



Challenges and Opportunities in Providing Inclusive Education for Refugee Children in Pakistan

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Abstract: This paper aims at exploring the dynamics of inclusive education for refugee children in Pakistan and the issues and prospects of inclusive education. Based on the literature review and fieldwork, this paper outlines the complex challenges that hinder refugee children's access to education in Pakistan. This paper focuses on the importance of inclusive education in the creation of social integration, economic growth, and protection of human rights. We look at the practices and ideas that have worked within and outside the country to tackle these problems. The considerations include policy recommendations, ways of engaging the communities, and pedagogical adjustments for the development of the inclusive classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to enhance the understanding of refugee education and to offer specific recommendations for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders involved in the process of refugee education in Pakistan and other comparable countries.

Keywords: Refugee education, Inclusive learning, Policy reform, Social integration, Educational access, Cultural sensitivity

1. Introduction

Pakistan has long been a major host country for refugees, with a history spanning several decades. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan has received millions of Afghan refugees, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting nations globally (Ali et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2022; Khan, 2017). There is no significant change in the refugee number since the exchange and conflicts continue in other neighboring countries like Afghanistan. The demography report of 2023 identifies that Pakistan has got approximately 1.4 million Afghan refugees have either registered with the UNHCR, and probably between 1-2 million unregistered Afghans residing in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2022; Khan, 2017).

And if refugee children do not attain proper education, then it is impossible to develop a proper society and economy for the asylum-seeking youths and all the nations hosting these refugees. Education is one of the most efficient means for integration and enables refugees' children to acquire all the knowledge they require in order to become active members of the society and to fit into the economic, social as well as the cultural life of the United States of America. Moreover, inclusive education helps in promoting social inclusion by ensuring that the refugees and the host community understand and accept each other, hence minimizing on cases of conflicts and discriminations (Burde et al., 2015).

Education is one of the fundamental human right that any child is entitled to as highlighted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and The 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2019). This way, by offering

the education for all the children irrespective of the disability, Pakistan can follow the international obligations to stimulate the process within the frame of commitments and achieve manning of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 stating that education must be equitable, inclusive and of good quality for children with disability (United Nations, 2015).

The aim of this paper is to comprehensively discuss the challenges and possibilities of the inclusive education in Pakistan related to refugees' children. Highlighting the current situation of refugee education, the main challenges and opportunities for their resolution are considered to make further contribution to the discussion of problematic issues of refugee education and to offer some recommendations for the improvement of general state of refugee education for the policymakers, educators, and humanitarian organizations. The objectives of this paper are to: The specific goals of this paper are to:

- a) Assess the current state of refugee education in Pakistan, including relevant policies and statistical data.
- b) Identify and analyze the primary challenges hindering inclusive education for refugee children.
- c) Explore opportunities and potential solutions to overcome these challenges.
- d) Provide evidence-based recommendations for stakeholders to improve inclusive education practices.

2. Current State of Refugee Education in Pakistan

Access to education for refugee children in Pakistan is determined by set policies at national and international levels and the practical difficulties that prevail at the time of the research. The Government of Pakistan has certain measures in place for providing education to refugee children, mainly through the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative started in 2009 by the UNHCR in Pakistan. The purpose of this endeavor is to assist both refugees and the communities they are relocated to by enhancing the availability of, for example, schooling, medical care, and other necessities.

In 2018, Pakistan formulated the Comprehensive Policy on Voluntary Repatriation and Management of Afghan Nationals, which also allows education to refugees registered with UNHCR. Despite that, the policy's execution has not been standardized across the provinces, which causes inequality in education and education quality.

However, even today, there are several barriers to attaining education, though there have been several attempts to enhance access to education. Currently, as per the UNHCR (2023), 80 % of an estimated 500,000 refugee children and youth living in Pakistan as refugees are not enrolled in schools. This percentage is much higher than the out-of-school percentage of children in Pakistan, which currently hovers around 39 % (PIE, 2022). The situation is, however, worse among girls, whereby far less refugee girls attend school as opposed to the refugee boys. The enrollment rates also differ from one region to another and from one type of settlement to the other. In general, the children's refugees in urban areas have easier access to education than those in rural areas or even refugee camps.

Several undertakings and schemes have been formulated to meet the educational requirements of refugee children in Pakistan. Currently, UNHCR, with the assistance of the government of Pakistan and other non-governmental organizations, has opened and is supporting many schools in refugee-settled areas as well as other cities. These schools adopt the Pakistan curriculum and seek to offer quality and inclusive education to both the refugee and host community children (UNHCR, 2021). In addition, the "Educate A Child" program, a global initiative in partnership with UNHCR, has helped enroll out-of-school refugee children in schools in Pakistan.

Moreover, the latest strategies, such as accelerated learning programs and non-formal education, have also been adopted in order to meet the needs of out-of-school children, especially refugee children who have lost years of schooling. For instance, the Norwegian Refugee Council's accelerated education program has provided evidence to indicate that it can assist overage refugee children in attaining the standardized education level of their peers and fitting them into the standard education system.

However, the research also reveals that there are still challenges that hinder the education of all refugee children in Pakistan. The remaining parts of this paper will give a more detailed analysis of the problems encountered and will also attempt to examine whether there are any possibilities of improving the state of inclusive education for this disadvantaged group.

3. Challenges in Providing Inclusive Education

This section aims to identify and discuss the challenges that hinder the provision of inclusive education access for refugee children in Pakistan through the legal, socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructural framework. These barriers are intertwined and, therefore, amplify each other, making it hard to pinpoint specific solutions to the challenges.

Impeding and enhancing factors for children's education in Pakistan, and specifically for refugees, can be categorized by the following: Legal and policy issues. Though the Pakistani government is a signatory to the international conventions that recognize refugees' rights, including their right to education, the country still has not ratified the agreements in its laws. The lack of clear national legislation on refugees leaves all sorts of uncertainty as to their legal position and their rights and freedom, including the freedom of education.

There is still a problem of compliance with the policies already enacted in the country since the policy implementation varies from one province and local jurisdiction to another. For example, though refugee education was one of the focus areas of the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) program, the implementation of education projects differs across the regions (UNHCR, 2021). The current distribution of refugee children's education thus has unequal chances depending on the district they are located in within the country.

Additionally, there are various obstructions from the bureaucratic structures that deny the refugee children education. Official documents, such as registration or certain identity cards, prove difficult for most refugee families to access, a situation that denies the children an opportunity to enroll in schools.

Impediments to the integration of refugee children in school hinder inclusive education for such kids due to socioeconomic influence. The refugees in Pakistan are among the most impoverished populations; most families lack basic necessities. This economic strain culminates in child labor in most cases since the family relies on the earnings of the children. Among the refugee children in Pakistan, a large number of population is engaged in some form of labor, which has disrupted their schooling mechanism, with most of them not attending school regularly or at all International Labor Organization (International Labor Organization, 2021)

The cost of being able to attend school or enroll the children in school is high for most of the refugee families. However, when it comes to schooling, though they may be free, other incidental expenses like fees for uniforms, books, and transport can be very expensive (Zetter & Ruadel, 2018). This financial implication puts pressure on families to focus on one's financial necessities rather than the educational advantages that may accrue in the future.

The school infrastructure and learning materials to cater to the education needs of both the host and refugee students are a challenge in most host communities, which are usually stretched by inadequate resources to meet the demand. In these areas, overcrowded classes, lack of teaching aids, and poor teaching facilities are some of the challenges that are usually observed. Such pressure puts a great deal of stress on the host communities, which may fuel group strife and interfere with the implementation of the education for all agenda.

Another barrier that influences learning for refugee children is cultural and communication differences that hinder the provision of social inclusion for young learners. Most refugee children, especially Afghan children, speak a different language, such as Pashto or Dari, and in school, the language mostly used is either Urdu or English (Muazzam et al., 2021). It will greatly affect learning processes as well as integration into the education systems (Maringe et al., 2017).

However, due to the different cultural values and norms about education, there will be misunderstandings and conflicts. For instance, certain cultural practices within some refugee communities may prohibit girl child education, negating UNESCO's agenda of promoting equality in educational enrolment based on gender (UNESCO, 2022).

Many refugee children experience discrimination and prejudice in school. This is a very big setback to their learning abilities and general health. Misconceptions and prejudice about refugees, which can be stoked by politicians, result in prejudice in peers' behavior, including the use of force, exclusion, and unequal treatment in school.

This discrimination could be directly in the form of aggressiveness or indirectly and this could include rejection of the other party. For instance, refugee learners might feel socially lonely within the learning environment or might not attend several school activities. This can make students appear to be outcasts, increase their tendency to have low self-esteem and neglect their education, hence, dropping out.

Refugee children are also subjected to significant challenges due to the physical setting and resources of Education in Pakistan. Namely, many schools, particularly those located in the regions that welcome numerous refugees, cannot feed even additional children. Larger classes, lack of proper sanitation facilities, and structures, and poor and substandard learning facilities are some of the difficulties (UNICEF, 2023).

Also, the aspect of education has not the opportunity to coordinate for the special needs of the refugee children, who, by their definition, are stressed or whose schooling has been affected by their situation. Special education, counselors and remediation services are rare or insufficient to cater for the refugee students need.

Another challenge that has been observed concerning the facilitation of education of refugee children is that teachers have not been trained in how to handle them. Many educators in the Pakistani context are themselves are not prepared to handle children with learning difficulties, issues of culture, or students, who have vulnerability issues in their backgrounds (UNICEF, 2021). This is an effect of the lack of teachers who can fluently speak the languages that the refugee students speak. This may lead to the failure of communication, and since communication is key to learning, it slows down the process (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Furthermore, there are limited resources and large class sizes in the classroom, may discourage the teacher from handling students with learning disability.

Besides, some teachers may be prejudiced or not culturally competent, in this way, they can contribute to discriminating or excluding other people in class. The absence of thorough and proper training can contribute to teachers feeling uneasy when it comes to addressing social processes of refugees and local learners' interactions (Mendenhall et al., 2018; Muhammad, 2015; Muhammad & Bokhari, 2024).

Solving these problems can only involve approaches aimed at policy changes, resource distribution, cultural competence, and specific preparation of teachers. The subsequent sections will also explain possible prospects and strategies that could help to eliminate these challenges and advance the effective integration of refugee children into education in Pakistan.

4. Opportunities and Potential Solutions

Although refugee children in Pakistan face numerous difficulties in having access to education, there are some opportunities and possible solutions that may enhance the existing situation. With regard to the main problem of this paper, policy reforms, new sources of funding, community mobilization, culturally appropriate strategies, use of technology, and partnerships are the ways through which Pakistan can make significant improvements and provide education for refugee children.

That is why one of the main steps in the enhancement of the situation with the education of children refugees is the primary introduction of complex policy changes and amendments to the legal basis. It is crucial for the refugees to have their rights enshrined in law, and the Pakistani country needs to improve on the formulation of a national refugee law that articulates the rights of refugees, among them is the right to education (UNHCR, 2022). It is such legislation that would serve as a basis for guaranteeing equal schooling in all the provinces and localities.

Also, a reduction of paperwork in school registration could also help many families of refugees since it would be a major hindrance. Measures that could enhance enrollment include adopting relaxed admission procedures that can accommodate the refugee children's situation, for instance, enrolling them on a conditional basis until they can produce the essential paperwork (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

To solve the financial challenges that affect inclusive education, there is the need to come up with new ways of funding. To enhance funding on refugee education one could consider increasing Public Private Partnerships. For instance, the Global Partnership for Education's multiplier fund which seeks to attract additional resources from other sources could be fully harnessed in Pakistan.

Other policy interventions for improving refugees' standing include conditional cash transfer whereby families with children in school are rewarded and can be applied to refugees in Pakistan (Bastagli et al., 2019). Possibly, such programs could make education losses to be offset for the impoverished families' opportunity costs.

Thus, the strategies that can contribute to enhanced social inclusion and increased support for integration include directing educational campaigns at the refugees yet also at the host population. Other programs that can be implemented in Pakistan include the community-based educations which imply the involvement of parents and other leaders in the community in making decisions relating to education of their children in the refugee camps (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008).

Awareness campaigns targeted at the key refugees and the host community enhance the reduction of discrimination and the promotion of every child to education. Such objectives could target the advantages of having educated refugee children who are economically and socially replenished to formally integrate with the local schools that help reduce host community resistance (Burde et al., 2015, 2016).

The practice can, nevertheless, increase the relevance of schooling through such strategies as: a) raising the cultural sensibility of the contents and attempting to align with the life experience of both the refugees and the local learners. That is, the strategy of supporting the refugee children's cultural background and gaining information about Pakistani culture should fit close to the improvement of learning environment and culture (Banks & Banks, 2020). Bilingual education systems that promote the use of the refugees' mother tongue and the language of learning can enhance academic achievements and inclusion. Mother tongue based multilingual education has

proved to be effective in different places and can be recommended for the refugee education in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2021). The use of technology can be an effective way of surmounting some of the infrastructural and resource challenges that hinder education among the refugee population. Technology such as e-learning and educational applications can offer additional sources of learning and create individualized learning opportunities even in the context of limited resources (Tauson & Stannard, 2011). Online education, which became topical during the COVID-19 outbreak, can also be used to enroll the targeted beneficiaries since refugee children do not attend physical classes regularly due to their mobility and other constraints. It needs to be noted, though, that the digital divide should be dealt with; this pertains to students' access to the relevant devices and internet connection (Unwin et al., 2020). By refocusing on the partnership between government and non-governmental organizations, the international organizations might provide more fund, information, and better ideas for a better future of refugees' education in Pakistan. International NGOs like UNHCR, UNICEF and many other NGOs are experienced in issues related to refugee education, and thus extend supportive help in matters concerning program formulation and implementation (Mendenhall et al., 2018).

5. Case Studies and Best Practices

Therefore, the studying of the findings and the best practices for improving the education of the refugee children including the framework of Pakistan and other countries, can yield ideas and the best practices for promoting the rights of refugee children to get the quality education.

The Citizens Foundation (TCF) Schools: The tested model of the inclusive education system is currently in operation in Pakistan by TCF, a non-profit organization that is running schools for underprivileged students. Their strategy is based on bringing community support, equality in the students, and high-quality teaching. Underprivileged student in TCF schools have registered impressive performances concerning enrollment, student dropout rates, and performance (The Citizens Foundation, 2023). Their tested model can be extended for refugee education in Pakistan.

Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) Initiative: Challenges to the RAHA initiative have been expressed, but it has also proved successful in some fields, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Thanks to upgraded school facilities and teachers' professional development, the project has promoted the right to education for refugee and host population children (UNHCR, 2021).

Lebanon's Reach All Children with Education (RACE) Strategy: Refugees from Syria are many in Lebanon, and the country implemented the RACE strategy in order to ensure that every child gets an education. It also includes other types of education modalities, which are formal and non-formal education, fast-track education, and psychosocial education. This has, in turn, increased the enrollment rates of refugee children in schools.

Uganda's Integrated Refugee Response Plan: Uganda employs positive measures, some of which include the approach towards the education of refugees. It has adopted the education of refugees, and therefore, refugee children are allowed to go to school and follow the Uganda education system. As a result of this integration, social cohesiveness has been promoted, and the education achievement of refugee children has been promoted (UNHCR, 2020).

The integration of community and the combination of different learning pathways, as well as the proper training of teachers are aspects that are vital for proper refugee education. Thus, the approach that involves the integration of refugee education into the national system is more effective and inclusive. Other factors which are also crucial include Holistic support for non-academic needs and Data Driven decision making. These lessons show that a broad and flexible model of education for refugees should be developed, which includes different actors and covers various spheres of refugees' lives. Drawing from these findings, and the challenges and opportunities discussed, specific recommendations for the stakeholders involved in delivering education to refugee children in Pakistan can be made, these include policy makers, schools, teachers, NGOs and host communities.

6. Recommendations for Stakeholders

Based on the current study's findings, the following recommendations are made for stakeholders to enhance the provision of inclusive education for refugee children in Pakistan: Some of the policy recommendations directed to the government and other policymakers include the need to establish a national refugee law, increased funding for the education system, simplification of the documentation procedures, and ensuring that the right to education of refugees is protected in the national policies. Because of this, educational institutions should consider the following measures for inclusion: Data gathering, service delivery for the target groups, and interaction with the refugee

communities. Thus, teachers should continue their education, watch how other teachers use different teaching strategies, make sure that they provide support to their colleagues and cooperate with the support services.

NGOs and international aid organizations should guarantee that the planned measures are pertinent to the country's requirements, should focus on capacity building, innovation promotion, and coordination enhancement. The host communities and civil society may engage in awareness-raising activities, offer their services in the schools, fight for inclusive policies, and support cultural interactions.

There is a need for further research in such fields as the impact of legal status on learning, the part played by technology in learning, mother tongue based multilingual education, the mental health status of learners, and factors that influence boys' enrollment and performance in school. The future research prospects should include following up on refugees' academic advancement; assessing various forms of inclusive schooling; examining the returns on investment in educating refugees; investigating the process of social inclusion; and monitoring the development of teaching profession and its stability.

7. Conclusion

Challenges to inclusive education for refugee children in Pakistan are the following: Legal and policy barriers, socioeconomic obstacles, cultural and linguistic factors, and infrastructure constraints. However, these are against the backdrop of equally great opportunities that can result from policy change, funding models, engaging the community, culturally appropriate ways to approach treatment and technology.

Tackling the problem of refugee children's education entails constant focus and partnership by all the involved parties. Government agencies, educational institutions/related NGOs, and the local communities need to come up with integrated and sustainable solutions. Because of this, the problem cannot be solved by simply focusing on the mere access to education but its quality, relevance, and sustainability.

Thus, this paper urges all stakeholders to rededicate themselves to the provision of education for refugee children in Pakistan. The right policies must be enforced, and the required resources must be provided by the policymakers. Team members and education professionals should incorporate and implement different forms of diversity and should also focus on the idea of improvement. Local NGOs and international organizations need to coordinate their activities with the national agenda and requirements. The host communities and the civil society formation have a significant responsibility to create a supportive atmosphere.

Given the opportunities realized with cooperation, Pakistan should be able to achieve a lot in the inclusion of quality education for children, refugees, and those affected. Doing so not only affirms the right to education but also creates a more stable and prosperous future for refugees and host communities alike by supporting social and economic development.

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