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The Political Economy of Foundational Learning Reform in Pakistan

Nasreen Shaikh
Programme Manger, RSPN

Background and Introduction: Pakistan has made significant progress in expanding access to schooling over the past decade; however, foundational learning outcomes remain critically low. National enrollment among children aged 6 to 16 increased from 79 percent in 2014 to 92.2 percent in 2025, yet a large proportion of children continue to lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Recent estimates suggest that nearly 78 percent of children aged 10 in Pakistan cannot read and understand a simple text, placing the country among those with the highest levels of learning poverty globally.

This essay examines the political economy of foundational learning reform in Pakistan by analysing trends in learning outcomes, access, early childhood education, fiscal priorities, governance structures, and emerging policy responses. It argues that despite growing policy attention, structural constraints including fragmented governance, limited public investment, weak early learning foundations, teacher capacity gaps, and unequal learning opportunities continue to hinder progress toward universal foundational learning.

The Scale of the Foundational Learning Crisis: Pakistan faces one of the highest levels of learning poverty in the world. Global estimates suggest that 77 to 78 percent of children aged 10 are unable to read and understand a simple age-appropriate text. This crisis is particularly concerning because foundational literacy and numeracy form the basis for all future learning. Children who fail to acquire these skills in early grades often struggle to keep up with curriculum demands in later years.

Access Expansion and the Learning Paradox: Over the past decade, access to schooling has expanded significantly, with enrollment reaching 92.2 percent of children aged 6 to 16. Despite this progress, a persistent gap remains between schooling and learning. Evidence from national assessments and citizen-led surveys consistently shows that many children progress through school without acquiring basic reading and numeracy skills.

ASER trend data highlights this challenge clearly. Among Class 5 students, the proportion able to read a Class 2 level story declined from 59 percent in 2019 to 52 percent in 2025. The share able to read English sentences improved to 56 percent, while the proportion able to solve basic division problems dropped to 49 percent.

These trends point to a fundamental paradox: more children are attending school, yet fewer are mastering foundational skills. This disconnect reflects deeper systemic and political economy challenges within the education system.

Early Childhood Education: Weak Foundations: Early childhood education (ECE) remains a critical but underdeveloped component of Pakistan's education system. Recent data indicates that only 59.5 percent of children aged 3 to 5 are enrolled in ECE programmes, while 40.5 percent remain excluded.

Limited access to quality pre-primary education weakens school readiness and contributes directly to poor foundational learning outcomes in early grades. From a political economy perspective, ECE has historically received limited policy attention and funding compared to primary and secondary education, despite its high returns in terms of learning outcomes. This underinvestment in early years represents a structural bottleneck in achieving universal foundational learning.

The Scale of the Learning Crisis and Inequalities: Pakistan faces one of the highest levels of learning poverty globally, with approximately 77 to 78 percent of children aged 10 unable to read and understand a

simple text. This crisis is further compounded by significant regional and socio-economic disparities. Provincial differences in learning outcomes remain stark:

- In Punjab, approximately 66 percent of Class 5 students can read a story.
- In Sindh, only 30 percent can read a story and around 36 percent can perform division.
- In Balochistan, learning levels are even lower, with about 49 percent able to read a story and only around 45 percent able to perform division.

In addition to provincial disparities, inequalities between school types are pronounced. Children enrolled in private schools consistently outperform those in government schools across literacy and numeracy indicators. For example, a higher proportion of private school students in Class 5 can read stories, English sentences, and perform division compared to their counterparts in public schools.

These disparities reflect differences in governance quality, accountability mechanisms, resource allocation, and parental socio-economic status, reinforcing inequities in learning outcomes across the system.

Public Expenditure and Fiscal Constraints: A central political economy factor shaping education outcomes in Pakistan is limited public investment in education. Spending has remained around 1.5 to 2 percent of GDP, significantly below the commonly recommended benchmark of 4 percent.

Within existing budgets, a large share is allocated to salaries and administrative expenditures, leaving limited fiscal space for interventions that directly improve learning such as teacher professional development, early grade instruction, and provision of learning materials.

Even where education budgets have increased, these have not consistently translated into improved learning outcomes. This indicates that both the level and efficiency of public spending are critical, and that reallocating resources toward learning-focused interventions remains a key reform challenge.

Governance and Political Economy Constraints: Pakistan's education governance structure plays a defining role in shaping learning outcomes. Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, education became primarily a provincial responsibility. While decentralization allows for contextualized policymaking, it has also led to fragmentation in policy design, uneven implementation capacity, and weak coordination across provinces.

Political incentives further complicate reform efforts. Governments often prioritize visible and politically rewarding investments such as school construction, infrastructure upgrades, and distribution of inputs—over less visible but more impactful interventions aimed at improving classroom instruction and learning outcomes.

This reflects deeper accountability dynamics: improvements in enrollment and infrastructure are easier to demonstrate to constituents, whereas gains in learning are harder to measure, slower to materialize, and more difficult to attribute to specific policies.

Teachers and Classroom Realities: Teachers are central to improving foundational learning outcomes, yet they operate in challenging environments. Many classrooms are characterized by large class sizes, multigrade teaching, and limited access to structured teaching materials.

ASER evidence indicates that multigrade teaching remains widespread, particularly in government schools, where a significant proportion of classrooms accommodate multiple grades simultaneously. This complicates effective instruction and limits teachers' ability to address diverse learning levels.

While teacher attendance has improved, gaps remain in professional capacity. Teacher training programmes are often irregular and insufficiently focused on early grade literacy and numeracy. As a result, many teachers lack the pedagogical tools required to support foundational learning.

Strengthening teacher support systems including continuous professional development, in-class mentoring, and access to structured teaching resources is essential for improving classroom instruction and student learning outcomes.

Emerging Policy Momentum: Despite these challenges, there are signs of increasing policy attention to foundational learning. In 2024, the Government of Pakistan launched the Federal Foundational Learning Policy, which aims to ensure that all children acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills by 2030. The policy covers public schools, private institutions, non-formal education centres, and religious schools.

To support implementation, the Pakistan Foundational Learning Hub has been established to coordinate efforts, promote evidence-based interventions, and align stakeholders. These initiatives signal a shift toward prioritizing learning outcomes within the national education agenda.

However, their success will depend on sustained political commitment, effective coordination between federal and provincial governments, and the ability to translate policy intent into classroom-level change.

Conclusion: Pakistan has made notable progress in expanding access to education, with enrollment approaching 92 percent among children aged 6 to 16. However, persistently low foundational learning outcomes highlight that the next phase of reform must focus on learning quality rather than access alone.

Addressing the learning crisis requires more than technical solutions. It demands sustained political commitment, increased and more efficient public investment, stronger institutional coordination, and accountability systems that prioritize learning outcomes over inputs.

Achieving universal foundational learning by 2030 will require confronting the structural constraints embedded in the political economy of education particularly underinvestment in early childhood education, systemic inequities, and misaligned incentives and ensuring that every child not only attends school but acquires the essential skills needed to succeed.