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Peace Begins with Knowledge: The Transformative Power of Education in Conflict-Affected Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The present study undertakes a critical examination pertaining to the transformative potential of education as a tool for peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions of Pakistan. The primary focus of the attention is on the capacity of educational systems to foster social cohesion, reconciliation, and sustainable peace within a country characterized by significant ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian diversity. The study in the context challenges the narrow conceptualization of education as mere skills transmission. It has moreover attempted to address a central paradox observed in the Pakistani educational landscape. This paradox relates to the coexistence of education's recognized potential for peacebuilding and the structural fragmentation that perpetuates social divisions. The study in the context undertakes a systematic assessment of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence from across Pakistan's diverse provinces. The analysis therefore is grounded in foundational peace theory and contemporary research. The synthesized framework helps locate education's dual capacity within Pakistan. It can either reinforce existing inequalities through what scholars' term "educational apartheid" or serve as a catalyst for social transformation. The study finding reveals significant empirical evidence supporting education's peacebuilding role in specific contexts. Research from Swat indicates that post-conflict educational reconstruction has paradoxically created opportunities for improvement with schools rebuilt to international standards and increased student enrollment. Furthermore, peace education programs demonstrate measurable impacts with encounter-based initiatives building social capital and motivating Pakistani youth toward community service. However, the analysis also notes persistent systemic barriers. These include curriculum gaps ideological resistance and uneven implementation across provinces. Therefore, the article proposes a strategic framework for integrating peacebuilding into Pakistan's educational systems. This framework emphasizes context-sensitive approaches teacher training and the meaningful participation of young people as active peacebuilders. Ultimately education must be recognized as a fundamental investment in Pakistan's peace not merely a humanitarian afterthought.

Keywords: Peace Education Pakistan Social Cohesion Conflict Transformation Educational Apartheid Single National Curriculum Youth Peacebuilding

Introduction

The proposition that peace begins with knowledge carries profound implications for Pakistan. The nation's complex sociopolitical landscape marked by ethnic diversity linguistic pluralism and periodic conflict presents both challenges and opportunities for educational transformation. Pakistan in the context occupies a unique and paradoxical position. Its education system can serve as a tool for liberation and social cohesion. It can also function as a mechanism for reproducing inequalities and exacerbating sectarian divisions (Jihad & Jinan 2026). This duality has been systematically documented across various Pakistani contexts. Bush and Saltarelli's seminal framework on the two faces of education in ethnic conflict finds particular resonance in

Pakistan where educational fragmentation has created what researchers describe as "educational apartheid" based on ideology and socioeconomic class (Jihad & Jinan 2026). The contemporary Pakistani landscape underscores this urgency. Conflict displacement and insecurity have disrupted the education of millions of children particularly in regions affected by militancy and natural disasters. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Swat district alone the conflict between security forces and militant groups caused massive internal displacement and severe disruption to secondary education (Zainab et al. 2025). Schools have been attacked and educational infrastructure destroyed. Yet paradoxically this destruction created opportunities for rebuilding to international standards demonstrating education's resilience and transformative potential. However, the dominant policy discourse has often underacknowledged education's peacebuilding potential in Pakistan. Rustam and Guo (2025) observe that while research exists on peace education in major cities such as Lahore and Karachi rural and conflict-affected regions including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan remain largely unexplored. This paper therefore addresses this analytical gap. It undertakes a systematic examination of education's power to build peace within the Pakistani context. The central research question guiding this inquiry is how can educational systems in Pakistan be designed and implemented to maximize their contribution to sustainable peace across the country's diverse and conflict-affected regions.

Theoretical Framework: Foundations of Peace Education in the Pakistani Context

The intellectual architecture of this study is grounded in foundational theoretical frameworks. These frameworks provide the analytical tools for understanding education's role in peacebuilding within Pakistan's specific context.

Galtung's Typology: Negative Peace Positive Peace and Peacebuilding

Johan Galtung's theoretical contributions remain essential for analyzing Pakistan's peacebuilding challenges. Galtung distinguished between negative peace defined as the absence of direct violence and positive peace defined as the absence of structural violence and the presence of social justice. This distinction is critical for educational analysis in Pakistan. Education for negative peace focuses on cessation of hostilities. Education for positive peace addresses deeper structural inequalities that perpetuate conflict including disparities in educational access and quality across provinces and socioeconomic classes. Shah and colleagues (2025) apply this framework in their analysis of Pakistan's security policies examining how official frameworks understand conflict causes and situate education within peacebuilding strategies. The 4R framework (Redistribution Recognition Representation and Reconciliation) developed by Novelli and colleagues provides additional analytical purchase for examining how Pakistan's educational policies address or fail to address structural injustices (Shah et al. 2025).

Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Liberation and Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed provides another foundational lens for Pakistani peace education. Freire conceptualized education as a tool for liberation and social transformation. Popular education and social justice movements underpin the philosophy of liberation through critical consciousness. In Pakistan's context where educational disparities reflect and reinforce social hierarchies' Freirean approaches suggest that peacebuilding education must aim to address inequalities recognize diverse identities and facilitate inclusive participation in decision-making. Cromwell's (2024) study of Pakistani youth participating in encounter-based programs demonstrates how critical consciousness develops through exposure to diverse perspectives and service-oriented activities fostering motivation for community improvement.

Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Contact in Pakistan

Social identity theory provides crucial insights into Pakistan's intergroup dynamics. The theory explains how individuals derive self-concept from group memberships and how competition for

resources can fuel intergroup conflict. Pakistan's ethnolinguistic diversity with major groups including Punjabis Pashtuns Sindhis Baloch and Muhajirs creates complex identity dynamics that educational systems can either bridge or deepen. Cromwell's (2024) research demonstrates that encounter-based peace education programs bringing Pakistani youth into contact across conflict differences resulted in increased openness toward opposing groups. This finding aligns with intergroup contact theory suggesting that structured positive contact under appropriate conditions can reduce prejudice and build social capital.

Critical Pedagogy and Social-Emotional Learning in Conservative Contexts

Rustam and Guo (2025) identify a critical gap in the Pakistani literature. They note limited adaptability of theoretical frameworks such as Critical Pedagogy and Social-Emotional Learning within Pakistan's conservative educational contexts. While some adaptations exist including SEL infused with Islamic values these have had limited documented impact. This finding underscores the need for hybrid models that integrate international peace education frameworks with local traditions and values. Such models can facilitate the development of linguistically and socially transformative classrooms while respecting cultural sensitivities (Rustam & Guo 2025).

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative systematic review methodology. The research is grounded in the analysis of primary theoretical texts and contemporary empirical studies focusing specifically on Pakistan. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles institutional research publications and policy documents examining peace education across Pakistan's provinces.

The review encompasses literature from diverse Pakistani geographic contexts. These include post-conflict Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Zainab et al. 2025) Balochistan's primary education system (Azeem et al. 2025) higher education institutions in Islamabad (Shahbaz & Rauf 2025) and encounter-based programs connecting Pakistani youth with international experiences (Cromwell 2024). This geographic diversity strengthens the validity of findings and enables comparative analysis across Pakistan's varied regions.

The analytical process involved thematic coding following established systematic review protocols. Sources were categorized according to theoretical foundations empirical evidence on impact implementation challenges and policy implications. This structured approach enables a comprehensive diagnosis of education's peacebuilding potential within Pakistan's complex sociopolitical landscape.

Findings

The Fragmented Landscape: Educational Apartheid and Social Division

A dominant finding across the literature is the profound fragmentation characterizing Pakistan's education system. Jihad and Jinan (2026) conducted a systematic literature review examining educational assimilation strategies in Pakistan's divided society. Their analysis reveals that Pakistan's fragmented education system creates what they term "educational apartheid" exacerbating social segregation based on ideology and socioeconomic class. The system operates through multiple parallel streams including elite private schools' low-cost private schools' government schools and madrasas each serving different social classes and often transmitting different values and worldviews.

The government's response to this fragmentation has been the Single National Curriculum initiative. However, Jihad and Jinan (2026) find this top-down approach through instrumentalization of religion and curriculum standardization has proven ineffective. It has fueled ethno-nationalist resistance deepened sectarian divisions and perpetuated gender bias. Their conclusion confirms that coercive assimilation fails to foster authentic social cohesion. This

finding carries significant implications for peacebuilding efforts suggesting that integrationist approaches must accommodate Pakistan's plurality of identities rather than imposing homogeneity.

Conflict and Opportunity: The Swat Case Study

The Swat conflict provides compelling evidence of education's vulnerability and resilience. Zainab and colleagues (2025) conducted a qualitative study examining the impact of conflict and internal displacement on secondary education in district Swat. Their research involved semi-structured interviews with twenty schoolteachers possessing over twenty years of teaching experience. The findings reveal that conflict and displacement had significant adverse effects on secondary school students' lives. However remarkably the research also found that conflict proved an opportunity for educational development. Schools have been rebuilt to international standards equipped with all facilities. The new school buildings provide more space with additional classrooms. The study also found a significant increase in student enrollment post-conflict.

This paradoxical finding suggests that crisis can catalyze positive transformation when accompanied by reconstruction efforts. The Swat experience demonstrates that educational systems can emerge stronger from conflict provided adequate resources and political will. However, the study emphasizes that sustainability requires involvement from government departments non-governmental organizations local communities' parents and teachers working collaboratively (Zainab et al. 2025).

Curriculum Analysis: Gaps in Peace Education Content

Multiple studies examine the extent to which Pakistani curricula incorporate peace education principles. Azeem and colleagues (2025) conducted a qualitative study examining public sector primary school textbooks in Quetta Balochistan alongside teacher perceptions. Their findings reveal significant variation across subjects. The Islamic Studies curriculum incorporated a comprehensive range of peace-related themes. However Social Studies Urdu and English textbooks demonstrated noticeable lack of such content. This disciplinary disparity suggests that peace education is not systematically integrated across the curriculum but rather confined to religious instruction.

Rustam and Guo (2025) in their systematic review of ESL and peace education integration in Pakistan identify additional gaps. Research on peace education predominantly focuses on major cities such as Lahore and Karachi while rural and conflict-affected regions including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan remain unexplored. Furthermore, they find limited adaptability of theoretical frameworks such as Critical Pedagogy and Social-Emotional Learning within Pakistan's conservative educational contexts. While some adaptations exist including SEL infused with Islamic values these have had limited documented impact.

Teacher Perceptions and Capacity

Teachers occupy a critical position in peacebuilding yet research reveals significant gaps in their preparation and understanding. Azeem and colleagues (2025) found that teachers in Balochistan demonstrated limited knowledge of peace education concepts despite expressing willingness to participate positively if provided sufficient training. Classroom observations revealed an absence of structured peace-related activities at both classroom and school levels.

Rustam and Guo (2025) note that certain grassroots initiatives exist such as senior-mediated conflict resolution or debates designed to resolve disputes. However, teacher-led innovative practices remain rare and undocumented. The existing education system creates barriers including exam-oriented curricula ideological resistance and limited resources for handling

conflict. These findings underscore the urgent need for teacher training programs that equip educators with peacebuilding knowledge and skills.

The Global Campaign for Peace Education (2025) documents various teacher training initiatives across Pakistan including workshops at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University in Sheringal equipping teachers with mediation skills and forums in Peshawar raising awareness about peace education's importance. These initiatives demonstrate growing recognition of teachers' catalytic role in peacebuilding.

Youth Agency and Encounter-Based Programs

Research on Pakistani youth demonstrates the transformative potential of structured peace education programs. Cromwell (2024) examined encounter-based programs that brought Pakistani youth to the United States analyzing alumni participants' long-term transformations. The research draws from interviews and focuses groups with alumni from four programs. Findings reveal that the programs' emphasis on service-oriented activities led to participants' motivation to improve their communities because of the social capital built through these experiences. Connecting with strangers across conflict differences resulted in participants' increased openness toward opposing groups.

Consequently, alumni implemented projects to benefit their communities in Pakistan. Despite sociopolitical constraints limiting their ability to explicitly promote social cohesion the programs emphasizing community action in both the US and Pakistan increased participants' peacebuilding motivation. Youth maintained this motivation as their projects reinforced attitudinal transformations promoting social cohesion (Cromwell 2024). This research demonstrates that young people are not merely recipients of peace education but active agents capable of leading peacebuilding initiatives when provided appropriate tools and spaces.

Multidimensional Factors in Higher Education Peacebuilding

Shahbaz and Rauf (2025) conducted research exploring factors influencing peacebuilding among students in Pakistan's higher education institutes. Their study responds to documented cases of violent behaviors reported in educational institutes disturbing the academic environment. Data collected from public sector universities through focus group discussions and interviews with teachers' students and administrative members revealed five thematic factors affecting peacebuilding.

These factors include intra-personal inter-personal inter-group environment-based and religious dimensions. The identification of multiple interacting levels from individual psychology to intergroup dynamics to environmental conditions underscores the complexity of peacebuilding. Effective interventions must address this multidimensional reality. The research provides evidence-based recommendations for strategies contributing to peacebuilding in higher education settings (Shahbaz & Rauf 2025).

Systemic Barriers: Out-of-School Children and Access Inequity

Any discussion of education's peacebuilding potential must acknowledge the foundational barrier of access. Pakistan ranks second globally for the highest number of out-of-school children. In Sindh province alone forty-four per cent of children aged five to sixteen remain out of school (Rind 2024 cited in BERA 2025). The reasons mirror global issues of poverty and conflict compounded by geographical hurdles disability inadequate infrastructure and sociocultural impediments particularly affecting girls in rural areas.

This access crisis fundamentally undermines peacebuilding. Children excluded from education are denied exposure to peacebuilding curricula and socialization opportunities that schools provide. They remain vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups and perpetuation of conflict cycles. Addressing the out-of-school children crisis is therefore a prerequisite for education-

based peacebuilding. Promising public-private partnership models particularly the Sindh Education Foundation's community-centered approach demonstrate that empowering school heads with autonomy can effectively tackle access challenges (BERA 2025).

Discussion: Toward a Transformative Framework for Pakistani Peace Education Moving Beyond Assimilation toward Integrative Models

The evidence reviewed indicates that Pakistan's current approach to educational integration requires fundamental reconsideration. Jihad and Jinan (2026) demonstrate that coercive assimilation strategies exemplified by the Single National Curriculum have proven counterproductive fueling rather than reducing social tensions. These findings challenge top-down standardization approaches. Instead, the research suggests that effective peacebuilding requires what Loader and Hughes (2017) term "shared education" approaches that accommodate diversity while building connections across groups.

Pakistan's complex sociolinguistic landscape demands hybrid models that integrate international peace education frameworks with local traditions and values. Rustam and Guo (2025) recommend such hybrid approaches to facilitate linguistically and socially transformative classrooms. These models would respect Pakistan's Islamic heritage and cultural sensitivities while incorporating contemporary peace education methodologies including social-emotional learning and critical pedagogy adapted to local contexts.

Community-Led Approaches and Local Knowledge

A consensus emerging from the literature is that externally imposed solutions are inadequate for Pakistan's diverse contexts. The Swat experience demonstrates that local communities' parents and teachers must be actively involved in educational reconstruction (Zainab et al. 2025). Similarly, the Sindh Education Foundation model shows that community-centered leadership with autonomy for school heads produces better outcomes than centralized bureaucratic control (BERA 2025).

Cromwell's (2024) research further emphasizes the importance of service-oriented activities rooted in local community needs. Pakistani youth who participated in encounter-based programs maintained their peacebuilding motivation when they could implement community projects reinforcing their attitudinal transformations. This finding suggests that peace education must be connected to concrete community action not abstract principles.

Integrating Peace Education Across the Curriculum

The disciplinary disparity identified in Balochistani textbooks reveals a critical weakness in current approaches. Peace education cannot be confined to religious instruction alone. Azeem and colleagues (2025) recommend that curriculum developers and policymakers incorporate peace education topics into all primary-level subjects to build a culture of peace from early years of schooling.

This requires systematic curriculum revision ensuring that Social Studies Urdu English and other subjects explicitly address peace-related themes. Furthermore, the hidden curriculum including classroom management styles school discipline policies and extracurricular activities must model peaceful conflict resolution. Cremin's (2025) emphasis on restorative techniques and peer mediation applies directly to Pakistani schools where punitive approaches often prevail.

Teacher Training as a Peacebuilding Priority

Teachers are the crucial link between policy and practice yet research consistently reveals inadequate preparation for peacebuilding roles. Azeem and colleagues (2025) found that teachers in Balochistan lacked knowledge of peace education concepts despite willingness to learn. Rustam and Guo (2025) note that teacher-led innovative practices remain rare and undocumented.

The Global Campaign for Peace Education (2025) documents promising initiatives including workshops equipping teachers with mediation skills and forums raising awareness about peace education's importance. However, these remain isolated efforts. Systemic teacher training reform is required integrating peace education into pre-service and in-service professional development. Teachers need not only knowledge but also ongoing support and resources to implement peacebuilding practices in challenging classroom environments.

Youth Participation and Agency

The research consistently demonstrates that young people are not merely recipients of peace education but active agents of change. Cromwell's (2024) study shows how Pakistani youth transformed encounter-based experiences into community action. Shahbaz and Rauf (2025) identify multiple factors affecting peacebuilding in higher education suggesting that students themselves must be engaged in creating peaceful campus environments.

This finding aligns with Pasli-Brombach's (2025) emphasis that young people are leaders of today not merely tomorrow. Pakistani youth need tools and spaces to shape peace on their own terms. Non-formal education approaches including youth-led initiatives peer mediation programs and community service projects can complement formal curricula. When young people develop conflict resolution skills, they transmit these skills to families and communities becoming lifelong peacebuilders.

Addressing Structural Inequalities

Galtung's concept of positive peace reminds us that sustainable peace requires addressing structural violence. Pakistan's educational disparities based on class gender and geography represent such structural violence. The out-of-school children crisis disproportionately affects marginalized groups particularly girls in rural areas (BERA 2025). Elite private schools and under-resourced government schools transmit vastly different opportunities and worldviews perpetuating social stratification (Jihad & Jinan 2026).

Peace education divorced from equity concerns remains incomplete. Pakistan must simultaneously address access quality and content. This requires increased investment in education particularly for marginalized communities. It requires challenging gender biases that exclude girls from schooling. It requires reforming curricula that perpetuate sectarian divisions. As Mahesar (2025) argues without reform education in Pakistan risks becoming a barrier not a bridge.

The Policy Imperative: From Rhetoric to Resource Allocation

The most critical implication of this analysis is the policy imperative. Pakistani policymakers at federal and provincial levels must recognize education as a peacebuilding investment not merely expenditure. The National Security Framework must explicitly integrate educational strategies (Shah et al. 2025). The Higher Education Commission provincial education departments and curriculum authorities must coordinate efforts.

Promising policy developments include the Inter Boards Coordination Commission's recent reforms allowing greater flexibility in subject selection and replacing discouraging terminology such as "below average" with "emerging" (Mahesar 2025). These changes reduce student anxiety and create more supportive learning environments. However systematic integration of peace education across all levels from primary through higher education requires sustained political will and adequate resources.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that peace begins with knowledge in Pakistan as elsewhere. Education possesses transformative power that can be directed toward building sustainable peace across the nation's diverse and conflict-affected regions. The evidence reviewed confirms

that well-designed peace education programs produce measurable outcomes. They build social capital across conflict divides. They increase youth motivation for community service. They reduce violence in schools when properly implemented.

However, the research also reveals significant challenges. Pakistan's fragmented education system perpetuates social divisions through what scholars' term educational apartheid. Curriculum gaps particularly in non-religious subjects undermine systematic peace education. Teachers lack adequate preparation and support. Rural and conflict-affected regions remain understudied and underserved. The out-of-school children crisis excludes millions from any educational exposure.

The path forward requires several interconnected actions. First Pakistan must move beyond coercive assimilation strategies toward integrative models accommodating the nation's plurality of identities. Second curriculum reform must systematically integrate peace education across all subjects from primary through higher education. Third teacher training must equip educators with peacebuilding knowledge and ongoing support. Fourth youth must be empowered as active peacebuilders with tools and spaces to lead community initiatives. Fifth structural inequalities in educational access and quality must be addressed as matters of positive peace. Sixth adequate resources must be allocated reflecting education's fundamental role in national security and social cohesion.

The Swat experience offers hope demonstrating that crisis can catalyze positive transformation when accompanied by commitment and resources. The encounter-based programs studied by Cromwell (2024) show that Pakistani youth possess remarkable capacity for bridge-building and community service when provided appropriate opportunities. The challenge lies in scaling these promising initiatives into systemic transformation.

As Federal Minister Ahsan Iqbal emphasized education is fundamental to establishing peace in Pakistan (Global Campaign for Peace Education 2025). This principle must guide policy and practice across all provinces and levels. Peace begins with knowledge. The knowledge Pakistan chooses to transmit through its educational systems will determine the peace it is able to build for future generations.

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