

# Improving Drivers of Learning for Marginalised Children

Insights from the DARE-RC Community of Practice

**Insight  
Note**

**DARE-RC Theme**  
Improving Drivers of Learning  
for Marginalised Children

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## ABOUT

This report was produced by the DARE Research Consortium as part of a series exploring learnings across each of the four themes of the research portfolio: Improving Drivers of Learning for Marginalised Children, Strengthening the quality of frontline education provision, Building resilient education service delivery, & Strengthening accountability, scalability and use of evidence

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### DARE Research Consortium

DARE-RC is Pakistan's largest education research programme, generating rigorous, actionable evidence to improve education policy and practice. DARE's 44 research studies and scoping papers offer critical insights on inclusion, teaching and learning, governance, data, accountability, and system resilience.

# Introduction

The Data and Research for Education Research Consortium (DARE-RC) has been structured around a research agenda consisting of four overarching priority areas:

- 1 Improving drivers of learning for marginalised children
- 2 Strengthening quality of frontline education provision
- 3 Building resilient education service delivery
- 4 Strengthening accountability, scalability and use of evidence

These priorities are underpinned by two cross-cutting themes: effective data use and scalable solutions.

This insight brief is based on learnings from work under the first priority area, improving drivers of learning for marginalised children. DARE-RC funded eight studies in this area, using a diverse range of methodologies to generate high-quality, policy relevant evidence to support inclusive learning for marginalised children in Pakistan. Researchers working on these studies came together as a Community of Practice to share reflections, perspectives and learning, with opportunities for exchange anchored around three workshops, intended to deepen thinking and understanding around (a) what constitutes marginalisation and inclusion, (b) how research can most usefully engage with these topics, and (c) how future research in the area can build on DARE-RC's legacy and further advance learning for marginalised children in Pakistan.

## DARE-RC studies on improving drivers of learning for marginalised children

Studies under DARE-RC have highlighted the presence and needs of children who are marginalised for a range of reasons — sometimes intersecting to deepen vulnerability and risk of exclusion. Within the CoP, studies explored marginalisation relating to religion, disability, gender, socio-economic status and geography (see Table 1). Other DARE-RC funded studies have also contributed to understanding marginalisation, particularly in relation to the role of climate change in shaping new forms of marginalisation and exacerbating those which already exist.

**Table 1** DARE-RC studies on improving drivers of learning for marginalised children

| Title                                                                                                                            | Core question                                                                                                                                                                                              | Methods                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Exploring Lived Educational and Social Experiences of Children from Religious Minority Backgrounds in Pakistan                   | What educational and wider social factors facilitate or hinder academic journeys, sense of belonging, social interaction and life aspirations of children from religious minority backgrounds in Pakistan? | Semi-structured interviews, FGDs and arts-based methods             |
| Classroom, family and community-related experiences of children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Pakistan              | What are the experiences of children with disabilities attending mainstream government schools in Pakistan?                                                                                                | FGDs, interviews, photo elicitation                                 |
| Breaking the Silence: Improving Educational Access and Technology for Deaf Learners in Pakistan                                  | How can access to gender-sensitive sign language technology support learning for Deaf learners in Pakistan?                                                                                                | Surveys, interviews, impact evaluation                              |
| Increasing Middle School Enrolment for Girls: Testing the Targeted Solutions in Locations with Unrestricted Middle-School Access | Can community-based interventions support improvements in transition from primary to middle school education for girls in Pakistan?                                                                        | Secondary analysis of administrative data, survey, interviews, FGDs |

| Title                                                                                                                                                        | Core question                                                                                                                                   | Methods                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Using Behavioural Insights into Parental Engagement for Improved Learning Outcomes                                                                           | Can parental behaviour change communication support parental engagement in learning for children marginalised by poverty, gender or geography?  | RCT evaluation; interviews                                                        |
| Researching the efficacy of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the Education Sector in Pakistan                                                           | What is the role of PPP schools in addressing educational improvements for learners marginalised by gender, socio-economic status and religion? | Survey, classroom observation, costing, secondary analysis, interviews            |
| Scaling Impact: Large-Scale Human Capital Interventions for Low-Income Children in Punjab                                                                    | What is the impact of an early childhood education intervention at scale?                                                                       | Quasi experimental evaluation; FGDs                                               |
| Disability inclusive data and systems: Analysis of the integration of the Washington Group Questions on Disability into the Annual School Census in Pakistan | How does implementation of disability data collection influence data quality, and how can this be enhanced?                                     | Secondary analysis of administrative data, documentary analysis, interviews, FGDs |

Under the DARE-RC research agenda, drivers of learning are conceptualised as educational access, educational quality, continuity of education, and the coherence of educational experiences.

## Understanding marginalisation and inclusion

In a context as large, diverse and complex as Pakistan, marginalisation relates to many facets of identity and context, which often intersect in complex ways. By extension, inclusion needs to be understood broadly, and as something to be embedded into Pakistan's education system iteratively, in ways which evolve over time. During the DARE-RC International Education Summit, participants gathered to discuss considerations for embedding inclusion into the education system. Participants drew on their own professional experiences, as well as insights from the Summit itself, in sharing reflections. Although many reflections focused on disability inclusion, they hold broader relevance. Key insights emerging from the discussion, as well as the broader DARE-RC work in this area, are shared below:

### Addressing explicit or intentional exclusion is important, but not sufficient

Some forms of exclusion may be explicit and intentional, such as overt discrimination often triggered by prejudice or stigma. However, many forms of exclusion can be unintended, for example those perpetuated through implicitly biased systems and policies, or continuation of historical resource allocations which benefit certain groups at the cost of others. Similarly, teaching practices may be better suited to the learning needs of certain groups of children than others, and may unintentionally exclude children with additional needs, girls, or those from particular linguistic or religious backgrounds. Unintended exclusion can be challenging to identify, particularly when it is part of a widely accepted status quo, or affects groups who are not reliably listened to or heard. Recognising more hidden forms of exclusion in the education system requires concerted effort and attention. However, identifying and working to address these forms of exclusion is critical to creating meaningful and sustainable inclusion in the educational system.

### Meaningful inclusion goes beyond enrolment and attendance

Participants emphasised that designing for inclusion needs to consider not just enrolment and physical accessibility, but also equitable participation in all educational activities, and equitable opportunities for meaningful learning. Inclusion cannot be considered successful if children feel uncomfortable, are unable to communicate effectively, or are vulnerable to bullying, abuse or violence. In the case of children with disabilities, inclusion in mainstream schools may require that they have access to specialised services, adapted materials and assistive devices. Children from marginalised groups may also require socio-emotional support, and families may require linkages to social support or health services. Children who are

struggling in learning, or have gaps in foundational skills, will also require support to catch up with peers. Children also need to feel that they belong in classrooms, which is supported by focusing on equity, and engaging active participation. Without adequate support and a sense of belonging, children are much less likely to remain in education and progress in their learning, increasing chances that they or their families will decide to withdraw from education. Inclusion cannot be scaled unless children experience positive learning environments, parents perceive tangible benefits, and teachers receive adequate support.

## **Inclusion as a design principle**

While exclusion is often unintended, it is typically not accidental. This is because it is often the result of structures, processes or decisions within the educational system, or individual educational settings, which do not adequately consider inclusion. The outcome of exclusion can therefore be anticipated, unless inclusion is integrated as a key cornerstone of education system processes, decision making, and design. Consequently, inclusion will not happen automatically. Instead, existing processes, policies and infrastructure needs to be interrogated from an inclusion perspective, and adjusted to ensure that the needs of diverse groups of marginalised children are routinely being considered.

## **Inclusion at scale requires good data**

Designing for inclusion, as well as resourcing and delivering inclusion, requires awareness and understanding of barriers and the factors that support inclusion for different children. Additionally, they require accurate, timely information about the number and location of children at risk of exclusion for different reasons, as well as the types of support these children need. Reliable data on existing inclusive infrastructure and resources within the educational system are also critical. Currently, significant gaps in the availability of high-quality disaggregated data is a major challenge for the educational system. Participants noted recent improvements in gender-disaggregated data, but persistent challenges with data on disability and religion. In order to ensure accurate and reliable data on marginalised learners at scale, concerns around stigma, vulnerability and privacy must be addressed. While collecting and using data on marginalised groups can offer clear and strong benefits, children and families must be protected from any risk of harm due to the clearer identification of their status as marginalised.

## **Good data supports advocacy and monitoring of progress**

When data does not accurately reflect the presence of marginalised learners in the educational system, they are often largely invisible. This limits insight into their needs, and complicates planning and resourcing for inclusion. Additionally, this invisibility negatively impacts efforts to advocate for investment in inclusion, or adjustments to policy and practice. High quality education data on marginalised children has the potential to be part of a virtuous circle, with clearer data supporting stronger delivery of inclusive education, in turn encouraging greater enrolment of marginalised children and building the commitment of teachers and schools to generating high quality data on these groups. Individual learner-level data can be particularly valuable in ensuring that children's support needs are known and met. It also supports monitoring of learning outcomes for marginalised groups. However, if individual data is not appropriately managed, it can also increase the risk of harm for vulnerable children.

While education system data typically includes only children attending mainstream government schools, data covering special schools, private schools and out of school children is also crucial. Participants shared experiences from disability inclusion reform initiatives, in which they encountered resistance to investing in inclusion due to perceptions about very small numbers of children with disabilities. Ensuring the visibility of marginalised children — both within and beyond the education system — is essential for working towards a system that can include many more of these children in more meaningful ways.

## **Teachers are key agents of inclusion, but require support**

Teachers were repeatedly identified as central agents of change in advancing inclusion, and participants noted that while many teachers are willing to support diverse learners, they often lack practical strategies, particularly in large and poorly resourced classrooms. Inclusive teaching often requires a shift in mindset and practice, with the adoption of a flexible, responsive problem-solving approach to teaching that is centred around the identification and removal of individual children's barriers to learning. This requires teachers to have a clear understanding of individual learner's backgrounds, difficulties, support needs and learning styles.

However, teachers often feel ill-equipped to support learners with disabilities or additional needs, particularly when they lack training in assistive devices, communication methods such as sign language, or curriculum adaptations. Teachers may also feel less comfortable or confident teaching other marginalised children. Appropriate training and mentoring can support teachers in understanding children's barriers to learning, and draw on a range of tools to support their engagement. Additionally, teachers themselves are often overburdened, and vulnerable to burnout. This limits their capacity to respond to children's needs and adapt their practices. Support to teachers therefore needs to encompass care for well-being and mental and emotional health. When appropriately supported, teachers can improve inclusion through practical strategies such as seating arrangements, building peer support, and varying instructional methods in response to need. Universal Design for Learning offers teachers a framework for designing inclusion into their teaching, by emphasising the importance of providing learners with multiple means of engagement, multiple representations of content, and multiple means of expressing their knowledge and understanding.

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## **Methodologies for research on improving drivers of learning for marginalised learners**

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The DARE-RC research agenda identified a particular need for two types of research: qualitative research capturing the lived experiences of marginalised children and their families in education, and mixed-method implementation research to provide a more comprehensive and actionable evidence base than previously available. Studies funded by DARE-RC in this thematic area included two such qualitative studies, and six mixed-methods studies. Researchers from all 8 studies convened for a discussion about the importance of methodology in studying marginalised groups, and shared learnings from the implementation of their studies. Key insights generated by this discussion are presented below:

### **Diversity and heterogeneity must be considered in study design**

Participants emphasised the diversity and heterogeneity found within marginalised groups of children, which is further amplified when considering multiple forms of marginalisation and intersectionality. Methodological choices strongly shape whose experiences are made visible, and DARE-RC studies had responded to this heterogeneity through careful study design, identifying key axes of variability and considering the need for multiple sites or samples, and using a wide variety of methods and data collection tools. Qualitative studies, and mixed methods studies with qualitative components, drew on purposive sampling to ensure diversity among study participants. Carefully designed qualitative work offers particular value in its ability to illustrate the diversity and variability within marginalised groups. Without adequate consideration of diversity in study design, studies risk missing important variations in experiences or outcomes, resulting in misleading and potentially harmful conclusions. For studies intended to support representation and voice, misrepresentation can be particularly damaging.

## **Flexible and reflexive implementation is critical when working with marginalised groups**

When studies focus on marginalised groups, there is a particular need to consider the challenges that participating in research might pose, and to work carefully and reflexively in identifying these, recording their implications, and whenever possible, adapting processes to overcome them. While some challenges can be predicted and addressed during study design, others may only become clear during implementation, requiring alertness and flexibility. Adjustments may need to be made to sampling and recruitment processes, to study tools, or to the ways in which participants are able to engage. For example, participants shared their experiences with adapting data collection processes to support participation of children with disabilities, and adapting tools and methods to support participation of parents from low-literacy households. Protecting methodological rigour at the expense of inclusion is a false economy when conducting research with marginalised groups. However, documenting and sharing methodological adaptations and adjustments is crucial for both methodological transparency and rigour, and for building the evidence base around inclusive research methods.

## **Research ethics and safeguarding must be prioritised**

In research with marginalised groups, the importance of research ethics and safeguarding is amplified by the power differentials between participants and researchers. Conducting ethical research required researchers to consider how diverse participants might experience different aspects of participation in the research process, and consider how to ensure their autonomy and well-being was meaningfully protected. Participant identification and recruitment requires researchers to consider privacy, and potential risks of stigmatisation or labelling if the study makes explicit aspects of identity that might otherwise be hidden. Power differentials need to be considered in informed consent, as do methods of sharing relevant information and clear and transparent ways that empower informed decision making. In data collection, trauma-informed approaches are crucial, and extensive preparation is required to ensure that safeguarding concerns can be reliably and rapidly identified and addressed. Even beyond data collection, ethics and safeguarding remain important considerations. In analysis, researchers must be vigilant about biases, and in dissemination, approaches to presenting and sharing must be respectful, protect participants from harm, and provide an accurate and clear narrative.

## **Purely quantitative approaches have severe limitations in the context of marginalisation**

Participants emphasised the considerable value of qualitative methods in understanding marginalisation, whether as a stand-alone method to document experiences, as a tool to understand contextual, social or environmental factors missing from quantitative data, or to explore reasons for statistically identified relationships or patterns. These approaches are particularly important in complex contexts, where causal pathways are unlikely to be straightforward. In a context of many competing demands, and severely constrained resources, it is crucial that policy-relevant findings are contextually grounded, and can be treated with confidence.

## **Policy engagement is crucial throughout the research lifecycle**

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that policy considerations are part of the study design process, and engaged with throughout the study — rather than being reserved purely for dissemination. Studies funded through DARE-RC involved engagement with policy stakeholders at multiple points, and in some cases policy makers were actively involved in study design, implementation or analysis. In a context of frequent political changes, maintaining relationships is crucial, but an element of uncertainty about uptake of findings is unavoidable. While engagement with government stakeholders is

essential, collaborations with community or private institutions can also contribute to the relevance of evidence generation, and to its uptake. In some instances, work with these types of organisations can create space for innovation and refinement of ideas, which can subsequently filter into government practice.

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## Priority areas for future research

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The final conversation under this Community of Practice was around identifying priority areas for future research. This discussion was framed by an acknowledgement of the increasingly challenging funding landscape for education research, and the importance of ensuring both that research proposals address important evidence gaps, and that funded research delivers genuine value and impact. Participants identified priority areas for future research in relation to their own work and specific areas of interest, and these are provided as an appendix to this brief. However, discussion also yielded a series of cross-cutting insights, which are listed below:

### **Learning from new and existing evidence must be consolidated**

Participants felt that through DARE-RC, considerable new evidence had been generated in the area of improving learning for marginalised children. Other new research has also been conducted during this period. Therefore, there will be considerable value in work to review and synthesise new contributions to the evidence base. In turn, this can be used to highlight existing priority gaps where evidence remains thin, and new questions that have been surfaced. Synthesis work needs to be conducted with the objective of producing outputs that are accessible to and useful for stakeholders at provincial and federal levels, rather than as purely academic exercises.

### **Intersectionality requires deeper research engagement**

The studies funded through DARE-RC typically focussed on particular groups of marginalised children. While several considered intersectionality, this was not at the core of the body of evidence generated. A deeper understanding is needed of how intersectionality operates in Pakistan, and how disadvantage or exclusion may act in layered and cumulative factors. Exploring variability within groups, and in learning outcomes over the longer term, may serve as useful starting points for further focussed research in this area. Further work in this area will be crucial for ensuring that policy approaches can address the full complexity of exclusion.

### **Learning environments remain under-explored**

Participants agreed that learning environments, broadly defined to include the educational and socio-emotional contexts of schools and classrooms, need to be better understood. This type of research can help to understand the reasons behind patterns of educational disadvantage, and the reasons that certain interventions and policies do not operate as intended. Particularly for marginalised children, including girls and children with disabilities, physical and psychological safety in school (and on the way to school) remains a significant concern which is not well understood. Children need to feel safe in order to learn effectively, but current exposure to harassment, corporal punishment and physical, psychological and sexual abuse in education often remains hidden. Additionally, teacher attitudes, expectations, and classroom interactions, particularly in relation to marginalised children, require closer examination — along with mechanisms for teacher capacity development and support. The role of school leadership in creating effective and inclusive learning environments will also benefit from further examination.

## **| Pathways for evidence uptake can be strengthened**

DARE-RC has invested considerably in supporting stronger and deeper engagements between researchers and policy-makers. Documenting learnings from these processes will support researchers in ensuring they consider uptake throughout their work, and help all parties recognise the value in continued communication and collaboration. Additionally, dedicated research into influencing policy and supporting evidence uptake from a perspective of inclusion will contribute over the longer term to strengthening the integration of both evidence and inclusion into policy-making.

## Appendix A: Suggestions for future research

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### Disability and Inclusive Education

- Innovative care models: developing new care approaches that are more effective and accessible for individuals with disabilities
- Exploring the effects of inclusive early childhood education programmes on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children with and without disabilities in Pakistani preschools
- Case studies of effective inclusive education for children with disabilities in early primary education (Grades 1–3)
- Identification of out-of-school children with disabilities and integration into education
- Improving reliability of data on disability prevalence, through national level research
- How head teachers' decision-making practices affect the admission and enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream schools
- What works to improve enrolment, retention, and learning for girls with disabilities? Girls with disabilities face multiple, overlapping barriers, from safety concerns to social norms. We need focused research on what actually helps them not just enrol, but stay in school and transition to higher levels of education.
- Research on learning outcomes and educational engagement for deaf children, in both inclusive education and special school settings
- Research on experiences in and outcomes of education in special schools for learners with a range of different disabilities
- How can teacher professional development systems integrate inclusive education at scale?
- Using currently available evidence and data, developing models of inclusive education suitable for use in low-income contexts
- Testing education system models for delivering inclusive education through mainstream schools
- Exploring the ways special education institutions work with mainstream education departments to improve education for children with disabilities
- Identifying core requirements to ensure a minimum level of inclusion throughout the public schooling sector

### Pedagogical Practices and Teacher Development

- Need to study teacher attitude and classroom practices in more depth. Additionally, research should explore the role of curriculum and textbooks in shaping identity and belonging.
- What low-cost inclusive teaching practices improve foundational learning outcomes?
- Pedagogical adaptation, particularly how teachers integrate innovative/sign language technology into mainstream classroom practices

- More and diverse educational content (ed-tech) in sign language technology that can work within resource-constrained public school systems
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## **Intersectionality and Multiple Marginalisations**

- Models of educational provision and disparities/inequalities within educational systems and provisions
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- Macro systems shaping and interacting with marginalisations
- 
- What evidence can establish efficacy of an intersectionality lens in framing relevant and inclusive education policy?
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- Understanding and defining different dimensions of marginalisation and how these intersect, as well as commonalities and variations across groups
- 
- Research should adopt an intersectional approach looking at how religion, class, geography and gender interact
- 
- How does caste play a role in school continuity and how can this be tackled?
- 
- How do gender, disability, and poverty intersect to limit learning, and what works to address this?
- 

## **Gender and Girls' Education**

- Scalability analysis for implementing behavioural science solutions for girls' middle school enrolment
- 
- How can behavioural science interventions help inform gender norms?
- 
- Safe learning environments, especially for girls
- 
- More research needed on school climate and belonging, from a gender lens
- 

## **Religious and Minority Inclusion**

- Strategies to support the education sector in acknowledging the strong presence of religious diversity in communities and encourage celebration of this diversity in the teaching and learning process and curriculum/textbooks
- 
- Longitudinal tracking of minority children's educational journey, especially transitions from middle school to higher education
- 
- Successful practice of parochial schools from minority religions
- 

## **Provincial and Geographic Contexts**

- One suggested framework, given that provincial priorities differ (all focus on girls): Punjab — public-private partnerships; Sindh — minority religious inclusivity; Balochistan — solutions for sparsity; KP — learning outcomes; Federal — disability
- 
- The Balochistan question: how do we tackle learning poverty in sparsely populated areas?
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- What education approaches work in climate-affected and fragile contexts?
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## **Public-Private Systems and Governance**

- Evaluating the effectiveness of privatisation of public schools across enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes
- 
- Testing solutions for gaps in administrative oversight
- 
- Resourcing needs for public schools — how to ensure they receive enough to be credible and attractive
- 
- Increasing public school enrolment: implications for overcoming marginalisation
- 

## **Out-of-School Children and Alternative Learning**

- Alternative and accelerated learning platforms for out-of-school children — how do they contribute to inclusion (implementation, training, model design, etc.)?
- 

## **Research Synthesis and Future Directions**

- Synthesis of what has been done and learnt
- 
- Identifying broader implications of work — beyond narrow educational domains
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