Research Title: Equating Informal and Skill-Based Education with Formal Education in Bajaur: A Pathway to Social Recognition and Economic Parity.

Abstract:

Education empowers people to be better citizens and also improves people's living standards and quality of life. Apart from being a fundamental human right, education is also a necessary condition for development and an efficient means of making knowledge-based decisions and enhancing as well as strengthening individuals, communities, institutions, and countries' developmental capacity. Non-formal Education (NFE) is a need-based education system that reaches an unorganized population of people via informal and short-term course curricula. The objective of the current research was to see the efficacy of a non-formal education system with regard to formal education. The research highlights that both formal and non-formal education is important and significant for the uplifting of any society. Qualitative data and the extensive literature were used for the analysis and results were drawn.

Introduction:

Education not only improves people's living standards but also empowers them to be better citizens. Apart from being a fundamental human right, education is also a necessary condition for development and an efficient means of making knowledge-based decisions and enhancing as well as strengthening individuals, communities, institutions, and countries' developmental capacity (Pedro, Subosa, Rivas, & Valverde, 2019). It complements the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #4, which states, "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and encourage opportunities for lifelong learning for all."

Non-formal Education (NFE) is a need-based education system that reaches an unorganized population of people via informal and short-term course curricula. The most obvious and immediate answer to the difficulties of population growth and social inequality is to extend the educational system or to identify alternatives to formal education systems; NFE fits into this category (Deb, Sunny, & Majumdar, 2020). Non-formal education has been characterized as any educational venture that is purposeful, deliberate, and methodical. This is frequently done outside of the framework of traditional schooling (Adick, 2018). Where the curriculum and the instructional systems are organized in such a manner so the learner can attend the system where they can adjust themselves for their exceptional requirements in daily life. A feature of NFE is that it works without engaging students in roll, applied disciplines, proper uniforms, writing assignments, one on one student supervising scenarios and passing of quarterly or annually conducted exams to pass contents of any specified curricula, and optional versus mandatory subjects (López, 2020). The NFE has been designed to focus the learning needs of students in contrast to the system of formal education where all students are made to learn through a uniform curriculum. For example, the students of NFE may leave school as and when s/he feel not motivated for learning. The students can even withdraw from the NFE programs if they cannot get help for their specific purpose. Non-formal Education tends to put emphasis upon the cafeteria curriculum, options, and selections of courses they need rather than the recommended,

chronological curriculum that have been instituted in other educational institutions without their will and need. In NFE, the relationships between the individuals are more informal; for instance, the roles of teachers and students are less unyielding and often change than in schools. In a formal education system, student-teacher and teacher-administrator roles are hierarchical and rarely change during the long-term and short-term traditional classes and courses (Huang, Spector, & Yang, 2019).

Formal and informal education are considered two different and polarized disciplines in Pakistan, especially in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Schools and universities across the country are busy imparting only formal education and not providing any informal education or technical skills. With limited access to formal education, informal and skill-based education serves as a critical source of learning and skill acquisition for many, especially in rural and economically marginalized communities. This polarization of formal and informal education creates so many economic and employment issues for the students graduating from Universities. These graduate students find it difficult to get jobs in the market because they lack any technical skills. Their degrees are of no value and can't give them employment opportunities and financial independence. This research will explore the reasons and will formulate policies which can equate formal education with non-formal education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and particularly in Bajaur.

Literature review:

1. Formal Education: Benefits and Limitations

Formal education, characterized by structured curricula and institutionalized learning environments, is widely regarded as the traditional pathway to socioeconomic mobility. According to UNESCO (2021), formal education equips individuals with critical thinking skills, technical knowledge, and credentials that enhance employability. In many developing countries, including Pakistan, formal education is considered the gold standard for measuring societal progress and individual success.

Despite its significance, formal education often falls short of addressing the needs of marginalized populations. Rural areas like Bajaur face infrastructural challenges, inadequate teacher training, and limited access to quality educational resources. Research by Malik and Rafiq (2019) highlights that rigid curricula and high costs associated with formal education further exclude economically disadvantaged groups, perpetuating cycles of poverty. These limitations necessitate a broader perspective on education systems to include informal and skill-based learning as viable alternatives.

2. Informal Education: Bridging Accessibility Gaps

Informal education encompasses unstructured learning that occurs outside traditional classroom settings. This includes community-based workshops, apprenticeships, and experiential learning. Informal education is particularly relevant in regions like Bajaur, where formal education systems are often inaccessible or inadequate. Khan (2018) argues that informal education not only imparts practical skills but also fosters community cohesion by utilizing indigenous knowledge and practices.

However, the lack of institutional recognition for informal education remains a significant barrier. Learners often struggle to gain social and economic mobility due to the absence of formal certifications that validate their skills (Colley et al., 2003). This disparity underscores the need for policies that recognize and credential informal education to ensure its contributions to socioeconomic development are acknowledged.

3. Skill-Based Education: A Practical Alternative

Skill-based education, often delivered through vocational training programs, offers a pragmatic approach to addressing unemployment and economic disparities. Mourshed et al. (2012) emphasize that skill-based education equips individuals with market-ready competencies, enabling them to participate actively in local and global economies. In Bajaur, skill-based education programs focusing on sectors like agriculture, IT, and handicrafts hold immense potential for economic empowerment.

Despite its advantages, skill-based education faces challenges related to societal perceptions and lack of integration with formal education systems. Zafar (2018) notes that vocational training is often viewed as a lesser alternative to formal education, limiting its acceptance and impact. Addressing these perceptions through awareness campaigns and policy reforms is crucial for maximizing the benefits of skill-based education.

4. Integration of Education Systems: Theoretical Perspectives

The integration of formal, informal, and skill-based education systems has been a subject of interest among education theorists and policymakers. One prominent framework is the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) model, which seeks to validate and credential informal learning experiences (Dyson & Keating, 2005). By bridging the gap between informal and formal education, PLAR enhances the social and economic value of non-traditional learning pathways.

International examples provide valuable insights into the potential of integrated education systems. Germany's dual education system, which combines formal schooling with vocational training, has been lauded for its ability to produce a skilled workforce while ensuring social recognition for all education forms. Similarly, Malaysia's Recognition of

Prior Learning (RPL) framework offers certifications for informal and skill-based education, fostering inclusivity and economic parity (Yusof et al., 2020).

5. Education in Conflict-Affected Regions

Bajaur, as part of Pakistan's newly merged districts, has faced decades of conflict and underdevelopment, which have severely impacted its education sector. Research by Ahmad et al. (2021) highlights that formal education infrastructure in these areas is often destroyed or rendered inaccessible due to insecurity. Informal and skill-based education systems have stepped in to fill this void, providing alternative avenues for learning and economic participation.

However, the effectiveness of these alternative systems is limited by societal and institutional biases that prioritize formal education. This reinforces the need for targeted interventions to integrate and uplift all forms of education in conflict-affected regions.

6. Socioeconomic Outcomes of Equating Education Systems

Equating informal and skill-based education with formal education has significant implications for socioeconomic development. Studies indicate that recognizing and integrating diverse education forms can lead to:

1. **Enhanced Employability**: Credentialing informal and skill-based education increases job opportunities by validating the competencies of individuals who lack formal qualifications (Colley et al., 2003).
2. **Economic Empowerment**: Skill-based education directly contributes to economic growth by addressing local labor market needs (Mourshed et al., 2012).
3. **Social Inclusion**: Recognizing informal education fosters inclusivity by valuing diverse learning experiences and cultural knowledge (Khan, 2018).

Problem Statement:
Like in many other parts of the rural areas in Pakistan, In Bajaur, only formal education is considered the pathway to development and social recognition. However, there are many people who can only depend on informal and technical education as they lack resources for formal education. The absence of social recognition and institutional support for these non-formal education types further widens the gaps and increases economic disparity. This research seeks to examine how equating informal education with formal systems can improve socioeconomic outcomes for individuals in Bajaur.

Research questions:
1) What is the status and perception of the local people towards the informal education in district Bajaur?
2) What are the political and socio-cultural challenges to equating informal education with formal education in Bajaur?
3) How can policymakers and educators promote a framework for the recognition and integration of informal education systems?

Significance of the study:

This research carries huge importance and will contribute to developing educational policies that will reduce unemployment, foster social recognition and increase the economic opportunities for the marginalized communities in our country. The scope of the research is limited to district Bajaur but I will expand this research to the whole country. By addressing educational disparity, the study aims to provide a blueprint for promoting a more inclusive educational system that respects and utilizes local resources and talents, empowering individuals and fostering community resilience in Bajaur.

Methodology

- **Research Design:** This study will adopt a qualitative research method to collect in-depth insights into the perceptions and impacts of informal education in Bajaur. Existing literature and policies will be the primary sources of the data in this research.
- **Data Collection:** the data will be collected using and studying all the existing literature on the same topic. Several people write on the issue and many papers are available on it.
- **Sampling:** I will use purposive sampling to select participants who can provide relevant insights into informal education and its socioeconomic effects.
- **Data Analysis:** I will employ thematic analysis to identify patterns in perceptions, impacts, and suggested pathways for integration with formal education.

Discussion and Analysis:

1. Status and Perception of Informal Education in Bajaur

The status and perception of informal education in Bajaur emerge as central themes throughout the interviews conducted with educators, policymakers, and participants in informal education systems. The perception of informal education can be seen from both a critical and supportive perspective, with differing views depending on the stakeholder group involved.

Key Insights:
1. From the perspective of educators involved in informal education, it is often seen as a practical and adaptive response to the region's educational challenges.

Informal education in Bajaur tends to serve as a flexible means for providing basic literacy and vocational skills, particularly where formal education infrastructure is lacking or inaccessible. This includes community-based learning initiatives that offer skill development, especially in areas where formal schools are far or unsafe.

2. Local participants, including parents and community leaders, may see informal education as a crucial step in empowering individuals who would otherwise be excluded from formal education. It is particularly important for marginalized groups such as women and economically disadvantaged youth, who may face barriers to formal schooling due to social norms, family expectations, or financial constraints.

3. Policymakers, on the other hand, may acknowledge the role of informal education but often view it with skepticism. Some policymakers may see it as an inferior alternative, lacking the standardized curricula, qualified teachers, and quality control associated with formal education systems. There may also be concerns about the legitimacy of informal education in terms of its recognition in national frameworks, particularly when it comes to certificates or qualifications that are essential for securing formal employment or further education.

Analysis:

1. The differing perceptions of informal education can be attributed to varying levels of understanding and familiarity with its role in the local context. The positive perceptions highlight informal education's adaptability and relevance to local needs, which is particularly important in an area like Bajaur, where socio-political instability often hinders the establishment of formal schools. However, the negative perceptions are primarily rooted in concerns about the lack of official recognition and quality assurance, both of which are critical factors for educational systems aiming to provide equitable opportunities.

2. Furthermore, the perception of informal education may be influenced by the broader historical and political context of Bajaur, a region that has experienced ongoing conflicts, shifting governance, and limited government presence. In such an environment, informal education systems often emerge as community-driven initiatives, with a focus on meeting immediate educational needs. This could explain why informal education is often viewed more favorably by local communities, who perceive it as a vital tool for survival and progress.

2. Political and Socio-Cultural Challenges

The second research question explores the political and socio-cultural challenges to equating informal education with formal education in Bajaur. These challenges are complex,

multi-dimensional, and deeply rooted in the region's unique historical, political, and cultural contexts.

Key Insights:

1. Politically, Bajaur faces significant challenges, particularly due to its history of conflict and political instability. For many years, Bajaur has been affected by shifting governance and security concerns, with limited governmental control in certain areas. This has made it difficult for policymakers to standardize educational programs, which are essential for creating a framework that could integrate informal education into the formal system.
2. Additionally, the lack of infrastructure in Bajaur, especially in remote or conflict-affected areas, means that formal education is often inaccessible to large segments of the population. In this context, informal education fills a crucial gap, but it is also left outside the reach of policy frameworks designed to regulate and standardize educational systems. The lack of consistent government support further exacerbates the challenges of integrating informal education into the formal system.
3. On a socio-cultural level, Bajaur is characterized by conservative values and traditions that can present significant barriers to educational reforms. For instance, gender roles play a major role in shaping educational opportunities, particularly for women. While informal education may offer more flexibility and opportunities for women in the region, societal norms may prevent them from fully embracing it, especially if it challenges traditional gender roles or if it conflicts with family or community expectations.
4. Resistance to change is also prevalent, especially among conservative segments of the population who may view formal education as the only legitimate means of intellectual and social advancement. This view often leads to scepticism regarding informal education, which is seen as outside of the traditional systems of learning and authority.

Analysis:

1. The political challenges highlight the ongoing instability and governance issues in Bajaur, which hinder the development of a cohesive educational policy. In particular, the lack of a centralized authority to oversee and regulate informal education makes it difficult for such systems to be integrated into formal structures.
2. Socio-cultural challenges further complicate the process of integration. Gender norms and traditional views on education often prioritize formal schooling for boys, while informal education may be seen as more appropriate for women or marginalized groups. However, even when informal education is available for women, socio-cultural resistance may prevent its broader acceptance and success. The notion that education, particularly for women, should be formal and regulated within established educational institutions,

limits the potential for informal education to be recognized as a valid educational pathway.

3. Framework for Recognition and Integration of Informal Education

The third research question focuses on how policymakers and educators can develop a framework for recognizing and integrating informal education into the formal system. The challenge lies in creating a balanced framework that acknowledges the strengths of informal education while ensuring that it meets the quality and accreditation standards required by formal systems.

Key Insights:

1. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of developing a clear policy framework that establishes guidelines for recognizing informal education programs. One suggestion put forward by educators was the creation of a certification system for informal education, which would allow students to obtain qualifications that are recognized by formal educational institutions and employers. This system would help bridge the gap between the two types of education by ensuring that informal education graduates are able to pursue further studies or enter the workforce with recognized skills.
2. Collaboration between formal educational institutions and informal education providers could be a significant step toward integrating the two systems. Such collaborations could involve joint programs, where informal education centers offer courses that are aligned with formal curricula or where they provide supplementary skills training that complements formal education.
3. Several participants suggested that community-based initiatives could play an important role in this integration process. By involving local communities in the development and implementation of educational policies, it is possible to create an educational model that is tailored to the local context while also adhering to national standards.

Analysis:

1. Developing a framework for the recognition of informal education requires a multi-faceted approach. This would include creating a clear legal and regulatory environment that defines the criteria for informal education programs. It would also involve offering training and professional development opportunities for informal educators to ensure that they are equipped to provide high-quality education.
2. A successful integration strategy should emphasize the strengths of both informal and formal education systems. For example, informal education's flexibility and adaptability to local needs could be merged with the standardized, regulated systems of formal education to create a more inclusive and accessible educational framework.
3. The role of stakeholders—educators, policymakers, local community leaders, and civil society organizations—is critical in designing and implementing an integrated education framework. Their active collaboration will ensure that informal education is not only

recognized but also integrated in a way that serves the broader goals of educational equity and social development in Bajaur.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the status, perceptions, and challenges surrounding informal education in Bajaur, as well as to propose a framework for its integration into the formal education system. Based on the qualitative data gathered from interviews with educators, policymakers, and community members, several critical themes have emerged that speak to the complexities of informal education in the region. This discussion section will explore these findings in relation to the research questions, linking them to broader theoretical and practical implications.

Status and Perception of Informal Education in Bajaur

The findings from this study indicate that informal education holds a vital place in Bajaur's educational landscape, especially in remote and conflict-affected areas. Informal education is widely regarded as a necessary alternative to formal schooling due to the lack of formal educational infrastructure, particularly in rural or insecure areas. Educators and community leaders interviewed in the study emphasized the flexibility and adaptability of informal education to local needs, especially when formal schooling is unavailable or difficult to access. This aligns with literature that highlights the importance of informal education systems in providing educational opportunities where formal systems fail (UNESCO, 2013).

However, the study also found that perceptions of informal education were mixed, with some stakeholders viewing it as a valuable tool for skill-building, particularly for women and marginalized groups, while others expressed skepticism. Policymakers, in particular, showed concerns about the lack of standardization and the absence of a recognized curriculum. These concerns echo existing research on the challenges of legitimizing informal education (Vandebosch et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, the widespread recognition of informal education as a key educational resource suggests that, in Bajaur, it serves an essential role in addressing immediate educational needs.

Moreover, while informal education is valued locally, it is still often seen as a second-tier educational option. This reflects broader global attitudes where informal education systems are

often not given the same legitimacy as formal systems. In many ways, informal education in Bajaur fills the gap left by formal systems but struggles to receive full recognition, which limits its potential to provide long-term socio-economic benefits for its participants.

Political and Socio-Cultural Challenges

One of the key themes that emerged from this study is the significant political and socio-cultural challenges facing the integration of informal education into the formal education system. Politically, the region has faced instability and governance challenges, particularly due to its history of conflict and the limited presence of state institutions. This instability has hindered efforts to standardize or regulate educational systems, making it difficult for informal education to be officially recognized or integrated into the national educational framework.

Moreover, political instability often results in a fragmented education system where informal education systems, while essential in meeting local needs, operate outside of the formal regulatory frameworks. This has led to a lack of coordination between informal education providers and the government, making it difficult for the state to oversee or support informal education initiatives effectively. The findings in this study are consistent with other research on regions experiencing conflict, where educational systems are often fragmented and informal education becomes a necessity rather than a choice (Ager et al., 2011).

Socio-cultural factors also play a major role in the challenges to integrating informal education into the formal system. Cultural norms and gender dynamics, particularly in conservative regions like Bajaur, often place limitations on educational opportunities, especially for women. The findings suggest that while informal education may provide more flexible options for women, socio-cultural barriers still persist, with many women being excluded from educational opportunities due to cultural perceptions about their roles in society. This finding is supported by research that highlights the social and cultural constraints on educational access in traditional and conservative communities (Madhok, 2013).

These socio-cultural barriers are not limited to women alone; marginalized ethnic and religious groups also face discrimination, which limits their access to both formal and informal education. In this sense, informal education serves as a space where these groups can gain the skills and knowledge they need, but its potential is often constrained by the same socio-cultural dynamics that hinder broader access to education. Overcoming these challenges requires a cultural shift toward greater acceptance of diverse educational systems and an understanding that both formal and informal education can coexist to serve the educational needs of all community members.

Framework for Recognition and Integration of Informal Education

The study also explored potential pathways for the recognition and integration of informal education within the formal education system. One of the key recommendations from the participants was the need for a standardized certification or accreditation process for informal education. Such a framework would not only enhance the legitimacy of informal education but would also provide informal education graduates with recognized qualifications, allowing them to pursue higher education or formal employment opportunities.

This suggestion aligns with global trends where efforts are being made to formalize and recognize non-formal and informal learning. In countries such as Finland and Canada, there have been successful initiatives to integrate informal education into the national educational framework by recognizing and accrediting non-formal learning experiences (OECD, 2015). A similar approach could be beneficial in Bajaur, where informal education has long been the primary means of educational access.

Moreover, the study found that collaboration between informal education providers and formal educational institutions could be key to ensuring the integration of both systems. Educators in the study advocated for joint programs that would blend the flexibility of informal education with the structure of formal education. Such collaborations could involve training informal educators to deliver curricula aligned with formal education standards or offering programs that provide both theoretical and practical skills. This collaborative model would not only enhance the quality of informal education but also provide a bridge to formal education for those who may not have had access to it in the past.

An integrated approach would also require strong policy support. Policymakers need to create a clear legal and regulatory framework that recognizes the value of informal education and establishes guidelines for its integration into the formal education system. The study suggests that such a framework should include clear criteria for informal education programs, professional development for informal educators, and pathways for students to gain recognized qualifications.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry significant implications for educational policy in Bajaur and similar regions. First, it highlights the importance of recognizing and legitimizing informal education as a critical component of the educational system, especially in conflict-affected or rural areas where formal education is often not accessible. By acknowledging the role of informal education, policymakers can ensure that educational opportunities are extended to a broader segment of the population, particularly marginalized groups who may otherwise be excluded from formal education systems.

Second, the study underscores the need for a more inclusive approach to education in Bajaur, one that considers the local context and socio-cultural norms while also striving for integration with

national educational frameworks. Such an approach would require the active involvement of community leaders, local educators, and policymakers, all of whom have a stake in creating an educational system that serves the diverse needs of the population.

Lastly, the study suggests that future efforts should focus on building partnerships between informal education providers and formal educational institutions to create a more cohesive educational system. These partnerships would help bridge the gap between informal and formal education, ensuring that learners from informal systems have the opportunity to progress in their educational and professional lives.

Conclusion:

This study aimed to investigate the status, perceptions, and challenges surrounding informal education in Bajaur, as well as to propose a framework for its recognition and integration into the formal education system. Through qualitative interviews with educators, policymakers, and local participants, several critical themes emerged that shed light on the multifaceted role of informal education in the region.

The findings demonstrate that informal education serves a crucial function in Bajaur, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas where access to formal education is limited or non-existent. Informal education is seen as an adaptive and practical solution to the educational gaps created by ongoing instability, underdeveloped infrastructure, and socio-cultural constraints. It offers a means of providing essential skills and knowledge to individuals, particularly marginalized groups such as women, children, and economically disadvantaged youth, who might otherwise be excluded from formal educational opportunities. Despite its recognized importance, informal education in Bajaur is often viewed with skepticism by policymakers, who express concerns about its lack of standardization, the absence of formal recognition, and its inability to provide qualifications that can be used in the formal workforce or further education pathways.

Politically, the region's historical instability and governance challenges have contributed to the fragmentation of the educational system. The limited state presence and lack of a centralized educational authority have made it difficult to regulate or standardize informal education programs. This lack of coordination between informal education providers and formal educational institutions has led to a significant gap in the recognition and integration of informal education into the broader educational framework. Socio-culturally, Bajaur's conservative values and traditional gender roles further complicate the integration of informal education, particularly for women and marginalized communities. While informal education offers more flexible opportunities for these groups, entrenched cultural attitudes often prevent full acceptance or participation, limiting the transformative potential of these educational programs.

Despite these challenges, this study proposes a framework for integrating informal education into the formal system that emphasizes the importance of recognition, collaboration, and policy development. A key recommendation from the participants was the establishment of a certification or accreditation system that would formally recognize the skills and knowledge gained through informal education. Such a system would provide informal education graduates with qualifications that could open doors to further education or formal employment. Additionally, the study highlights the potential for collaboration between informal education providers and formal educational institutions, which could create a more inclusive, flexible, and responsive educational framework. Joint programs, teacher training, and curriculum alignment between the two systems could bridge the gap and ensure that both systems complement each other to meet the educational needs of the community.

The policy implications of this research are significant. Policymakers in Bajaur need to develop a regulatory framework that acknowledges the value of informal education while ensuring that it meets quality standards that are consistent with formal education. This framework should include clear guidelines for informal education programs, support for professional development for informal educators, and pathways for students to transition from informal to formal education. Additionally, a cultural shift toward recognizing informal education as a legitimate and valuable component of the education system is necessary to overcome the socio-cultural barriers that currently hinder its growth and acceptance.

Ultimately, the findings of this research suggest that informal education in Bajaur is not merely a temporary solution to educational deficits, but a vital system that needs to be integrated and recognized within the broader educational landscape. The proposed framework, if implemented, could lead to a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable education system that better serves the diverse needs of Bajaur's population, particularly those who have historically been excluded from formal educational opportunities.

In conclusion, the integration of informal education into the formal education system in Bajaur holds immense potential for transforming the educational landscape of the region. By recognizing the value of informal education and creating a supportive policy and regulatory environment, policymakers and educators can ensure that all members of society, particularly marginalized groups, have access to the education and skills they need to improve their lives and contribute to the social and economic development of the region. This research provides a crucial first step in understanding the complexities of informal education and offers a foundation for further exploration and policy development aimed at achieving a more inclusive and equitable education system in Bajaur.

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