



Leadership Under Pressure: Contextual Barriers and Capacity-Building Needs of School Heads in South Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Effective school leadership is pivotal to improving educational quality, especially in resource-constrained and underserved regions like South Punjab. The study seeks to examine the leadership strengths, weaknesses, and systemic challenges encountered by head teachers in Southern Punjab, offering strategic recommendations for enhancing educational development in the region. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design, with data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 school leaders selected via purposive sampling. The data were analyzed with a thematic analysis method utilizing NVivo software. Findings revealed that, although school leaders possess essential leadership qualities, they commonly engage in the collaborative integration of vision and active participation in instructional planning to encourage joint team efforts. Insufficient autonomy, bureaucratic obstacles, and inadequate follow-up support post-training limit their effectiveness. QAED and the British Council are conducting leadership development projects; however, the training is centralized, generic, and lacks relevance to the specific contexts of local schools. Gender prejudices, contextual relevance, and inadequate monitoring hinder leadership effectiveness. It is recommended to use localized training, mentorship, and decentralized leadership frameworks to enhance school efficacy. However, longitudinal studies on the relationship between training and student performance in rural Pakistan are lacking.

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1. Introduction

In this new era of education, effective school leadership is essential for the success of both individual schools and educational institutions that maintain high academic standards (Clinciu, 2023). Research findings from around the world have established that school heads are crucial not only in performing organizational activities but also in influencing the teaching-learning environment, staff motivation, and providing a clear academic vision (Gading, 2024). In developing regions, school leadership has a particular impact on the quality of education offered, as systemic impairments are more prevalent (Ullah et al., 2023). The same issues have been supported by research conducted by Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020), which further confirms that strong leaders lead to effective schools. There is a close correlation between strong leadership in schools and student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and the overall performance of the school. Nonetheless, school leadership remains an under-researched and underdeveloped topic in Pakistan. Although the batteries of leadership development programs have been introduced through the work of institutions such as QAED and the British Council, their curricula usually do not include the integration of transformational leadership

models and reflective practices to respond to the new challenges of the 21st-century educational process. Schools in developing regions, such as South Punjab, Pakistan, commonly face entrenched systemic issues, including ineffective resources, teacher shortages, misaligned policies, and socioeconomic barriers—a reality that makes the work of school heads even more significant (McPherson, Lampert, & Burnett, 2024). These heads of schools are not just administrators but change agents, and they will have to navigate the complexities of the institution to ensure that good-quality education is delivered to underserved areas. According to Shields (2022), South Asia requires decentralized decisions, leadership independence, and the development of educational leadership pipelines, as it is vital. It coincides well with the educational conditions in Pakistan, where school heads in South Punjab are still confronted with such restrictions as structural constraints, non-professional growth opportunities, and scarce self-autonomy. On the other hand, the school leaders in the area also possess ideal leadership behaviors, such as being good mentors, having visions in education, managing curriculums, and establishing relationships with staff members, which indicates the versatile characteristics of school leadership (Hoang, 2024). These contradictory realities underscore the need to explore and understand the strengths and weaknesses of school leadership in diverse institutional settings. This article seeks to study these varied leadership experiences by critically analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the leadership of the school heads in both the state- and privately-owned schools in South Punjab, as well as the way forward for these leaders. On the basis of the qualitative evidence and informed localized views, such a major study has implications for policymakers and education departments, as well as the school management bodies through which systemic improvement in education can be achieved.

1.1. Problem Statement

Although effective school leadership has become a widely recognized global phenomenon due to its ability to be a determinant of school quality, most areas fail to utilize it, such as South Punjab in Pakistan. Among the key problems that schools in this region face are a lack of resources, poor infrastructure, a shortage of teachers, and the presence of socio-political issues that act as a deterrent to the introduction of quality education in this region. In this environment, school heads are looked upon as spearheading the growth of academic processes as well as handling the performance of the institutions. However, they primarily work with little autonomy, inadequate training, and a heavy administrative workload, which reduces their ability to act as transformational leaders. Although national bodies, such as QAED, and multinational bodies, like the British Council, have initiated training programs, these efforts are mostly generic, as they do not address the realities or aim to overcome the structural limitations present in South Punjab. Consequently, some school leaders' visions of integrated systems—mentoring teachers, crafting a shared vision, and collaborative planning—are disrupted by external factors, bureaucratic red tape, insufficient professional help, and fractured authority. Moreover, there is an absence of educational leadership research in Pakistan, especially concerning its neglected regions, like South Punjab. Comparatively little is known about the lived experiences of school principals grappling with the multidimensional realities of these contexts as well as the strategic abilities and difficulties encountered by school principals exercising leadership in such contexts. In the absence of such insights, it is unlikely that policies and capacity-building programs can achieve tangible results in enhancing school performance and student learning outcomes. Therefore, there is a dire need to thoroughly review the leadership principles of school heads in a study of both state and private schools in South Punjab. Their strengths, weaknesses, and future possibilities are essential, and these must be identified so that we can develop context-related leadership models that can serve as fundamental catalysts for providing quality education in the region.

1.2. Research Objectives

- 1.** To investigate the effective leadership strengths practised by head teachers in the southern region of Punjab.
- 2.** To identify the weaknesses and systemic constraints that school heads encounter.
- 3.** To provide strategic recommendations on school leadership practices that can improve educational development in the region.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This investigation focuses on the leadership functions of principals in the context of South Punjab, where socio-culturally inequitable and bureaucratically centralized systems will

hinder educational advancement. It analyzes the situational impact assessments of QAEDs and the British Council's training programs, evaluating the gap between policy and its actual implementation. This work addresses a substantial gap in localized, evidence-based educational leadership scholarship in Pakistan. Additionally, the research interprets practitioners' views on the gendered scholarship of leadership approaches in rural education and governance devolution in schools, all of which are inadequately articulated. The study aims to provide policymakers with proof that shows the need for leadership changes that are responsive, which will help make school leadership more professional and enhance education in areas that lack resources.

2. Review of Literature

In circumstances marked by persistent performative and systemic challenges, effective leadership of a school is paramount for achieving educational quality. In addition, the school head as an instructional leader and managerial linchpin steers and shapes the climate of teaching and learning, faculty motivation, and the processes of school renewal. Thus, he/she exerts considerable influence on the educational outcomes (Eacott, 2019; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). Pakistan school heads, particularly in South Punjab, are greatly impacted by socioeconomic and structural constraints. Many works within limited frameworks of institutional autonomy, face scant formal training in leadership, and are constrained by scarce resources (Ayaz, 2024). Although school leadership could be improved through clear vision, consistent communication, policy enforcement, distributed responsibilities, collegial teacher development, and evidence-based decision-making, most of these policies are mitigated by unclear or contradictory policies and inadequate support systems. Based on theoretical perspective, the current study is justified by special principles of the Transformational Leadership Theory, which deals with the ability of a leader to inspire, motivate, intellectually influence, and personally support the employees (Northouse, 2025). The model is distinctly in line with the leaders of underprivileged schools, where motivation, or rather, vision and environmental empowerment, play a crucial role in resisting the systemic challenges (Hill, 2025). In the same spirit, the Instructional Leadership Framework developed by Karadağ and Sertel (2025) underscores participation in curriculum planning and supporting teachers, as well as in the school-wide learning objectives. These are all critical for leaders working in South Punjab.

Challenges such as a lack of well-structured mentorship, negative comments, and complex supervision procedures contribute to low morale and minimal advancement in South Punjab institutions. Successful school administrators exhibit transformational leadership qualities like mentorship, creativity, collaboration, and team building (Northouse, 2025). However, high administrative costs, policy agendas, and a trend towards centralized control limit these models, hindering their sustainability. (Rafiq et al., 2024) found that the heads of schools in South Punjab, especially women, faced patriarchal opposition, restricted mobility, and burnout. Existing training models fail to address these challenges, particularly in South Punjab, and do not incorporate gender sensitivity or institutional support, hindering the implementation of transformational change. A comparison with similar areas, like rural schools in Bangladesh and Nepal, shows that South Punjab has the same issue, which comes from a lack of professional independence, very centralized control, and weak authority at the school level (UNESCO, 2022). Nonetheless, the setting lacks a strong leadership pipeline, limiting upward movement and succession. Despite new educational policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) and Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP), a divide exists between policy achievements and reality at schools. Many head teachers lack knowledge about leadership standards or struggle to implement reforms with flexibility, leading to institutional failure and a barrier to leadership. Researchers recommend context-based approaches to leadership development to address this issue. Mendoza Jr. and Callo (2024) focus on the way instructional leadership is to be integrated with managerial competencies, which should be adjusted to the needs of the underserved region, such as South Punjab. Similarly, (Amin, Amjad, & Amin, 2024) point at evidence-based decision-making, digital literacy, and community engagement as emerging competencies capable of expanding leadership capacity. Finally, current research demonstrates that school heads in South Punjab operate within intricate and frequently restrictive socio-institutional environments. Most of them have outstanding interpersonal and leadership abilities, but there are systemic weaknesses that are limiting their effectiveness, such as lack of autonomy, minimal training, gender-based tendencies, and administrative burdens. It is thus crucial to have a context-sensitive, theory-

sensitive, and habitual strategy of leadership development in a bid to transform school heads into transformational agents inserts of quality education in the region.

The Punjab government has urged the Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational Development (QAED) to provide head-teacher capacity building to address a leadership gap. QAED has developed training modules for induction, continuous professional development (CPD), and leadership competency-based training, while the British Council has piloted programs on reflective practice and inclusive education. However, these initiatives have faced criticism for their excessive centralization, lack of contextualization, and thin follow-up evaluations (Abbas, Tariq, & Arif, 2023). In South Punjab, rural head teachers still find these programs abstract and unrelated to their daily lives. The impact of school leadership is significant, with professional development and teacher motivation being key effects. Farid, Qamar, & Ahmad (2025) refer to these as trainings that occur during induction and CPD (Continuous Professional Development) sessions for school heads in the public sector. (Bukhari, Qamar, & Abiodullah, 2025) reported that the QAED and the British Council have been actively involved in training development and transformational leadership for school principals in South Punjab. These programs cover leadership, decision-making, multidisciplinary curriculum management, teacher appraisal, strategic vision crafting, and school ethos articulation. The programs aim to provide school administrators with the tools to engage staff, streamline teaching and learning procedures, and align school operations with national education policy (Nasir et al., 2025).

The challenges faced in the design and implementation of training programs are still considerable in scope and intricate in nature. One of the problems is lack of contextual relevance. Training programs are overly rigid, excessively reliant on a singular theoretical framework, and dominated by rote learning, which makes follow-up support, mentorship, guidance, or any form of applicable help one month after training sparse (Sain et al., 2025). As noted by (Hill, 2025), school leadership argues that the policy in focus overlooks systemic difficulties, such as organizational design, funding distribution, and workforce disengagement. National-level frameworks for training policies are hindered by a multitude of participants' experiences, varying categories of schools, geographic regions, and types of training received by participants (Niaz & Rose, 2025). Workshops disconnect from reality and lack contextually relevant materials, rendering them irrelevant to South Punjab's sociocultural and institutional context. Without ongoing materials, support, and post-training accountability mechanisms, these programs cannot effectively address the challenges faced by school leaders in improving educational quality. Research shows that although headteachers in southern Punjab demonstrate some leadership capabilities, their functional effectiveness remains constrained by systemic limitations, gaps in policies, and inadequately designed training frameworks. To empower headteachers as effective agents of change for quality education, leadership training should be contextually responsive, inclusive of gender considerations, grounded in practical application, and sustained through systematized post-training follow-up and mentoring structures.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The given research utilizes an exploratory qualitative design, a technique widely acknowledged as the most suitable when it comes to explaining complex, situation-related leadership practice and experience. This qualitative method provides an opportunity to conduct a deep review of perceptions, behaviors, and issues being observed by school heads in both the state and private schools in South Punjab. Since the focus of the research topic lies on the subjective leadership strengths, weaknesses, and situational factors, a constructivist paradigm was chosen. It is a paradigm in which attention is paid to a social phenomenon in the light of lived experiences of the participants.

3.2. Research Setting and Participants

The current research was also conducted through a survey design to collect information in four districts of South Punjab, namely Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Rahim Yar Khan, where disparities in education and bureaucratic barriers are typically higher than in central Punjab. The study created a comparison system by looking at public schools as an investment, which showed different trends in leadership practices and support at the schools

involved. Samples were obtained from 15 school heads using a purposive sampling method. To ensure that the participants had the necessary leadership authority and firsthand experience and could offer an extensive professional understanding of the educational setting in focus, purposive sampling was used, as it is a non-probability method. Attempts were also made to ensure that heterogeneous cases, in terms of gender, urban-rural setting, and school size, were used to enhance the external validity of the results.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

First, the semi-structured interview was chosen as the main data-collection instrument, and it allowed enough flexibility to help conduct follow-up requests in detail. The instrument was built based on the objectives of the research, where themes included

1. Investigating Leadership Strengths in South Punjab
2. Leadership tactics and approaches
3. Administration and problems
4. positive leadership assets
5. Practice monitoring and evaluation
6. areas of weakness, system limits
7. Future expectations and suggestions

The length of speech was between 45 and 60 minutes, and a participant decided the language it would be, namely English or Urdu. The audio recording was done with the consent of participants in advance, and consequently, the generated files would be transcribed verbatim to aid in analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis Using NVivo

Transcribed data and field notes were analyzed using NVivo 14, one of the qualitative data analysis software. (Naeem et al., 2023) six-step process of thematic analysis included familiarization with data, initial coding, identification of themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and report production. Such visual tools as word clouds and treemaps were created to facilitate thematic patterns and connections between the concepts. Then, the report was read into the objectives of the research.

4. Data Analysis

Objective 1: To investigate the effective leadership strengths practised by head teachers in the southern region of Punjab.

Figure 1: The word cloud of effective leadership strengths



The accompanying word cloud outlines the primary focus of the research, which is to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of public-school leadership in South Punjab. In the center is the word 'teacher,' which reinforces the importance of educators in the success of these institutions. The most frequently occurring positively rated features, which are the leadership, development, motivation, vision, and curriculum, have all pointed to the importance of empowerment of teachers, setting of common objectives, and instructional leadership. In comparison, the repetition of such terminologies as "monitoring" and "focus" helps to identify the areas that need more consideration or consistency. In combination, the word cloud

suggests that, despite the regular evidence of professional development vision among the school heads, their greater level of monitoring and long-term, systematic teacher assistance would help them achieve complete educational excellence.

Figure 2: A tree map of effective leadership strengths

teacher	focus	motivation	alignment	collaboration	direction	environment	inclusive	mentors	pedagogy	performance	planning
			autonomy	community	driven	evidence	innovation	positive	recognition	reinforcement	reviews
	leadership	vision	based	creating	effective	goal	instruction	practices	setting	success	support
			classroom	data	encourage	goals	long	professional	strategic	supporting	term
curriculum	monitoring	academic									
development		achievement	clear	decision	engagement	guidance	making	quality	student	teaching	

The representation of the heads of the public schools in South Punjab in the form of a treemap is a visual representation of the impact on the main educational areas. The words "teacher," "curriculum," "development," and "leadership" denote areas of participation, while the leadership attributes—motivation, vision, alignment, collaboration, and support—characterize an outcome-based professional development plan undertaken by these leaders. Moreover, the words "planning," "monitoring," "mentorship," "innovation," and "recognition" illustrate a responsive stance oriented toward constructing facilitative and learner-centered educational frameworks. The visualization aligns with the study's objective by illustrating the impact of strong leadership practices on holistic school improvement while hinting suggestively towards "decision making," "quality," and other dimensions that might need continuous prompting towards sustained performance.

Objective 2: To identify the weaknesses and systemic constraints that school heads encounter.

Figure 3: A word cloud of the weaknesses and systemic constraints



The word cloud provided displays the most important issues that have been hindering the performance of students at the lower schools and demotivating the teachers. The central word in this description is "teacher," who plays a necessary role in comparison with such words as "lack," "inconsistent," "support," "motivation," and "leadership," which together reveal the hopelessness of the system. This despair is driven by the root causes based on a number of deficiencies, such as poor evaluation, weak vision, poor decision-making, and lack of development of support structures. These deficiencies can foster professional impotence, a segregated delivery of pedagogy, and a lack of a unified learning environment. The word cloud shows that if there isn't strong leadership that builds support networks, gives a clear vision, and provides good professional development along with effective teaching and learning, then educational performance will likely stay stuck at its current low level.

Figure 6: A tree map of the provided strategic recommendations

teacher	training	manager	focus	autono	driven	issues	staff	acad	char	class	clear	coad	colla	com	confl
				based	environ	monitor	studer	acce	cons	dire	effe	enco	enga	evid	expe
	learning	motivatio	making	challen	guidanc	opportu		achie	cons	facili	goals	head	inclu	ineff	infra
leadership			mentors	classro	inadequ	poor	teachi	actio	cont	feed	innov	long	low	mat	mod
	development	curriculu		collabo	inconsi	profess	techno	auth	creat	form	intera	netw	overl	per	plar
support	lack	decision	vision	data	instruct	resistar	time	bure	deleg	fund	limita	netw	pedag		
								cent	deliv	goal	limite	obse	peer	poli	pos

The given tree map visualization outlines and prioritizes the main concepts on which interventions to strengthen school governance and, consequently, the quality of education as a whole, should be based. The biggest circles (defining the categories of teacher, leadership, and support) indicate the areas that should be the focus of attention. Keywords such as training, development, motivation, vision, and decision-making highlight the spheres where leadership plays a significant role, while terms like collaboration, feedback, mentorship, policy, and resistance represent the opportunities and challenges present in the education system. According to the objective of mapping the future directions, the figure also draws attention to the need to have a holistic leadership framework that enables teachers, strengthens support systems, and promotes professional development to realize high student results.

5. Conclusions

Objective 1: To explore the leadership strengths exhibited by school heads in South Punjab.

The study found that school heads in South Punjab possess significant competencies in teacher empowerment, instructional leadership, curriculum planning, and vision-setting. However, the lack of long-term accountability measures and teacher-advancing devices hinders the full realization of these strengths. To achieve educational excellence, school leaders need systemic leadership practices, regular monitoring, and organized support services.

Objective 2: To identify the weaknesses and systemic constraints that school heads encounter.

The image depicts the instructional leadership weaknesses, with a teacher at the center facing gaps, inappropriate choices, and minimal aid structures that surround them. This scenario implies that a school subsystem lacks operational functionality as a system. Problems can be cited as evaluation deficiency, planning ineffectiveness, and curriculum oversight, all of which are often done in a highly centralized manner. These factors contribute to low morale among teachers in the public education system.

Objective 3: To provide strategic recommendations on school leadership practices that can improve educational development in the region.

Professional help, training, ongoing development, and mentorship programs, along with evidence-based decision-making and strategic foresight systems, are among the Professional Support Section Strategies suggested by the assessment to foster educational leadership in South Punjab. These programs need to be contextual, sustained, and integrated with the school's intended goals for improvement. There is a need for a unifying leadership framework, systemic reforms, strategic design, accountability frameworks, clear responsibilities, and a culture of innovation.

6. Discussion

The research analyzes school leadership within an institutional context and finds that, although most head teachers act as vision-setters, they are frequently constrained by rigid central control, ineffective support structures, and poorly aligned appraisal frameworks that hinder system functioning. The findings align with previous research on system leadership's

interaction with developing situations using external frameworks (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). South Punjab head teachers practice transformational leadership by mentoring and fostering collaboration, setting comprehensive goals, and guiding the school at the strategic level (Northouse, 2025). However, (Noor & Nawab, 2022) highlighted that ineffective support and monitoring structures often negate these leadership attributes, and unregulated accountability systems can exacerbate school-level challenges. The findings show that problems like restricted job freedom, poor planning, and lack of resources, as noted by (Maqbool et al., 2024), make it hard for public-school leaders to be effective, which points to more local control and adaptable resources. Rafiq et al. (2024) examine discrimination and the mobility constraints faced by rural Pakistani women school leaders, proposing advocacy for more gender-sensitive leadership frameworks. School practice gaps, alongside policy initiatives such as the NEP and PESRP, become apparent. Organizational and individual autonomy, bound by hierarchical structures, hinders the awareness and implementation capacity of school heads regarding policies. Leadership governance frameworks, as posited by Afzal, Khan and Kamran (2025), cannot be mono-political; they cannot lack comprehensive, actionable implementation strategies, precise tools, coaching, contextualized support, tailored guidance, and mentorship. The neglect of South Punjab's realities is a primary concern, even with the advanced training programs for school heads provided by QAED and the British Council. As noted by Abbas, Tariq and Arif (2023), the irrelevance of this training, coupled with participant disengagement, reinforces the absence of a responsive leadership framework. It becomes critical that the reimagining of school leadership frameworks merge instructional leadership with distributed governance skill sets. The data suggests that through mentorship and contextualized training, South Punjab school principals can surmount considerable challenges within decentralized systems as transformative leaders of quality education, given the appropriate framework. This aligns with the advocacy of Amin, Amjad and Amin (2024) on capacity governance frameworks, evidence-based policymaking, digital methods, and community engagement.

6.1. Recommendations

1. Develop a contextual leadership model that aligns the functions of school leadership with defined goals for student achievement and the strategic objectives of the institution.
2. Establish systematic mentorship and evaluation structures for training programs (follow-up frameworks) for leaders at all levels.
3. Focus on specific geographic areas, mainly rural and underserved areas, for professional development initiatives.
4. Increase school head discretion by eliminating centralization of decision-making.
5. Implement frameworks of leadership responsive to the needs of women to address the challenges faced by women school leaders.
6. Develop school leadership effectiveness, which fosters continuous evaluation through evidence-based performance evaluation systems.

6.2. Identified Research Gap for Future Research

Understanding the impact of leadership training—whether from QAED or the British Council—for measuring school improvement, teacher retention, and student outcomes is lacking in South Punjab's documented impact-based and longitudinal studies. Holbein et al. (2020) highlighted systemic constraints alongside leadership strengths, but there is a need for more focused study on measurable outcomes following training interventions. More studies must be conducted to examine the direct impact of these leadership frameworks within varying contextual school settings.

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