



Original Article

# Out-Of-School Children in Northern Sindh, Pakistan: Qualitative Exploration of Push and Pull Factors

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## Abstract

*Despite its severity in Pakistan, the issue of out-of-school children has surprisingly received very little attention from academics. A couple of studies conducted in other provinces of Pakistan have investigated the views of parents and school principals on out-of-school children where both parties seem blaming each other. How do children themselves feel being out of school, although very significant, has remained unattended. It is believed that listening to the voices of the real sufferers is essential to bring forth insights that would help policy makers and educational reformers in considering the existent issues to be addressed in relation to out-of-school children. The current study explores the perceptions of out-of-school children about the factors dropping them out of school and the challenges they face after dropping out of school. Five children dropped out of school are identified and interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that the push-out factors enforced by the schools included the teachers' unprofessional behaviors. Pull-out factors enforced from home included poverty and heavy responsibilities at very early ages to be an earning member for the family. The study calls for collaborative efforts by school, parents, community and civil society to address multi-sectoral issue of out-of-school children. It is also argued that for SDG-4 to be practically effective on grounds in Sindh or elsewhere for that matter, education needs to be re-imagined to make education of Out of School Children possible.*

**Keywords:** Developing context, out-of-school children, pull factors, push factors

## INTRODUCTION

Article 28 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) grants all children and young people (aged 17 and under) a right to education. Accordingly, every child should have access to free primary education and a variety of secondary education options. Similarly, article 29 ensures developing everyone's talents and abilities to the full extent (UNICEF, 2017). Another recent world declaration, Sustainable Development Goals pledges to ensuring every child access to free, equitable and quality education from pre-school through high school by 2030. Despite these pledges, children's absence from school is a problem that affects every nation. Data from 2018 show that 258 million children are still out of school in developing countries around the world (UNESCO, 2016) which roughly makes one sixth of the world's population of young children (6 to 17 years of age). The same report shows that 59 million children at primary level, 62 million at secondary level and 132 million at higher secondary age group level children are out of school. Even more concerning is the fact that, despite drastic measures, 12 million elementary school students have never attended class. Given these statistics, it is difficult to guarantee universal access to high-quality education by 2030, one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set for education around the world.

Although out-of-school children is a major issue faced by developing countries across the globe, the issue is more severe in Pakistan where 22.8 million Children aged 5 to 16 are predicted to be absent from school, which accounts for 44 percent of the country's total population in this age group. 11 million of these are young people aged 10 to 14, the majority falling into the age range of 5 to 9 (Mughal, 2020). This statistics is very surprising given the assurance in the constitution of Pakistan that "All children between the ages of five and sixteen must be provided with free and compulsory education by the state, in accordance with law". In 2010, Pakistan's constitution was amended to include the 18th Amendment and Article 25A, which decentralized the regulation of education to the provinces. Since then, Pakistan's provincial governments have made education a primary priority, resulting in revised policies, sector plans, laws, and strategies aimed at the provision of free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 5 and 16 years of age (Jamil, et al., 2019). However, evidence suggests that no encouraging improvement has been made mainly because of the limited allocation of budget to education and the less effective use of the allotted budget (Ahmed, Ali, Khan & Khan, 2014). Consequently, 22.8 million children are still out of school in Pakistan.

Although, out-of-school children is such a burning issue in Pakistan, it has received surprisingly little attention from academics. There are some studies (see, for example, Mughal & Aldridge, 2017) who have investigated the views of school leaders and parents on out-of-school children. These stakeholders have been found simply blaming one another considering the other party responsible for out-of-school children. What we do not know is how being out of school impacts the lives of children and what schools can learn from the experience of out of school children. The voices of the real victim, out of school children, have not been heard and highlighted so far. Through this study, we approach out of school children, listen to them and document their stories with a focus on the push-out and pull-out factors that impact these children's exclusion from mainstream education. Thus, building on the experience of the children themselves, the research sought out to respond to the question of 'what factors push and pull children out of school'. The outcomes bring forth

significant insights from the lives of out of school children. We expect that these insights will help policy makers, educational reformers and schools to reflect on and revise their practices in order to address the issue of out-of-school children.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Out of School Children**

There are two types of children who are not in school; those who dropped out and those who never went back. The dropout concept is more difficult to define because of the issues of formal, non-formal, recognized and unrecognized education (Bylsma & Ireland, 2005). Schargel (2014) identifies three distinct categories of dropouts, namely, those who are currently leaving or have already left school; those who are still enrolled but have disconnected themselves from the educational process; and those who have been suspended or expelled. While the first category is easily categorized, the tune-outs are difficult to identify, while the force-outs have been recognized as troublemakers either in or out of school.

One of the major frameworks to build profiles of children who have been excluded is the Five Dimensions of Exclusion (5DE) Model (UNICEF, 2018). With a focus on equity, this model offers a multifaceted approach to identify children who have dropped out of school and those who are at risk of doing so. There are two distinct population groups represented by the five dimensions: school-age children who are not in school and students who are currently enrolled but are on the verge of dropping out (UNESCO, 2016). The first dimension related to group one represents the children who do not receive the benefits of pre-primary education and who, as a result, may not be adequately prepared for primary school, putting them at risk of either not enrolling in primary education or, if they do enroll, at risk of dropping out of primary education. This dimension focuses on youngsters between the ages of 5 and 7. The second and third dimensions of the first group focus on the children between the ages of 6 and 14 who are not currently enrolled in school. The fourth and fifth dimensions of group two represent the school-age population at risk of being expelled. Regardless of their age, they are grouped according to the educational level they are currently enrolled in (UNICEF, 2016).

### **Factors Leading to Out-of-School Children**

Whatever is the age limit or school level, keeping children away from school is depriving them from their very basic right; quality education. Literature identifies a number of reasons resulting in out-of-school children. These factors include poverty, child labor, parents' negligence, unprofessional conduct of teachers and weak academic performance of children. Although, other factors are equally important, studies on out-of-school identify poverty as the primary reason to drop out of school (Adamu & Dikko, 2017). Unemployment, especially in economically disadvantaged countries, necessitates that children work along with their parents or guardians (Kyambalesa, 2019). In many countries and contexts, the financial burdens of raising large families and perpetuating a culture of intergenerational reliance force parents to engage their children in some earning activities (Mughal, 2020). In addition, children representing disadvantaged families fail to afford school fees, levies, and other charges keeping them out of school (Oduro, 2000). Financial factors have also been reported as common reasons for children's absence from school (Fentiman, Hall & Bundy, 1999). Working and attending school at the same time puts children at a disadvantage academically and increases the likelihood that they drop out of school early (ILO, 2020). A number of other studies have found a correlation between parental socioeconomic position and the likelihood that a child may drop out of school (Abuya, Oketch & Musyoka, 2013; Chugh, 2011; Dakwa, Chiome & Chabaya, 2014).

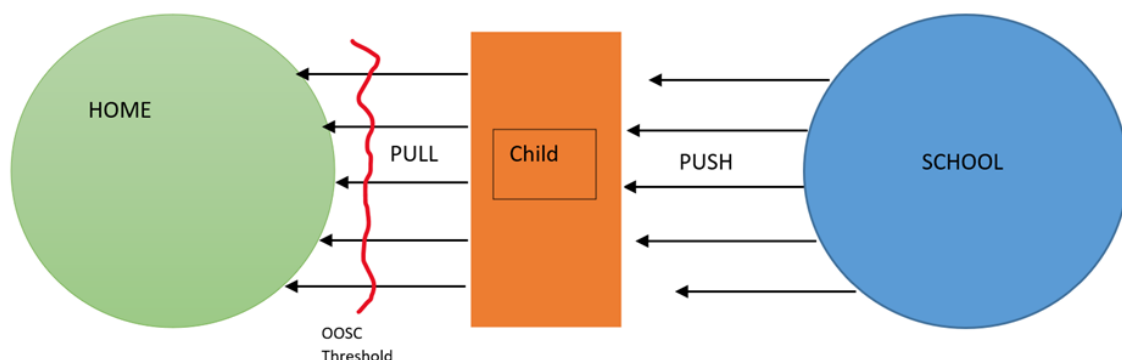
Along with transferring social and financial fortunes, parents influence their children in many other ways. Studies suggest that the limited involvement of parents in studies of their children, lack of appreciation of children's achievements, and limited connections with children and their school are some of reasons resulting in reduced interest of children towards studies and schools (Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Bedrossian, 2017; Vaughn, et al., 2013). In addition to their financial support, there appeared to be very little else the fathers were doing to help their children. Parents clarified that they had never been directly or indirectly involved in school activities related to their children's education and they were unaware of the parent-teacher associations, parent teachers' meetings and other events (Mughal, 2020). Parents' conflicts, separations, and mental illness also caused children's drop out from the schools (Casas-Gil & Navarro-Guzman, 2002). Likewise, lack of trust between parents and children as well as physical and emotional punishment were also found to be strong reasons in this regard (Corville-Smith & Dalicandro, 1998; Janosz, 1997). Most importantly, weak emotional and physical growth of children also result in dropout of children from the school (Henry, 2007; Reid, 2005).

Whereas children's home related factors play an important role in keeping them either in or out of school, schools and teachers, on the other hand, have even a larger role in this regard. At first place, some schools make education inaccessible for the disadvantaged groups through the fees they charge. Parents have been found struggling to pay school fees and were under increasing pressure to find a school that would fit their budgets (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2019). Likewise, in some areas, due to the distant location, parents are afraid to send their young children to school (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2019). In addition, low quality instruction and inadequate resources have also been found to be the factors keeping children out of school (Filmer & Pritchett, 1998). Such situation not only affects the achievement of students and trust of parents but also negatively impacts the cognitive and emotional health of children.

Many studies have shown that poor academic performance can be a contributing factor in school dropouts (Fortin, et al., 2013; Hardre & Ravee, 2003; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). As Waheed (2020) found, parents' had high hopes for their children's futures and expressed disappointment when it became clear that they would not be able to go on to higher education because of their poor grades. Parents quickly adjusted to the new reality and were happy if their children were able to secure part-time work in the city. Parents also blamed teachers for their inadequate instructions that result in poor academic performance of students. This situation has a psychologically negative effect on children. A theory of "learned helplessness" proposed students become paralyzed by fear of failure because they begin to believe that their efforts have no bearing on their success, leading to the development of the "learned helplessness" syndrome (Abramson, 1978).

Another interesting fact is the limited support of teachers to students in school that necessitate home coaching for them. Nepalese teachers were found to be teaching their students less at school in order to create a market for their own personal and paid tutoring sessions. Because of this, students who could not afford private tutoring fell behind academically and eventually failed their exams and were forced to drop out of school (Jayachandran, 2014).

In line with the above factors, as a framework for data collection and analysis, this research uses push and pull theory put forth by Lee (1966). Accordingly, people are either forced to migrate or are enticed to do so by factors known as "push and pull". In the context of education, Mughal (2020) has used this theory to identify the push and pull factors resulting in pull out of children from school. However, he has depended on the views of parents. In this research, we have used the migration push-pull theory to identify the factors from the perspective of the real victims; out-of-school children. The figurative representation of the framework is given below. As shown in the figure, a child is in between the push and pull factors. All the factors which influence by the school are the push factors and all the factors from the home are the pull factors. When the child tries to overcome the push factors, from the other side, the home starts to attract (in negative sense) the child toward itself. But when a child overcomes this factor, at the stage of threshold (a red line), he becomes totally unable to overcome both of the factors and finally to cross the threshold line. After which he is considered an out of school child and moves down from the mainstream education with less job opportunities and more challenges in their lives.



**Figure 1.** Data collection and analysis framework adapted from Lee (1966)

## RESEARCH METHODS

Since the purpose of our research was to identify the push and pull factors for out-of-school children through building on their stories, we used interpretivist lens with a belief that knowledge is constructed and the role of researcher is to interpret the real situation instead of depending on pre-conceived theories (Willis & Jost, 2007). In line with the philosophical stance, qualitative approach was used, as it allows interaction with

the real participants in their natural settings and enables developing a deeper understanding of human nature, emotions, behaviors, practices, and attitudes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Following the qualitative approach, the researchers interacted with out of school children who were working for earning in different roles and, through listening to their stories, tried to identify the reasons pushing or pulling them out of school and the challenges they face as they work.

Aimed at a deeper analysis of the phenomenon, the researchers employed case study method because this method allows to focus on certain cases and to generate thick descriptions by using a variety of data collection tools (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Five out of school children were taken as cases for this research. One criteria was to select one child from each five regions/ locations where this study was conducted. The researchers also considered ease of access, the availability of the child for interviews as well as their willingness (Etikan et al., 2016). As a result five children were selected as detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.**

Demographic data of participants

S. No.	Name (pseudonym)	Age (in years)	Occupation	Earnings (daily)	Working hours (daily)
1	Afzal	13	Hairdresser	Rs. 500	8
2	Ashraf	12	Food vendor	Rs. 250	10
3	Ihsan	10	Tailor shop	Rs. 300	8
4	Arif	9	Vegetable Vendor	Rs. 50	12
5	Saleh	9	Flower shop	Rs. 350	15

We conducted semi-structured interviews to generate data from the selected participants. The questions were open-ended to generate conversation by combining a predetermined set of open questions with the possibility of going deeper through probing on the basis of the participants’ responses (Doyle, 2018). The questions revolved around the experiences of these children with a focus on the push and pull factors and the challenges they face while working as an earning member for their families. The participants were interviewed once and twice in few cases depending on the completion of the required data. Each interview lasted 20 to 40 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded after taking their consent.

Data collection was an ongoing process. The emerging data were analyzed to be conscious to the emerging themes and to identity areas which required further exploration in the subsequent interviews. At the end of the data collection, the emerging data were organized and analyzed using the thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Data were coded and then patterns were identified. The patterns were finally developed or evaluated into themes. The researchers believe that certain measures carried out in this research contributed to the trustworthiness of our findings. Firstly, five cases were taken to support the emerging themes through various sources. Limited cases might have made the conclusions questionable. We also used the strategy of reflexivity (Charmaz, 2008), putting the influences under strict scrutiny and questioning our own beliefs and assumptions.

As an ethical consideration, the first step was to get informed consent from the guardians of the children who were either their parents, close relatives such as uncles, brothers or in some cases the owner of a shop whom the child was working with. Secondly, interview timings were decided in consultation with the participants to avoid any disturbance to their routines.

## RESULTS & FINDINGS

Four major themes emerged: teachers’ behavior; poverty; challenges; and aspiration of out-of-school children. Data under these themes are presented and interpreted in the following sections.

### Teachers’ Behavior

Although there were some other minor reasons, teachers’ behavior was found to be the most significant push factor in the dropout of children from school. One of such behavior of the teachers was giving physical punishment to students. Ihsan, now a ten years old child shared why he left school owing to the harsh behavior of his teacher. He stated:

At times he used to beat me for no reason. He just accused me by saying I was disobedient or too weak in studies. Yes, I know I am not good at studies, but he has to make me learn. He was humiliating me in front of the class. It was so discouraging for me that I left school.

‘Disobedient’ and ‘weak in studies’ are the labels used by the teacher for the child. The child acknowledges

his weakness in studies. However, as he rightly points out, teacher has to overcome his weakness. That is what the school is for. Even his self-confidence is shattered as he is disgraced in front of the whole class. Teachers' harsh behavior is not limited to physical punishment. As Saleh revealed, "he [the teacher] likes some students and dislikes the others." The children keenly observe their teachers and experience favoritism in the class. Arif lamented by saying, "He calls some students by name, but never named me in the class as he doesn't even know my name." These students want an environment where they are valued and encouraged. Unfortunately, teachers' demonstrate harsh behavior and favoritism that make the school less attractive for them. In addition, children who dropped out of school also reported bullying. Since they come from socially disadvantaged background, other students made fun of them.

Ihsan revealed:

They [other students] have formed a group consisting of students coming from a privileged caste. They target those who do not belong to that caste. In the classroom they do not want to sit with others. Outside the classroom, they laugh at students and even fight when you do not listen to them.

This quote shows how socially disadvantaged students are prone to bullying in schools. Ideally, a teacher should also have a close eye on such behavior. However, no measures are taken by the teachers to make the school safe and friendly for the children. Ihsan further said:

"I can't report the bullying to the teacher because I know he will do nothing and I will be further disgraced by those students if they come to know about this."

Another unprofessional behavior of the teachers was to engage students in activities beyond their roles. One example, as shared by Afzal was asking them to clean the school. Afzal stated:

Yes, I was going to school in our neighbor but that school was not clean. Teachers asked us [students] to clean the school. The peon is there who gets salary for this purpose. Still they collect 50 rupees from each student for cleanliness of the school. Why should we clean the school? That's why I left the school. I told the teacher that he asks us to do the task of others.

Although the incident seems a minor one, it has such a massive impact upon the student that he decided to leave the school. This is mainly because at this age, students, especially the ones coming from low socio-economic background look for minor excuses to discontinue their education. Consequently, they require greater care and encouragement. If a teacher is not mindful of such critical aspects, the outcome is much predictable; students drop out of the school.

### **Poverty of Parents**

Parents' poverty was another significant factor leading to pulling children out of school. It was revealed that when a poor family's income drops suddenly, the family responds by pulling a boy out of the school so that he can make money to stabilize the economic situations of the family. As Ashraf stated:

I left school when I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade because my father had faced a fatal road accident in which his one leg was broken. He became impaired and physically disabled. He was the only earning member in my family. I had no other option but to leave the school and to earn something to afford the family's expenses.

As this representative quote shows, children drop out of school to support their family financially. When the father of a child gets disabled for some reasons or passes away, there is no other support mechanism to sustain that family. Unfortunately, those parents, because of their poverty, barely transfer some good fortune to the children including money or property. The family is now desperate and helpless. In such scenario, the elder child in the family, predominantly male, looks for some earning opportunities to support the family as sustaining the family is more important than their education, further, believing that investing education does not guarantee a good livelihood for them in future.

Whereas some children drop out of school as there are no earning members in their families, others drop out to support their large families. Arif, for example, revealed that there were around 15 members in his family, and only his uncle was doing some labor work. The whole family was depending on the meagre amount his uncle was earning. "My father is not working while my uncle hardly gets 15000 rupees in a month. It was very difficult for him to feed 15 people. Yes, we have to pay house rent, electric bill and other utilities", Arif stated. Culturally, there is joint family system especially when living separately becomes challenging. Siblings and cousins depend on each other for their survival. However, Arif's uncle was unable to afford all the expenses of the large joint family. So he dropped out of the school to be a helping hand to his uncle.

Another reason associated with the poverty of parents that results in drop out children is the school

expenses. Although public schools provide free education, parents prefer sending their children to private schools owing to the perceived quality of these schools. However, as household expenses increase due to certain reasons, parents face difficulty in paying the tuition fee which the private schools charge. As Ashraf stated:

I was going to a private school just close to my house. My father is working in a factory. My home expenses were increasing and so was our school tuition fee. But my father's salary remained the same. So my father asked me to leave that school and attend a public school. I didn't want to go to public school as their teaching is not good.

Again, poverty pulls the child out of a private school. He does not want to go to public school owing to their perceived low quality. The general perception in the context is that a public school does nothing to the enrolled children. There is no guarantee of job for the graduates attending public schools. Therefore, they prefer working over studying. Consequently, children mainly because of their poor financial background drop out of schools and start working.

### **Challenges Out-of-School Children Face**

As children drop out of school are forced by the pushing or pulling factors, they turn to child labor that robs their early age enjoyments and make them prone to a variety of challenges placing heavy burdens upon their delicate shoulders. The biggest challenge for them is the insufficient amount and heavy responsibility. This is the time they are exploited through engaging them in long hour labor and paying them very little. As Saleh reported:

I work at flower shop from 7 am to 10 pm. The shop owner gives me 350 rupees only. I am elder son in my family, all burden of the responsibilities falls on my shoulders. My father is sick all the time. Life is very hard for me as I can't fulfil the demands of my home such as house rent, food, and medicine.

As this quote suggests, how challenging is life for children who start working to support their family. This is the age when they should enjoy life. However, they hardly get time to sleep and rest. What they get in return is so little that they cannot fulfil the needs of their families. They live in rented houses. Along with the house rent, the child is expected to feed the family members and to buy medicine for his sick father. The amount in his disposition for all these expenses is 350 rupees (around one and half US dollars). How challenging is life for this child!

The second biggest challenge for a child as he starts working is the attitude of the boss or business owner whom the child works with. It is quite hard for a child to get an earning opportunity in the context where so many individuals are looking for employment options. The child will be engaged because he expects less amount compared with adult job seekers. However, he will have to face the harsh behavior of his boss. Any mistake from him or being late to work will not be tolerated. As Saleh revealed:

He expects me to reach there at 6am in the morning. At times I go there without having breakfast. When I am late for a couple of minutes, he threatens me by saying that he will hire someone else. If something wrong happens, he penalizes me for that. Once a bunch of flowers dropped down on the road when I was carrying them. He cut down my 30 rupees for that. I don't want to work there but I have no other option.

This representative quote illustrates the challenges children face while working. How hard is it for a nine year old child to get up and report to work at 6pm? At times, he even goes to work without having breakfast. The boss will not bear if the child is late to work for a couple of minutes. A child at this age is naughty by nature. However, there is no possibility for him to enjoy what nature has bestowed upon him. Any mistake even if it is very minor will result in penalty or discontinuation of his employment which he will never afford at any cost. Consequently, the life of a child leaving school and working to earn is full of hardships and miseries.

### **Aspirations of the Out-of-School Children**

The pushing and pulling conditions have placed these children out of schools, otherwise, they demonstrate great desire to get education. The out of school children interviewed for this research believed that education could have a positive lasting effect on their future. Ashraf revealed that:

Education is a good thing. Everyone should get it to sustain one's life. Education is enlightenment for me. I miss my school so much because I believe education can solve all my problems. If I was able to get a government job, all my problems could have been solved. When I was a kid, I always aspired to be an army officer. But alas! It is impossible now.

This representative quote reveals so many insights about the aspirations of the out of school children.

Although they are so young, they realize the importance of education. They understand that education is the only solution for the problems they face and will continue facing. Like so many other children, they aspire to get a good status, government job such as army officer. But it was quite emotional for them to declare that they will not achieve this dream as they discontinued their education. Thus, being out of school not only snatches their childhood enjoyments but also keeps them away from achieving their dreams.

It was more appealing to listen to the aspiration of Ihsan who wanted to be a teacher but could not fulfill this dream. As he stated:

I had a dream to be a teacher and to be a loyal government servant. Teaching would have enabled me to earn and to help others in their education. Now I am confined to the tailor shop. Business is good but education is matchless. Nothing can replace education.

The word 'loyal' suggests that, if given the opportunity, he could have demonstrated greater commitment working as a teacher. But his dream remains a dream only. How miserable is it for the child who wanted to be a teacher but ends up in a tailor shop. These children feel that education is the only key to fulfill their dreams. Since they have no way to continue their education, they are unable to fulfill their dreams. As they missed education, they see their future at stake.

## Discussion

This research revealed the pushing and pulling factors resulting in drop out of children from school. It also unveiled the challenges out of school children face. In line with previous research (see, for example, Adamu & Dikko, 2017; Asad, 2009), this research showed that poverty is one of the most important pulling factor for out of school children. Poverty vis-à-vis the rising cost of basic necessities affects livelihoods and thus lives of people (Asad, 2009). When a poor family's income drops suddenly, the family responds by pulling a boy out of the school so that he can make money to stabilize the economic situations of the family. As presented in the results section, majority of children interviewed for this research left school to be an earning member of their families. In some cases, the large families and limited number of earning members forced the children to leave school to support the family through some labor to enhance their financial capacity. In some cases, unfortunately, there was no other earning member in the family as parents of those children either passed away or were disable and thus unable to do some labor work. The economic plight of the poor (daily wagers especially), which are in considerable numbers in province of Sindh where this research was conducted, worsened further due to COVID-19 pandemic and recent floods, exacerbated the social and educational inequalities pushing the already Out of School Children into further marginalization.

The second significant factor was the role of school that worked as a push factor. Children experienced such forces such teachers' behavior, physical punishment, favoritism, and bullying. The poor teaching practices of teachers lead to the poor academic performance of children (Mughal, 2020) resulting in reduced confidence of parents on schools. The weak relationship between students and teachers and academic failure of students (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011), along with other unfavorable factors eventually push a child out of the school. Unfortunately, school environment often is less enabling to create sense of belonging amidst students and friendly environment to engage children in joyful learning. It calls for schools to be conscious of the hidden curriculum it creates that pushes the children out of the school. In addition, school policies and management practices should correct those actions that result in students' drop outs.

As children drop out of school owing to either push or pull factor, they become vulnerable to the societal forces that exploit them making their lives miserable. In most cases, they enter the child labor market which not only deprives them of their early years' enjoyments but also get them exposed to an environment which is opposed to their dignity and harmful for their moral, social and ethical development. They have to work for long hours for a very minimal return. Although there are laws against child labor in Pakistan (see, for example, Employment of Children Act, 1991), a child as young as of nine years age was found working for as long as 15 hours a day. What he gets in return is insufficient to afford the expenses given the needs of a large family and disable or sick parents. The behaviors of the business owner whom these children work with are too harsh. The children have high aspirations, and they acknowledge education would have helped them to address their poverty. But now they realize that it is impossible to get education and to overcome the poverty. They are destined to remain poor and miserable. The psychological impact of all these challenges on a little child can be well imagined.

These apparently simple conclusions carry significant implications for policymakers, civil society, and educational reformers. Something that is within the approach to overcome the issue of drop outs is to control

the pushing factors. Significant improvement can be brought by addressing the issues of teachers' behavior, physical punishment, favoritism, bullying and policies less favoring the disadvantaged children. A child-friendly school is more likely to retain those children who look for minor excuses to drop out of school. This can be achieved by purposely training teachers with a focus on developing child-friendly schools. Similarly, the schools that charge equal tuition fee from the students of financially poor families should reconsider their policies to make their school more affordable and accessible for every child.

The question that will consistently perplex both academics and practitioners, however, is how to address the pulling factors. Majority of the children interviewed for this research dropped out of schools to support their family who were otherwise helpless. Ideally, state should be responsible to support such families so that their children will continue availing education; their basic right. Consequently, either the family or the child has to suffer. The dominant practice is to make the child suffer. State should identify and support those families who depend on their young children for their survival. Another important step in this scenario is to strictly implement child labor laws so that the sufferings of a child during work can be minimized. Designing and implementing curriculum for working children would be another significant measure to develop required life skills of out of school children.

## CONCLUSION

Although international declarations, national policies recognize education as a basic right of every child irrespective of his/her background, race, gender and location, a good number of children across the world especially in the developing countries such as Pakistan are still out of school. As this research showed, there are pushing and pulling factors forcing children out of school and, thus, depriving them of their basic right. The pushing factors are quite within the domain of schools that can be corrected and addressed through re-culturing schools; making them child-friendly, having flexible curriculum and inclusive pedagogies. However, the bigger challenges related to society that need to be collectively addressed are the grave issues of social inequalities, social hierarchies, and resultant exclusions.

For SDG-4 to be practically effective on grounds in Sindh or elsewhere for that matter, education needs to be re-imagined to make education of Out of School Children possible. Furthermore, it should be accepted that, given the grave and complex relationship between education and social inequalities, as highlighted by this research, education as social institution cannot address alone the complex socio-economic problems that afflict educational chances of the Out of School Children. Education should be supported and fortified through multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholders' partnerships. In a nut shell, SDG-4 needs socio-political will, commitment, and scaffolding of social security and social support for the out-of-school children to achieve their aspirations of inclusion. Although we have not been able to find convincing solutions to the pulling factors, we hope this research will provoke further discussion, and thereby serve as a catalyst to the debate and actions for inclusive spaces and practices for the out-of-school children in Sindh in particular, and in Pakistan and beyond in general.

## Competing Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

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