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LANGUAGE HIERARCHIES AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN ENGLISH AND URDU MEDIUM EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS ACROSS PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Language plays a significant role in shaping educational opportunities, social identities, cultural relationships, and power structures within Pakistani society. The distinction between English-medium and Urdu-medium educational institutions represents an important dimension of educational inequality and linguistic hierarchy in Pakistan. English is frequently associated with academic prestige, professional advancement, international communication, and socioeconomic mobility, whereas Urdu serves as a major national language and an important medium of cultural and social communication. This study examines language hierarchies and social identity in English-medium and Urdu-medium educational institutions across Pakistan in 2026. Particular attention is given to students' linguistic experiences, classroom communication, institutional language policies, social recognition, and perceptions of educational opportunities. The research investigates how language preferences influence students' confidence, academic participation, cultural belonging, and perceptions of social status. It also explores how differences in institutional resources and language practices contribute to the reproduction of educational and social inequalities. Drawing upon sociolinguistic perspectives, language ideology, and theories of linguistic capital, the study examines English and Urdu as educational resources associated with different forms of social recognition and opportunity. A mixed-methods research approach is proposed, combining student questionnaires, interviews, and institutional document analysis. The study aims to demonstrate that language-medium differences extend beyond classroom instruction and contribute to the construction of educational identities and social boundaries. It further emphasizes the importance of inclusive multilingual education, equitable language policies, and improved educational opportunities for students from diverse linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

KEYWORDS

Language Hierarchy, Social Identity, English-Medium Education, Urdu-Medium Education, Linguistic Inequality, Pakistani Education System, Language Policy, Educational Opportunities, Linguistic Capital, Multilingualism.

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most influential elements of educational development, social communication, cultural identity, and institutional power. In multilingual societies, the selection of a language as the medium of instruction can influence students' educational experiences, academic confidence, and future opportunities. Pakistan represents a particularly important context for examining these relationships because its educational system includes institutions that use English, Urdu, and regional languages in different instructional and administrative settings. The distinction between English-medium and Urdu-medium education is not simply a

difference in classroom language; it is also connected with social status, institutional reputation, economic opportunities, and perceptions of educational quality. Consequently, language-medium differences have become an important issue in discussions concerning educational inequality and social identity in Pakistan.The English language occupies an influential position within Pakistan's educational and professional environments. English is widely used in higher education, scientific communication, professional institutions, administration, and international academic exchange. Students who receive English-medium education may develop greater familiarity with academic English and experience advantages when accessing certain educational and professional opportunities. However, access to English-medium institutions is frequently influenced by family income, geographical location, institutional resources, and socioeconomic background. This situation creates a relationship between language proficiency and social privilege, in which English can function as a marker of educational distinction. Rahman (2005) provides an important historical and sociolinguistic foundation for understanding how English, Urdu, and other languages are associated with educational structures and social inequalities in Pakistan English-speaking students may develop identities associated with modern education, professional achievement, and international communication, while Urdu-speaking students may establish stronger associations with national culture, community relationships, and local linguistic traditions. These identities are not fixed or mutually exclusive because students frequently use multiple languages across different social environments. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) explain that identity is constructed and negotiated through social interaction, providing an important theoretical perspective for understanding how students develop linguistic and educational identities.

Language hierarchies can also influence classroom participation and the relationship between teachers and students. In institutions where English is strongly emphasized, students with limited English proficiency may hesitate to ask questions, participate in discussions, or express complex ideas. Similarly, students who are more comfortable communicating in Urdu may experience difficulties when classroom activities require advanced English-language skills. These challenges can influence academic confidence and create differences in participation that are not necessarily related to students' intellectual abilities. Language therefore becomes an important factor in determining how students experience educational inclusion, recognition, and academic achievement.The distinction between English and Urdu as languages of instruction also influences students' experiences of classroom participation and academic confidence. Muhammad and Alexander (2026) investigate multilingual classroom experiences at a private university in Pakistan and identify difficulties involving vocabulary comprehension, academic participation, and limited proficiency in English and Urdu among students from diverse educational backgrounds. Their research emphasizes that students' linguistic resources should be recognized as educational strengths rather than treated as deficiencies. It also highlights the

importance of translanguaging practices in developing inclusive classroom environments. Recent research has further demonstrated that the relationship between medium of instruction and educational quality requires careful examination. Imran et al. (2026) investigate English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools across three districts of Punjab, Pakistan, using data from 531 students. Their study identifies a significant relationship between English-medium instruction and perceived educational quality. However, the advantages associated with English instruction must also be understood in relation to students' language backgrounds, teaching resources, and opportunities to develop proficiency. This distinction is important because the presence of English as a classroom language does not automatically guarantee equal educational outcomes for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Another significant issue concerns the relationship between linguistic identity and educational anxiety. Students who previously studied through Urdu may experience difficulties when entering institutions where English is the dominant language of instruction. These difficulties can influence classroom participation, oral presentations, communication with teachers, and confidence in academic settings. Rashid, Malik, and Shafqat (2026) examine the relationship between previous medium of instruction, gender, and speaking anxiety among Pakistani higher education students. Their research highlights the importance of considering students' previous educational experiences when examining language-related participation and confidence. The social meaning of language is also influenced by institutional policies and broader ideological structures. English-medium education is frequently associated with modernization, globalization, professional development, and international academic opportunities. However, the dominance of English can create difficulties when educational institutions fail to recognize the linguistic resources students bring from their homes and communities. Raza et al. (2026), in their critical postcolonial analysis of Pakistani English-medium education policy, identify how policy discourse can reproduce linguistic hierarchy through elite–mass distinctions and the unequal valuation of languages. Their research provides an important perspective for understanding why English-medium education may be perceived as a marker of social privilege rather than simply an instructional choice. Pakistan's multilingual environment further complicates the relationship between educational language and social identity. Alongside English and Urdu, students communicate through Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Saraiki, and other regional languages. These languages are important resources for cultural belonging, family relationships, and local knowledge. Khosa et al. (2026), in their study of plurilingual practices among university students in Balochistan, demonstrate that multilingual communication represents an important communicative competence rather than a linguistic deficiency. Their findings also highlight how monolingual educational expectations can overlook the value of students' existing linguistic resources. Syed and Shah (2026) further investigate the ideological framing of multilingualism in Pakistani education through policy documents and university students' narratives. Their research

identifies the hierarchical valuation of languages according to political and economic significance, as well as the marginalization of indigenous linguistic identities. This perspective demonstrates that educational language policies do not operate independently of wider social structures. Instead, they influence which languages receive institutional recognition, which linguistic skills are considered valuable, and how students understand their positions within educational and professional environments. Despite the growing importance of multilingual education and language-policy research, further investigation is required into how English-medium and Urdu-medium educational experiences influence students' identities, academic confidence, and perceptions of social status across different regions of Pakistan. The present study addresses this issue by examining the relationship between language hierarchies and social identity within educational institutions. It considers the role of English, Urdu, and regional languages in shaping educational experiences and investigates how institutional language practices can either reproduce inequality or support more inclusive learning environments.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the differences in language practices and educational experiences between English-medium and Urdu-medium institutions across Pakistan.
2. To investigate how the medium of instruction influences students' linguistic identities, academic confidence, and perceptions of social status.
3. To analyze how institutional language policies contribute to linguistic inequality and educational opportunities among students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What differences exist in language practices and educational experiences between English-medium and Urdu-medium institutions in Pakistan?
2. How does the medium of instruction influence students' linguistic identities, academic confidence, and perceptions of social status?
3. How do institutional language policies influence linguistic inequality and educational opportunities among students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language and education are closely connected with social identity, institutional authority, and the distribution of educational opportunities. In multilingual societies, the selection of a medium of instruction can influence how students participate in academic activities, understand

educational material, and develop relationships with teachers and classmates. The Pakistani educational system provides an important context for examining these issues because English and Urdu occupy different positions within institutional and social environments. Syed and Shah (2026) explain that educational language policies in Pakistan are influenced by historical, political, and economic ideologies that establish different levels of institutional value for different languages. Their research demonstrates that multilingualism may be officially recognized while educational practices continue to privilege languages associated with economic and political power.The relationship between language and educational inequality is particularly visible in the distinction between English-medium and Urdu-medium institutions. English-medium education is frequently associated with private educational institutions, professional opportunities, and greater access to English-language academic resources. Urdu-medium education, meanwhile, is often connected with public-sector institutions and students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Imran et al. (2026) examine English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools across Punjab and report a significant relationship between English-medium instruction and educational quality. Their research provides relevant empirical evidence for understanding the relationship between language practices and educational experiences. However, the relationship between medium of instruction and educational quality should also be interpreted in relation to institutional resources, teacher preparation, and students' previous language exposure.

A further contribution to the literature concerns the influence of previous educational experiences on students' participation in higher education. Muhammad and Alexander (2026) investigate translanguaging practices in a private university in Pakistan and examine the challenges experienced by students from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds. Their research identifies difficulties related to vocabulary comprehension, limited language proficiency, and participation in English-medium academic environments. The study demonstrates that students' linguistic resources should be acknowledged as important educational assets. It also suggests that teachers can support classroom comprehension and participation by incorporating students' existing languages into instructional practices. This research is particularly relevant because it explains how language-based educational differences continue beyond school education and influence students' experiences at university level.The literature also identifies a relationship between language-medium background and students' confidence in academic communication. Rashid et al. (2026) investigate how previous medium of instruction and gender are associated with speaking anxiety among Pakistani higher education students. Their research examines the experiences of students from English-medium and Urdu-medium educational backgrounds and highlights the importance of understanding linguistic anxiety within the broader context of educational identity. Speaking confidence is particularly significant in institutions where classroom discussions, presentations, and academic assessments require

English-language communication. Students who have had limited opportunities to use English may experience difficulties in expressing their ideas, even when they possess a strong understanding of the subject being studied. Such challenges indicate that academic participation should not be evaluated exclusively through English-language fluency.

Language hierarchy is also connected with the historical and ideological development of educational policies. Raza et al. (2026) examine linguistic imperialism and discourse colonialism in Pakistani English-medium education policy through a critical postcolonial discourse analysis. Their research identifies recurring policy patterns involving globalist legitimation, functional divisions between languages, implementation gaps, colonial linguistic legacies, and elite–mass distinctions. These findings demonstrate that language policies can reproduce existing social hierarchies even when they are presented as instruments of modernization and educational development. The study provides an important foundation for examining how English receives institutional recognition and how this recognition can influence the social value attached to different educational backgrounds.The role of regional languages is another important dimension of educational identity and linguistic equality. Pakistan's linguistic diversity includes Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Saraiki, and several other languages that contribute to students' cultural and social identities. Khosa et al. (2026) investigate plurilingual practices among university students in Balochistan and demonstrate that the use of multiple languages represents a functional communicative competence. Their research identifies how monolingual expectations can create negative perceptions of multilingual communication and overlook the linguistic knowledge students bring to educational environments. This finding is important because the distinction between English and Urdu does not fully represent Pakistan's educational language diversity. Students may enter English-medium or Urdu-medium institutions while possessing other home languages that remain important to their identities and learning experiences.

Recent research also highlights the importance of understanding classroom language practices rather than focusing exclusively on official institutional policies. Noor Ul Ain et al. (2026) investigate English–Urdu code-switching in a Pakistani public-school English-medium classroom. Their study identifies the practical use of English for reading and writing and the use of Urdu for explanations, questions, and clarification. The findings suggest that strategic code-switching can support comprehension and classroom participation, although excessive dependence on Urdu may reduce opportunities for English exposure. This research demonstrates that actual classroom practices may differ from formal language expectations and that flexible multilingual approaches can support students' educational experiences. The relationship between multilingualism, educational policy, and identity is further developed by Syed and Shah (2026). Their research explains that dominant language-policy frameworks can classify languages according to their political and economic value, creating unequal conditions for students who

possess different linguistic backgrounds. Such classifications can influence how students understand their educational identities and how they evaluate their own language abilities. The research also highlights the marginalization of indigenous languages within broader institutional structures. These findings support the argument that linguistic diversity should be treated as an educational resource rather than an obstacle to academic development.Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that language-medium differences in Pakistan involve more than the selection of English or Urdu for classroom instruction. They are connected with educational resources, institutional recognition, academic confidence, linguistic capital, and cultural identity. Recent research published in 2026 provides important evidence concerning language hierarchies, multilingual classroom practices, English-medium instruction, and educational inequality. The present study builds upon this literature by examining how these factors interact across English-medium and Urdu-medium educational institutions and how they influence students' experiences of social identity and educational opportunity.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a mixed-methods research methodology to investigate language hierarchies and social identity in English-medium and Urdu-medium educational institutions across Pakistan. The research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine students' language preferences, educational experiences, academic confidence, and perceptions of social recognition. The quantitative component will provide information about language practices and students' experiences through structured questionnaires, while the qualitative component will explore the social meanings associated with English, Urdu, and regional languages through interviews and institutional document analysis. This methodological approach is informed by recent Pakistani studies on multilingual education, classroom participation, and language policy, particularly Muhammad and Alexander (2026) and Syed and Shah (2026).The proposed target population will consist of students enrolled in public and private secondary schools, colleges, and universities across Pakistan. A proposed sample of 400 students will be selected from institutions representing Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan. The sample will include students from English-medium and Urdu-medium educational backgrounds, different academic disciplines, and diverse socioeconomic groups. A stratified sampling approach will be used to ensure appropriate representation of the two educational streams, while purposive sampling will be employed to select participants for qualitative interviews. The proposed sample will help examine differences in language experiences across educational levels and geographical settings.

Quantitative data will be collected through structured questionnaires designed to investigate students' preferred languages, previous educational backgrounds, classroom participation,

language-related confidence, and perceptions of social status. The questionnaire will also examine students' experiences of using English, Urdu, and regional languages in academic and informal communication. Questions concerning access to educational resources, teacher communication, language-based discrimination, and perceived employment opportunities will be included to understand how linguistic preferences interact with broader socioeconomic circumstances. The questionnaire will be developed in accessible language to ensure that students from different educational backgrounds can understand and respond to the questions.Qualitative information will be collected through semi-structured interviews with a proposed subsample of 40 students and 20 teachers from selected educational institutions. These interviews will explore the experiences of students who have studied through different mediums of instruction and their perceptions of linguistic prestige, educational inclusion, and academic participation. Teachers will be asked about institutional language policies, classroom communication, code-switching practices, and the challenges faced by students with different language backgrounds. Relevant institutional documents, including language policies, instructional guidelines, and curriculum materials, will also be examined to identify the formal expectations associated with English and Urdu.The collected information will be analyzed through statistical procedures and thematic analysis. Quantitative responses will be examined using descriptive statistics and appropriate inferential techniques, while qualitative interviews and institutional documents will be analyzed to identify recurring patterns of language hierarchy, educational identity, and linguistic inequality. Ethical considerations will include informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the protection of participants' personal information. The methodological framework will allow the researcher to investigate language-medium differences while recognizing the importance of students' multilingual backgrounds and educational circumstances.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study will employ a cross-sectional comparative mixed-methods research design to examine differences between English-medium and Urdu-medium educational institutions. The comparative component will investigate how students from the two educational streams experience classroom communication, academic participation, institutional expectations, and social recognition. The cross-sectional component will allow the researcher to collect information during a defined period in 2026 and examine the relationship between previous educational backgrounds and students' current linguistic identities. This design is appropriate because the research investigates both measurable differences in language experiences and the meanings students attach to their educational identities.The quantitative component will compare students' responses concerning academic confidence, language proficiency, classroom participation, and perceptions of educational opportunities. Particular attention will be given to

differences between students from English-medium and Urdu-medium backgrounds while considering their socioeconomic circumstances and geographical locations. The qualitative component will investigate how students describe their experiences of linguistic inclusion, social recognition, and educational challenges. These two components will provide complementary perspectives on language hierarchy and social identity.

The research design will also incorporate a sociolinguistic perspective to understand the relationship between language use and social positioning. English, Urdu, and regional languages will be examined as linguistic resources associated with different educational, cultural, and communicative functions. The study will consider how institutional language expectations influence students' identities and whether multilingual communication is encouraged or discouraged within different educational environments. The research will also examine the role of teachers and institutional policies in shaping students' language experiences.The comparative analysis will focus on three interconnected dimensions: institutional language practices, student identity formation, and educational inequality. Institutional language practices will include the language of instruction, classroom interaction, teaching materials, and assessment expectations. Student identity formation will involve linguistic confidence, cultural belonging, and perceptions of social status. Educational inequality will examine differences in access to resources, academic participation, and perceived opportunities for further education and employment. This research design will provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how language-medium differences influence educational experiences across Pakistan.

DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. These techniques will identify the distribution of students according to their previous medium of instruction, preferred communication language, and institutional background. Comparisons will be made between English-medium and Urdu-medium students to examine differences in reported academic confidence, classroom participation, and perceptions of educational opportunities. Relevant statistical tests, including independent-samples comparisons and regression analysis where appropriate, will be employed to investigate relationships between medium of instruction, socioeconomic background, and students' educational experiences.The analysis will further investigate the relationship between language preference and social identity. Students' responses concerning English, Urdu, and regional languages will be examined to understand how they associate particular languages with academic achievement, cultural belonging, social recognition, and professional advancement. Particular attention will be given to whether English-medium students report greater confidence in English-language academic communication and whether

Urdu-medium students experience difficulties when entering institutions where English is the dominant language. The analysis will also consider how family background and geographical location influence these experiences. Imran et al. (2026) and Rashida et al. (2026) provide relevant research foundations for examining the relationship between medium of instruction, educational quality, and students' academic communication experiences.Qualitative interview data will be examined through thematic analysis. Interview transcripts will be organized into recurring themes involving linguistic prestige, academic confidence, cultural identity, classroom participation, educational discrimination, and institutional language expectations. Particular attention will be given to students' descriptions of situations in which their language background influences their confidence or participation. Teachers' responses will be analyzed to identify institutional practices concerning English-language instruction, Urdu explanations, and the use of regional languages. Muhammad and Alexander (2026) and Noor Ul Ain et al. (2026) provide relevant evidence for understanding how translanguaging and strategic code-switching influence classroom participation and comprehension.

Institutional documents will also be analyzed to identify how language policies establish expectations concerning instructional practices and educational communication. The analysis will examine whether institutional policies promote multilingual inclusion or emphasize a particular language as the primary measure of academic competence. Raza et al. (2026) and Syed and Shah (2026) provide relevant conceptual foundations for investigating the relationship between language policy, institutional authority, and linguistic hierarchy. This analysis will help establish whether formal educational expectations correspond with students' actual linguistic experiences.Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings will be integrated through methodological triangulation. Statistical patterns will be compared with students' interview responses and institutional documents to identify areas of agreement and difference. This process will help explain not only how language-medium backgrounds are associated with educational experiences but also why particular linguistic practices may create feelings of inclusion or exclusion. The analysis will distinguish between students' actual educational achievements and their perceptions of language-based opportunities. No statistical results will be presented as completed findings until the proposed fieldwork has been conducted.

FINDINGS

The literature-based analysis suggests that English-medium and Urdu-medium educational experiences are associated with different perceptions of linguistic prestige and academic identity in Pakistan. English-medium education is commonly connected with professional advancement, international communication, and access to certain educational opportunities. Urdu-medium education, meanwhile, remains important for national communication and cultural belonging.

These differences may influence how students evaluate their own language abilities and compare their educational backgrounds with those of other students. The research of Syed and Shah (2026) provides relevant support for understanding how institutional language hierarchies are connected with political and economic valuations of linguistic resources.Another anticipated finding concerns the relationship between previous medium of instruction and academic confidence. Students who have studied primarily through Urdu may experience difficulties when they enter institutions where English is the dominant language of instruction. Such difficulties may involve understanding academic terminology, participating in discussions, delivering presentations, and communicating with teachers. Students from English-medium backgrounds may demonstrate greater familiarity with English-language academic tasks, although their actual educational performance will also depend on teaching quality, institutional resources, and individual learning experiences. Research by Muhammad and Alexander (2026) and Rashida et al. (2026) highlights the importance of previous language experiences in understanding classroom participation and communication-related challenges.The study is also expected to identify differences in how students construct their linguistic and cultural identities. English-medium students may associate English proficiency with academic recognition and professional aspirations, while Urdu-medium students may emphasize Urdu as an important resource for communication and cultural belonging. Students from regional-language backgrounds may experience additional challenges when their home languages receive limited recognition within formal educational environments. Khosa et al. (2026) demonstrate that multilingual communication is an important aspect of students' identities and should not be interpreted as a deficiency in linguistic competence.

A further anticipated finding concerns the influence of institutional language policies on educational inequality. Institutions that emphasize English without providing sufficient language support may create difficulties for students who have had limited previous exposure to English. Such practices may affect classroom participation and reinforce distinctions between students from different educational backgrounds. Raza et al. (2026) identify how language-policy discourse can reproduce elite–mass distinctions and unequal linguistic recognition within Pakistan's educational system. This suggests that language policies should be evaluated not only according to their stated objectives but also according to their effects on students' educational experiences.The study may also demonstrate that flexible multilingual classroom practices can improve educational inclusion. Teachers who use appropriate combinations of English and Urdu may help students understand complex concepts while developing their English-language abilities. Strategic use of students' existing linguistic resources may support comprehension, confidence, and classroom participation. Noor Ul Ain et al. (2026) provide relevant empirical evidence that English–Urdu code-switching can support classroom understanding when it is used purposefully. These findings suggest that multilingual teaching approaches may offer a more

inclusive alternative to rigid monolingual instructional expectations.Overall, the anticipated findings indicate that language hierarchies are connected with educational identity, social recognition, institutional policies, and unequal access to opportunities. The study is expected to show that the distinction between English-medium and Urdu-medium education cannot be understood independently of socioeconomic circumstances and Pakistan's wider multilingual environment. These findings remain provisional until the proposed questionnaires, interviews, and institutional document analysis have been completed.

CONCLUSION

The present study examines language hierarchies and social identity in English-medium and Urdu-medium educational institutions across Pakistan in 2026. It highlights the importance of language as an educational resource and a significant element of social positioning, cultural belonging, and institutional recognition. The research demonstrates that differences in the medium of instruction extend beyond classroom communication and influence students' perceptions of academic competence, educational identity, and future opportunities. English and Urdu perform important but different functions within Pakistan's educational and social environment, while regional languages remain essential to students' cultural and linguistic identities.The study further emphasizes that English-medium education may provide students with greater familiarity with English-language academic communication, but the advantages associated with English proficiency are influenced by socioeconomic conditions, institutional resources, and educational opportunities. Similarly, Urdu-medium education provides important opportunities for learning and communication but may create additional challenges when students enter educational environments where English is strongly emphasized. These differences demonstrate that language-based educational inequality should not be interpreted as a difference in students' intellectual abilities or academic potential.Another important conclusion concerns the recognition of multilingualism as an educational resource. Students entering Pakistani educational institutions bring diverse linguistic experiences involving Urdu, English, and regional languages. These linguistic resources can support learning, communication, and identity development when educational institutions recognize their value. Teachers and policymakers should therefore promote instructional practices that strengthen English-language competence without marginalizing Urdu or regional languages. Strategic translanguaging and multilingual classroom communication can help improve comprehension and encourage greater student participation.In conclusion, reducing language-based educational inequality requires inclusive institutional policies, effective teacher training, accessible learning materials, and equal opportunities for students from different linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Educational institutions should avoid treating English proficiency as the only indicator of intelligence, academic ability, or social worth. Instead, they should recognize multilingual competence and

provide students with opportunities to develop academic communication skills in an inclusive environment. The present research contributes to understanding the relationship between language, power, and identity in Pakistan and provides a foundation for future investigations into equitable multilingual education and educational policy development.

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