**[Education as politics](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642104/education-as-politics)**

[Umair Javed](https://www.dawn.com/authors/498/umair-javed)Published August 23, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

[Facebook Count](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1642104&display=popup&ref=plugin)

[Twitter Share](https://twitter.com/share?text=Education%20as%20politics&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1642104&counturl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1642104)

[6](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642104/education-as-politics#comments)

The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.

PUBLIC schooling and government regulation of the education sector more broadly are both developmental and political phenomena. Developmental because they aim to equip future citizens with knowledge and skills that may allow them to contribute towards their personal and societal growth. A well-educated citizenry can therefore achieve its own material and intellectual aspirations and help raise the material and intellectual well-being of society as a whole.

Seen in this light, it should be in the interest of every conscientious government to expand access to education and improve the quality of education available. There are debates on how best to do this in contemporary Pakistan — some argue that supporting education entrepreneurship through the low cost fee-paying private sector can fill the gaps that the government does not have resources for. Others argue that providing education is now a constitutional right so any fiscal and competence constraints should be overcome to expand public schooling. Some will argue for a hybrid model where different types of systems may work in tandem to achieve the basic goal of access and quality.

While the future of any country’s children is a high-stakes matter and should be treated as such, such developmental questions around education are fairly standard. There are differences in approach and methods but at least some semblance of agreement on what the end goal should be.

This consensus becomes a little more complicated once public schooling and government regulation of the school education sector is analysed as a political phenomenon. And there are several reasons why it should be done so.

Increasingly it seems, more opportunities in higher education and the workforce are reserved for those on the ‘right’ side of the class divide.

Firstly, and most relevantly in Pakistan’s current context, schooling forms a direct relationship with citizenship through the curriculum. What kind of citizens are emerging from the schooling system? What is being taught and to whom? What kind of messaging is being introduced at impressionable ages? What will the legacy of this messaging be in the long run? These are questions that are not and should not be tangential to discussions about education in any country.

A review of the history of primary school expansion in the 19th and early 20th century across the West reveals that in many places, political considerations were a central part of why school access was deemed an important goal. As states increased political participation through extension of electoral franchise, the schooling system was identified as a key avenue through which to generate compliant and supportive citizens. Depending on the ideological proclivities of the state (or of different ruling parties), schools would impart different types of curricula. Current debates and hand-wringing on ‘Critical Race Theory’ in American schools is part of the same phenomenon. Conservatives don’t want racial realities to be taught in schools, while progressives are pushing for greater societal reckoning with racial inequities.

A second reason why school education is political is because its actual form and associated regulation has powerful distributional consequences. By distributional we mean how do different socioeconomic segments in society access education, what they stand to gain from it, and what are the long-term effects of any differences that may exist across different strata.

Take the example of a seemingly benign decision in Pakistan, such as the opening up of for-profit private schools and the allowance for a foreign credential system. Over the space of three decades, we’ve ended up with a large high-cost private school industry (with the power to shape government decisions) and the credential-based segregation of children on the basis of their class background through the O/A level system. Increasingly it seems, more opportunities in higher education and the workforce are reserved for those on the ‘right’ side of this class divide.

More worryingly, with the children of all decision-makers safely ensconced in high-cost private schools with the guarantee of a foreign credential, there is no incentive for anyone to fix anything that may be wrong in schools that lie outside this space. This is a glaring example of politics at work through the education system.

Citizenship ideals and distributional consequences should also form the basis through which ongoing government interventions in Pakistan’s education space are analysed, especially the Single National Curriculum (SNC).

At its formal launch, the prime minister stated that the SNC was a step in removing class divides in the educational sector by setting similar guidelines for textbooks across different types of schools. Well and good in theory, but given the bureaucratic machinery around textbook approvals and the differing quality of textbooks being published, what kind of standardisation will actually emerge in practice? And if the entire edifice of class divide through high-cost fee-paying schools with a different credential system remains in place, does this intervention actually serve its stated purpose? As some parents are already suggesting, those with political clout can get away with strong-arming regulators into approving their preferred books while others remain stuck with lower quality content.

Secondly, the use of religious injunctions to impart ethical, civic-oriented lessons — another key pillar of the SNC — is not a particularly controversial idea on its own. But has any consideration been given as to what the long-term impact of this might be, in a multi-ethnic, multi-sect polity, where gender-based subjugation is also frequently rationalised under the garb of religion? If citizenship ideals inculcated in the early years are repeatedly intertwined with particular religious outlooks, what kind of citizens are we left with in the long run?

The diffused and long-term impact of such interventions is precisely why they need to be interrogated not just from a developmental angle but also as issues of immense political importance. This responsibility rests with policymakers tasked with shaping the education space but also with opposition politicians and civil society organisations, who need to induce more debate and greater transparency in the entire process.

*The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.*

**Twitter:** [**@umairjav**](https://twitter.com/umairjav)

*Published in Dawn, August 23rd, 2021*