

Coloniality, Resistance, and Reimagining the Future: Exploring the Influence of Language Policies on Learner Identities in Pakistani Schools

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This paper explores student experiences of language-in-education policies through the lens of colonial processes and traces such logic as they operate through educational institutions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews of high school seniors and recent graduates, I investigate how students in Pakistani secondary schools interact with intersecting modern/colonial structures that rationalize existing hierarchies of power along colonial, racial/ethnic, and gendered lines. The findings suggest that students have internalized dominant colonial ideologies and they also constitute key sites for decolonial resistance at the same time. Student experiences of colonial hierarchies in the school were mediated by their socioeconomic class, gender, ethnic and linguistic background. However, despite internalizing dominant hierarchies, many students understood their experiences through the framing of colonial power structures, which simultaneously positioned them as potential actors for decolonial resistance. In this paper, I analyze their experiences in detail, and in doing so, this study adds to the growing voices in the field of international and comparative education that critically examine the role of modern/colonial formations in the structuring of education globally.

Keywords: coloniality, Pakistan, decolonial resistance, language of instruction, education policy

Introduction

Interviewer: Does your school have language rules? Shahid:¹ Yes. In our [English-medium] school, anyone caught speaking a language other than English was made to deliver a one-minute speech in front of the whole school during the next day's morning assembly. One girl used her speech to criticize the administration, [saying] that forcing students to give a speech for violating the language rules was humiliating. The admin turned her mic off, but the whole crowd was cheering. She was expelled.

Since the state apparatus in Pakistan continues to operate on colonial structures, English remains the language of official work and holds considerable currency in the labor market. Social class and upward mobility, including access to higher education and well-paying jobs, are determined through proficiency and education in English (Rahman, 2004). In the education sector, colonial-era policies have divided schooling into

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

two distinct streams. Higher education institutions and private schools provide education in the English language, whereas government schools employ Urdu, the national language, as the medium of instruction (Coleman, 2010). Such division along language lines, in addition to the unequal distribution of resources between public and private secondary schools, has formed deep tracks within the education system, making English-medium synonymous with high-quality and upper class, and Urdu-medium with low-quality education for the poor (Shamim, 2011).

While economic disparities arising from unequal access to education are compounded by two-tiered language-in-education policies (Durrani, 2012; Mahboob & Jain, 2016; Mustafa, 2015), educational institutions that are based in colonial ideologies have also been shown to influence learner identities and perceptions of self and others in complex ways (Fanon, 1967; Rahman, 2004; Said, 1994; Shamim & Rashid, 2019). Although extensively studied in other post-colonial contexts (Fanon, 1967; Kalua, 2009; Said, 1994; Shange, 2020), this influence remains understudied in Pakistan. This study aims to fill this gap and understand how student beliefs about self and others are shaped by their experiences of language-in-education policies—through semi-structured interviews of Pakistani high school seniors and recent graduates. The purpose of this inquiry is to explore how students in Pakistani secondary schools interact with intersecting modern/colonial² structures that rationalize existing hierarchies of power along colonial, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gendered lines. Thus, the research questions are: How do students experience language-in-education policies in their everyday interactions in the school? How are existing neocolonial class structures perceived and reproduced through embodied practices and student presentations of self? How do students contest shared meanings and how do they modify them in their daily interactions in the school? The findings suggest that students have internalized dominant colonial ideologies and that, at the same time, they also constitute key sites for decolonial resistance. Student experiences of colonial hierarchies in the school were mediated by their socioeconomic class, gender, ethnic and linguistic background. However, despite internalizing dominant hierarchies, many students understood their experiences through the framing of colonial power structures, which simultaneously positioned them as potential actors for decolonial resistance. In this paper, I analyze their experiences in detail, and in doing so, this study adds to the growing voices in the field of international and comparative education (Rahman, 2002; Mustafa, 2015; Khoja-Moolji, 2017; Degraff, 2019; Allweiss, 2021) that critically examine the role of modern/colonial formations in the structuring of education globally.

Historical Background: The Colonial Project and English Education

An important development in establishing Western-centric education in pre-partition colonial India was Bentick's English Education Act of 1835, which established a

² I use the term modern/colonial in light of Walter Mignolo's (2000) analysis of modernity and coloniality as two sides of the same coin, and two aspects of one reality. Mignolo (2000) argues that modernity, ushered through the Industrial Revolution, was made possible through the exploitation of colonies in the Global South, and is thus, intimately related to coloniality, which he calls the "dark side of modernity."

hierarchy between Western and Indigenous knowledges. The British administration deemed it important to educate its Indian subjects in Western knowledges in an effort to “form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” according to British official Thomas Macaulay (Macaulay & Young, 1935, p. 359). Carnoy (1974) has argued that the purpose of this policy was to instill a deep awe of English language and culture among the Indian elite and a deep disdain for their own background. Khoja-Moolji (2017) argues that the collective effect of this policy was the establishment of English knowledges as dominant and a displacement of the prevalent pluralistic conceptualization of knowledges. Durrani (2012) posits that this education policy divided the locals into two classes: the elite—to be trained and educated in English—and the masses, who were to be taught in the vernacular or not at all. The consequence of such a division for post-independence Pakistan, according to Khoja-Moolji (2017) was a deeply tracked education system, the valorization of English over local languages, and a heavy reliance on European and American experts for policy making.

Post-Independence Education Policies: The Colonial Model Continues

After the departure of the British and the subsequent partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan, political power was transferred over to the English-trained local elite. It was in the interests of this class to maintain existing structures of sociopolitical power based on colonial ideologies (Carnoy, 1974). As a result, British-era language policies in education were recycled (Durrani, 2012) and political independence changed relatively little in Pakistani educational institutions, transitioning them from colonial to neocolonial configurations (Altbach, 1971). English continues to be the working language of the most powerful institutions of the state, including the higher bureaucracy, judiciary, armed forces, and elite corporate institutions (Rahman, 2016). Thus, English is accorded high social capital and is a symbol of power that is intimately tied to the post-independence social structure. The local elite class has thus used English to consolidate power and reproduce existing social structures that benefit them (Islam, 2018; Rahman, 2002; Shamim & Rashid, 2019). English and Urdu are Pakistan’s official languages, while the development of other vernacular languages has been left to the provincial governments. Of all the local languages, however, only Urdu, Sindhi, and Pashto³ are employed as media of instruction in public schools. In describing post-colonial language policy, Durrani (2012) highlighted that there was little political interest in maintaining the elements of linguistic diversity in Pakistan’s language-in-education policies. Comparing post-colonial language policies to their colonial counterparts, Durrani argued that Pakistan’s education system perpetuated the colonial-era policy: English-medium education for the elite and Urdu-medium for the masses.

³ Sindhi has an official role as medium of instruction in primary schools in the province of Sindh while Pashto is used in government schools in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Coleman, 2010).

This dichotomy between English and vernacular-medium education has been a recurrent theme in Pakistan over the years. After independence, the official stance of the government was to transfer all official work and education to Urdu, however, this move was perpetually forestalled by the elite because it went against their political and economic interests (Rahman, 2019). English-medium schools thus continue to be popular among Pakistani elite and middle-class parents as a ticket to their children's upward social mobility.

Educational Institutions: An Overview

While it is impossible to fully account for the diverse variability in educational institutions, schools can be divided roughly into the following categories: (1) elite private English-medium schools, (2) non-elite, low-cost private English-medium schools, (3) vernacular-medium government schools, and (4) religious schools (madrasas) (Coleman, 2010). Most university education is conducted in English, with limited majors in the arts and languages offered in Urdu or other local languages. Gross enrollment ratios across Pakistan continue to remain low, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels at 43 percent and 8.9 percent, respectively in 2019⁴ (World Bank, 2020). Table 1 provides a breakdown of K-12 students by type of institution. Most students in both rural and urban areas attend public schools, and the share of students in private schools is larger in urban areas compared to rural districts. More recent data is not available.

Table 1

Percentage of children currently in school – by level and type of school

Province \ Type of school	2018–19		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Pakistan:			
Government	39	69	57
Private	56	25	37
Religious institution	1	1	1
NGO/Trust	3	6	5
Others	0	0	0
Matric:			
Government	53	72	63
Private	43	24	33
Religious institution	2	1	1
NGO/Trust	2	3	3
Others	0	0	0

Note: Matric level includes 9th and 10th grade. Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

⁴ More information on Pakistan's educational statistics can be found in Pakistan Bureau of Statistics PSLM survey report (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Those who can afford to educate their children do so through private schools where educational quality is proportional to tuition fees, while those from low-income backgrounds educate their children in tuition-free government schools of poorer quality (Coleman, 2010). In a neoliberal global economy that increasingly attaches utilitarian terms to education, this tracking is a source of deep frustration for those impacted by poor-quality education and subsequent exclusion from the economy (Shamim & Rashid, 2019). Even though educational experiences vary greatly throughout the country, a common thread among them is the shared “colonial wound” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 161) that is a salient feature of educational institutions across the country.

Literature Review: Colonialism, Language, and Education

Colonial Formations: From Global to Local Contexts

In her study of coloniality and Chuj Maya youth in Guatemala, Allweiss (2021) argues that “education, development, and Indigenous youth are simultaneously targets of racialized colonial logics and important sites of decolonial resistance” (p. 208). Framing the positioning of these youth at the intersection of modern/colonial racialized and gendered logics, Allweiss links their struggle to that of marginalized youth around the world who are targeted by global webs of modern/colonial hierarchies. Through her work, Allweiss calls on scholars of comparative education to unpack and disrupt global geographies and logics of modern/colonial exploitation that intersect with education globally and amplify spaces of resistance and decolonial possibility. This study builds upon Allweiss’ analysis of global colonial hierarchies while paying close attention to the context-specific features of how modern/colonial logics manifest themselves in the Pakistani case where, according to Khoja-Moolji (2017), the trauma of colonial annexation of lands is still part of the fabric of society and must be attended to in addition to colonialism’s transmutation into global capitalist relations of exploitation. Hence, in her presentation of restorative and reparative work through a decolonial praxis, Khoja-Moolji emphasizes the need for attention to “the intersection of histories of classic colonialism with wider webs of class, capital and identity” (p. S148). Thus, in this study, I understand the experiences of Pakistani youth as mediated by their positioning along modern/colonial racialized and gendered logics.

Colonialism and Education

In describing the role of education in the colonial project, Ashcroft et al. (2003) argue that education acts a “tool of colonialist subjectification [which] established the locally British or English as normative through critical claims of ‘universality’ of the values embodied in English literary texts and represented the colonized to themselves as inherently inferior beings” (p. 426). Education has thus been a crucial tool in the artillery of empire to perform what Gramsci (1971) has called *domination by consent*. Post-colonial scholars across the world have described schools as central to the modern/colonial project by privileging European knowledges while seeking to erase indigenous knowledge ecologies and modes of being (Allweiss, 2021; Fanon, 1967; Khoja-Moolji, 2017; Said, 1994). In the Arab context, Said (1994) spoke about his own education and “the tremendous spiritual wound” (p. 7) caused from being taught by domineering foreigners to respect foreign norms more than his own. Said concluded that his education deemed indigenous knowledge and culture to be congenitally inferior and a source of deep embarrassment. This inferiority complex associates local norms and knowledges with

ideas of shame and embarrassment, the only remedy of which is presented through anglicization, or becoming what Rahman (2004) has called “brown Englishmen” (p. 79).

Altbach (1971) has noted that even after the end of direct colonization, advanced nations continue to influence their former colonies and other developing countries, including the educational systems and intellectual lives therein. In the case of former colonies such as Pakistan, the influence of global colonial relations is augmented by the perpetuation of colonial power structures by a strong local elite class that continue to manipulate these structures for their own benefit. This is reflected in Pakistan’s education system through language-in-education policies as well as administrative structures of schools. A privileging of modern/colonial knowledges and values over indigenous ones is a common feature of students’ educational experiences (Rahman, 2004), emphasizing the importance of understanding coloniality not as an event of the past, but rather a structure (Wolfe, 2006) that continues to organize the lives of youth in subaltern locations globally.

Language Ideologies and Colonial Power Structures

Language ideologies are defined by linguistic anthropologists as a set of beliefs about language that serve as rationalizations of language usage and structure (Silverstein, 1976). Language ideologies “locate the meaningfulness of linguistic signs in relation to other signs in particular historical, political-economic, and socio-cultural contexts” (Rosa & Burdick, 2017, p. 103). Ideologies around language are thus never really about language but serve to rationalize or justify societal structures on the basis of linguistic distinction. Language does not exist in a vacuum but is located in relation to a broader set of political, and socio-cultural signs and symbols.

In the context of racialized imperial logics, language ideologies serve as a tool to rationalize colonial structures of power by establishing the speakers of the colonial language as superior to those of indigenous languages. This colonial linguistic domination, termed the “coloniality of language” (Veronelli, 2015, p. 108), is a key feature of the modern/colonial apparatus that attaches notions of rationality, humanity, knowledge, intellect, and expressivity to the colonial language while deeming the colonized/colonialized as sub-human and therefore lacking in expressing rational thought, and having no language altogether (Veronelli, 2015). In the context of a Eurocentric education framework, this has manifested in explicit and implicit sanctions against local languages –and by association the knowledges intimately connected to them–, and a valorization of the English language –and the Western knowledges associated to it–. Such sanctions against local languages and valorization of English are a common characteristic of many Pakistani schools across the country (Rahman, 2002; Mustafa 2015; Shamim & Rasheed, 2019), deeply influencing the ways in which students engage with their local linguistic and cultural heritage.

Fluidity of Learner Identities and Decolonial Possibility

Language and communication are also key aspects of the production and regulation of various social identities, including national, ethnic, professional, racial, class, and gender identities (Kroskrity, 2001). The process of identity construction through linguistic distinction is neither uncontested nor static or monolithic. According to Rosa and

Burdick (2017), “language does not simply reflect preexisting identities—it actively participates in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of identity” (p. 109). Consistent with this argument, Bhabha (1994) has emphasized the notion of fluidity and negotiation entailed in the production of cultural identities. He argues that cultural differences cannot be ascribed to pre-given traits. Instead, the articulation of identities is an “on-going negotiation” (p. 2). Applying Bhabha’s concepts to African cultural identities, Kalua (2009) has shown that “culture, which arises from people’s actions, including their capacity to reinvent and reconstitute themselves in the narrative of their existences cannot be a totality” (p. 30). African identities are thus not fixed but keep shifting and changing over time.

Conceptualizing Learner Identities

In my analysis of student subjectivities in the Pakistani context, I borrow from the ideas of Bhabha and Kalua on the fluidity and mutability of cultural identities. I understand Pakistani students as positioned across multiple locations of stratification in the colonial matrix of power that hierarchizes their subject-positions along the lines of class, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, and ability. Student identities or subjectivities, as posited by Bhabha (1994), Kalua (2009), and Rosa and Burdick (2017), are actively constructed, reproduced, transformed, and renegotiated through interaction with their environment. These interactions, in turn, have the possibility of changing the social environment that structures the lives of its inhabitants, and thus can reveal the ways in which modern/colonial logics shift across time and space.

In this study, I explore the experiences of Pakistani students in elite and non-elite private English-medium, and public Urdu-medium secondary schools. I seek to understand how students’ self-perceptions are influenced through their positioning within their educational institutions and the ways in which they engage with larger social structures and re-negotiate their identities. My research questions include: How do students experience language-in-education policies in their everyday interactions in the school? How are existing neocolonial class structures perceived and reproduced through embodied practices and student presentations of self? How do students contest shared meanings and how do they modify them in their daily interactions in the school? Through this analysis, I illuminate the complexities of students’ identity formation within colonial contexts and explore how students engage in decolonial resistance. By bringing attention to these processes, I engage in the process of decolonizing Pakistani education since, as Ashcroft et al. (2007) argue, the recognition of such forces indicates the possibility of their contestation. As such, the goal of this paper is to extend the ongoing discourse on post-/anti-/de-colonial resistance, and to unpack and disrupt the geographies and logics of modern/colonial power structures in educational systems in Pakistan.

Data and Methodology

The current study lies at the intersection of post-colonial theory, language ideologies, and theories, policies, and practices of education with a central focus on Pakistani students and their educational experiences. An appropriate method to grasp students’ experiences in Pakistani schools is through a qualitative study with in-depth interviews. This approach allows students to articulate their self-perceptions, understanding of

others, and delve into how school interactions influenced their beliefs. I have approached data collection using case-study logic (Small, 2009), a method aimed at eliciting an increasingly accurate understanding of the research questions, with the objective of saturation, when new cases provide little new information. 33 online semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 15 participants. Each subsequent interview was built upon data collected from the preceding ones, in order to identify similar mechanisms underlying different students' experiences. Furthermore, I conducted at least two interviews with each participant to build rapport, ensuring rich and accurate data collection. After 33 interviews, a point of saturation in the data was achieved. The small sample size also allowed me to investigate each student's case in-depth, because each respondent provided a considerable amount of information. The findings of this study are, therefore, not aimed at generalizability, but seek to provide deeper insights into student experiences with modern/colonial logics.

The participants were between 18 and 25 years old, with eight participants in high school and the remainder having graduated. Participants were recruited from the four major provinces of Pakistan, namely Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), in order to include diverse perspectives and experiences. Respondents also had diverse educational backgrounds, including both English and Urdu-medium, public and private schools, and were comprised of both men and women. Table 2 provides pseudonyms and demographic details of all students who participated in the study.

Interviews were conducted in Urdu and English, with participants often code-switching. These were transcribed and translated to English, prioritizing the preservation of meaning while acknowledging potential losses in translation. Context and cultural nuances were emphasized for accuracy, and feedback was sought from respondents and local students to refine translations.

Interview analysis employed codes from theoretical frameworks and existing literature, as well as emergent themes from the data (inductive approach). I made multiple iterative coding passes, adhering to Charmaz (2012) and Saldaña's (2013) recommendations. I wrote analytic memos consistently to explore themes and connect to research questions. Coding began after the first interview to recognize and apply emergent themes to subsequent data. The small sample size, resulting from pandemic-induced recruitment challenges, limits its scope in encompassing Pakistani students' diverse experiences. Nonetheless, the study offers unique insights from participants who shared their stories, and thus I believe it contributes to comparative education research.

Table 2. Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Province	Region	MOI	School Type	Education Level
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Alia	Female	Punjab	Rural	Urdu/ English	Government	Graduate
Amjad	Male	Punjab	Urban	English	Non-elite Private	Undergraduate
Majid	Male	Punjab	Urban	Urdu/ English	Non-elite Private	12th
Mazhar	Male	Punjab	Urban	English	Non-elite Private	Undergraduate
Saima	Female	Punjab	Urban	Urdu	Government	Graduate
Sara	Female	Punjab	Urban	English	Elite Private	Undergraduate
Hania	Female	Sindh	Rural	English	Government	12th
Nadia	Female	Sindh	Rural	Urdu/ English	Non-elite Private	12th
Sameena	Female	Sindh	Rural	English	Non-elite Private	Graduate
Iffat	Female	Baluchistan	Rural	Urdu/ English	Government	12th
Sameer	Male	Baluchistan	Urban	English	Elite Private	12th
Shahid	Male	Baluchistan	Urban	English	Elite Private	12th
Aslam	Male	KPK	Rural	Urdu	Government	12th
Beena	Female	KPK	Rural	English	Government	12th
Nazish	Female	KPK	Rural	English	Government	12th

Researcher positionality significantly influences research design, data collection, and analysis (Peshkin, 1991). I approach this study as a Pakistani, a graduate of an elite English-medium school, with ethnic roots in Punjab. This positions me as both an insider and outsider regarding certain research aspects. My insider status might blind me to some societal assumptions, while my outsider perspective may limit my grasp on specific cultural nuances. To mitigate these limitations, I sought feedback from my Pakistani respondents through member-checking. My aim wasn't to eliminate inherent biases but to acknowledge and understand how they might influence the study's outcomes (Luttrell, 2000, p. 500).

Findings

In this section, I discuss the key themes that emerged from the data. The first section discusses students' associating English language with being educated, respected, and modern. The next section presents student's ideas about local languages as being associated with illiteracy, backwardness, and premodernity. The following section outlines school policies on language use and how they influenced students' ideas about themselves and others in the school. The last section discusses how students actively engaged in decolonial resistance by challenging existing hierarchies and (re)imagining alternative education systems.

Coloniality of Language: English Speakers are *Parha-Likhay*

Students in the sample actively engaged in meaning-making and identity construction in relation to linguistic distinction. Each language is constructed in the students' social reality as relating to a particular set of socio-cultural, political, and historical symbols that collectively seek to define what it means to be a speaker of said language in the academic environment. The English language was associated by students across all educational streams—from government schools in KPK to elite private schools in Islamabad—to being *parha-likha*, a construct associated with notions of knowledge, superiority, intelligence, respect, and professionalism. Nazish, a student at a government boarding school in KPK put it as follows: "Those who speak English are treated with a lot of respect. Everyone says that they are *parhay-likhay* (educated)." Similar ideas were also echoed by other students. Amjad, a private school graduate from Lahore stated: "[The] mindset here is that whoever knows English knows everything." This revealed a potential conflation between English and knowledge altogether. Whoever is considered a proficient speaker of English is deemed *parha-likha*, that is, educated, rational, and knowing everything.

Furthermore, students often conflated English with language altogether; that is, to know English meant to know language itself, and conversely, to not know English meant to be "lacking communication skills" (Sara, elite-private school student) altogether. Classmates who did not speak in English were described by Sara, a graduate of an elite private school in Islamabad and a second-year university student, as not knowing "how to talk properly." Ideas of appropriateness were attached to English by several other students as well. Iffat, a graduate of a government Urdu-medium school, defended monolingual school language policies by appealing to this idea of what was appropriate. She claimed that the rules were "important because [through them we] give others the impression that we are *parhay-likhay*. If we talk properly and respectfully, others get impressed." For Iffat, the notion of being *parha-likha* is comprised of multiple constructs ranging from appropriateness, education, and respect. These values become attached to speakers of English who are constructed as possessing qualities ranging from education and literacy, to being respectful and proper. These symbols collectively define the English speaker as a dominant actor in the academic space who is accorded a privileged status through their association with the English language and its connection to Western knowledges.

Local Languages and Colonial Reproduction

Local languages have been hierarchized as inferior to English in the modern/colonial

Western-centric education framework. As a result, policies pertaining to local languages reinforce the notion that local languages and knowledge ecologies have no place in the school and, by association, neither do the speakers of these languages. Students across the education system have thus come to associate local languages with particular signs and symbols that reflect their inferior status in the academic institution. They attach ideas of *paendo* (rural/rustic), and *jahil* (ignorant/illiterate) to local languages and cultures, constructs that collectively signal premodernity, rurality, illiteracy, ignorance, and unprofessionalism. However, students' conceptualizations about local languages are not straightforward, and regional languages' subordination in the colonial power matrix has not erased their intimate links to students' identities and communities. Therefore, local languages elicit ideas of identity, belonging, culture, regional and/or national pride, and unity; at the same time, they occupy a subordinated status compared to English.

Students were palpably aware of the inferior status of local languages and culture in the school. Sara mentioned that her elite private school promoted "Western culture [as being] right, and our norms and our cultural background [as] *paendo*." The English speaker is associated with modernity, which is constructed in opposition to *paendo*, a label that is used to describe speakers of local languages as pre-modern, backward, and illiterate. It is important to note that language is one of the many signs that construct the individual or group as *paendo*, along with other elements including clothing, rituals, practices, social class, and so forth. These signs collectively serve as templates that shape interpretations of what an individual or group of people can and cannot be.

School Policies on Language Use: Colonial Logics of Silencing the Jahils

Language is a prominent symbol of identity, and by regulating language use, schools inevitably give messages to the students regarding appropriate and inappropriate language, and by association, appropriate or inappropriate students. Such practices work to hierarchize languages and their speakers in the school. Sameer, a private school student from Baluchistan described school policy on local languages as follows: "Urdu is second-tier now. There is an Urdu corner for students caught speaking it. It's a collar of shame."

Policies are often hostile to the use of local languages, and nearly all students in the sample experienced some form of explicit language policy or implicit social norm that discouraged the use of local languages within the school. While informal conversation in Urdu was deemed acceptable in some cases, in other schools there was an explicit prohibition on speaking in any language other than English. Shahid, whose experience was stated in the opening sentences, describes the school as one that was extremely rigid about language use. He stated that the policy "frustrated the students [because] teachers would teach in English, regardless of [the students] understanding it or not. Seventy-five percent of the students [could not] follow the lectures." Such experiences work to silence the students who are not proficient enough in English to understand the lecture or converse fluently with peers, resulting in deep frustrations and alienation in the school.

A similar experience was described by Nadia, a 12th grade student from a non-elite low-cost private English-medium school in Sindh: "[Students] didn't perform well [in

school] but they would talk like scientists [in Urdu]. The teacher would strictly insist on using English in class, and so they wouldn't talk at all." This silencing can leave deep impacts on students' perceptions of themselves as well as their capabilities. In the case of Nadia and her classmates, students felt alienated in the classroom because they were not allowed to express themselves in a familiar language. As a result, they disengaged from learning altogether.

Nadia further goes on to describe this alienation: "The school has become a place for us where we think it is out of reach. And we are inferior. [As if] we don't know anything...all because of language." For Nadia and her peers, the school felt "out of reach" because they could not access an education in English, which led them to feel that they were inferior and did not know anything. Thus, students associate inadequacy and inferiority with lack of English proficiency as a result of their educational experiences.

Since students' fluency in the native language has no value in the academic institution, the native language also becomes a symbol of illiteracy, which, together with lack of English proficiency, constructs the native language speaker as *jahil*, a wholly ignorant individual who does not fit in the academic space. Sara described such a student at her school in the following terms: "Here, they call them *jahil* (ignorant/illiterate), those who can't speak English. And you can tell this from the way they talk. A guy in our class can't speak English... he talks weird, in that harsh, typical Urdu/Punjabi tone, so we don't even want to talk to him."

The identity of the non-English speaking student thus gets associated with notions of *jahalat* based on the "way they talk." The *jahil* is understood, through their association with local language and culture, as a person who is illiterate and ignorant. This association shapes social interaction and works to stigmatize speakers of local languages and subsequently silence them in the academic institution. One aspect of this stigmatization is that their use of language is construed as "harsh." Alia described the students in her public Urdu-medium school as follows: "Most of the students from the rural areas speak Punjabi, the typical and crude one." Similar words were also used by Saima, a public-school graduate from Punjab when referring to Pashto as a "harsh" language. Such associations of harshness/crudeness to local languages enable the rationalization of their position as inferior to the dominant language in the modern/colonial power structure and thus, unworthy of engagement within academic spaces.

What is interesting to note, however, is that associations between languages and ideas about their speakers are not straightforward in any way. One language can at once occupy multiple locations that simultaneously position it as a "crude" language unfit for academic engagement and as a language that is intimately attached to notions of shared communal belongings. In the case of Urdu, which has symbolic significance as the language of the Muslims of the subcontinent, its linkages to Pakistan's independence movement have enabled its construction as a flagbearer of national identity and unity. Such attachments of Urdu to an imagined national community (Anderson, 2016) were prevalent in my conversations with students. Students described Urdu as related to "our roots," and expressed its importance as a "unifying force" that brought citizens together

as “a single nation.” Similarly, students also associated other regional languages, such as Pashto and Sindhi, with communal ties and cultural identity.

Colonial Ideologies and Decolonial Possibilities

Students’ encounters with colonial logics of exclusion and silencing in school shape their beliefs about language, education, knowledge, and culture. The consistent messaging from a Eurocentric educational framework had resulted, to a certain extent, in an internalization of colonial power structures that positioned Western knowledges as dominant and local knowledges as irrelevant within the school. In Gramsci’s (1971) terms, domination by consent had been achieved in some ways. Several students saw language policies in the school as appropriate and as benefiting the students. Aslam, a government school student in KPK, described the prohibition against the use of Pashto in school as an important feature that would prepare students for “professional” life. Since Pashto was constructed as having no place in professional institutions, Aslam thought it was important to actively discourage its use in school. As mentioned above, ideas of what was “appropriate” in an academic/professional institutions offered key rationalizations for school rules against local language use. Rigorous training in using linguistic codes associated with being *parha-likha* (educated) was seen as a favorable feature of education since it would prepare the student to succeed in school, university, and the job market—arenas that are deeply stratified along colonial hierarchies.

At the same time, students understood their personal experiences through the framing of global modern/colonial discourses. For instance, Sameer had come to understand the connections between English education and superiority, compared to Urdu education and its associated inferiority through the lens of modern/colonial logics: “I think it’s our colonial legacy. The English speaker is *parha-likha*. And Urdu-medium is a disgrace in our society.” Here, Sameer connected the two-tiered education system to white supremacist colonial logics. While Sameer thought that it was next to impossible to escape such harmful logics, through his own resistive work of writing an online blog on social justice issues and anti-colonial possibilities, he was engaged in repurposing his own English education at an elite private school as a tool to confront the same colonial power structures that his schooling was designed to reproduce.

Similarly, Hania, a government school student from rural Sindh, described the privileging of English over local languages through the framing of colonial power structures: “We speak English over here because the British ruled us. And we are still under their rule mentally.” Students were palpably aware of the continuation of colonial hierarchies and understood their educational experiences through the structure and logics of colonization. By describing contemporary colonization as one that was “mental,” Hania alluded to the ways in which colonization had not only structured social, political, and educational institutions, but also the very desires and internal orientations of people. She went further to discuss how “[we] still like to dress like the people who ruled us.” For Hania, the choice of clothing is an important feature of resistance against this “mental” colonization, and she openly admired women who “dress according to [their] own culture and morals.” The regulation of women’s clothing has long been an avenue through which ideas of modernity and backwardness are expressed, which Khoja-Moolji (2017) calls “another form of colonialism against rural

women” (p. S161). Similarly, Allweiss (2021) has described the ways in which Maya women wearing the traditional dress are met with contempt by the settler colonial powers who seek to erase their identities. Women’s traditional, and religious, dressing was thus an important feature through which Pakistani students engaged with ideas of modernity, rurality, backwardness, and progress.

Sara, who was a frequent target of discrimination at her elite school because of her religious headscarf and *shalwar kameez*,⁵ discussed the ways in which her choice of clothing led peers and teachers to make assumptions about her: “If you’re wearing *shalwar kameez*, or if your clothing is covering your body, they’re just automatically going to assume everything about you. They assume that I’m *paendo* and I’m from a very strict [religious] background.” For Sara, ideas of indigenous and local knowledges/cultures were intertwined with her religious beliefs and practices. Her school attached notions of *paendo*, backwardness, and premodernity to those practices, stigmatizing students for their association with them. Through such subtractive practices, the school sought to erase this aspect of Sara’s identity, but her continued expression of her religious beliefs through her clothing was what Allweiss (2021) has called an act of refusal against a gendered and anglicized image of what an educated, *parha-likhka* student in an elite private school should look like.

Pakistani youth thus experienced modern/colonial hierarchies in distinct ways because of their particular social locations. For some students, it was through education in an unfamiliar language which severely restricted their potential for intellectual growth, while for others, it manifested in policing around language use or dress code. Students responded to such structures in diverse ways which positioned them simultaneously as targets of colonial reproduction through internalization and reenactment of certain colonial logics and decolonial social change through resistance to others. One avenue where this played out was students’ response to school language use policies. While students in some schools bought into the rationale behind such rules, students in other situations refused to conform and instead devised multiple strategies to resist and express themselves in local languages at the school. In Shahid’s school, students devised secretive ways to evade teachers’ eyes during recess so they could communicate in Urdu or other native languages. After the incident where a girl openly condemned the school administration for punishing her for speaking Urdu, Shahid explained that the entire student body supported her more than they would ever support the school administration. “She had fought well,” said Shahid, framing her actions as a struggle for self-expression in the school.

Therefore, in some instances, students pushed back against the contours of modern/colonial logics around language ideologies in the school through active acts of resistance. These actions positioned the students as sites of decolonial resistance and made possible through their efforts a change in their social environment. As Shahid explained, even though they expelled the girl, ultimately his school had to abandon the

⁵ Traditional dress consisting of a long and loose-fitted shirt, pants, and a stole that drapes over the chest.

rigid language policies because of students' retaliation against them, resulting in a shift towards decolonization of the school.

(Re)Imagining the Future

Students' understanding of their educational experiences through the framework of Western-centric colonial hierarchies opened the possibilities for them to act as resistive agents against such logics and (re)imagine alternative futures for themselves and their nation. When students experienced the harmful ways in which Eurocentric education models, and particularly colonial language-in-education policies, functioned to undermine local knowledges and languages in the school, they contested such hierarchies. This was especially true in instances where these hierarchies worked to exclude them from the educational institution, particularly for students who were from lower socioeconomic classes and were multiply discriminated due to lack of educational opportunities in addition to insurmountable language barriers in higher education. Such a dissatisfaction with the way things were currently structured opened up the space from which students could (re)imagine alternative futurities. "[Schools] should teach us the actual culture of Pakistan, instead of asking us to be like America, or UK, or whatever," said Sara when ruminating about an education outside colonial logics. For Sara, this would mean an education that did not borrow its knowledges and values from the West, but instead was inward-focused and centered on local knowledges and cultures.

For other students, especially those from rural backgrounds where language-in-education policies worked in conjunction with poor educational quality to undermine students' learning, the key feature of an alternative education system was a language of instruction that they could understand. Sameena, a graduate of a non-elite low-cost private English-medium school in rural Sindh, elaborated on this: "Shifting our curriculum from English to Urdu can drive significant progress and boost societal self-esteem. Many struggle, including me, with English as a barrier to understanding and university admissions."

Sameena had experienced great difficulties in her educational journey, and she attributed her challenges to the fact that she was forced to learn through an unfamiliar language because of the current colonial educational structure. This narrative is extremely common across Pakistan and came up frequently in my conversations with students from lower socioeconomic and rural backgrounds. Such students faced multiple disadvantages that not only jeopardized their educational and economic futures, but also influenced their beliefs about their own capabilities and their self-esteem, something that many students believed was negatively impacted when they struggled against the grain to learn in a foreign language. Thus, a place for local languages and knowledge ecologies in the school, as mentioned by students, would improve students' learning outcomes and by association their belief in their capabilities, which is an important aspect of decolonial resistance through reimagining education.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sheds light on how Pakistani youth encounter modern/colonial hierarchies in the school and how such logics structure their lives, and their beliefs, including their

ideas about self, others, and society at large. The experiences of Pakistani students illuminate the very material consequences of modern/colonial logics of exclusion and silencing in the school that seek to erase their local languages and knowledge ecologies. The structuring of their educational experiences along colonial logics resulted in students internalizing existing hierarchies. However, at the same time, many students understood their experiences through the framing of colonial power structures, which simultaneously positioned them as potential actors for decolonial resistance and (re)imagining alternative futurities.

Students exhibited particular language ideologies in relation to Western and local languages, which reflected social structures they were embedded in. Accordingly, English represented particular sociopolitical and historical signs and symbols, positioning it as the dominant language in the modern/colonial hierarchy. Students associated English with ideas of superiority, knowledge, respect, intellect, modernity, rationality, and being *parha-likha*. Local languages, on the other hand, were associated with ideas of *paendo* and *jahil*, constructs that signaled illiteracy, ignorance, backwardness, rurality, and premodernity. However, at the same time, students felt deeply emotionally connected to their local languages, which occupied multiple locations that positioned them simultaneously as below English in the colonial hierarchy and as intimately tied to notions of identity and communal belonging.

Ideologies around language and language of instruction were, as Rosa and Burdick (2017) theorized, not really about language but served to rationalize societal structure based on linguistic distinction. The positioning of English as the “language of knowledge” and rationality thus served to justify its position at the top of the hierarchy and the language of instruction and academic engagement. Similarly, as theorized by Veronelli (2015), local languages and their speakers were associated with notions of illiteracy and lacking capacity for rational expressivity, which served to justify their erasure from the academic institution along with the exclusion of their speakers from educational advancement and opportunity. Such logics sought to dehumanize speakers of local languages who were construed as *jahil*, *paendo*, and lacking “personality” because of their use of “crude,” “harsh,” and “improper” language.

Students’ encounters with colonial hierarchies were mediated by their social class, gender, race/ethnicity, and ability. Students from poor and rural backgrounds experienced coloniality through a deeply stratified education system that denied them access to high quality education and forced them to learn through a language that was unfamiliar. In doing so, the colonial structure stunted their intellectual growth and limited their possibilities for academic progress, a condition that has been termed “linguistic apartheid” (p. xi) by Haitian educator Michel DeGraff (2019).

On the other hand, students from higher socioeconomic class and elite backgrounds did not experience language barriers in education, but were socialized into colonial norms that sanctioned native languages and cultures in the school and valorized Western knowledges and cultures. An important aspect of colonial logics that was experienced by women was mediated through the policing of dress code, which constituted as a key site for the enactment of colonialism against rural and religious women. Students thus

encountered coloniality in ways that positioned them across multiple locations of stratification in the colonial matrix of power depending on their class, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, and geographic location.

Students were also active agents of decolonial possibilities and were engaged in resistive action against colonial logics of exclusion and silencing. Their understanding of their educational experiences through the framing of colonial power structures enabled them to recognize colonialism as a structure that was deeply influential in organizing their lives. This positioning opened a space for resistance against colonial hierarchies and a (re)imagining of alternative futurities. As Bhabha (1994) and Kalua (2009) posited, the articulation of student identities was an on-going negotiation with their educational environment. Students were active agents of change, rather than passive recipients of societal norms.

The experiences of Pakistani youth are an important avenue from which to investigate global hierarchies of coloniality that influence the lives of marginalized youth across the world, especially youth in post-colonial countries that continue to perpetuate colonial educational structures. DeGraff (2019) has posited that decolonization is even more urgent when the medium of instruction is a foreign language that disenfranchises most of the population. Speaking in the context of Haiti, DeGraff claims that despite more than two centuries since independence, Haiti has yet to break the intellectual, cultural, and political chains of neo-colonialism. This analysis holds true for many post-colonial contexts across the world, including Pakistan, where deeply held colonial beliefs attach notions of increased humanity to education in English, while associating local languages with being sub-human, a condition that is common in societies across the world that suffer from the colonial wound (Allweiss, 2021; Degraff, 2019; Mignolo, 2009; Said, 1994). Therefore, the insights and experiences of Pakistani youth presented in this paper offer promising comparative possibilities. The struggles of Pakistani students speak to those of colonized/colonialized youth around the world who challenge global neo-colonial, imperialist, and racialized power structures that seek to dehumanize and erase indigenous ways of being. Through resistive and reparative work, scholars combating colonialism can serve as important allies in the struggle against modern/colonial systems of racialization, oppression, and dehumanization globally. The current study has illustrated that Pakistani students have internalized colonial hierarchies and constitute key sites for decolonial resistance at the same time. Their voices offer insights into the structuring of colonial logics locally while also being in conversation with colonial frameworks globally.

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