

## FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF IMPLEMENTATION GAPS IN EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN SINDH

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### Abstract

This study critically analyses the implementation gaps in educational reforms in the province of Sindh with a particular emphasis on the gap between policy formation and implementation at the school level. While there have been a number of reform efforts to enhance access, quality, governance, and learning outcomes, these have not delivered the anticipated gains. The study examines how institutional, administrative, political, and contextual factors are barriers to effective policy implementation in light of implementation theory and the concept of street-level bureaucracy. The qualitative research design with an interpretivist paradigm was employed through the multiple case studies of selected districts (urban and rural) in Sindh. Semi-structured interviews with policy makers, education officers, school heads, and teachers, as well as analysis of policy reports and reform plans, were used to gather data. Weak institutional capacity, political interference, lack of resources, lack of engagement with stakeholders, poor monitoring, and high urban-rural disparities are some of the key challenges identified through thematic analysis. The results show that educational reform is frequently unsuccessful due to a lack of attention to the planning and implementation of policy being given to the local context and conditions of implementation. This study shows that for education to work, it is necessary to design good educational policy, but it is also essential that the governance is strong, there is the participation of good students, good resources are allocated, and that the implementation of the policy is tailored to the specific context. The study helps in understanding the gaps between policies and practices in education and proposes practical suggestions for making the education reforms in Sindh more effective and sustainable.

**Introduction**

Reform in education has been a priority in efforts to enhance the quality, equity, and efficiency of schooling systems worldwide. In the Sindh context, various governments have proposed policy changes to increase access, improve the quality of teaching, strengthen governance, and improve learning outcomes. These reforms, which have included curriculum reform, teacher recruitment, decentralization, accountability, and partnerships between the public and the private sector, are a reflection of a long-term commitment to changing the educational landscape (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, in spite of well-developed policy frameworks and ambitious reform agendas, the expected gains in educational outcomes have frequently been below expectations. One of the more important issues that this discrepancy is based on is the persistent disparity between policy development and actual performance. The success of policies, according to the implementation theory, especially the works of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) lies not just in good design but also in the ability of institutions to implement policies effectively. In Sindh, policies are mostly formulated at the macro level with a clear intent, but their implementation at the school and classroom levels is unequal and uneven. The weak institutional capacity, poor resource allocation, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, as well as political interference, remain the factors that impede successful implementation (Asian Development Bank, 2019; World Bank, 2018). Moreover, the process of decentralization reforms followed after the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment of Pakistan to make the education a provincial concern made provinces such as Sindh more responsible for designing and implement contextual specific policies. Although this transition brought about the prospects of localized decision-making, it also revealed systemic flaws in the structure of governance, monitoring, and accountability (UNICEF, 2021). The difficulties are further escalated in rural and marginalized regions where inequalities in infrastructure, availability of teachers and community involvement further widen the disparities between policy intentions and actual practice (Oad, et al., 2024; Hussain, et al., 2023). This paper, then, aims to critically

examine the gaps in education reforms in Sindh in terms of how and why policies have not been implemented in line with the ground realities. The research utilizes a policy-practice lens and investigates the functions of the major stakeholders, institutional processes, and structural limitations, which influence the implementation process (Hossain, et al., 2025). In this way, it transcends descriptive reform narratives and gets into more profound questions of effectiveness, sustainability and impact (Akhtar & Kayani, 2024; Akhtar, et al., 2020; Anwar, et al., 2019). Evidence-based on finding and unpacking these gaps, the study has a goal of contributing to a deeper approach to the educational reform in Sindh. It is also aimed at creating evidence-based knowledge to inform more coherent, context-sensitive, and implementable policy strategies. It is necessary to bridge the gap between policy and practice not only to enhance educational outcomes but also to make reform efforts translate into meaningful and sustainable change at schools and communities (Riipa, et al., 2026). **Problem Statement.** Although there are several education reform efforts in the Sindh region, there is minimal performance in access, quality and learning outcomes. One of the major problems is the constant discrepancy between policy-making and its practical application on the school level. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment of Pakistan has led to a greater provincial responsibility further revealing the vulnerability of the institutional capacity, governance and accountability. This paper, hence, looks at the issues that have led to discrepancies in implementation of education reforms in Sindh.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although there are several education reform efforts in the Sindh region, there is minimal performance in access, quality and learning outcomes. One of the major problems is the constant discrepancy between policy-making and its practical application on the school level. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment of Pakistan has led to a greater provincial responsibility further revealing the vulnerability of the institutional capacity, governance and accountability. This paper, hence, looks at the issues that have led to

discrepancies in implementation of education reforms in Sindh.

#### Research Objectives

1. To determine the key educational reforms that were adopted in Sindh.
2. To examine the causes of the gaps in the implementation of these reforms.
3. To suggest the plans on how to enhance the successful execution of educational policies.

#### Research Questions

1. What are the key education reforms in Sindh?
2. What are the reasons behind the policy-practice gap in these reforms?
3. What can be done to reduce the implementation gaps in educational reforms?

#### Scope of the Study

This paper is aimed at examining the nature of the implementation loopholes to educational reforms in Sindh. It analyses the chosen reform initiatives that have been implemented over the last few years especially in the governance, teacher management and quality improvement. The research question is mainly how these policies are implemented at the school level in terms of the role played by the policymakers, education administrators and teachers. The study is geographically confined to a few districts in the state of Sindh including both urban and rural settings to include the differences in implementation. The study focuses on institutional, administrative, and contextual elements affecting the implementation of policies and not policy formulation.

#### Justification of the Study

Although there have been major policy efforts, the results of education in Sindh are below expectations, which signifies that there is a severe gap between policy intents and practice. Although much attention has been on policy design or historical developments in existing studies, we have not paid much attention to the challenges of implementation that are on the ground. This research is warranted because it fills this gap by giving a comprehensive, context-specific analysis as to why reforms do not lead to desired results. The results will add to the academic knowledge on policy implementation and provide practical information to the policymakers, education leaders and other stakeholders in designing better and context-

sensitive reforms. In addition, the research is relevant to the post-18<sup>th</sup> Amendment of Pakistan where provincial governments have more responsibility in the educational outcomes

#### Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this study. First, it is geographically restricted to chosen districts of Sindh and this can restrict the applicability of results to other provinces or regions. Second, the research is based on qualitative data (e.g., interviews and perceptions of stakeholders), which can be subjective and biased in responses. Third, time and resource constraints might restrict the scope of the data collection and the participants. Lastly, the study is limited to the selected reform initiatives as opposed to the entire educational reforms, which can limit the thoroughness of the analysis.

#### Literature Review

##### 1. Understanding Educational Reform and Implementation

Educational reform can be defined as policy interventions to enhance the structure, processes and outcomes of education (Zaidi & Sultana, 2023; Imran, 2022). Yet, evidence suggests that reforms need to be well-designed and well-implemented to be successful. According to the seminal study by Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky (1973), even sound policies often fall short because of implementation challenges. Likewise, Michael Lipsky (1980) underscores the importance of policy implementers, such as teachers and principals, in translating policies into action.

In the realm of Public Policy, policy implementation is recognised as an iterative process influenced by institutional, resource and engagement factors (Hill & Hupe, 2002). This approach is especially pertinent in developing nations, where systemic factors often constrain policies' success (Imran, Akhtar, & Khan, 2026; Zaidi, et al., 2024).

##### 2. International views on implementation gaps

Global sources show that implementation gaps are a prevalent issue in education systems around the world. World Bank (2018) and UNESCO (2020) reports highlight that many nations face challenges in converting policy initiatives into learning outcomes (Imran, Khan, & Rani, 2025; Imran, Sultana, & Jat, 2023).

The "implementation gap" is the gap between policy and practices (Imran, Akhtar, & Khan, 2026; Haider, et al., 2025). Researchers claim that this is often the result of poor governance, accountability and the disconnect between policy and local context (Fullan, 2007). Often, reforms are top-down but do not account for issues at the local level.

### 3. Educational Reforms in Pakistan

Pakistan has followed national policies such as the National Education Policy (2009) to drive educational reforms with a particular emphasis on access, quality and equity. But despite these reforms, Pakistan still faces challenges in attaining its educational goals (Asian Development Bank, 2019). Pakistan's 18th Amendment decentralised education to the provinces (Ansari, Akhtar & Hafeez, 2024; Akhtar, et al., 2021). This change sought to improve local responsiveness but also posed challenges in coordination, capacity and resource allocation (Naviwala, 2016).

### 4. Pakistan's Sindh Province Reforms

Sindh has introduced various reforms such as the Sindh Education Sector Plan and public-private partnerships. These are designed to enhance access, infrastructure and quality of teachers (Malik, et al., 2025; Hameed & Akhtar, 2023; Hashmi, et al., 2021). The World Bank (2018) reports that there has been progress in enrolment and infrastructure but low learning outcomes. Likewise, according to UNICEF (2021), there are widespread urban-rural gaps, suggesting that reforms are not equally effective across the province. These reports point to the problem of implementation gaps in Sindh's education system (Rana & Tuba, 2017; Tuba & Rana, 2015).

### 5. Reasons for Implementation Gaps

There are various factors that lead to implementation gaps, as per the literature:

- Institutional Capacity: Inefficient administration systems affect implementation (World Bank 2018).
- Political Interference: Political processes are interrupted (Naviwala, 2016).
- Funding and Human Resources: Insufficient funding and teacher training (Asian Development Bank, 2019).
- Teachers' Involvement: Low teacher participation affects ownership (Lipsky, 1980).

- Evaluation and Accountability: Limited evaluation reduces the effectiveness (UNESCO, 2020).

### 6. Sindh's Policy-Practice Gap

Research conducted in Sindh shows that policies are often not fully implemented. Although policies may be in line with global benchmarks, they are poorly implemented. For instance, teacher training programs may have good designs but poor implementation because of the lack of supervision (World Bank, 2018). Implementing policies is also hampered by contextual issues including poverty and rural disadvantage (UNICEF, 2021), especially in disadvantaged groups.

### 7. Theoretical Underpinning

This research is informed by implementation theory (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) and street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), which provide insights into how policies are implemented and how institutional and human factors influence policy outcomes.

### 8. Research Gap

While there is ample research on education reforms in Sindh, it has mainly focused on policy design or outcomes rather than implementation. Only a few studies analyse the sources of implementation gaps in a comprehensive and contextual manner. This study seeks to address this gap.

### Research Methodology

#### 1. Research Design

The research uses a qualitative research design to understand and critique implementation gaps in education reform policies in Sindh. This is suitable because it focuses on understanding the experiences, perspectives and realities of the people who are part of the policy implementation process. The interpretivist research paradigm is adopted for this study, which focuses on understanding social events from the viewpoints of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### 2. Research Approach

The research adopts a multiple case study design, with a focus on the districts of Sindh to understand the differences in the implementation of policies in different settings (urban and rural). This method allows for an in-depth understanding of the implementation of educational reforms and the role of contextual factors in their implementation (Yin, 2018).

### 3. Population of the Study

The study's population includes various stakeholders in educational reforms in Sindh such as:

- Policy-makers (education department officials)
- District education officers
- School heads (principals/headteachers)
- Teachers

These participants play a role in the policy implementation process.

### 4. Sample and Sampling Technique

A purposive approach is adopted to choose the participants with expertise and experience in educational reforms. Participants are drawn from chosen districts in urban and rural areas.

- Sample size: 20-30 participants
- Inclusion criteria: Educational administration or teaching experience, participation in reforms

Purposive sampling allows appropriate and meaningful data to be obtained (Patton, 2015).

### 5. Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews are the main source of data for this study. It provides flexibility in exploring participants' views while ensuring consistency.

- Design of an interview guide in line with research questions
- In-person and online interviews
- Interviews 30-60 minutes long

Document analysis (policies, plans, reports) is also used to complement data and provide contextual information.

### 6. Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data in line with the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- Familiarization with data
- Coding of data
- Identification of themes
- Reviewing and refining themes
- Interpretation of findings

This approach will support identification of patterns and themes around implementation gaps.

### 7. Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

The following measures will be taken to ensure rigor of the study:

- Credibility: Member checking and extended time with participants

- Transferability: Offering a thick description

- Dependability: Audit trail of processes
- Confirmability: Conducting research free from researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

### 8. Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to ethical guidelines:

- Participants will be provided with informed consent
- Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained
- Withdrawal at any time will be permitted
- The data will only be used for research

### 9. Limitations of the study

This study is restricted to a few districts of Sindh and is concerned with the implementation stage of educational reforms and not with national level policy development and evaluation.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

The semi-structural interviews and document reviews were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Once transcribed and read multiple times, codes were created and then grouped to form themes that capture the essential elements of implementation gaps in educational reforms in Sindh. A constant gap between anticipated and realised outcomes was identified in this analysis, which is presented under key themes.

A major theme was the discrepancy between policy and practice. Interviewees expressed the view that educational reforms are clearly articulated at the policy level, often in line with global standards and frameworks. However, there are challenges in implementing these policies at school level, as reported by school actors (teachers and headteachers). This observation supports the views of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) that policy success is contingent on the "fit" between policy and circumstances. Our findings indicate that the lack of consultation with local stakeholders in policy design is a factor.

The second major theme was administrative capacity factors. Participants noted factors such as staffing shortages, expertise gaps and poor coordination across levels of the education department. District authorities commented that while policy directives are given from the top, they are not supported. This is consistent with

the findings of the World Bank (2018) which stress that poor institutional capacity is a critical barrier to implementation of policies in developing countries.

Governance issues and political interference was another prominent theme. Many participants noted that the rotation of officials, leadership changes and political interference hinder the continuity of reform efforts. This hampers forward planning and accountability. This is consistent with literature that governance and politics play a major role in implementation (Naviwala, 2016).

Lack of resources was also a key factor in implementation. Many schools, especially those in rural settings, are under-resourced with regard to infrastructure, resources and staffing. Teachers felt that additional tasks required by the reforms are not supported by additional resources and incentives. This resource gap leads to ineffective or non-implementation of reforms, as also reported by the Asian Development Bank (2019). The findings also showed a lack of stakeholder engagement and ownership. School leaders and teachers view reforms as "imposed" from above, and respond accordingly with resistance or compliance. The results point to the discretion of front line actors in policy implementation, which can facilitate or impede reform efforts, as suggested by Michael Lipsky's model of street-level bureaucracy (1980). Lack of stakeholder engagement results in low reform buy-in.

A further key theme was poor monitoring and accountability. While monitoring mechanisms are in place, participants reported these are often patchy, bureaucratic or compliance-oriented. Lack of feedback loops leads to a delay in responding to challenges with implementation. This finding resonates with UNESCO (2020) reports which emphasise the need for strong accountability mechanisms to support effective policy.

Lastly, contextual factors, such as urban-rural divide, were found to impact implementation. Urban schools often have more access to resources and support, while rural schools are constrained by various factors, including geographical barriers and socio-economic factors. This widening's the implementation gap and leads to inequitable outcomes in education.

In conclusion, the results suggest that implementation gaps in educational reform in Sindh are not only the outcome of one factor but rather the combined effect of institutional, administrative and contextual factors. The conversation shows that successful reform is not just about designing effective policies, but also having adequate institutional capacity, engagement of stakeholders and nuanced implementation in context. The findings lend strong support to the theories of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) and Lipsky (1980), which emphasise that the implementation of policies is crucial to their success. Thus, closing the gap between policy and practice requires a comprehensive approach to implementation, addressing both organisational and human factors.

#### Findings

- The qualitative analysis shows a number of interconnected issues that affect the implementation of educational reforms in Sindh. First, there is a clear disconnect between policy and practice; policies are often developed without considering the voices of those on the ground. This is consistent with the views of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) that policy success requires policy design and context fit.
- Second, capacity issues were identified as a significant impediment, such as staffing levels, administrative capacity and technical expertise. This is consistent with the World Bank's (2018) report that identifies capacity constraints as a barrier to reform.
- Third, governance and political interference negatively impacted continuity and accountability. High turnover rates of staff and leaders impact the sustainability of reform, in line with findings by Naviwala (2016).
- Fourth, shortages in resources, especially in rural settings, impede implementation. Lack of infrastructure, resources and skillful teachers exist, confirming evidence from the Asian Development Bank (2019).
- Fifth, the study found weak stakeholder participation - teachers and school leaders are not part of the decision-making process. This results in lack of ownership and compliance, confirming Michael Lipsky's (1980) theory that frontline actors have discretion.

• Lastly, the lack of monitoring and accountability and urban-rural disparities also compound the implementation gap, as also identified by UNESCO (2020) and UNICEF (2021).

#### Conclusions

• From this study, it can be argued that the implementation of educational reforms in Sindh is complex and multi-dimensional. This study proves that policies are not enough to achieve the desired outcomes unless they are complemented with high institutional capacity, governance and stakeholders' engagement.

• The fact that these gaps continue suggests that the problem is not just technical but also structural and contextual. The devolution of power following the 18th Amendment in Pakistan has provided greater autonomy to the provinces; but it has also highlighted implementation issues.

• The research supports the views of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) and Lipsky (1980) as it suggests the success of policy is largely achieved during the implementation phase. As such, the policy-practice gap can only be closed through a holistic approach that takes into account institutional and human elements of the education system.

#### Recommendations

Based on the findings and insights, it is recommended that:

- 1. Strengthening Institutional Capacity:** Government should provide technical and administrative capacity building, through training and allocation of resources, at the provincial and district level (World Bank, 2018).
- 2. Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement:** Teachers, school administrators and community members should be engaged in the process of policy development and implementation to ensure ownership (Lipsky, 1980).
- 3. Enhancing Governance and Stability:** Steps should be taken to minimise political interference and promote leadership stability to ensure steady implementation of changes (Naviwala, 2016).
- 4. Allocating Adequate Resources:** Higher resource allocation and fair distribution of resources, especially in rural regions is crucial (Asian Development Bank, 2019).

**5. Enhancing Monitoring and Accountability:** Effective and transparent monitoring arrangements should be put in place to track compliance and performance improvement (UNESCO, 2020).

**6. Context-Sensitive Policy Design:** Policies should be responsive to local contexts, especially to urban-rural inequalities (UNICEF, 2021).

**7. Closing the Policy-Practice Gap through Piloting:** Reforms should be tested before full-scale roll-out to ensure effectiveness and address potential issues.

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