

Exploring the Lived Educational and Social Experiences of Children from Religious Minority Backgrounds in Pakistan

Evidence from the DARE Research Consortium

Policy Brief

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ABOUT

This policy brief was produced by the DARE Research Consortium. It summarises the findings from a full report (forthcoming) detailing research conducted as part of the DARE-RC portfolio, and was authored by the researchers of that report. This brief forms a part of a series to provide actionable evidence to policymakers in Pakistan to improve education.

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Methodology

- **Qualitative:** focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and picture-prompt storytelling with children aged 14–16, plus separate FGDs with teachers and school administrators.
- **Scope:** fieldwork across all four provinces with Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Kalasha, Parsi, Buddhist and anonymised minority communities; thematic analysis with qualitative software.

Key Figures

4

provinces covered to reflect regional and socio-economic diversity

14–16

age range of child participants

7+

minority communities represented in the research

Findings

1

Education is valued as a path to upward mobility

Minority children show strong personal motivation, shaped by family expectations and awareness that opportunities without education are limited.

2

Barriers accumulate over time

Invisibility of their religion in the curriculum, discomfort with compulsory religious subjects, unequal financial support, and unaddressed bullying shape engagement.

3

Cross-religious friendships offer protection

In larger cities especially, interfaith friendships and shared activities act as informal safety nets where institutional responses are weak.

4

Teacher silence allows exclusion to continue

In smaller towns and poorer areas, teacher silence – often from fear of backlash – lets identity-based teasing and social distancing continue unchecked.

5

Aspirations are ambitious but shadowed by uncertainty

Many students fear their religious identity may limit access to higher education and public sector jobs, regardless of merit.

6

Gender and class strongly shape opportunity

Girls face mobility restrictions and pressure towards early marriage; students facing poverty narrow their goals to what feels achievable.

Policy Implications

- **Curriculum and textbook frameworks need deliberate inclusion of religious and cultural diversity so minority identities are visible in what is taught.**
- **Accountability frameworks and school inspection systems should incorporate inclusion and student wellbeing indicators.**
- **Diversity-responsive teacher education and mandatory inclusion training are needed to address teacher inaction in the face of bullying.**
- **National and provincial data systems should incorporate voluntary, safeguarded religious identity indicators to enable targeted policy responses.**

Recommendations

SHORT-MEDIUM TERM

Curriculum & Textbook Reform

- Revise curricula and textbooks for visible, accurate minority representation.
- Operationalise minority curricula and introduce shared ethics education.

MEDIUM TERM

Teacher Education & Standards

- Embed diversity-responsive training in pre- and in-service education.
- Equip teachers to address bias and respond to bullying.

SHORT TERM

Leadership, Support & Data

- Integrate inclusion and wellbeing indicators into school inspections.
- Adopt need-based scholarship and stipend frameworks.
- Develop safeguarded religion-disaggregated education data systems.

Key Messages

The lived experiences of children from religious minority backgrounds in Pakistan are a test of how inclusive Pakistan's education system is. This brief brings these experiences into policy discussion and reflects on what it will take to get there.

Minority children value education as a pathway to upward mobility and strive for it. Supportive teachers and friends strengthen their confidence, but some barriers hold them back: their religions are largely invisible in the curriculum and they experience discomfort with compulsory religious subjects, unequal access to financial support, and unaddressed discrimination or bullying.

Social interactions are shaped by school culture, economic context, and classroom environment. Cross-religious friendships and institutional support can provide protection and a sense of normalcy, particularly in larger cities. But teacher silence and absence of institutional support aggravates their exclusion, especially in smaller towns and poverty-stricken areas.

Minority children's career aspirations are ambitious but many remain uncertain whether their religion will limit access to education and public sector jobs, regardless of merit. Gender and class strongly shape aspirations: girls face mobility restrictions and pressure towards early marriage, while students facing poverty limit their goals to what feels achievable.

Addressing the gaps requires visible representation of minority religions and cultures in curricula and textbooks, mandating diversity-responsive training to help teachers address biases and respond to bullying, and stronger accountability (like school inspections and monitoring systems). Inclusion can also be improved through career guidance and equitable financial support for access to scholarships and stipends.



Introduction

This policy brief draws on a DARE-RC-supported research study that examines the lived educational and social experiences of children from religious minority backgrounds in Pakistan. While national policy frameworks recognise inclusion and equal rights, there is limited grounded evidence on how minority children actually experience schooling in their daily lives. This study was designed to bring those lived realities into policy discussion by listening directly to children, alongside teachers and school leaders, across multiple regions of the country.

Religious minorities have long contributed to Pakistan's social and educational landscape, yet their own educational experiences remain under-documented. Available data are fragmented, and many forms of exclusion operate in subtle, everyday ways that are rarely captured in official statistics. The research, therefore, focused on school practices, teacher attitudes, peer relations, family support, and children's own aspirations to understand where inclusion is working and where barriers persist. Special care was taken to include voices from diverse minority communities across four provinces, including groups whose identities required anonymisation for safety reasons.

The study is policy-relevant by design. Its purpose is not only to document challenges but to generate practical, evidence-based recommendations for education authorities, teacher education institutions, and school leadership. The findings offer concrete entry points for strengthening inclusive, equitable, and safe schooling for minority learners.

Study Methodology

This policy brief draws on a qualitative study designed to understand how children from religious minority backgrounds experience schooling in Pakistan. The research focused on personal accounts of the schools, communities and children to develop insights about their lived experiences of education.

Data were collected through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and picture-prompt storytelling activities, which enabled children to discuss sensitive issues in an age-appropriate and open way. Separate focus group discussions were also conducted with teachers and school administrators to capture institutional perspectives on inclusion, school culture, and support practices.

Fieldwork was carried out across all four provinces to reflect regional and socio-economic diversity. Participants included children aged 14–16 from multiple minority communities, including Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Kalasha, Parsi, Buddhist, and anonymised groups with representation ensured across religion, gender, and socio-economic background. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on community presence and self-identified affiliation, allowing a broad range of minority perspectives. Research tools were piloted and simplified to reduce leading questions and improve clarity across language and education levels. Data were analysed using structured thematic analysis with qualitative software.

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PROVINCES COVERED

Fieldwork across all four provinces to reflect regional diversity

“

The educational experiences of minority children cannot be treated as marginal or exceptional – they are a meaningful test of how inclusive the system truly is.

Key Findings

Academic Journeys

Across communities and regions, minority children place a high value on education and often see it as their practical route to upward mobility. Many students described strong personal motivation and persistence, shaped by family expectations and an awareness that opportunities without education are limited. Teachers also frequently observed that minority students demonstrate seriousness and sustained effort in their studies.

However, these academic journeys are not experienced on equal terms. As students progress through school, they encounter multiple barriers that shape their engagement and participation over time. These include the invisibility of their religions in the curriculum, discomfort in studying compulsory religious subjects, unequal access to financial support schemes, and classroom environments where discriminatory remarks or peer bullying are not always addressed. Such experiences accumulate over time, influencing not only their academic confidence but also how they navigate schooling and position themselves within the learning environment. Despite these challenges, school spaces are not perceived as wholly negative. Many children reported supportive teachers, interfaith friendships, and shared school activities that strengthened their confidence and engagement at different stages of their schooling.

Overall, the academic journeys of minority children reflect a pattern of strong aspirations, repeated experiences of exclusion, and ongoing resilience. Where schools adopt fair practices and leadership is responsive to the needs of minority students, their academic confidence and participation improve noticeably. These findings indicate that institutional responses can significantly shape how minority children experience and progress through schooling.

Social Interactions

Social interactions within schools emerged as a decisive factor in shaping minority children's daily experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Many students described meaningful cross-religious friendships that provided emotional support, protection from bullying, and a sense of normalcy. In several schools – especially in larger cities and more economically stable settings – children reported studying, playing, and participating in activities together across religious lines. These peer relationships often acted as informal safety nets when institutional responses were weak.

However, such positive interactions were uneven and fragile, as they could quickly shift when religious identities became visible or when social pressures reinforced group boundaries. In the absence of consistent institutional support, these relationships were not always strong enough to withstand moments of tension or exclusion. In other contexts, particularly in smaller towns and economically marginalised areas, students described social distancing, identity-based teasing, and peer avoidance once their religion became known. Some reported that teacher silence, often driven by fear of backlash, allowed exclusionary behaviour to continue. Overall, the findings show that social interactions are shaped by school culture, economic context, and classroom environment. Where schools actively promote shared activities and intervene early in peer conflict, interfaith trust grows; where they remain passive, social exclusion becomes normalised.

Life Aspirations of Minority Children

Minority children expressed high, often ambitious career aspirations, including becoming doctors, teachers, engineers, public servants, and community leaders, and consistently linked education to respect, security, and the ability to support their families. At the same time, many students were uncertain about their futures. A recurring concern was that their religious identification may limit access to higher education, public sector

employment, and merit-based selection, regardless of performance. As a result, aspirations were frequently described alongside anticipated barriers. Migration abroad was often mentioned as a strategy for safety and fair opportunity rather than rejection of national belonging.

Gender and class strongly shape these aspirations. Boys generally spoke with greater confidence about future careers, while many girls, especially from more marginalised communities, reported mobility restrictions, safety fears, and family pressure towards early marriage, which narrowed their educational and professional horizons. Children from relatively stable economic backgrounds imagined wider career paths, while those facing poverty adjusted their goals towards what felt achievable. The findings show that aspirations among minority children are not weak; they are constrained by perceived structural limits, and that targeted scholarships, career guidance, and safe access to continued education could significantly expand their opportunity pathways.

Policy Implications

The findings show that minority children's educational experiences are shaped by systemic patterns rather than isolated incidents. For instance, the limited representation of minority religions in curriculum and school practices contributes to feelings of invisibility and exclusion. This indicates that curriculum and textbook frameworks need deliberate inclusion of religious and cultural diversity so that minority identities are visible in what is taught, celebrated, and assessed.

Similarly, findings on classroom experiences highlight that exclusion is often reinforced not only through direct discrimination but also through teacher inaction. Students reported that teachers frequently remain silent in the face of bullying or discriminatory remarks, often due to lack of training or fear of repercussions. This points to the need for diversity-responsive teacher education, mandatory inclusion training, and structured practicum exposure to diverse classroom contexts. School-level findings further show that inclusive environments are strongly dependent on leadership and institutional culture.

Importantly, the findings on life aspirations reveal that minority children's ambitions are shaped not only by personal motivation but also by perceived structural barriers, particularly in access to higher education and public sector employment. These patterns indicate the need for targeted policy interventions such as equitable scholarship schemes, career guidance, mentoring support, and safe pathways for continued education, especially for girls and marginalised groups.

Finally, the absence of disaggregated education data by religion limits effective policy planning and monitoring. National and provincial data systems should incorporate voluntary and safeguarded religious identity indicators to track participation, attainment, and transition gaps.

“**Curriculum and textbook frameworks need deliberate inclusion of religious and cultural diversity so that minority identities are visible in what is taught, celebrated, and assessed.**”

Recommendations

1. Curriculum and Textbook Reform (Short–Medium Term)

Revise national and provincial curricula and textbooks to ensure visible and accurate representation of minority religions, histories, and cultural traditions. Operationalise previously developed minority curricula and introduce ethics education as a shared subject.

Lead: National Curriculum Council, Provincial Curriculum Authorities · **Supporting:** Textbook Boards, NACTE · **Delivery:** Curriculum revision notifications, textbook approval guidelines, teacher guides

2. Teacher Education and Professional Standards (Medium Term)

Embed diversity-responsive and multi-religious education in pre-service and in-service teacher training. Ensure teachers are equipped to address bias, manage diversity, and respond to bullying.

Lead: National Accreditation Council for Teacher Education · **Supporting:** Teacher Training Institutes, HEC · **Delivery:** CPD module revision, accreditation standards update, practicum guidelines

3. School Leadership and Accountability (Short Term)

Strengthen accountability for inclusive school environments by integrating inclusion and student wellbeing indicators into monitoring systems.

Lead: Provincial Education Departments · **Supporting:** District Education Authorities, School Inspection Units · **Delivery:** Inspection checklist revision, school evaluation frameworks

4. Equitable Financial and Structural Support (Short Term)

Adopt need-based student support frameworks ensuring minority students have equal access to scholarships, stipends, and participation resources.

Lead: Provincial Education Departments · **Supporting:** Social Protection Departments, Scholarship Boards · **Delivery:** Scholarship eligibility reforms, funding allocation guidelines

5. Multi-Stakeholder Policy Coordination (Medium Term)

Strengthen coordination among education ministries, curriculum bodies, and teacher education institutions to align minority inclusion efforts.

Lead: Federal Ministry of Education · **Supporting:** Provincial Governments, Parliamentary Committees · **Delivery:** Inter-agency coordination frameworks, policy directives

6. Civil Society and Media Engagement (Ongoing)

Promote minority inclusion through awareness campaigns, interfaith engagement, and mentoring initiatives.

Lead: Civil Society Organisations · **Supporting:** Media, NGOs, Donor Agencies · **Delivery:** Public campaigns, pilot programmes, community initiatives

7. Religion-Disaggregated Education Data (System Priority)

Develop voluntary and safeguarded systems to collect religion-disaggregated education data.

Lead: Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training · **Supporting:** Provincial EMIS Units · **Delivery:** EMIS system updates, data collection protocols

Conclusion

The evidence from this study makes one point unmistakably clear: the educational experiences of minority children in Pakistan cannot be treated as marginal or exceptional, they are a meaningful test of how inclusive the system truly is. The findings show that exclusion is not uniform and is shaped strongly by the intersection of religion, class, gender, and geography. Many minority students experience ordinary school life on the surface, yet carry a quiet awareness of invisibility, unequal recognition, and conditional belonging. At the same time, their commitment to education, their resilience, and their continued identification with the nation are striking and consistent.

For policy and system leaders, this creates both an obligation and an opportunity. Inclusion cannot remain a statement of principle; it must become visible in curriculum, teacher preparation, school leadership practice, student support systems, and data frameworks. Because local contexts differ, reform will need phased and context-sensitive implementation, but delay will deepen inequity. Engaging seriously with these findings offers a practical pathway towards safer, fairer, and more representative schooling. Strengthening minority inclusion is not a special provision, it is central to building a credible and future-ready education system.

For More Information

Report Title: Exploring the Lived Educational and Social Experiences of Children from Religious Minority Backgrounds in Pakistan

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