

Cultural Imperialism Through Education in Pakistan and the Loss of National Identity

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Abstract: One of the key roles of schooling in contemporary societies is socialization-the transmission of cultural values of the home community, habits of conduct and formation of national identity. With this in mind, this paper aims to examine whether and to what extent the process of public schooling in Pakistan exposes the nation's children to values and ways of life that foster patriotism, national and local identities or teaching them values and culture that are alien to them and their families? The data for the study comes from the core curriculum (Urdu, English and Social Studies textbooks from class 1 to 8) of public schools. The study is informed by poststructural thoughts in sociology of education. I employ critical discourse analysis as methodological tool and examine both texts and images with the belief that the images are of the same importance in the creation and formation of beliefs and identities. The research found that school textbooks in Pakistan are effectively promoting cultural values and identities that are alien (and not national) and which serve the interest of global hegemonic players. The paper concludes with a stress for textbooks that teach national identity, while creating an understanding and respect for cultural diversity and values of others.

Key words: National identity • Post structuralism • Critical discourse • Hegemonic players

INTRODUCTION

One of the key functions of public schooling is to develop and promote shared cultural values, national identity and loyalty to local community. Bettelheim Bruno [1] argues that there is no doubt in the cultural importance of children's books [school textbooks] as a powerful means through which children learn their cultural heritage and [identities]. National/cultural identities are neither straightforward nor easily defined concepts. These are among those concepts which are frequently used but beggar definition. For the purpose of this paper I use identity in the same fashion as it was used by Keith Cameron. Drawing on Cameron [2], identity here means awareness of oneself with a defined national and cultural context: 'the relationship we establish between ourselves and the larger society, the way we identify with objects, institution, behavior patterns, common traditions and history'. I am aware that the concern voiced through this

paper may be trivial thing to some who might object and think of this approach as narrow-minded, conservative and closed to change in the era in which the mantra of globalization is chanted by media and politicians (see pro and anti-globalization theorists [3,4,5,6,7]. Nevertheless, fostering national identity, transmission and preservation of cultural values are still considered as a key function of public education around the world, see Feinberg [8]. Traditions, culture and faith all reflect upon the education system while at the same time get affected by it. National Education Policy (NEP) 2009, which came in the light of a series of education policies dating back to the very inception of the country in 1947, clearly writes that cultural values of the majority of Pakistanis are derived from Islam. Education system reflects and strengthens social, cultural and moral values. Pakistan's educational interventions have to be based on the core values of faith [and cultural values] [9]. The contradiction between this explicit Government's commitment and the distorted

messages present in textbooks stresses to investigate what social, political and ideological forces guide school knowledge. As argued and debated by many [10, 11] Government, since the inception of Pakistan, is not only in an illusion regarding education, but also very indifferent towards public education. However, under the recent commitment to international challenges, like Millennium Development and Dakar Education for All (EFA) goals, public education has become more like a baby of the international donor agencies (i.e. UNESCO, GTZ) than the state. The concern voiced here does not mean that these international commitments to EFA and MDGs are bad or we should make education policy like it was in 1970s. Rather voice to be raised in this paper is that throwing education into the hands of vested interest groups within and outside society serves as fertile sites for the establishment of western cultural hegemony and destroying local cultural and national identities through implicit efforts. Also see John Tomlinson's work *Cultural Imperialism: a critical introduction* [12]. It is acknowledged that the concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by multiple forces: individual characteristics, family and social class dynamics, historical factors, economic and political contexts [13]. But education plays a key role in constructing and preserving collective national and cultural identity. Tomlinson argues that *national identity is the product of deliberate cultural construction and is maintained through regulatory and socializing institutions of the state [particularly] the education system and the media.* Keeping this in view, the paper is theoretically and methodologically informed by social constructionism.

Theoretical Framework: Social constructionism provides persuasive theoretical and methodological underpinning to the study. The paper draws on Michel Foucault's concept of *discourse or power/knowledge*; Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony* and Raymond Williams and Michael. W. Apple's work of *selective traditions*. The term *discourse can be used in different ways depending on the field and purpose of the researcher.* I use discourse here in pure Foucauldian sense: knowledge as power. For Foucault it is through discourse (through knowledge) that we are created and controlled [14]. Every age has a dominant discourse(s) that people adapt as 'reality'. Discourse joins power and knowledge and its power follows from our acceptance of the 'reality' with which the world is presented. One such discourse is

to be 'modern' and civilized along the lines (those) defined and fixed by the West. In this sense textbooks knowledge is powerful discourse aimed to construct the new generation in line with the powerful group(s). These discourses are created and presented as common sense 'reality' and 'objective' knowledge. It was this concern of problematizing the monolithic reality and objectivity of knowledge that the paper takes into account the work of Raymond Williams and Michael. W. Apple. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, Williams [15] called school's knowledge as *selective tradition*: "someone's selection, someone's vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, one that in the process of enfranchising one group's cultural capital disenfranchise another's"-William cited in Apple [16]. Drawing on the notion of *selective tradition*, Michael Apple argued that selection and organization of knowledge for schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of dominant group. Apple further argues that what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggle among identifiable groups [17]. School textbooks are used to construct commonsense reality, whose arbitrariness and inadequacy are disguised as far as possible [under the discourses of objectivity, truth and normative]. The struggle is to have this discursively constructed 'reality' accepted as truth by those whose interest may not necessarily be served by it [18]. These theoretical and conceptual tools give me room to argue how education is used to create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups (the Western powers) having to resort to overt mechanism of domination. Thus the 'reality' selected in textbooks is neither objective nor the only true knowledge, but a particular social construction of 'reality' which serves the interest of the West.

The Study: The data for this article comes from public school textbooks prepared by Textbooks Board Khyber Pakhtunkhwa following the guidelines of the National Curriculum, Federal Ministry of Education Islamabad. Drawing on Pingel [19] who argues that in textbook analysis, specifying the quantity is more essential than a precisely defined sample, a total of 16 textbooks (*Urdu and English*) from class 1 to 8 were purposefully selected for the study. The study stressed in-depth investigation and used purposive sampling.

The selection of these textbooks was made on the following basis: first, these textbooks encompass a collection of material regarding social life education, i.e. religion, citizenship, health, family and environmental education as well as communication skills and career motivations. Second, in addition to basic literacy skills, these introduce children to cultural heritage, social norms and values, attitudes and so forth. Third, textbooks in these areas highlight the personalities who are considered to be religious, national and other heroes of society. The basic questions this paper aimed to answer were:

- Weather textbooks in KPK promote and foster national and cultural identities or expose the new generation to values and ways of life that are alien to them and their families?
- What social, political and ideological forces devise curriculum and textbooks?

These questions are critically important for a number of reasons. As discussed in the theoretical framework and argued here that what constitutes curriculum and hidden curriculum in the past and now is not random, but is *selective traditions* [20]. In the light of theoretical framework and Williams' argument of "selective tradition", the study used qualitative interpretative content analysis, deconstruction and critical discourse analysis as methods of examining how cultural politics is played out through public school textbooks in Pakistan. The findings are summarized into the following sub headings:

- Traditional dress pattern is at risk
- Labeling local culture as deviant and inherently uncivilized
- Separation of state and religion and the dissemination of distorted religious knowledge
- Family portrayal in textbooks: idealizing western type of nuclear family

As children (students) develop their self-concept during adolescence, they also develop a sense of cultural identity [21]. It is important to highlight that an awareness of their cultural identity provides the foundation for how children (students) define themselves in terms of how others see and understand them. Thus, it is important that school knowledge (textbooks) should aim to equip

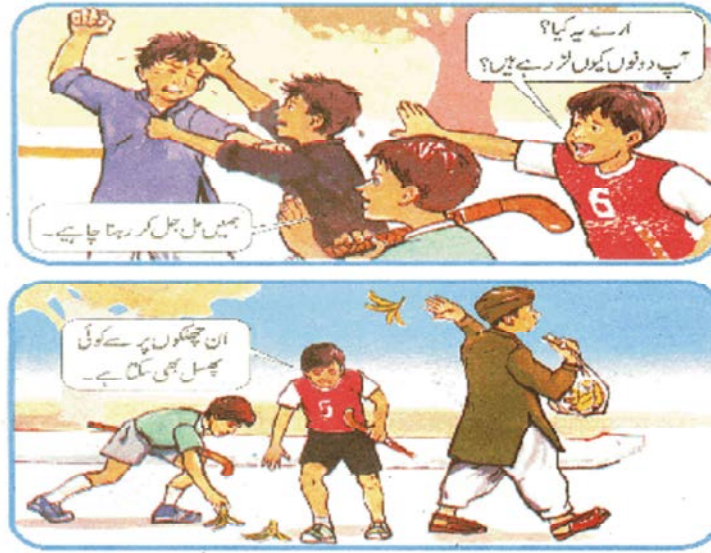
children with national and cultural identities. Identity can be described from many perspectives. However, here the focus is an answer to questions such as *who I am and where do I belong to?* What should I be proud of as an individual and as a part of the larger collectivity? The national and cultural identities of students are constructed from their experiences with religion; ethnicity/nationality, social class, gender and geographical region. Also also see Cushner, McClelland and Safford [22].

Data Presentation

Dress-Clothing as a Powerful Container of National and Community Identity: Dressing/clothing, weather for special occasions or on an everyday basis has merited serious consideration in the debate of national identity. National dress "bears the weight of representation of an entire nation...nationhood" [23]. Similarly, Hooper-Greenhill argues that dress-clothing historically carries highly specific visual forms of religious, ethnic, national and community identity [24]. Keeping this in view, the issue of national/regional dress as cultural identity was analyzed, focusing on how many characters are depicted in national/regional dress and how many in foreign/western dress. The first point that needs to be noted is that there is high prevalence of western dress than the national/regional dress. Out of the total 545 pictures, in 356 pictures boys/men/girls/women were observed in western dresses. Problematizing the above statistics, it is evident that school textbooks are central to power structures. These are sites of power distribution and principles of social control which create and recreate identities.

Labeling Local Culture as Deviant and Inherently Uncivilized: A critical examination of the public school textbooks reflects that people dressed up in regional and national clothes are labeled as inherently uncivilized and culturally deficit. People in the national (Pakistani cultural) dress have been discursively consolidated by textbooks as problem, i.e. as diluters of peace and lacking manners and sense of hygiene. A stream of messages and pictures portray people in *shalwar qameez* as fighting, throwing garbage on the ways (i.e. *Every Day English for Class VI*, 75; *Urdu Book for Class I*, p 36). Following picture from *Urdu New Book for Class III*, p 28, is one of the examples that explain the concern voiced here.

رانا اور عدنان ہانکی کھیلنے جا رہے ہیں۔ راستے میں انہوں نے دیکھا کہ دو لڑکے لڑ رہے ہیں۔



بتائیں رانا اور عدنان نے کیا ایسا اچھے کام کیے؟

Fig. 1: Labelling local culture as inferior and inherently uncivilized

Translation: Rana and Adnan were going to play hockey. On their way to the ground they saw two boys fighting with each other. Oh [they exclaimed] what is this? Why are you people fighting? We have to live in harmony and peace with each other. [picking the banana skin, Adnan and Rana conversed] Someone can slip on these Banana skins. Tell what good thing Rana and Adnan did?

At the level of surface meaning, the picture conveys a very important message 'not to fight' or 'fighting is bad'. However, a second look with sociological lens makes the hidden politics visible: the children who are fighting wear cultural dress-shalwar kameez¹ whereas those involved in mediation are depicted in tee-shirts and shorts, popularly considered 'western and civilized dress. The implicit message being communicated here is that the former has been taken as uncivilized and less evolved whereas the later as marker of elevated culture and civilization. This gives a plain message that people in developing nations with their cultural identities and practices are inherently deficient and inferior to the cultural identities of the western societies. The aim of the picture, then, seems not to teach children to be peaceful and respectful to others. It is, rather, an attempt to teach them to take a new identity of the group depicted as civilized and peaceful. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, I argue such messages serve to legitimize some groups and delegitimize others by giving elevated position to the

material (dress) and symbolic (behavioral) codes of western society and devalue Pakistani national and regional identities. Such depiction reinforces the cultural biased dispositions (habitus), i.e. reinforcing the stereotype that people in the developing countries are more susceptible to exhibit violent behaviour. In a nut shell, these messages are aimed to teach Pakistani children to erase the boundaries of local and national identities. Erasing local and national identities means erasing the community and nation. From this point of view, the issue is substantive and should not be minimized and ignored as narrow mindedness. These representations involve the question of respect for cultural diversity, traditional communities and also about the commitment of public schools to their obligation of fostering national identity in society members. It is evident that textbooks, when examined within Foucauldian conceptualization of power/knowledge relations, leads me to argue that school knowledge is inextricably bound to broader social contexts of cultural and political struggle.

¹Shalwar kameez is a traditional dress worn by both women and men in Pakistan. Shalwar is a loose pajama-like trouser-the legs are wide at the top and narrow at the ankle. The kameez is a long shirt or tunic (also see the picture in figure 4.1)

Family Portrayal in Textbooks: the Conspiracy of Nuclear Family: In modern society, the discourse of nuclear family started in the early twentieth century, especially when Bronislaw Malinowski [25] argued that the nuclear family had to be universal as it fulfills a basic biological need and protects infants and young children in the best way. The debate was elaborated by Anthropologist George P. Murdock [26] asserting that the nuclear family is both universal and essential. Extending the argument, Talcott Parsons [27] argued that the nuclear family fits the needs of industrial society. Independent of the kin network, the "isolated" nuclear family is free to move as the economy demands. Further, the intimate nuclear family can specialize in serving the emotional needs of adults and children in a competitive and impersonal world. As argued earlier, since then the ideal family in the west, especially in America consists of father, mother, one or two children and a dog or cat [28, 29]. It is important to highlight that such ideal nuclear family and family discourse has been criticized in the west from different corners [30, 31]. Despite the fact that nuclear family is disappearing in the west and is no more considered as a license for happy life, nuclear family discourses are embedded into textbooks as ideal way of life and happiness. Analyzing portrayal of family in Pakistani textbooks, the study found that textbooks have idealized a family structure that does not reflect the existing Pakistani society, rather idealize western type of nuclear family. There is a stream of lessons and stories which depict 'happy family' as the one that consists of two-parents-husband and wife one or two children and a pet, dominantly dog. Some references are made here which speak volume of the aforementioned concern. (*My English Reader for Class IV: page 4, My English Reader for Class V: page 32*). The study explored that textbooks describe two forms of families: traditional (joint family) which is presented in a very stereotypical way and modern western type of nuclear family which is idealized and constructed as 'happy family', i.e. in *My English Reader for Class V, p, 2*, Ali introduces his family: *I am Ali. I am twelve years old...My father is professor...My mother is doctor...we are a happy family*. Similarly, Ali, in the same book, introduces his friend's family: *Salma is my friend. She is ten years old...Salma's father is a pilot...her mother is a bank officer...they are a happy family*. These and many more messages throughout the textbooks associate happiness with modern nuclear family. On the contrary, there are plenty of examples where girls or boys from traditional family background introduce their families but without such description that

'we are a happy family' (i.e. *Urdu Textbook for Class I, p14; Urdu New Textbook for Class II, p 4; Social Studies for Class I, p 12, 31; Textbook of English for Class I, p117, My English Reader for Class IV, p19*). There is no such phrase as "we are happy family". Such stories strengthen the idea that happiness resides in establishing nuclear family and fail to show that one can be happy irrespective of the fact what the family type is [32].

The overwhelming emphasis on pets, especially dog, as a part and parcel of the family does not reflect the true picture of Pakistani society. For example, *My English Reader for Class V, p52* narrates "*Maria has a dog. She calls it Moti. She gives it milk and meat...*" Similarly, *My English Reader for Class II, p 19* describes: *This is Mano. She [Mano] is my pet cat...She is fat. I give her milk and meat*. Also see *My English Reader for Class IV, p 21; My English Reader for Class II, p 2. Textbook of English for Class I, p11, 13, 14,131*.

This over obsessive emphasis on dog as part and parcel of the family life is not only the conspiracy of nuclear family but also not hygienic. According to Islamic injunctions, if the saliva of a dog touches anyone or any part of his/her clothing, then it is required of him/her to wash the body part touched and the item of clothing touched by the dog's mouth or snout.

The point is not what family type is good or bad or weather keeping a dog is lawful (*halal*) or unlawful (*haram*), but the institutionalized idealization of western type of nuclear family is not the reflection of the larger Pakistani society. Similarly, attaching such a great value with pets, especially dogs, their care and lavish food in a country where people don't find enough food, shelter and access to school is creating confusion and illusion among the new generation.

Separation of State and Religion and the Distortion of Religious Rituals: The study highlights how insidiously the religious discourses are embedded into texts and images. There are plenty of examples which either discourage prayers in the public domain or disseminate distorted messages about religious rituals. For example, *My English for Class III, p 12* clearly declares saying prayer in the school as wrong by crossing the sentence "*I say my prayer in school*". Similarly, describing Sana as a good girl with discourses such as: *Sana is a good girl. She gets up early in the morning. [She] cleans her teeth, washes her hands and face. She changes her dress, recites Quran and goes to school* (*Urdu Book for Class I, p 30*). At the level of surface meaning, this and many more discourses seem to convey very important messages.

However, when looked closely and critically, it enabled me to argue that the discourse of 'brushing teeth, washing hands and face' has undermined the concept of ablution² (*Wudu*). The importance of teaching social diversity including religious diversity in the 21st century cannot be denied. Nevertheless, embedding many (10) pictures of Christmas Tree in *Textbook of English for Class I* creates many questions in a society where 97 per cent population is Muslim [33]. The same book does not carry a single symbol of Islam, i.e. *Khana Kaaba*, mosque etc.

I acknowledge that collective and organized prayer(s) in the public school setting, whether in the classroom or at a school-sponsored event, i.e. football, is unconstitutional in some of the western countries. Religion is thought as a private and voluntary affair. Any effort carried out to promote religion in curriculum and extra curriculum or in the school premises is not permitted in most of the western society, i.e. America [34]. In 1948 the American Supreme Court used the "Separation of Church and State" argument to outlaw a time for school prayer. In 1962 the Supreme Court again declared that prayer in school was unconstitutional. In 1963 the Warren Court stopped schools from allowing Bible reading in classes [35]. The only type of prayer that is constitutionally permissible is private, voluntary student prayer that does not interfere with the school's educational mission. These may be the right actions in America which is multicultural society and known as melting pot but not in a homogenous country like Pakistan. Discouraging prayers in school and other religious rituals can be viewed as an attempt and indicator of the presence of external forces in Pakistani Education system. These forces work to generate a discourse of religion as a private affair and schooling as public issue or separating the state and religion and secularizing the society on the lines followed in the western world.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study suggest public education in Pakistan does not seem to foster and promote national/regional cultural identities. It does not develop a

sense of pride among new generation for their cultural heritage. The texts and illustrations persuade children to erase the boundaries of national/regional identities. It is emphasized that erasing regional and national identities means erasing the community and nation. The study suggests that curriculum reforms in Pakistan are politically motivated and ideologically invested that condition students to take up certain subject positions (western identities) and not others. Thus, the identities formed by educational movements are political and ultimately impinge upon the construction of society at large [36]. It is then clear that that what ends up as school knowledge arises from power/knowledge relations. Therefore the power of textbooks knowledge may not be undermined as "everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are" [37]. It is important to clarify that the study does not negate pluralists' view of cultural diversity and individual freedom, but there are important and justifiable reasons to take the nation seriously and not simply a shell of separated and fragmented groups. It is, therefore, argued that in addition to its main role of preparing members of society for the various positions of services and work world, the goal of education in general and public schools specifically should be to inform and encourage students to have pride in their own cultural heritage. School education should help the students build their own national identity. It should educate them about cultural diversities and teach them how to respect other cultures not at the cost of their own. The findings of this study are shared to stimulate discussion, to give voice to national/regional cultural identities and to draw from this critical approach useful information for future policy and practice. The study also stresses policy makers to rejuvenate public education policy to foster a national identity in the members of the society.

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²Before offering the prayer, Muslims wash parts of their bodies which are generally exposed to dirt or dust or smog etc. This performance is preferably carried out as follows: declaring in heart that the intention of the act is for the purpose of worship and purity, start by saying Bismillah (starting with the name of Allah); washing hands up to the wrists, three times; rinsing out the mouth with water, three times, preferably with a brush; cleansing the nostrils of the nose by sniffing water into them, three times; washing the whole face three times with both hands, if possible, from the top of the forehead to the bottom of the chin and from ear to ear; washing the right arm three times up to the far end of the elbow, and then do the same with the left arm; wiping the whole head or any part of it with a wet hand, once; wiping the inner sides of the ears with the forefingers and their outer sides with the thumbs. This should be done with wet fingers; and washing the two feet up to the ankles, three times, beginning with the right foot.

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