**[On educational justice](https://www.dawn.com/news/1691878/on-educational-justice)**

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WHILE often hailed as an equalising force, a great leveller, a silver bullet, or a harbinger of social progress, our education system continues to perpetuate the very socioeconomic disparities it claims to end; a system that often emboldens those in power to dissociate from, and thrive on the subservience of, those less educated. In a country where social class dictates educational success and intergenerational prosperity, children enrolled in public schools and low-fee private institutions (which together serve the majority) face the greatest disadvantage. Tellingly, according to recent measures of learning poverty, 75 per cent of children in Pakistan are unable to even read by the time they reach the age of 10.

Educational justice hinges precariously on policy choices. Well-intentioned policymakers are often admittedly mired in the complex and conflicting web of stakeholder interests, political pressures, and resource constraints when making decisions. But quite often, they fail to account for ground-level realities and needs of low-income communities — communities with restricted access to resources or power to mount pressure for change.

It is, foremost, crucial to redress the disadvantage that past policies (or the lack thereof) have inflicted on those facing socioeconomic hardship through efforts centred on the redistribution of wealth and power and improved provision of basic services (housing, health, sanitation, etc). The poverty and adversity that many are born into often bring with them neurobiological stressors that can impede learning, and associated factors such as malnutrition, low parental literacy and social capital, as well as a lack of learning resources at home, hold these children back even before they enter school. Unless systemically addressed, they can continue to keep the children at a disadvantage.

Particularly for education, targeted support through a combination of context-driven, (ideally) evidence-based short- and long-term interventions is needed. Children in low-income communities ineluctably need better access to early childhood developmental support and experiential, empowering and engaging learning opportunities; they need caring educators trained in child-centred pedagogy, acquainted with learning science, and equipped with teaching resources and access to field-based coaching. They need well-resourced spaces with books, play material and technology, and an environment that prioritises their physical and mental well-being. The imposition of policies draped in one-size-fits-all garb, while giving an illusion of fairness, is often antithetical to the needs of children in diverse, marginalised communities and particularly inimical to their learning.

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Consider policies that mandate a uniform medium of instruction across all schools. Theoretical understanding of how children learn, as well as a plethora of evidence grounded in global practice, insists on teaching in a language the child knows well. A strong foundation of concepts across key disciplines in the early years is critical to later schooling. Policies that compel young children to learn in a language they are not yet proficient in (or exposed to outside school) delay literacy acquisition, hamper meaningful learning, force rote memorisation, and increase chances of failure. And in a country where the mother tongues of the majority are not officially recognised in sociopolitical structures, they do not only demoralise but also evade common sense.

When, as part of a socio-linguistic survey, we asked a matriarch in rural Thar what language her children should learn in at school, she promptly replied “Sindhi, because that is the language they understand”. To outright dismiss and devalue the rich oral language repertoire the child’s brain has laboriously spent half a decade developing in order to think and make sense of the world as soon as they enter the confines of the school is egregiously unfair. Tethering educational progress to assessments in alien languages is being complicit in ensuring the non-elite majority struggle to stay afloat in the waters the elite child sails through. While proficiency in national/global languages is essential, we must build exposure to these gradually, using the child’s first language as an anchor, and ensuring access to multilingual resources as well as trained educators; all the while endeavouring to make room for local languages in our postcolonial systems and structures.

Lastly, it is vital that policymakers seek to ensure coherence between research, policy and practice. Impact (and implementation) of past and present educational policies must be gauged by spending time inside, and gaining insights from, school classrooms; engaging with school stakeholders (particularly students, parents and teachers); and considering data and evidence. Future policy responses must stem from structures put in place to incorporate community-based needs, perspectives and lived experiences to ensure contextual relevance, and aided by global advances in education research and practice.

For those outside policy circles — instead of blithe acquiescence to ivory tower decisions made behind multilayered bureaucracies, caustic cynicism or disillusioned detachment, there is a need to view educational justice as a collective social responsibility. It is incumbent on the privileged to rise above hyper-individualistic notions of self-interest and self-advancement; to share rather than confine advantage; and for all to vociferously question public policies that disregard the fundamental principles of social justice and equity: does the official medium of instruction policy privilege only those who grow up speaking the mandated language? Do virtual learning opportunities exclude those in rural areas without reliable internet access? Does the school-leaving exam affordable to the non-elite value needlessly excessive memorisation of content over genuine understanding and restrict future opportunities? Does the curriculum consider their needs, interests, contexts and futures? And does this education help connect them to the purpose of their divinely ordained existence — enabling them to think, reflect, question, challenge injustice, drive social change, and build a better future?

Until we bring care and consideration into our policy decisions, the education system will not only continue to solely benefit the privileged minority at the expense of the forsaken majority, but also actively obliterate prospects of the latter. To fully realise the consequential and transformative promise of education to better life circumstances, more needs to be done to ensure no child is deprived of their inviolable right to learn, by virtue of who they are, where they are from and in what circumstances they are born.

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