

## Decolonizing Preschool Education in Pakistan: A Qur'anic Perspective on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

إزالة الاستعمار من التعليم التمهيدي في باكستان: رؤية قرآنية للتربية الثقافية الأصيلة

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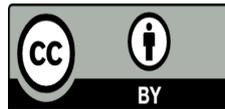
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## Decolonizing Preschool Education in Pakistan: A Qur'anic Perspective on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

إزالة الاستعمار من التعليم التمهيدي في باكستان: رؤية قرآنية للتربية الثقافية الأصيلة

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### Abstract

This study explores the colonial legacy embedded in Pakistan's preschool education, analyzing its effects on young children's spiritual and cultural identity through a Qur'anic and postcolonial framework. Despite official curriculum reforms, textbooks in both public and private schools prioritize Eurocentric themes – such as English dominance, Western imagery, and foreign celebrations – at the expense of local languages, traditional stories, and Islamic values. This imbalance leads to identity confusion among children, deviating from the Qur'anic principle: “*And We did not send any messenger except in the language of his people to make things clear to them*” (Ibrāhīm, 14:4). Using a qualitative exploratory method, ten preschool textbooks from Karachi were analyzed through a culturally relevant pedagogy lens, supplemented by interviews with five educators. Results reveal that 74.7% of the content reflects foreign influence, with minimal local cultural representation. Teachers cited institutional resistance and lack of resources as barriers to change. Drawing on Edward Said's Orientalism, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and Islamic epistemology, the paper advocates for decolonized early childhood curricula that embrace indigenous narratives and Islamic worldview. Recommendations include producing culturally grounded textbooks, investing in teacher training, and implementing policy changes to support identity-affirming education. This approach aligns with the Qur'anic vision of justice, diversity, and meaningful communication, ensuring that early education nurtures both national belonging and spiritual development.

**Keywords:** Colonial Legacy, Curriculum Decolonization, Early Childhood Education, Islamic Epistemology, Cultural Identity

### Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a pivotal role in shaping children's understanding of themselves and the world. In Pakistan, however, preschool curricula remain saturated with colonial residues, particularly privileging the English language, Western characters, and foreign customs, while marginalizing local languages like Urdu, Sindhi, and Punjabi, as well as Islamic values. This imbalance distorts children's identity and detaches them from their roots. The Qur'anic directive emphasizes contextual education and clear communication: “*And We did not send any messenger except in the language of his people*” (Ibrāhīm, 14:4), underscoring the importance of cultural relevance in learning. Although Pakistan's National Education Policy (2009) emphasizes culturally responsive education, the dominant paradigm in both public and private institutions remain Eurocentric. This research investigates these

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embedded biases through Qur'anic guidance and postcolonial critique, analyzing ten preschool textbooks and conducting interviews with five experienced educators. Findings reveal a critical gap between policy and practice, highlighting the urgent need for decolonized education that centers Islamic epistemology and indigenous knowledge systems. A culturally aligned and spiritually informed ECE framework can help young learners build strong, rooted identities in a rapidly globalizing world.

### **Background of the Study**

The legacy of colonialism continues to shape educational systems across formerly colonized nations, particularly through language policies, curriculum content, and institutional structures. In South Asia, the British colonial administration introduced an education system designed to serve imperial interests—prioritizing English, Western knowledge systems, and Eurocentric worldviews.<sup>1</sup>

After independence, Pakistan inherited this framework, which significantly influenced the design and content of early childhood education. Although the country has witnessed several policy efforts to indigenize the curriculum—including the National Education Policy (2009) and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) initiatives—many preschool textbooks and learning materials still reflect colonial-era ideals.<sup>2</sup>

These include the use of foreign characters, stories from Western contexts, and linguistic preferences for English over local languages such as Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, and Pashto.<sup>3</sup> Scholars argue that such curricular choices can alienate young learners from their own culture, diminishing their self-esteem and weakening cultural identity formation.<sup>4</sup>

Language, in particular, serves not only as a medium of instruction but as a conveyor of worldview and identity. The dominance of English in Pakistani preschools often overshadows indigenous languages, creating a cognitive and cultural disconnect in early learners.<sup>5</sup> This disconnect runs contrary to both pedagogical best practices and cultural relevance, as well as Islamic teachings that emphasize contextual learning in the language of the people.<sup>6</sup>

Within this context, the present study explores the colonial imprints in preschool education texts in Pakistan, examining how these influences manifest and what implications they have for the development of children's cultural and spiritual identity. The analysis draws from both critical curriculum theory and Islamic educational philosophy to advocate for a decolonized, contextually rooted approach to early childhood education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

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<sup>1</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Government of Pakistan, *National Education Policy 2009* (Islamabad: Ministry of Education, 2009), 23–27.

<sup>3</sup> Ayesha Bashiruddin, "English as the Medium of Instruction in Pakistan: Issues of Identity and Belonging," *Pakistan Journal of Education* 37, no. 1 (2020): 53–68.

<sup>4</sup> Rashida Qureshi and Nazneen Sadaf, "Cultural Dislocation in Early Childhood Education: A Critique of Curriculum and Pedagogy in Pakistan," *International Journal of Early Years Education* 28, no. 3 (2020): 290–305.

<sup>5</sup> Tariq Rahman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45–60.

<sup>6</sup> Qur'an 14:4, *The Qur'an: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings*, trans. Saheeh International (Riyadh: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, 1997).

Despite efforts to develop contextually relevant and culturally rooted curricula in Pakistan, many preschool education texts continue to reflect colonial legacies in both content and structure. These include the dominance of the English language, Western imagery, and Eurocentric values that often overshadow indigenous cultures, languages, and Islamic teachings. As a result, children in their formative years may be exposed to narratives and learning environments that disconnect them from their own identity, traditions, and linguistic heritage.

This situation raises important educational concerns: To what extent do preschool textbooks used in Pakistan still bear traces of colonial influence? How do these influences affect children's cultural and spiritual development? And what implications does this have for efforts toward decolonizing the curriculum and promoting holistic, values-based early childhood education in line with national and Islamic ideals?

This study seeks to address these questions by critically examining preschool texts through the lens of decolonial theory and Islamic educational philosophy. The aim is to identify embedded colonial narratives and recommend ways to reconstruct early childhood education materials that affirm children's cultural identities and support locally grounded pedagogies.

### Research Questions

- What colonial influences are evident in the content, language, and themes of preschool education texts in Pakistan?
- What are early childhood educators' perceptions regarding the cultural relevance of current preschool textbooks?

### Objectives of the Study

- To **identify and analyze colonial influences** present in the content, language, and themes of preschool education texts used in Pakistan.
- To examine **early childhood educators' perceptions** regarding the cultural relevance, appropriateness, and local contextual fit of existing preschool textbooks.
- To contribute towards the **decolonization of early childhood education** by providing insights for culturally responsive curriculum development.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it bridges the gap between educational content and the socio-cultural and religious contexts of learners in Pakistan. By uncovering how colonial legacies persist in preschool texts, the research contributes to the broader discourse on decolonizing education. It also aligns with Islamic pedagogical principles that emphasize learning within one's language and cultural context. The findings aim to support curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers in creating early childhood materials that foster strong cultural identity, spiritual grounding, and national belonging among young children.

### Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses specifically on analyzing colonial influences within preschool education texts currently used in selected public and private schools in Pakistan. The scope includes textbooks and workbooks designed for children aged 3 to 6 years, particularly those used in nursery and kindergarten levels. The research examines content, language, imagery, and themes through qualitative content analysis to identify Eurocentric elements and assess their impact on cultural and spiritual identity development.

The study is delimited to a sample of texts from urban areas, primarily in English and Urdu mediums, and does not cover all provinces or regional language schools. It also does not evaluate teacher practices or classroom implementation, focusing solely on the textual content. Furthermore, while Islamic references guide the interpretive lens, the study does not

aim to conduct theological analysis but rather to explore alignment with Islamic educational principles.

### Review of the Related Literature

The legacy of colonialism continues to manifest in educational systems across postcolonial societies, particularly in former British colonies like Pakistan. Scholars have noted that curricula in many developing nations often remain Eurocentric, prioritizing Western knowledge, characters, and values while marginalizing indigenous cultures and languages.<sup>7</sup>

In early childhood education, this influence is more subtle yet profound, as it shapes a child's initial understanding of identity, community, and belonging.

Research by Ali and Zeb<sup>8</sup> highlights how preschool textbooks in Pakistan frequently portray Western settings, foreign names, and English linguistic dominance, often at the cost of cultural and religious relevance. Such practices may lead to alienation and identity confusion in children during their formative years. This concern aligns with critical pedagogy perspectives, where scholars like Freire argue that education should not be a tool of oppression but rather a means for liberation and cultural affirmation.<sup>9</sup>

From an Islamic perspective, the Qur'an emphasizes the importance of nurturing children in their own linguistic and cultural context. This view has been supported by scholars like Nasr<sup>10</sup>, who contend that the Islamic worldview promotes educational experiences rooted in tawhid (oneness of God), fitrah (natural disposition), and cultural continuity. However, when preschool texts fail to reflect Islamic or local cultural values, they risk disrupting the child's spiritual development.

Moreover, Said's concept of Orientalism<sup>11</sup> is relevant in analyzing how colonial discourse continues to operate in postcolonial education. By privileging Western narratives and norms, educational materials may unconsciously reinforce colonial hierarchies and suppress local knowledge systems.

While there is growing advocacy for curriculum decolonization in Pakistan, practical implementation remains limited. Studies such as by Shamsi and Khan show that despite policy reforms, textbook boards and private publishers often continue to follow outdated models influenced by colonial legacies.<sup>12</sup> Thus, a critical evaluation of preschool texts through both academic and Islamic lenses is essential for reimagining an education system that affirms cultural identity and spiritual integrity.

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<sup>7</sup> Anjum Altaf and Amit Basole, *Thinking with Ghalib: Poetry for a New Generation* (Lahore: Folio Books, 2020), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Syeda Huma Ali and Sadaf Zeb, "The Hidden Curriculum in Preschool Textbooks: A Qualitative Content Analysis," *Pakistan Journal of Education* 38, no. 2 (2021): 44–59.

<sup>9</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (World Wisdom, 2007), 80.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Raheela Shamsi and Nazia Khan, "Curriculum Development in Pakistan: Colonial Legacy and Contemporary Challenges," *International Journal of Education and Development* 4, no. 1 (2022): 17–33.

## Colonial Education: An Introductory Perspective

### Historical Background of Colonial Education in the Indian Subcontinent

Colonial education in the Indian subcontinent, introduced by the British in the 19th century, aimed to produce a class of loyal subjects to serve colonial administration. The British replaced traditional Islamic and indigenous educational systems, such as makhtabs and madrasas, with English-medium schools that prioritized Western knowledge and values. Lord Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) explicitly sought to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, and intellect."

**Impact on Local Systems:** Traditional institutions like makhtabs, which emphasized Qur'anic literacy and moral upbringing, were marginalized.

**Cultural Alienation:** The imposition of English as the medium of instruction distanced children from their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Quotation: Allal al-Fasi notes,

"الاستعمار حاول إحياء العرف المحلي ليحل محل الشريعة، ثم استبدله بالقوانين الأجنبية"<sup>(13)</sup>

*"Colonialism attempted to revive local customs to replace Shariah, then substituted them with foreign laws."*

### Colonial Influences on Pakistan's Preschool System

Post-independence, Pakistan inherited a colonial educational framework that continues to influence preschool education. Many elite preschools adopt Western curricula, emphasizing English language skills and Eurocentric values over Islamic and Pakistani cultural norms.

**Curriculum Design:** Preschool curricula often rely on imported models like Montessori or British Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which may not align with local cultural or religious contexts.

**Teacher Training:** Educators are frequently trained in Western pedagogical methods, sidelining Islamic concepts like tarbiyah and adab.

**Social Impact:** This creates a disconnect between children's home culture and school environment, fostering cultural alienation.

Muhammad Iqbal, a prominent thinker, stated,

*"The teaching of Western sciences must be reconciled with the spirit of Islamic culture to preserve our identity."*<sup>(14)</sup>

### Western Dominance in Language, Curriculum, and Educational Values

Western dominance in preschool education manifests through the prioritization of English, secular curricula, and individualistic values, which often conflict with Pakistan's collectivist and Islamic ethos.

**Language:** English is often the primary medium, marginalizing Urdu and regional languages like Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto.

**Curriculum:** Western stories, rhymes, and values dominate, sidelining Islamic narratives and local folklore.

**Values:** Individualism and competition are emphasized over Islamic principles of community and cooperation. Qur'anic Verse:

<sup>13</sup> Al-Fāsī, 'Allāl, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah wa Makārimuhā (Rabat: Maṭba'at al-Risālah, 1382 AH), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1400 AH), p. 122.

"وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ" (15)

*"And We have certainly honored the children of Adam."*

This verse underscores the dignity of all humans, suggesting that education should honor local identities rather than imposing foreign frameworks.

### **Qur'anic Philosophy of Education and Early Childhood**

#### **The Qur'anic View of Fitrah and Child Development**

The Qur'an emphasizes that every child is born with a natural disposition (fitrah) inclined toward goodness and submission to Allah.

"فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَتَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا" (16)

*"So, direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people."*

Preschool education should nurture this fitrah by fostering a child's innate inclination toward faith, morality, and curiosity.

**Holistic Development:** The Qur'anic view encourages nurturing a child's spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capacities in alignment with their natural disposition.

**Role of Environment:** A culturally relevant environment reinforces fitrah, while colonial frameworks may distort it.<sup>(17)</sup>

#### **Key Islamic Concepts: Tarbiyah, Ta'lim, and Adab**

Islamic education is rooted in three core concepts: tarbiyah (nurturing), ta'lim (instruction), and adab (etiquette), which provide a comprehensive framework for early childhood education.

**Tarbiyah:** Focuses on holistic nurturing of a child's spiritual, emotional, and physical growth.

**Ta'lim:** Emphasizes structured instruction, including Qur'anic literacy and basic knowledge.

**Adab:** Instills ethical behavior, respect, and humility, aligning with the Prophetic example.

Hadith: The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said,

"أَكْرِمُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ فَأَحْسِنُوا أَدَبَهُمْ" (18)

*"Honor your children and teach them good manners."*

#### **Moral, Emotional, and Intellectual Growth through Qur'anic Principles**

Qur'anic principles prioritize balanced growth in early childhood:

**Moral Growth:** Teaching values like honesty and compassion, as exemplified by the Prophet's saying,

"إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الْأَخْلَاقِ" (19)

*"I have been sent to perfect noble morals."*

**Emotional Growth:** Encouraging love, empathy, and community through stories of the Prophets and Qur'anic teachings.

<sup>15</sup> Sūrat al-Isrā', 17:70

<sup>16</sup> Sūrat al-Rūm, 30:30

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid, Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1402 AH), 3: 65.

<sup>18</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan, Sunan Ibn Mājah (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1419 AH), 2: 1203.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Mālik ibn Anas, Al-Muwatta' (Cairo: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1413 AH), 2: 904.

- Intellectual Growth: Promoting curiosity and critical thinking, as urged in,  
"أَفَلَا تَتَفَكَّرُونَ" (Sūrat al-An‘ām, 6:50)

*"Do you not reflect?"*

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Islamic Alignment**

#### **Overview of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and Global Application**

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), developed by scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings, emphasizes education that reflects students' cultural identities, promotes academic excellence, and fosters socio-political consciousness. Globally, CRP has been applied in diverse contexts to empower marginalized communities.

**Core Principles:** Cultural competence, high expectations, and critical consciousness.

**Global Examples:** Indigenous education in Australia and African-centered curricula in the U.S. demonstrate CRP's effectiveness in decolonizing education.

**Quotation:** Ladson-Billings states,

*"Culturally relevant pedagogy uses cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective."*<sup>(20)</sup>

#### **Integrating CRP with Qur'anic and Islamic Educational Thought**

CRP aligns seamlessly with Islamic educational principles, particularly tarbiyah, ta'lim, and adab. Both emphasize nurturing identity and moral growth.

**Cultural Identity:** CRP's focus on cultural relevance mirrors the Qur'anic emphasis on preserving fitrah and community values.

**Moral Framework:** Islamic education's focus on makārim al-akhlāq (noble morals) complements CRP's aim of fostering ethical citizens.

**Qur'anic Guidance:**

"وَقُلْ اَعْمَلُوا فَسَيَرَى اللَّهُ عَمَلَكُمْ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ" (Sūrat al-Tawba, 9:105)

*"And say, 'Do [as you will], for Allah will see your deeds, and [so will] His Messenger and the believers.'"*

This verse encourages actions rooted in faith and community, aligning with CRP's socio-political consciousness.

#### **Harmonizing Religious and Cultural Identity in Pakistani Preschool Education**

A decolonized preschool system in Pakistan should integrate Islamic values, local languages, and cultural traditions to nurture a strong religious and national identity.

**Curriculum Design:** Incorporate Qur'anic stories, Prophetic narratives, and Pakistani folklore to teach moral and cultural values.

**Language Inclusion:** Use Urdu and regional languages alongside English to preserve linguistic heritage.

**Teacher Training:** Train educators in tarbiyah and CRP to create culturally responsive classrooms.

**Community Engagement:** Involve parents and local scholars to ensure alignment with Islamic and Pakistani values.

**Hadith:** The Prophet (PBUH) said,

"كُلُّكُمْ رَاعٍ وَكُلُّكُمْ مَسْئُولٌ عَنْ رَعِيَّتِهِ" (21)

<sup>20</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), p. 17.

*“Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock.”*

This hadith underscores collective responsibility in education, encouraging community involvement in decolonizing preschool systems.

### Findings

The analysis of textbooks revealed a significant overrepresentation of English nursery rhymes, foreign imagery (e.g., Western names, landscapes), and Christian holidays. Local festivals, indigenous names, and regional language content were largely absent or marginal.

**Table-1**  
**Frequency of Foreign vs. Local Cultural References in Textbooks**

Category	Foreign References	Local References	Total References	Percentage (Foreign/Local)
Characters (names, people)	85	27	112	76% / 24%
Language Used	93	31	124	75% / 25%
Festivals and Holidays	22	8	30	73% / 27%
Cultural Practices/Customs	19	11	30	63% / 37%
Stories and Rhymes	66	21	87	76% / 24%
Images/Illustrations (e.g. dress)	58	18	76	76% / 24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>74.7% / 25.3%</b>

**Language Usage Patterns across Book Samples**

Textbook Sample	English Content (%)	Urdu Content (%)	Regional Language Content (%)
Book 1	80%	20%	0%
Book 2	75%	25%	0%
Book 3	85%	15%	0%
Book 4	70%	25%	5%
Book 5	90%	10%	0%
Book 6	65%	30%	5%
Book 7	78%	22%	0%
Book 8	82%	18%	0%
Book 9	76%	20%	4%
Book 10	88%	12%	0%

- \* English dominates in all book samples (ranging from 65% to 90%).
- \* Urdu content appears moderately but never exceeds 30%.
- \* Regional language content is minimal or completely absent.

### Themes Identified in Educators' Interview Responses

Theme	Frequency of Mention	Example Quote
Cultural Misalignment in	High	“Children don’t see their own names or festivals in books—they feel disconnected.”

<sup>21</sup> Al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1423 AH), 3: 893.

Content		
<b>Dominance of English Language</b>	High	“English is prioritized even when children speak regional languages at home.”
<b>Lack of Localized Materials</b>	Medium	“There’s hardly any preschool content in local languages or about our traditions.”
<b>Institutional Inertia</b>	Medium	“Curriculum boards rarely revise materials—they stick to outdated formats.”
<b>Need for Teacher Training</b>	Low	“Most teachers aren’t trained to create or use culturally relevant content.”
<b>Parental Preferences for English</b>	Low	“Parents often want English books, thinking they’re more modern or useful.”

Educators largely agreed that preschool content lacks cultural representation, and they attributed this to systemic issues such as lack of resources, policy inertia, and societal bias toward English.

### Analysis

- \* Colonial narratives continue to shape early learning
- \* Cultural misalignment affects children's identity development
- \* Aligns with literature emphasizing Western bias in education
- \* Unique contribution: Focus on preschool stage and textbook-level analysis
- \* Highlights need for policy and content-level change
- \* 74% of textbook content was foreign in language, imagery, and themes
- \* English rhymes, Western characters dominate
- \* Minimal representation of regional languages, festivals, or local stories
- \* Educators confirmed lack of culturally relevant materials

### Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a pronounced dominance of Eurocentric content—74.7%—in Pakistan’s preschool textbooks, marginalizing local cultures and Islamic teachings. Such an approach contributes to identity erosion and contradicts the Qur’anic emphasis on contextual and meaningful instruction: “*O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and do not invalidate your deeds*” (Al-Anfāl, 8:20). Educators interviewed noted systemic barriers like institutional inertia and a lack of culturally relevant resources. Grounded in the principles of Islamic epistemology and postcolonial theory, this research highlights the need for transformative educational reform. Developing indigenous curricula and supporting teachers in culturally responsive pedagogy are vital steps toward aligning early childhood education with Pakistan’s Islamic and cultural identity. Ultimately, a decolonized educational model rooted in local narratives and values will help cultivate well-rounded, spiritually connected, and culturally confident learners.

### Recommendations:

1. **Develop Culturally Relevant Textbooks:** Incorporate indigenous stories, Islamic values, and regional languages into ECCE materials.
2. **Teacher Training in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** Equip educators with tools to counter colonial biases and engage students with culturally affirming methods.
3. **Policy Reform for Decolonization:** Align early education policies with Qur’anic teachings and local heritage, promoting inclusive and identity-affirming learning.
4. **Collaborate with Local Creators:** Involve writers, illustrators, and curriculum designers from local communities to ensure authenticity.

5. **Promote Multilingual Education:** Encourage balanced use of Urdu and regional languages to foster linguistic and cultural pride.



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