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BETWEEN NEGLECT AND NECESSITY: TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BALOCHISTAN THROUGH STRUCTURAL REFORM AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract
School education in Balochistan faces crisis at the very basic levels where learning begins. This systematic review synthesizes empirical research analyzing how infrastructure inadequacies, teacher shortages, and financing gaps intersect with gender norms, early marriage, restricted mobility, and socio-economic constraints. With 69% of children out of school (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023), literacy at 42%, and 78% of girls excluded, Balochistan exemplifies failed SDG 4 progress. Drawing on educational equity theory, Bourdieu's cultural capital framework, and postcolonial perspectives, this study examines provincial research, UNESCO's recent ECE initiatives, and comparative evidence from Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka. Findings reveal ECE remains virtually absent in rural areas, 22% of primary schools are non-functional (Government of Balochistan, 2023), and thousands of ghost teachers drain budgets. The study proposes integrated reforms: equitable financing prioritizing ECE/primary infrastructure, teacher professionalization with female recruitment emphasis, gender-responsive culturally grounded pedagogy addressing early marriage and mobility restrictions, strengthened community governance, and strategic technology deployment. Transformative change requires comprehensive, locally owned approaches addressing structural and cultural dimensions simultaneously.

1. INTRODUCTION

School education in Balochistan, particularly at early childhood education (ECE) and primary levels, faces South Asia's most severe crisis. Pakistan's largest province (44% of territory, 7% of population) ranks last on all educational indicators. The 2023 census reveals 52.69% of children aged 5-16 never attended school, with 78% of girls and 63% of boys currently out-of-school, being Pakistan's highest exclusion rates (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Literacy stands at 42.0% versus 60.7% nationally, with rural female literacy at merely 25%.

ECE remains severely under-developed despite recognition as critical for addressing out-of-school children. UNESCO's initiative for developing Balochistan's first comprehensive ECE Policy represents urgency and determination to transform early learning. The Global Partnership for Education's USD 1.331 million System Capacity Grant secured by UNESCO specifically targets foundational learning (UNESCO, 2024).

Despite Article 25-A guaranteeing free compulsory education for ages 5-16 and SDG 4 commitments, Balochistan remains trapped in deprivation. The province operates 15,168 schools, yet 22.1% are non-functional, 79% lack electricity, 60% lack toilets (Government of Balochistan, 2023). At primary level, several of schools have single teachers managing multiple grades simultaneously (Khan, 2011).

This study provides integrated analysis connecting structural and cultural factors, emphasizes ECE and primary education foundations, draws on South Asian comparative evidence, and articulates context-sensitive reform strategies.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

Overall objectives of this study include:

1. Identify structural challenges (infrastructure, financing, staffing, curriculum) affecting ECE and primary education
2. Examine cultural barriers, such as early marriage, boys' prioritization, mobility restrictions, perceived lack of returns from girls' education
3. Assess governance, community engagement, and technology deployment influences
4. Propose evidence-based reforms for foundational education

To achieve these objectives, the following research questions were considered:

1. What structural factors constrain ECE and primary education and how do they interact?
2. How do cultural norms, like early marriage, mobility restrictions, family perceptions, shape educational patterns?
3. How do governance, community participation, and technology influence provision?
4. What reform strategies (including the ones successfully adopted in the region) appear most promising for Balochistan?

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The study design revolved around systematic literature review synthesizing Balochistan education research with regional comparative evidence. Data sources for this study included peer-reviewed studies on Balochistan education (Chachar, 2023; Khan, A. R. & Ali, H.M., 2024; Rehman et al., 2023; Coşkun, 2023; Gul et al., 2023); UNESCO/UNICEF reports on ECE in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2021; Khan, 2011; Hunzai, 2011); official statistics (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Government of Balochistan, 2023, 2024); South Asian comparative sources on successful reforms in Bangladesh (stipends, free textbooks), India (community-school partnerships, mid-day meals), Sri Lanka (free quality primary education) (Little, 2003; UNICEF, 2013, 2014; Kumar et al., 2024).

Studies for this research included if focused on ECE/primary/secondary education in Balochistan, Pakistan or South Asia, provided empirical data or relevant theoretical frameworks, published between 2003 and early 2025, and employed rigorous methodologies.

3.2 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Integration of educational equity theory (Omar et al., 2025), Bourdieu's cultural capital framework (Marinković, 2024), and postcolonial perspectives (Abdulrahman et al., 2021; Cruz et al., 2023) examining structural, cultural, and governance dimensions. This composite framework interprets resource indicators alongside cultural practices (early marriage, mobility restrictions, educational prioritization) and governance factors (patronage, community participation, technology), avoiding economic determinism and cultural essentialism while maintaining foundational education focus.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic synthesis extracting key findings, organizing into themes, such as structural challenges at ECE/primary levels, cultural barriers including specific practices, socio-economic factors, governance issues, technology initiatives, and South Asian successful models. Moreover, it included cross-study pattern identification through iterative coding, triangulation across sources, comparative analysis identifying shared patterns and Balochistan-specific dynamics.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Structural Challenges in Foundational Education

ECE remains severely under-resourced. UNICEF (2021) found government ECE (Katchi for ages 3-5) exists predominantly in urban areas, excluding rural Balochistan. While donor programs operate (Aga Khan initiatives, AusAID-funded programs), however, they remain limited. Structural challenges include no dedicated ECE classrooms; no trained ECE teachers (primary teachers allocate minimal time with no specialized training); no standardized ECE curriculum adapted to linguistic/cultural diversity; minimal budget allocation for ECE materials (Khan, 2011; UNICEF, 2021).

On the other hand, primary schools (80.6% of institutions) face catastrophic gaps. Data reveals that on average one-fourth of the schools are entirely non-functional (Government of Balochistan, 2023). Among functional schools 79% lack electricity; 60% lack toilets (critical barrier for girls); many lack boundary walls; classrooms lack furniture; and learning materials are insufficient. Only 62.2% have proper buildings (Chachar, 2023; Rehman et al., 2023). Over 7,000 single-teacher multi-grade primary schools make proper and individualized instruction almost impossible.

On financial side, school education sector suffers from low development funding. While Balochistan allocates around 24% of budget to education, over 75% are allocated for salaries, with ECE receiving almost no allocation. Pakistan's education expenditure at 0.8% of GDP is far below UNESCO's 4-6% recommendation, declined 29.4% to Rs. 899.6 billion in FY 2025. According to Rehman et al., (2023) estimates, ghost teachers siphon 400-500 million rupees annually.

Government of Balochistan statistics report approximately 16,000 teacher shortages, with hundreds of primary schools non-functional due to staff absence (Government of Balochistan, 2024). No specialized ECE teacher cadre exists in the structure. Among primary teachers, qualifications are inadequate, chronic absenteeism (30-40%) undermines learning, and around 15,000 ghost teachers represent extreme accountability failure. Only 38.7% are female among the overall public sector appointed teachers, while the research and practice have proved that female presence boosts girls' enrollment (Rehman et al., 2023).

Curriculum is another big area of concern. Primary and ECE curriculum emphasizes rote memorization over foundational skills. ECE inappropriately replicates formal schooling rather than play-based approaches (UNICEF, 2021). Language of instruction in Urdu/English from *katchi* onward creates barriers for Balochi/Pashto/Brahui speakers. Primary curriculum reflects non-local and non-indigenous perspectives, failing to incorporate provincial realities. Most of the assessment modalities emphasizes recall, providing no formative feedback (Coşkun, 2023).

4.2 Cultural Barriers to Foundational Education

One of the most significant barriers to girls' primary completion is early marriages. Data shows 36% of girls drop out in grades 4-5, coinciding with puberty and marriage age (Chachar, 2023). Families view early marriage as relieving economic burdens, ensuring daughters' security, and fulfilling cultural and religious expectations. Once married, girls rarely continue education.

Where families face financial constraints, boys' education is prioritized as economic investment and perceived economic and financial returns. Sons support parents in old age and contribute to the household income. Girls' education is perceived as lacking returns, because daughters marry and join husbands' families, employment opportunities for educated women are limited in rural areas and cultural norms emphasize domestic roles over careers for women and girls (Coşkun, 2023).

The prevailing norms around honor, modesty, and gender segregation restrict girls' mobility, particularly approaching puberty. Families express concerns about reputation, harassment during travel, inappropriate mixing with boys/male teachers, and in conflict areas, security threats. These intensify when schools are distant, lack boundary walls, operate as co-ed, and/or lack female teachers (Chachar, 2023; Coşkun, 2023).

Another big challenge, especially for rural children, is linguistic alienation. Children arrive at *katchi*/primary speaking Balochi/Pashto/Brahvi, while the instruction occurs in Urdu/English from day one. This creates comprehension difficulties, humiliation, messages that home languages are inferior, and cultural alienation. Curriculum content to al large extent contains urban experiences alien to rural children (Coşkun, 2023; Abdulrahman et al., 2021).

Majority (over 70%) of the population live below the poverty line. High poverty shapes primary enrollment decisions. Children engage in agricultural work, livestock herding, paid labor. Girls perform domestic labor, such as cooking, childcare, water/firewood collection. Opportunity costs outweigh perceived benefits when schools are low-quality (Rehman et al., 2023).

Families with uneducated parents face difficulties supporting children's foundational education, because of their narrow vision and not recognizing early education importance, understanding

homework, and going through their children's enrollment procedures (Marinković, 2024).

4.3 Governance and Technology Challenges

In Balochistan it is a bitter truth that teacher recruitment and posting/transfer are highly politicized and are most appointments are awarded to political supporters. This undermines meritocracy and creates impunity cultures protecting ghost teachers (Khan, A. R., & Ali, H.M., 2024; Rehman et al., 2023). Among employed teachers, qualifications are often inadequate, and chronic absenteeism (30-40% in some areas) severely undermines quality (Khan, A. R., & Ali, H.M., 2024).

Although during the last few years Parent Teachers Schools Management Committees (PTSMCs) were established in almost across the province, but these committees function poorly, particularly for rural primary schools. Where communities engage, participation is financial rather than governance involvement. Women are excluded despite being primary caregivers and education decision-makers at the household level (Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023).

Although we are cruising through the ear of technology and AI, modern Technology is a rare entity among the primary schools. With 79% lacking electricity, technology deployment is largely infeasible. COVID-19 online education attempts excluded rural students entirely, particularly at primary level. While the urban-rural technology gaps exacerbated inequality (Gul et al., 2023).

5. Comparative Insights: South Asian Successful Reforms

Bangladesh achieved progress through stipend programs providing monthly cash transfers to families keeping daughters enrolled, offsetting opportunity costs; free textbook distribution eliminating cost barriers; school feeding programs improving attendance; and female teacher recruitment targeting rural areas (UNICEF, 2014). The initiative demonstrates that well-targeted financial incentives dramatically shift household decisions.

Sri Lanka achieved 98% primary enrollment and 92.3% literacy through free education kindergarten through university eliminating financial barriers; primary education quality reforms focusing on foundational literacy/numeracy and teacher training; equitable resource distribution to rural schools; and compulsory education through age 14. The 1990s Primary Education Reforms specifically targeted grades 1-5 quality, recognizing "outcomes in Grades 1-5 create the foundation for higher grades" (Little, 2003; UNICEF, 2013).

India's District Education Revitalization Program (DERP) opened 160,000 new schools including 84,000 alternative schools reaching 3.5 million previously excluded children through community-school partnerships where village education committees gained decision-making power; mid-day meal schemes addressing malnutrition; and targeted interventions for marginalized groups. Experimental evidence shows community-school participation significantly improves foundational learning (Kumar et al., 2024).

The above exemplary initiatives from the region provide a way forward for Balochistan education improvement. The regional examples have proved that financial incentives work (stipends, free textbooks); free quality education dramatically expands access; primary level quality focus yields long-term dividends; genuine community participation improves outcomes; nutrition programs address learning barriers; and female teacher recruitment is essential. However, successful reforms required sustained political commitment, adequate financing, systematic implementation reaching underserved areas, and integration across various dimensions of education encasement.

6. Discussion

Balochistan's foundational education crisis stems from convergence of structural, cultural, and governance dimensions. Structural deficits like absent ECE, inadequate primary infrastructure, teacher shortages, are intensified by peripheral and geographical status. Cultural dynamics such as early marriage, mobility restrictions, boys' prioritization, perceived lack of returns from girls' education, shape access alongside structural constraints.

Educational equity theory reveals equal treatment perpetuates inequality when starting points differ for boys and girls. Balochistan requires compensatory investments with ECE/primary priority (Omar et al., 2024). UNESCO's ECE initiative (2021-2025) represents recognition that "ECE is a critical entry point for tackling out-of-school children" (UNESCO).

Bourdieu's framework illuminates how schools reproduce inequality at earliest stages through linguistic mismatches and cultural alienation (Marinković, 2024). Cultural barriers, early marriage, mobility restrictions, require nuanced engagement beyond "traditional resistance" narratives. South Asian evidence demonstrates barriers can be overcome through sustained, multi-faceted approaches. Bangladesh's stipends addressing early marriage economic pressures; Sri Lanka achieving 98% enrollment post-conflict; India's community partnerships improving foundational learning are the best successful examples for way-forward.

Strategic technology deployment must recognize infrastructure realities. Priorities include foundational digital infrastructure (solar power before educational technology), basic connectivity, mobile teacher training platforms, supplementary offline resources in local languages, and improved data systems. Technology should supplement, never replace, face-to-face instruction at ECE/primary levels where human interaction is pedagogically essential (Gul et al., 2023).

7. Conclusion

Balochistan's foundational education crisis, where 69% children are out-of-school, literacy rates are only 42%, 78% girls are excluded from education, ECE is absent, particularly in rural public schools, demands urgent comprehensive intervention. Structural constraints (non-existent ECE, 22% non-functional primary schools, 16,000 teacher shortages, ghost teachers) compound with cultural barriers (early marriage driving 36% girls' dropout, boys' prioritization, mobility restrictions, linguistic alienation) and governance weaknesses (patronage, limited accountability, superficial community participation) is currently presenting a bleak picture of the situation.

Regional examples demonstrate resource-constrained contexts can achieve transformation through sustained interventions prioritizing foundational education. UNESCO's ECE policy development represents critical momentum requiring adequate financing and implementation. However, success requires integrated approaches. Equitable financing prioritizing ECE/primary, teacher professionalization emphasizing female recruitment, gender-responsive culturally grounded pedagogy addressing early marriage and mobility, strengthened community governance, and strategic technology deployment will be critical to overcome the challenges. Fundamentally, improvement of provincial education status demands political will to dismantle patronage, courage to engage cultural dynamics respectfully, commensurate resources, and genuine community partnerships. Balochistan's children deserve opportunities comparable to Pakistan's urban centers, realizing this vision is a question of justice.

8. Recommendations

The study presents the following set of doable and achievable recommendations to overcome the ECE and primary education challenges in the province:

8.1 For Policy Makers

1. Implement UNESCO-supported ECE policy with 5% minimum education budget allocation; construct ECE classrooms in all primary schools prioritizing rural areas; develop specialized ECE teacher cadre with play-based training; create mother tongue curriculum for ages 3-5; and provide ECE-specific materials and furniture.
2. Increase education spending to 4% GDP with primary priority; implement equity-focused funding formulas prioritizing rural districts and girls; systematically address infrastructure (solar electricity, gender-segregated toilets, boundary walls, classrooms, furniture); and conduct annual public infrastructure checks for repair and maintenance.
3. Eliminate patronage through merit-based transparent recruitment and posting/transfers; prioritize female teacher recruitment with rural posting incentives (housing, 50% hardship allowances, career acceleration); provide specialized ECE/early grade training; implement continuous professional development with coaching and mentorship; strengthen accountability through biometric attendance and community oversight; and eliminate ghost teachers through verification and prosecution.
4. Construct girls' schools within easy reach of communities; ensure female teachers in all girls' schools; provide safe transportation; implement conditional cash transfer/stipend programs modelled on Bangladesh targeting girls katchi-grade 10; engage religious/tribal leaders legitimizing girls' education;

enforce legal marriage age (18) by law; create mentorship connecting educated women with girls; and establish community-based ECE centers managed by local women/parents.
5. Implement mother tongue-based multilingual education in *Katchi* and grades 1-3; develop ECE/primary curriculum reflecting Balochistan's livelihoods, cultural traditions, environments; train teachers in bilingual pedagogy; reform assessment emphasizing foundational literacy/numeracy over rote learning; and establish early grade benchmarks with regular assessment.

8.2 For Educational Practitioners

1. Use play-based child-centered approaches in ECE; employ phonics-based reading and concrete-representational-abstract mathematics in early grades; conduct formative assessments identifying gaps early; differentiate instruction; and value children's home languages as learning foundations.
2. Engage families as partners in education; Conduct regular parent-teacher meetings; make home visits understanding family contexts; create mother literacy programs enabling learning support; communicate progress clearly; and organize participatory activities building trust.
3. Create safe gender-responsive environments through ensuring separate private toilets for girls; maintain boundary walls and security; implement zero-tolerance harassment policies; accommodate girls' needs during menstruation; and create classroom cultures where all feel respected.
4. Participate in school governance by joining management committees actively providing expertise while respecting community authority; advocate for children's learning needs; share transparent information; and collaborate on improvement planning.
5. Collaborate with fellow ECE/primary teachers sharing practices; observe classrooms for mutual learning; solve challenges collectively; and support each other emotionally and professionally.

8.3 For Technology Deployment

1. Invest in solar power before educational technology; establish reliable connectivity starting with district hubs; ensure electricity reaches all schools within five years; and avoid technology diverting resources from teachers/classrooms/materials.
2. Deploy mobile-based training platforms with offline capability; create video demonstration lessons in local languages for ECE/early grade instruction; establish district resource centers with computers/internet; and use SMS/WhatsApp for training communications.
3. Develop contextually appropriate content; create supplementary learning videos in local languages for foundational skills; develop offline digital libraries with teaching resources and children's stories in local languages; and ensure content reflects Balochistan's cultural contexts.
4. Strengthen RTSM and EMIS with real-time enrollment, attendance, learning outcome data; use biometric teacher attendance tracking; implement digital monitoring for evidence-based school visits; and publish district-level dashboards for community oversight.
5. Maintain pedagogical appropriateness; never replace face-to-face instruction with technology at ECE/primary levels where human interaction is essential; use technology to supplement traditional teaching; ensure deployment includes teacher training in pedagogical integration; and regularly evaluate for learning impact.

9. Future Research

Longitudinal studies are needed to document enrollment expansion, teacher training effectiveness, community responses, and early learning outcomes across districts, while identifying operational and contextual challenges that affect implementation.
Further inquiry should explore the role of mother tongue instruction in early grades through experimental or quasi-experimental designs, comparing learning outcomes with early Urdu-medium instruction and assessing transition strategies across linguistic groups. Research is also required to examine the effectiveness of interventions aimed at mitigating cultural barriers, including early marriage, mobility constraints, and gendered educational prioritization, with specific analysis of religious leader engagement and community perceptions of returns to girls' education. Additionally, studies on technology integration should assess the educational and cost-benefit impacts of solar energy installations and

mobile-based teacher training, documenting their influence on instructional time, teacher motivation, student learning, and community acceptance, while identifying contexts in which technological investments meaningfully enhance educational outcomes.

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