initial drafts of the Single National Curriculum received stringent critiques from many in the educational fraternity (Mahmood, 2020). These critiques can be divided broadly into two types: pedagogical critiques and rights-based critiques. The former highlighted the significant increase in learning materials in several subjects, especially in the *Islamiat* curriculum. An aim of developing a single national curriculum was to incorporate the madrasa sector into the fold of mainstream education by including more secular subjects and learning material in their syllabi (currently only for Years 1-5). Such purposeful uniformity resulted in the continued pervasiveness of Islamic teaching in all subjects, and a greater learning load in *Islamiat* for

non-madrassa students (also for Years 1-5) (Rahman, 2020). This change generated a harsh public critique, polarising civil society and government policymakers. Critics also pointed out that religious seminaries are likely to drag their feet; their general lack of participation in the first phase of implementation of the SNC suggests that this is indeed the case.

The rights-based criticism focused on a) children from religious minority groups not having their own religious education curricula and b) the continued inclusion of Islamic religious content in subjects such as English, Urdu and the social sciences that imposes such learning on religious minority students (Hoodbhoy, 2020; Razzaque, 2021). Both elements of the rights-based critique are seen by many as a violation of Article 22-1 of the Constitution of Pakistan. In fact, it has been claimed that the education system has long been in violation of the Constitution (Paul, 2014).

While no action has been taken yet to reduce the curricular load, or to move religious content out of other subjects, the Ministry has agreed to the long-standing demand of minority religious groups to have their own curricula, thus mitigating a major source of human rights violation. This development will be the focus of the rest of this article.

A new religious curriculum for religious minorities

As noted above, students from religious minorities must choose between *Islamiat* and *Ikhlaqiat*. Many advocates of equity in education, along with members of the minority religions, have been arguing for the need to rethink the relationship between education and religion, proposing that religious instruction should not be part of the education system. According to Dr Peter Jacob (Director of the Centre for Social Justice), after decades of unsuccessfully struggling to achieve this aim, he and others advocated for educational parity for children of all religious traditions, a parity that would give them the opportunity to be taught their own religious traditions. As noted by a member of the National Curriculum Council, the body responsible for developing the SNC, the Council used to receive regular complaints about this lack of parity and appeals for redressing it. In 2006, a multi-religious curriculum was prepared but not implemented and 'ethics' remained the only choice for non-Muslims. Interestingly, as the ethics curriculum included lessons about the history of religion and information about various religions, it was also in breach of Article 22(1) of the Constitution.

The subject of 'ethics' was unpopular with students and parents, and this was confirmed by a study in 2019 by the Centre for Social Justice. The findings showed that: i) only 0.07% students opted for ethics at Grade 5 level, while 0.06% students at Grade 8 studied ethics; ii) out of a total of 15,917 matriculation students belonging to religious minority groups, 80% studied *Islamiat* and only 20% studied ethics; iii) out of 7,405 non-Muslim students at intermediate

level, 90% studied *Islamiat* and only 1.7% studied ethics, while 8.8% studied civics (Jacob & Malik, 2020). Evidence that ethics as an alternative subject was not working created further pressure to develop dedicated curricula for various religions. The Ministry finally agreed to these demands in 2020 and commissioned work on curricula for five religious traditions – *Christianity, Hinduism, Baha'i, Kalasha* and *Sikhism*.

The Introduction section of 'religious education' in the SNC tells us that the 'purpose of developing a 'Religious Education' curriculum for the students belonging to minorities is to provide them an equal opportunity of learning about their own religions in line with the provisions of the constitution of Pakistan' (National Curriculum Council, 2020). There is an inherent tension when it comes to the idea of minority religions in a modern nation state. This tension alludes to the debates about the identity of Pakistan – should it be an Islamic state (which then makes all other religions minority ones) or a non-denominational one which treats all religions equally and where 'religious minority' is not a legal concept, only a sociological one? In the latter case, the law does not define minorities, as it does now.

How were the five religions chosen and what work was done on creating their curricula? Here we will draw extensively upon interviews with Ministry personnel and representatives of the minority religions. The selection of religions and the development of curricula was an exercise in making possible what once seemed impossible. Consensus building, compromise, and the promise to revisit the curricula periodically were the main policy tools that were used to bring people together and engage in the task of curriculum development. The five religions were chosen on the basis of political convenience and demography. According to the 2017 census, only 3.72% of the population belongs to minority religions (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Christianity was an obvious choice because of the community size (1.59%), educational organisation within the community and its critical role in advocating for the religious education curriculum. Demography played a key role in the choice of Hinduism (1.6%) as well, besides the fact that its absence would have been the most glaring omission when it comes to Pakistan-India relations. Kalasha was chosen because of its culturally distinct religious identity as well as its international fame. The Baha'is were willing partners. It was not clear why the Parsi (Zoroastrians) and Buddhist traditions were not chosen; members of the Curriculum Council indicated an ongoing process, and more religions will be added in the future. Finally, the fact that Ahmadiya was not included has much to do with sensitivities involved. Since Ahmadi self-identify as Muslims, any curricula designed for them would undermine the very arguments that have led to their constitutional expulsion.

The minority religions' curricula were developed in their own unique ways. For example, in the case of the Baha'i, their national body (National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is of Pakistan) developed the curriculum in consultation with the community's international headquarters.

In the case of Christianity, because of the internal diversity of the community a long process of negotiation and compromise between four leading denominations—Catholics, the Church of Pakistan, the Salvation Army, Presbyterians—helped develop the curriculum. This may not have fully satisfied any one group but none was left too unhappy. In addition to managing internal diversity, yet another factor that informed curriculum development was Islamic sensitivity to certain ideas, such as the Trinity.

Regardless of process, all five curricula follow a uniform structure consisting of the following sections: *Introduction to Beliefs and Prayers, Life of the Religious Leader(s), Ethical Values, Sources of Guidance/Heroes and Festivals*. It should be noted that this structure broadly follows that of the *Islamiat* curriculum already in place. One of the curriculum writers indicated this was done to ensure greater acceptability for the RE curriculum.

The emphasis on shared and common elements, both within and across religions, is evident. All the interviewees told us that this was by design. This is also articulated in the Introduction to the RE curriculum where it says: ‘the students will realise that their own religion like all other religions teaches similar values, and they have all reasons to have positive feelings for other faiths.’ There are thus hardly any references to differences within each of these religions. For example, internal diversity within the branches of Islam and Christianity are largely ignored. This limits the pedagogical and social resonance of the curricula. Though the emphasis on shared aspects of religions is desirable, it is equally important to expose students to intra- and inter-religious diversity: the main source of religious intolerance is the inability to accept and deal with difference – *Ikhtilaaf*. Such intolerance is more often shown towards the internal religious Other than to the external Other, who can simply be dismissed as misguided. The challenge of living together is inherently a challenge of living with differences (Salmon & Vivekanandan, 2014; Sinclair, 2013). When asked, the members of the NCC claimed that there is an unprecedented stress on tolerance and respect for the Other in the SNC.

Throughout we give a message of tolerance through Quranic verses and historical anecdotes. Such messages are there in *Islamiat*, in Urdu, in social studies textbooks. For example, along with mosques, we also discuss other places of worship. We show diversity in festivals, inclusive representation in names used in the SNC. In fact, we want to move to the appreciation of diversity – pluralism - in higher levels. (N. Lone & S. Aziz, personal communication, May 8, 2021)

Under each section in the religious education curriculum there is a list of relevant elements from a religious tradition, but without any commentary about the rationale for their inclusion. For example, the lists of ethical values are repetitive and almost always consist of general moral values. This is in line with the desire to bring out shared features of religions. Further, the values stressed seem to mostly emphasise accepting and bearing the circumstances one

faces in life – for example, obedience is listed three times, forgiveness (4), patience (5), acceptance (3), sacrifice (1), tolerance (1) – while those values that can inspire challenge to the status quo are few and far between – justice (3), equality (2).

Implementing the curriculum

A curriculum is a statement of intent. Its ultimate value lies in its implementation in the classrooms. In Pakistan, responsibility for implementing curricula lies with the provinces as education delivery is, constitutionally, a provincial concern (Government of Pakistan, 2010). This fact creates challenges, as provinces differ in their enthusiasm as well as their capacity for implementing the new curriculum. In our discussion with the members of the NCC, there was a recognition of the challenges of implementation. Next to bringing all the provincial units on board, the most important challenge noted was that of finding teachers to teach the RE curriculum. The quality of teaching in all school types is critical when it comes to educational reform. Research indicates that teachers often lack content knowledge and pedagogy is geared towards preparing for the exam rather than providing a holistic approach that will encourage lifelong learning (Aslam & Kingdon, 2011; Idara-e-Taleem-o- Aagahi, 2013; Rawal et al., 2013). Teacher motivation remains a concern (Ali, 2014, 2018; Aslam et al., 2019) and teacher quality is a critical bottleneck to student achievement in Pakistan (Alam & Ahmad, 2017), a finding that is supported by global literature on the importance of pedagogy on critical learning (Abercrombie, 2009; Alcott, 2017; Rawal et al., 2013).

Exacerbating this situation is majority Muslim teachers' lack of training and motivation to teach about other religions; in fact, the government has outlined that only members of the respective religious communities should teach the different curricula (N. Lone & S. Aziz, personal communication, May 8, 2021). This creates critical teacher supply concerns. In some parts of the country, with relatively high densities of one or more religious minorities, enough teachers may be found. With regard to the Kalasha faith, practiced only in the region of Chitral, finding local teachers may not be difficult. But in most places this is likely to be a challenge. One solution, suggested to us by a curriculum writer, proposes that *Islamiat* teachers be trained to teach other religions. However, this ignores the fact that many schools do not even have a specialised *Islamiat* teacher. Furthermore, the issue is not just the availability of alternate teachers in the absence of teachers from minority religions; it is also about teachers' attitudes towards teaching the content. Teaching about a religion other than one's own in an educationally sound manner requires empathy and a degree of impartiality. Any teacher training will need to take this into account.

The asymmetrical teaching provision for religious studies also has implications for assessment, particularly for any large-scale assessment. It may make sense to exclude religious education

from any such examination. This argument can also be made for *Islamiat*; if students are free from examination stress, many of them might find the subject to be an avenue for thinking about and engaging with larger moral and existential issues. There is evidence of this happening in other countries (Holt, 2018).

There are other subtle implementation and impact issues that need to be considered and studied. Presently, the only religion discussed in the classrooms is Islam. Once minority religion children have their own classes and texts, they are likely to discuss their learning and hence classroom discourse may become multi-religious. How will this shape a school's culture? A sensitive pluralistic pedagogy could lead to fostering positive attitudes towards religious pluralism and informed civic discussion on controversial topics. Pedagogical failures that end up privileging one religion over the others in class discussions could give rise to tensions among students from different religions. Furthermore, even though all the curricula (including the one for *Islamiat*) explicitly and repeatedly emphasize religious tolerance and pluralism and zero tolerance for any forms of religious disrespect to all faiths (National Curriculum Council, 2020), theological contradictions can give rise to greater social segmentation across religious grounds and education might embed the othering of minorities (Mahmood, 2020).

Concluding remarks: curriculum change and societal implications

The current reforms are being introduced into an environment of layered, structured intolerance towards freedom of religious expression. The spell of the blasphemy law has created an ethos of fear and self-censorship. Although census data remains sketchy, Pakistan has seen a decline in its minority populations, particularly of Hindus and Christians. This is primarily due to emigration as a result of discrimination and harassment, and this also permeates school culture (Hoodbhoy, 2021). There are reports of bullying of children belonging to religious minorities in schools, and parental disapproval of non-Muslim teachers. Such social marginalisation represents a symbiotic relationship between school and society that mutually reinforces social beliefs and practices.

Given that religion is both rhetorically and practically very important in Pakistani society and its diverse landscape, it can be argued that the role of the school should be to provide education about religion rather than religious instruction. However, this step seems a distant reality given the way the State has functionalised religion and the resulting emotional intensity and political sensitivity in society about all aspects of religion. Hence, for now, drafting multi-religious curricula carries a symbolic weight that recognizes the constitutional rights of religious minorities though it falls short of an equity-driven approach that critically acknowledges past curricular marginalisation and social prejudice against religious minorities.

Furthermore, proposed religious curricula (including *Islamiat*) address embedded social prejudice through privileging respect and religious tolerance (interpreted by zero tolerance for 'hate speech') but omit potentially contentious and conflicting viewpoints. While this limits the critical interpretive potential of the curricula that would enable a deeper engagement with how religions address human rights, it is designed to limit potential conflicts that may arise from alternative religious epistemologies. As such, the curriculum designers are arguably 'functionalising' religion purposefully to promote religious tolerance and social harmony.

While this paper focuses on the political and historical evolution of the curriculum, future research will document its full social impact. The broader curricular reforms fall short of a proactive rights-based education that foregrounds critical pedagogy aimed at righting wrongs, and all the curricula (for religious education, *Islamiat* and mainstream subjects) face structural bottlenecks in their implementation. Furthermore, there are potential social implications, such as religious othering, that cannot be predicted, given the novelty of this initiative. However, given the socio-political context of Pakistan, the introduction of non-Islam based 'religious education' arguably represents a policy intent towards a functionalisation of religious education to create a more pluralistic and just society.

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