



# The Interplay of School Ethos and Identity Crisis among School-Going Children: An Ethnographic Study of Conflicting Discourses

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**ABSTRACT-** The contestation in the prevailing education system of Pakistan raises serious questions on the role of school environments in the development of children's identity. The increasing level of identity crisis among school-going children in Pakistan has appealed educationists, school counselors and social scientists at large to focus on qualitative discrepancies, which exist between private and public schools to understand the factors hampering children's positive self-development. This article endeavours to discern the discursive patterns of school socialization in private and public schools of Chakwal analyzing how value conflicts between school environment and general social milieu influence the psychological well-being and socio-cultural attitudes of school-aged children. Using purposive sampling, this study employs participant observation in nine private and public schools accompanied by in-depth interviews of students, teachers and parents of varied socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The findings reveal that the value system embedded in both private and public schools in Chakwal is at odds with those ethos which define the everyday discourse of life. The contradictory lived experiences of children in schools and wider society and the chaotic socialization experiences are engendering ideological confusion, social stigmatization, status war, and identity crisis among school-aged children.

**Keyword:** School Ethos, Education System, Identity Crisis, Psychological Well-Being, Pakistan

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan confronts multiple challenges which go beyond religious extremism, terrorism and other security-related problems that tend to draw the most attention globally. One of the most substantial challenges that Pakistan has been confronting, is witnessed in the educational landscape of the country. The diverse and often contested schooling systems in Pakistan have been the central focus of this struggle. The clash of value systems between government and private schools is one of the main concerns that drive this squabble. The emergence of private schools and qualitative differences between public and private school discourses pose severe disquiets for the positive psychosocial development of school students. The undertaking of this article is to explore the psychosocial implications of contested school discourses on the identity development of school-going children. In order to develop in-depth understanding of this issue, it is important to highlight the roots of the private-public education system in Pakistan, which goes back to the pre-independence era of colonialism.

Much of the research in educational, social, developmental and cultural realms of psychology has focused on the ideological, cultural and historical underpinnings of one's social identity such as acculturation, ethnicity and collective self-esteem. However, research marking the socio-political correlates of these constructs including colonialism and internalized oppression is scarce in psychology (Okazaki, David & Abelmann, 2008). The debate of colonialism has remained confined to the economic and political gains and losses while ignoring the discursive and linguistic practices associated with the European period (Migge & Léglise, 2007; Nandy, 1982). Prior to British rule, madrasahs or religious seminaries were considered as the basic source of organized learning and education which were established to meet the administrative and educational needs of the empire. Madrasah Nizamiyawas among the first such institutions established by Saljuk Wazir Nizamuddin Tusi in Baghdad who started a chain of Madrasahs in Middle Eastern Asia (Muhammad, Omer, Imran, Akbar & Karim, 2012). The practical and comprehensive nature of the syllabi in madrasahs dealt with the religious as well as the worldly matters and produced different religious scholars and professionals (Zaidi, 2013). The peak of the madrasah system of education

during the Muslim rule faced a swift decline with the establishment of British rule in the Subcontinent (Muhammad et al, 2012).

Considering language as the representative of one's identity (Mercuri, 2012; Shakib, 2011), British colonizers entered with the intention to establish the superiority of their language and culture through various social discourse undermining the value of indigenous languages and culture. Education was one of the significant grounds, which was used by the colonizers as a mode to indoctrinate British culture and ideology and perpetuate British discourses with the aim of asserting their power and superiority (Migge&Léglise, 2007; Pennycook, 1998). To achieve the socio-political goals, the British rulers replaced the local language (Persian) in private and public sectors with the English language. The substitution of Persian with English and British educational policy gave rise to a divided Indian society –the educated western elite class and the uneducated vernacular masses. Consequently, two social categories arose where British values and language were considered as superior, prestigious, and powerful in the society. Conversely, the local (colonized) were being considered as inferior, subordinate, and powerless. Muslims of the subcontinent were compelled to receive English education as it was being associated with various employment opportunities (Waseem, 2014).

The current debate of private and public education system in Pakistan roots back to the history of lingual colonization where the superiority of the English language associated with upward social mobility became a necessity for those who wanted to acquire higher position (Migge&Léglise, 2007). Since the independence of Pakistan in 1947, both public and private educational institutions served as the main sources of imparting education at primary and secondary levels (Iqbal, 2012). However, the predominant purpose of private school education was to serve the elite class. Rehman and Khan (2011) support this argument by asserting that private schooling created different tiers to facilitate the hold of the elite for ruling the country. The psychology of colonial discourses was well manifested in General Ayub Khan's cognitive map where he disapproved the old traditions and language-based ethnicities and supported English as a symbol of modern and progressive values. The multiplication of private English medium schools in the 1960s, as the professional middle class was emerging, was the expression of colonial mindset which was indoctrinated and creating psychological and social division on the basis of intellect and power (Rahman, 1998). The commission on students' welfare and problems, also called as Hamoodur Rehman Commission, defended these schools on the basis of their excellence and quality performance. Missionary schools were supported by the commission based on providing religious freedom to the Christian community. The commission supported the viewpoint that these schools serve to produce the military and civilian elite class of administration (Rahman, 2005). In 1972, Prime Minister Zulifqar Ali Bhutto came up to power with a democratic classless socialist agenda. In order to accomplish his objectives, he introduced several educational reforms to improve the quality of education including the nationalization of all the educational institutes during his period (1972 to 1978) (Shamim, 2008).

Education policy of 1979 gained much significance in the educational discourses (Rahman, 1998; Shah, 2012) because of its significant contribution in bringing an ideological shift and psychological turn in the social cognitive makeup of the local people. The education policy emphasized on promoting Islamic ideology, scientific and technological education, character building and provision of equal opportunities for religious and cultural development. In order to gain these objectives, the government mobilized the community resources for literacy programmes and developed separate institutes for girls' education (Khan & Mahmood, 1997). Later, the Afghan War and the succeeding wave of Islamization 1979 - 1989 also left a great mark on the education landscape of Pakistan leading to major changes in the curriculum design and educational philosophy. The content of the curriculum was revised following the Islamic ideology. Urdu language as a medium of instruction was stressed from grade 1 in all the schools except missionary and elitist schools. Major changes occurred with a boost to madrasah education and imposing a compulsion of Arabic subject up to class VIII. Pakistan Studies and Islamiyat were compulsory till intermediate (Aamer, 2009).

The era of the 1990s is referred to as a period of globalization and neoliberalism, which affected the cultural, social, political and economic landscapes of most of the countries emphasizing on education and technology for enhancing the economic progress of the global world. International organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations (UN) and World Bank played a momentous role in highlighting and laying the global education policy influencing developing countries including Pakistan (Ali & Tahir, 2009). This led to the privatization of educational institutes was a finance-driven reform as the government lacked the human and capital resources to achieve the goal of universal education (Ali & Tahir, 2009; Khattak, 2014). Therefore, active encouragement of education privatization was observed in the 1990s (Andrabi, Das & Khwaja, 2008).

For this very reason, the national education policy (1998-2010) encouraged private-public partnership schemes for establishing schools in rural areas. Consequently, private schools received mass acceptance to ensure the sustained progress of the country. Later, the event of 9/11 and subsequent international pressures reshaped the educational reforms (Hameed - ur - Rehman & Sewani, 2013). The portrayal of Pakistan as a terrorist country posed a serious threat to the education sector. Militancy and terrorism were being associated with the poor educational system of Pakistan on international forums (Nauman, 2015). The global debates and criticism on Islamized curriculum left a great mark on the educational policies of Pakistan (Hameed - ur - Rehman & Sewani, 2013). Resultantly, private enterprises were encouraged with the introduction of radical changes in the syllabus. The private sector created commercialization in education and thus influenced the philosophy of life in terms of class differences (Aamer, 2009). The current debate of education in Pakistani society strongly revolves around the three basic systems of education – Elite English Medium Education System, State Urdu Medium Education System and Madrasah Education System that have evolved over the course of time in Pakistan's history (Nisar, 2010). The three systems exhibit different discourses for educating young minds. In the case of Pakistan, the existence of multiple education systems posed serious challenges for the sustenance and preservation of varied cultural identities and social values to uphold the diverse population of the country. The distinct education system led to the construction of contested ethos in various setups of education may it be a state-run institute, private school or an Islamic seminary. The products of the three institutes with diverse experiences of socialization created a flagrant value conflict in real-life situations. The kind of choices children make, the set of values they learn and the adoption of behaviours they exhibit in their socialization is largely influenced by the socio-cultural context which defines the moral and ethical behaviour of children and adolescents. The changes and conflicts in the social setups, including the ideological clashes and social transformations, mark substantial implications on the development of a child by affecting the structure and dynamics of social contexts which are a part of children's everyday experiences such as family, school, and peers. The current study employs the ecological theory of human development proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner as the theoretical framework. According to this theory, there are different types of systems, which influence a child's development. These systems include the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. Based on this theory, this study attempts to explore how the contested school environments, being proximal structures of microsystem, influence the psychological wellbeing of school-aged children?

## II. METHODOLOGY

The current research was conducted while employing qualitative approach whereby different research methods and techniques were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the socialization process at different school environments. The research was carried out in nine schools including three public schools and six elite private schools of Council City 1 and 2 of Chakwal city. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of participants, which consisted of students, parents and teachers belonging to diverse socio-economic and educational background.

In order to gain qualitative insights, participant observation was conducted by spending a time period of two weeks in each of the nine schools. The researchers participated in various formal and informal activities becoming an active part of the school environment. These activities include class discussions, interaction with teachers in staff room settings, playing games with the students during sports week and organizing farewell events along with the students. Students were also observed during their informal daily interactions in school vans and social gatherings such as school parties and family gatherings. Participant observation enabled the researchers to interact with a large number of students, teachers and parents on a formal and informal basis including up to 200 students, 60 teachers and 30-50 parents.

Participant observation was accompanied by in-depth interviews, which were employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Initially, three interview guides were developed in the English language that were translated into the Urdu language for ensuring the comprehension of the questions for the local participants. A pilot study was conducted. The translated versions of the interview guides were more understandable to the local participants. In total, 40 interviews (20 males & 20 females) were conducted from students of private and public schools, 30 from parents (including 15 mothers and 15 fathers) and 18 from teachers (9 males and 9 females) of private and government schools. Interviews were conducted in Urdu and Punjabi language based on the feasibility of the participants. Each interview lasted for about 45 to 90 minutes. In order to record the responses of the interlocutors, field jottings were taken which were converted into field notes afterward.

Before the fieldwork and actual data collection, formal permission was sought from the school administration. A consent form was formulated to facilitate the process of rapport building so that the participants can be able to develop a trustworthy and empathetic relationship with the researchers. Before the data collection, the purpose of the topic was elucidated to the respondents to address their obscurities and questions. The participants were briefed about the process of research to ensure their voluntary participation.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Urie Bronfenbrenner's perspective of ecological development and socialization of a child posits a dynamic interplay between a child and social context where the reciprocal patterns of culture and institution influence the development of a child in manifold ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In face of the value conflicts between school and everyday life practices, children undergo certain implications which present themselves in the form of internalizing or externalizing behaviors thus influencing the psychosocial development of a child. The following discussion reflects a thorough picture to understand these behaviours for developing a comprehensive insight of what children face, how do they feel, and their coping strategies to make their way out of these conflicts.

#### IDEOLOGICAL CONFUSION AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

Language confusion is one of the major manifestations of ideological puzzlement. Children face serious repercussions of this quandary based on a mindset where the English language is taken as a brand language and a symbol of progress, high class, and prestige (Sadiq, 2015). Fluency in the English language is not the only sign of one's affluent status rather the ignorance of one's regional and national language is taken as a matter of pride among the young circle. Husna, a female student of private school, reflected:

**I cannot speak as good English as they do. We are Punjabi speakers. They (class fellows) label me as "Paendu". I feel inferior to them and that is why I do not participate in class discussions.**

This is not the case only in a class setting; such reflections are a part of Pakistani society at large, where a person speaking Punjabi, Urdu is not appreciated by any organization, institution. The obsession with English is so deeply rooted in the psychology of parents, teachers, and children that snide and sarcastic remarks for speaking incorrect English are often heard in the playgrounds and social places followed by malevolent laughter. From a business class to a lower class, it is parents' priority to equip their children with the ability to speak fluent English to avoid the stigma of *Paendu* and outdated.

The English language is thought of as a testament to one's intelligence. Children who speak English and orient themselves towards Shakespeare and Dickens writings are seen as intellectual and socially superior to those who read Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. According to a government schoolteacher, English speaking is a route to elite social class. Students from Urdu medium family backgrounds are somehow inferior and backward than those who belong to English medium background. This kind of impression is widely admitted in Pakistan where English is associated with the rich and affluent class (Ráková, 2016; Shamim, 2017). The social stigma attached to the regional and local languages makes people hesitate while using their native languages on public forums considering it a symbol of backwardness and inferiority. The findings of the fieldwork indicate the feelings of low self-esteem among the students of lower classes when they find themselves unable to speak fluent English. This attitude distinguishes them from the rest of the social circle disapproving them to be a part of a specific class. Some students also face social isolation and exclusion in this regard when their friends disapprove of them just because they do not stand in their class socially, academically and lingually.

The empirical findings of the study reveal that one's way of life often encounters the daily experiences where everyday practices intersect the values taught in school or family which becomes a source of ideological confusion among the students. Most of the students face this confusion questioning that what values they should embrace and what are the foundations to decide which values are against their religious-cultural ethical makeup? Children experience these ideological discrepancies in their real settings compelling them to compare those values which they learn in schools and those their families and society at large teach. In the state of this confusion, they find themselves involved in a struggling situation

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<sup>1</sup>The word *Paendu* is derived from the term '*Pind*' which means a village and an inhabitant of a village is known as a *Paendu* (or villager). The term has various connotations. Most often, the term is used to label villagers as uncultured, uncivilized and ignorant persons. People most often use this term for the one who seems to speak in a funny accent or dressed up in an outdated manner.

between these values and everyday experiences, which tend to influence their behaviours (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). A similar concern was expressed by a working mother:

**Today our children are confused and they question us that if wearing sleeveless short shirts with tight jeans is not our culture, then why do girls wear them at school functions.**

Another similar response was reflected by a student of O' levels (class 10th) at Myer's School who expressed that the youth is stuck in the war of ideological confusion. Ideological bewilderment is well manifested in multiple forms when students get the religious teachings of spending one's life according to Islamic values but the daily discourses are embedded in western culture. According to Rismsah, a student of 8<sup>th</sup> grade in a government school:

**I like to wear a short shirt with Capri but my mother does not allow me to wear it. I wear jeans at school parties or if I have. At home, I wear *shalwar kameez*<sup>2</sup> in the presence of my grandfather.**

The above response is not an exception in Pakistani society. People have assigned different dressing criteria for various events like for parties they have to wear something that looks trendy, modern and western. At home, most of them prefer eastern dressing; some in respect of their elder members of family and others are not allowed to follow western trends. Those parents who do not like western dressing and value themselves, many of them prefer them for their children and posit these values as a marker of updated, trendy and fashionable class. Resultantly, children find themselves in a confused state, which is reflected on various occasions.

#### **STRESS AND FRUSTRATION: NEGATIVE EMOTIONS**

While expressing their value conflicts, children expressed great stress and frustration. Nepotism, favoritism, and class discrimination from top to the bottom level has introduced a culture where children think that potential, hard work and one's capabilities are compromised behind the bars of power politics. Such kind of attitude creates negative emotions among the children who experience this culture. With reference to the teacher's biased attitude, one of the 10th class government school students named Shoab responded:

**It hurts when teachers discriminate among us. Only the rich and wealthy are successful here and they earn respect. They take the first position. People like me cannot come to the top despite of hard work because I am not from an upper-class family.**

A similar response was reflected by a private school teacher who argued that there are separate rules for those who belong to influential background, and those who are powerless. While elaborating this, the teacher said that students belonging to higher cases are allowed to visit the canteen at the timings when others cannot, they are forgiven even if caught with drugs. She further argued that such sort of behaviour from teachers and administration contradicts their teachings of equality and raises certain questions in the minds of the students about their status. The culture of nepotism and merit genocide in schools augments frustration, anger and antagonism in society, particularly amongst the students of young age. These perceptions of injustice and conflict create a state of debility, frustration, and despair and apathy — which makes one vulnerable to various mental and physical diseases, delinquent behaviour and adoption of substance abuse.

#### **SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS OF VALUE CONFLICTS**

Apart from psychological impacts, the findings of the study came across certain impacts of value conflicts on the socio-cultural life of students. These impacts do not only influence the social identity rather they hold a considerable influence of varying degrees and intensity on the overall lifestyle they live. The school-home or social conflicts exhibited in various social values leave diverse implications on the social development of students.

One of the momentous impacts is the radicalized and extremist manifestation of children's religious and sectarian beliefs. Children show strong affiliation towards their religious sects and beliefs

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<sup>2</sup>A traditional dress is worn by men and women in South Asia specifically in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. In Pakistan, it is also considered as a national dress. A Shalwar is a pair of loose pleated trousers that narrows around the ankles whereas a Kameez is a long shirt usually it is of knee-length.

considering the other one as wrong ultimately leading to the development of a mind where the majority of *Sunnis*<sup>3</sup> believe that *Shias*<sup>4</sup> are not the true depiction of Muslims. According to a fraction of *Shia* students, *Sunnis* do not believe in their Imams and they (*Sunni*) claim to be the only right version of Islam. Such kind of negative perceptions about each other's sect hinder the development of a tolerant attitude. Consequently, whenever the religious debates and discussions, each one supports their sects with rigid and extremist arguments and aggressive upshots where students are not ready to listen alternative perspectives against abusing the opposite sect.

Class-based interaction and discrimination is another evident upshot influencing the students in both private and public schools. However, the findings support the notion that private school students show class-based interaction patterns more than public school students. One of the plausible explanations behind this is that most of the private school students come from a background where the inter-class interaction is considered important to maintain one's class and standard. Therefore, parents and caregivers hold significant influence in shaping the interaction circles of their children. This attitude has been observed in various school interactions of students where they prefer friends from higher class and anyone belonging to the lower class is left alone. English language, western dressing patterns and branded accessories are specifically adopted to gain acceptance into the elite circle. In the struggle to maintain one's class and superiority, fieldwork observations reveal that the trend of wearing branded clothes is also on the rise in Chakwal city even at the funeral procession of a person.

#### IV. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In a multicultural developing society like Pakistan, contested school milieus pushing the young children to the verge of identity conflict. In the context of Pakistan, the social and religious identity crisis further augments this puzzlement. The vibrant global interconnectivity, flow of western philosophies and importance of the English language have been socially transforming the young generation engendering cultural and ethnic conflict of identities. Families and schools play an important role in empowering children to develop an inclusive understanding of different religions, beliefs, cultures. Attitudes held at schools and homes towards the opposite faiths leave a great impression on the perceptions of children related to other sects, therefore, there is a need to put efforts on both parts to encourage tolerance and equality among students belong to various socio-economic and sectarian backgrounds by cultivating openness and reverence for the diversity and inclusiveness. This could be achieved by empathetic listening and respecting the diverse beliefs without exhibiting stereotypical prejudiced outlook. The schools need to develop a holistic and integrated methodology to foster an all-encompassing environment. Children are observant of what is demonstrated around them. Modeling positive attitudes and strengthening peaceful inter-religious discussions in classrooms and families can stimulate religio-cultural tolerance and inter-faith diversity. Textbooks and curriculum can also play a crucial role in showing respect for diversity and otherness.

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<sup>3</sup>The largest sect of Islam in Pakistan follows four schools of thoughts- *Hanafi*, *Hanbali*, *Maliki* and *Shafi'i*- named after their Imam founders. *Sunni* believe in four Caliphs of Islam and companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). The core difference between *Sunni* and *Shia* lies in the belief regarding the successorship of Hazrat Ali (R.A.) where *Sunni* believe that Hazrat Ali (R.A.) is the fourth Caliph and Holy Prophet (PBUH) did not nominate him as the first successor.

<sup>4</sup> A sect of Islam that follows *Ja'fari* school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence. Their core belief is that Hazrat Ali (R.A.) is the true successor of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) after his death. They do not believe in the first three Caliphs of Islam instead they have strong faith in twelve infallible Imams who are the successors of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

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