

## EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED SECONDARY SCHOOLS: EVIDENCE FROM DISTRICT KECH, BALOCHISTAN, PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates how secondary school principals in District Kech, Balochistan, enact leadership amid acute resource scarcity, addressing a critical empirical void in educational leadership research within Pakistan's most marginalized province. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with ten principals and twenty-five teachers, alongside document analysis and school observations, the study reveals that principals practice "adaptive resourcefulness" – a dynamic interplay of bureaucratic navigation, community engagement, and teacher capacity-building that compensates for systemic deficiencies. Leadership enactment is profoundly shaped by geographic isolation, cultural norms, and a coercive "sink or swim" professional socialization process, positioning principals as critical boundary-spanners between state apparatus, local communities, and schools. Notably, female principals encounter intensified constraints related to mobility and positional authority within patriarchal structures. As the first empirical inquiry of its kind in this context, the study advances adaptive and transformational leadership discourses by proposing an Adaptive-Resourceful Leadership (ARL) model, offering a culturally situated framework for understanding school leadership in resource-constrained settings across the Global South.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Quality education is foundational to sustainable development, yet millions of children in the Global South attend schools plagued by resource scarcity, inadequate infrastructure, and underprepared teachers (UNESCO, 2024). Within these challenging contexts, school leadership emerges as a critical determinant of educational quality (Day & Sammons, 2016). However, dominant leadership frameworks remain predominantly derived from Western, well-resourced settings, raising questions about

their applicability in last-mile contexts where principals navigate chronic resource deficits, geographic isolation, and systemic fragility (Grant, 2024). This study contributes to the global agenda for Sustainable Development Goal 4 ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education by examining how leadership can sustain schooling in contexts of extreme resource scarcity. Pakistan's education system exemplifies these challenges. Home to the world's second-largest out-of-school population (26.2 million children), the country's public school sector is burdened by

chronic underfunding, political interference, high student-teacher ratios, and outdated administrative structures (UNICEF, 2024). Provincial disparities are stark Balochistan, Pakistan's largest but most sparsely populated province, consistently ranks lowest on national education indicators (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2023). While educational challenges in Punjab and Sindh have received scholarly attention, Balochistan remains severely under-researched.

Research from rural Sindh reveals that principals' priorities are predominantly administrative rather than instructional, with limited attention to student achievement or teacher professional development (Noor & Nawab, 2022). This "implementation gap" between policy aspirations and ground-level realities reflects systemic pressures that shape leadership practices in resource-constrained Pakistani contexts (Rahman et al., 2026). In Balochistan specifically, a study from Mastung district identified culturally-based inclusive leadership as a significant factor in teacher motivation (Jogezai et al., 2023), yet represents the sole qualitative investigation of school leadership practices in the province. District Kech geographically remote, culturally distinct, and resource-scarce district bordering Iran remains entirely unexamined. This represents a significant gap in the literature.

Globally, research on adaptive leadership in "last-mile" schools has grown considerably. A study of elementary school principals in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines geographically isolated province comparable to District Kech identified five interrelated themes: community engagement and cultural responsiveness, resourcefulness in instructional leadership, building a positive learning environment, focus on professional development, and adaptive leadership in response to challenges (Frontiers in Education, 2026). Similarly, research on Indonesian pioneer schools demonstrates how infrastructure crises can catalyze organizational transformation through trans-theoretical leadership approaches that integrate transformational, transactional, situational, and distributed leadership (Puspitasari et al., 2026). These studies highlight the

importance of context-sensitive, adaptive leadership frameworks for resource-constrained settings.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do secondary school principals in District Kech, Balochistan, experience and navigate leadership in resource-constrained environments?
2. What leadership strategies and practices do principals employ to sustain schooling despite resource deficits?
3. How do systemic, cultural, and geographic factors shape leadership practices in this context?

This study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it extends adaptive and transformational leadership frameworks to a last-mile Pakistani context, proposing an Adaptive-Resourceful Leadership (ARL) model. Empirically, it provides the first investigation of school leadership in District Kech, addressing a critical geographic gap. Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for leadership development and systemic support in Pakistan's most marginalized regions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Transformational leadership (TL) remains dominant in resource-constrained settings. Its "Four Is" idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration have consistently demonstrated positive effects on teacher motivation and school culture in developing contexts (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). In Pakistan, studies confirm moderate positive relationships between principals' TL behaviors and teacher job satisfaction, performance, and organizational innovation (Asad et al., 2021a; Asad et al., 2021b). Transformational leaders can create environments that promote teacher engagement and professional development by fostering shared vision, collaborative practices, and individual empowerment.

Instructional leadership (IL), focusing on curriculum, instruction, and student learning, faces significant implementation barriers in rural

Pakistan. Research from rural Sindh reveals principals' priorities are predominantly administrative rather than instructional, with limited attention to student achievement or teacher development (Noor & Nawab, 2022). Principals refrain from instructional leadership due to community relationships that complicate monitoring and parental characteristics that conflict with achievement emphasis (Shaked, 2021). Administrative overload, teacher competence issues, and negative attitudes toward instructional changes further hinder leadership effectiveness. Recent research from the Philippines demonstrates that in geographically isolated schools, principals must exercise "adaptive instructional leadership" "expanding traditional IL frameworks to address systemic, cultural, and resource-based challenges (Frontiers in Education, 2026).

Adaptive leadership (AL) addresses non-technical, systemic challenges requiring behavioral change and flexible responses (Heifetz et al., 2009). AL distinguishes between technical challenges (addressable with existing knowledge) and adaptive challenges (requiring innovation, collaboration, and continuous learning). In geographically isolated Philippine schools, principals exercise adaptive instructional leadership through community engagement, cultural responsiveness, resourcefulness, and building "holding environments" that sustain teacher morale (Frontiers in Education, 2026). AL has particular relevance for District Kech, where resource scarcity is a chronic, systemic condition.

## 2.2 School Leadership in Resource-Constrained Settings

Global evidence reveals consistent patterns in last-mile contexts. Grant's (2024) study of Sub-Saharan African principals documents "sink or swim" leadership socialization principals receive no formal orientation and learn through trial, error, and mentorship. This finding aligns with research on Indonesian pioneer schools operating simultaneously as new institutions and crisis environments, where principals must develop adaptive leadership ecosystems that transform

resource constraints into organizational capacity (Puspitasari et al., 2026).

Research on trans-theoretical leadership in Indonesian pioneer schools reveals three empirical paradoxes: resource scarcity enhances creativity, informal structures strengthen coordination, and external pressure increases team cohesion (Puspitasari et al., 2026). These findings challenge deficit-based approaches to resource-constrained schooling, demonstrating how crises can activate dormant organizational capabilities. Similarly, the Philippines study identified that principals employed adaptive strategies such as localized curriculum development, mentoring and peer support, community collaboration, and flexible leadership in response to challenges (Frontiers in Education, 2026).

In Pakistan, a recent study on middle leaders in rural Balochistan high schools found that principals, subject coordinators, and senior teachers cultivated trust, open dialogue, and constructive feedback to establish supportive professional learning communities (Jogezai et al., 2023). However, persistent resource shortages and entrenched gender norms constrained the depth and consistency of these efforts, producing uneven opportunities for teacher learning across schools. Research on reward strategies in Balochistan public schools further highlights how leadership practices incorporating intrinsic and extrinsic rewards significantly boost motivation, yet effective implementation remains inconsistent.

Rosel et al. (2025) explored adaptive leadership in resource-constrained Philippine schools, finding that principals employ flexible, context-sensitive strategies to address infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, and community disengagement. Their research emphasizes the importance of cultural competence and community partnerships in sustaining schooling in last-mile contexts (Zaman et al., 2025). This finding parallels the Pakistani context, where community relationships are essential for school survival.

## 2.3 The Pakistan Context

Pakistan's educational leadership literature remains fragmented. Research demonstrates that principals across Balochistan shifted from political

to combined political-symbolic leadership orientation post-COVID, suggesting adaptation to external shocks (Baloch & Jomezai, 2023). Nisar (2020) found that Punjab's leadership training programmes lacked contextual relevance, failing to address rural schools' specific challenges. Teacher-related challenges delayed salaries, favoritism, limited autonomy persistently impede instructional improvement (Rahman et al., 2026). The "implementation gap" between Pakistan's national education policies and ground-level realities remains profound. While policies advocate instructional leadership and teacher professional development, principals' priorities remain administrative not due to personal failings, but systemic pressures (Noor & Nawab, 2022). This gap is particularly pronounced in Balochistan, where school leadership training is limited, and principals lack strategic understanding of how to implement policies in ways that address local needs.

Recent research on professional development and teacher motivation in developing contexts demonstrates that school leadership is a critical mediator between policy and practice (Rahman et al., 2026). Principals who create supportive professional learning communities and recognize teacher effort can sustain motivation even in challenging circumstances. However, the research also highlights that external factors including political interference, bureaucratic burden, and delayed salaries can undermine these efforts.

#### 2.4 The Research Gap

While international literature on school leadership in resource-constrained settings has grown considerably, Balochistan remains critically under-researched. Existing evidence is limited to one qualitative study from Mastung (Jomezai et al., 2023), research on middle leadership in Barkhan District, and investigations of reward strategies. No focused empirical work examines leadership practices in District Kech context characterized by geographic isolation, cultural distinctiveness, and chronic resource scarcity. This gap represents a significant opportunity to contribute to the theoretical and empirical literature on school leadership in Pakistan's most marginalized regions.

#### 2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrative Adaptive-Transformational Leadership (ATL) framework, synthesizing transformational leadership's motivational dimensions with adaptive leadership's systemic navigation capacities. Drawing on recent Philippines research on adaptive instructional leadership (Frontiers in Education, 2026) and Indonesian studies on trans-theoretical leadership (Puspitasari et al., 2026), the framework conceptualizes school leadership as simultaneously:

1. **Motivational and inspiring:** Building teacher morale and shared vision (transformational dimension)
2. **Adaptive and systemic:** Navigating non-technical, resource-based challenges (adaptive dimension)
3. **Contextually responsive:** Engaging community, culture, and local resources (contextual dimension)

This integrated approach is necessary because single-theory frameworks are insufficient for addressing the complexity of leadership in resource-constrained contexts (Puspitasari et al., 2026; Rosel et al., 2025).

The ARL framework extends existing integrative models in two significant ways. First, it identifies **resourcefulness** as a distinct adaptive practices dimension that is implicit in the Philippines model but not fully theorized. Resourcefulness encompasses the creative mobilization of community assets, improvisation with limited materials, and the development of innovative solutions that transform constraints into opportunities. This reflects the paradox identified by Puspitasari et al. (2026) that resource scarcity can enhance creativity, challenging deficit narratives of rural schooling. Second, the ARL framework explicitly addresses the **implementation gap** between Pakistan's education policies and ground-level realities, recognizing that leadership practices are shaped not only by resource constraints but also by bureaucratic burden, political interference, and systemic inflexibility.

**Table 1**  
*Adaptive-Transformational Leadership Framework Dimensions*

ATL Dimension	Leadership Practices	Empirical Evidence
Adaptive Capacity	Diagnosing systemic challenges; navigating policy volatility; responding flexibly	Frontiers in Education, 2026; Puspitasari et al., 2026
Holding Environment	Maintaining psychological safety; supporting teachers despite constraints	Frontiers in Education, 2026
Resourcefulness	Community partnerships; creative material use; technology adaptation	Puspitasari et al., 2026
Cultural Responsiveness	Community engagement; working with elders, SMCs, cultural brokers	Noor & Nawab, 2022; Jomezai et al., 2023
Transformational Vision	Building shared vision; recognizing teachers; inspiring commitment	Asad et al., 2021a; Asad et al., 2021b
Professional Development	Mentoring; peer support; creating learning communities	Frontiers in Education, 2026; Jomezai et al., 2023

This framework acknowledges that principals in District Kech must simultaneously inspire and motivate teachers while navigating resource deficits and systemic constraints dual demand not fully captured by single-theory approaches. The framework also incorporates insights from research on teacher motivation, which demonstrates that recognition, professional development, and supportive leadership are critical for sustaining teacher engagement in resource-constrained settings.

**4. Methodology**

**4.1 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), appropriate for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena. The case is bounded as secondary school leadership in District Kech, Balochistan. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables rich, contextual understanding of leadership practices and the meanings principals and teachers attach to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**4.2 Context: District Kech**

District Kech is located in southwestern Balochistan, bordering Iran. Characterized by arid terrain, sparse population, and limited infrastructure, it ranks among Pakistan's most marginalized districts. The literacy rate is significantly below the national average (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2023). Secondary schools are widely dispersed, serving geographically isolated communities with limited access to resources, professional development, and administrative support. This context parallels other "last-mile" school settings studied internationally, where principals face chronic resource scarcity, weak infrastructure, and cultural isolation (Frontiers in Education, 2026; Rosel et al., 2025).

**4.3 Sampling and Participants**

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure variation across geographic location, school size, gender, and principal experience. Ten secondary school principals participated, selected to represent the diversity of schools in District Kech. The selection criteria included: geographic location (urban, semi-urban, remote valley), school

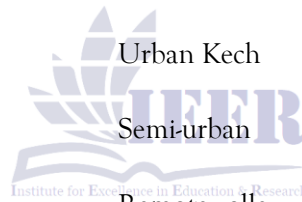
size (enrolment variation), gender (seven male, three female), and years of experience (range: 6–31 years).

To address the limitation of single-source data and enhance triangulation, three teachers from each of the ten schools (25 teachers total) were also interviewed. Teacher participants were selected

based on their willingness to participate and their length of service at the school, with preference given to teachers who had worked with the current principal for at least two years. This multi-perspective approach aligns with best practices in qualitative educational leadership research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Table 2**  
*Participant Demographics*

Principal	Gender	Experience (years)	School Location	School Size	Teachers Interviewed
P1	Male	18	Urban Kech	450+	3
P2	Male	24	Remote valley	200+	2
P3	Female	12	Semi-urban	300+	3
P4	Male	7	Remote valley	150+	2
P5	Male	31	Urban Kech	500+	3
P6	Female	9	Semi-urban	250+	3
P7	Male	15	Remote valley	180+	2
P8	Male	22	Peri-urban	350+	3
P9	Female	6	Remote valley	120+	2
P10	Male	19	Urban Kech	400+	2



**4.4 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews (35–45 minutes each) were conducted with principals using an interview protocol aligned with the ATL framework. Questions explored: leadership socialization, resource management, community engagement, teacher motivation, bureaucratic relationships, and cultural dynamics. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in probing emergent themes while maintaining consistency across participants (Kallio et al., 2016). Teacher interviews (30–45 minutes each) explored perceptions of principal

leadership, motivation, and professional support. A separate interview protocol was developed for teachers, focusing on their experiences of principal leadership, the support they received, and the challenges they faced. Teacher interviews were conducted in private settings to encourage candid responses.

Critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was employed during both principal and teacher interviews to elicit specific events and concrete examples (e.g., "Tell me about a crisis you

managed," "Describe a time when your principal supported you in a difficult situation"). This technique enhances recall and provides rich, contextual data.

Document analysis examined school records, attendance registers, meeting minutes, and official correspondence where available. School observation was conducted at each site, focusing on the physical environment, teacher-student interactions, and leadership activities. Field notes were maintained throughout the observation period.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Urdu, and translated to English. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and writing.

The analysis process proceeded systematically. Phase 1 involved repeated reading of transcripts to achieve familiarization with the data. Phase 2 involved systematic manual coding of the entire dataset, identifying patterns of meaning relevant to the research questions. Initial coding identified 87 discrete codes, which were grouped into 15 sub-themes based on conceptual similarity. Phase 3 involved generating candidate themes by reviewing codes and sub-themes, resulting in six major themes. Phase 4 involved reviewing themes against the dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. Phase 5 involved defining and naming themes with precise descriptions. Phase 6 involved writing the findings section, selecting vivid quotes to illustrate each theme.

The analysis remained fundamentally interpretive, with the researcher's judgement central to theme development and interpretation. Theme development, interpretation, and the selection of illustrative quotes were guided by the researcher's judgement and the theoretical framework. This approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) emphasis on the active, interpretive role of the researcher in thematic analysis.

Member checking was conducted with three principals and five teachers, who reviewed preliminary findings to ensure accuracy and

resonance with their experiences. This process enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed participants to clarify or expand on their contributions.

#### 4.6 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was secured from all participants. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and how data would be used and protected. Pseudonyms protect participant anonymity. Participation was voluntary. All data were stored securely, with access limited to the research team.

#### 4.7 Trustworthiness

Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, several strategies were employed to establish trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement (4 months in the field), triangulation (principals, teachers, observation, documents), and member checking (eight participants reviewed findings). Transferability is supported through rich contextual description, enabling readers to assess applicability to other settings. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail documenting all research decisions, from sampling to analysis. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling, where the researcher documented assumptions, decisions, and potential biases throughout the research process. These strategies collectively establish the trustworthiness of the findings.

### 5. Findings

#### 5.1 Theme 1: "Sink or Swim" Socialization

All principals described entering the role without formal preparation, learning through trial and error. This finding mirrors Grant's (2024) Sub-Saharan African research and reflects a systemic failure in Pakistan's educational leadership development. P4, a 7-year veteran from a remote valley, explained:

"When I became principal, I knew nothing about administration. No training, no orientation. I learned by making mistakes and asking senior principals. The department just appointed me one day."

Principals identified mentorship from experienced colleagues as their primary source of professional learning. P2, a 24-year veteran, noted: "I had no induction. A retired principal in my village guided told me how to maintain records, handle the DEO's visits, manage teachers. Without him, I would have drowned."

This "sink or swim" socialization was consistent across all 10 principals, regardless of gender or experience. Teacher interviews confirmed this pattern teachers observed that principals "learned on the job" and that this sometimes resulted in inconsistent leadership practices. T3 from School 5 reflected:

"Our principal has been here for five years, but he learned everything himself. Sometimes he makes decisions that don't make sense, but we understand he didn't have any training. We help him when we can."

T1 from School 2 added:

"We know our principal is trying his best. He didn't get any training. We support him when we can. It's not his fault."

The absence of formal preparation emerged as a source of anxiety and uncertainty for principals, particularly in their first year. P4 described his initial months:

"I was terrified. I didn't know how to handle the budget, how to deal with difficult teachers, how to respond to the DEO. I made mistakes. I learned from them, but it was stressful."

This finding suggests that the "sink or swim" model is not merely an induction phase but can persist throughout a principal's career, shaping leadership practices and decision-making.

## 5.2 Theme 2: Adaptive Resource Management

Resource scarcity was universally described as the most pressing challenge limited teaching materials, no science laboratories, insufficient furniture, delayed funding, and infrastructure deficits. This mirrors findings from Indonesian pioneer schools where the absence of dedicated science and computer laboratories, limited library facilities, and constrained technology resources demand continuous adaptive leadership responses (Puspitasari et al., 2026).

Principals demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness through diverse strategies:

- **Creating materials:** Principals encouraged teachers to develop low-cost teaching aids using local materials. P8 described: "I told my teachers we have no money for charts and models. Use what you have. Use clay, paper, leaves. We have creativity."

- **Community partnerships:** P5 (31 years experience) established a "School Support Committee" that contributed furniture and stationery: "I went to every shopkeeper, every successful person in this town. I explained this is your school, your children. They responded."

- **Improvisation:** P8 converted a storage room into a science demonstration space: "We need a laboratory. I cannot build one. But I can use this room we put tables, we bring whatever equipment we can find. Something is better than nothing."

- **Bartering:** P2 exchanged school vegetables from a kitchen garden for science equipment: "We have land. We grow vegetables. A school in the next valley had some old microscopes. We exchanged. That is how we survive."

- **Teacher involvement:** Several principals described involving teachers in resource mobilization. P3 noted: "I ask my teachers what do you need? How can we get it? They have ideas. They know the community. We work together." We have nothing in our budget. If I need chalk, I ask the community. If I need science materials, I improvise. Survival is about creativity. (P7, 15 years experience)

Teacher interviews confirmed these resource constraints and principals' resourcefulness. T2 from School 8 described:

Our principal is amazing. He found a way to get a computer for our office he asked a local businessman. He always finds a way. We teachers follow his example we make teaching aids, we use whatever we have.

This finding aligns with the paradox identified in trans-theoretical leadership research: resource scarcity enhances creativity (Puspitasari et al., 2026). Principals and teachers in District Kech

have developed a culture of improvisation that compensates for systemic resource deficits.

### 5.3 Theme 3: Community as Resource

Community engagement emerged as a critical leadership strategy. Principals described working intensively with parents, elders, and School Management Committees (SMCs) to sustain schooling. This parallels findings from Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, where principals exercised community engagement and cultural responsiveness as core adaptive strategies (Frontiers in Education, 2026). P3, a female principal with 12 years experience, articulated:

“The community is everything here. If parents don't send children, the school closes. So I visit homes, talk to elders, convince fathers to educate their daughters. It's exhausting, but necessary. SMC while mandated by policy were perceived as having limited capacity but were effectively mobilized for resource provision and enrolment drives.”

P6 (9 years experience) noted:

“The SMC members don't understand their formal role. But they contribute fixing roofs, providing water, helping with enrolment. I train them slowly.”

P5 described his approach to community engagement:

“I know every elder in this town. I visit them regularly. I ask their advice. When I need help for the school, for the children they support me. Leadership here is about relationships.”

This community engagement role extends beyond traditional instructional leadership, positioning principals as boundary-spanners between schools and communities. Teacher interviews confirmed that community relationships were essential for school survival. T1 from School 3 reflected:

“Our principal goes door to door. She talks to fathers, grandfathers. She tells them education is important, send your daughters. Without her, many girls would not be in school.”

The cultural competence required for effective community engagement emerged as a significant theme. Principals described learning tribal dynamics, identifying influential families, and

navigating complex social relationships. P10 explained:

“I know which families have influence. I approach them first. If they support the school, others follow. This is how it works here.”

### 5.4 Theme 4: Navigating Bureaucracy

Principals described a demanding bureaucratic environment characterized by administrative overload, political interference, and systemic inflexibility. This aligns with research from rural Sindh showing that principals' priorities are predominantly administrative rather than instructional (Noor & Nawab, 2022). P10 (19 years experience) stated:

“We are drowning in paperwork. The DEO wants reports, attendance, stock registers but no one asks about students' learning. Cleanliness is the first check! If the school looks clean, they are happy.”

Political interference was particularly pronounced. P1 (18 years experience) explained:

“Teachers are appointed based on political connections. Sometimes I receive phone calls from politicians asking about transfers. Managing this without conflict is a skill.”

P7 described the pressure of political demands:

“I have to be careful. If I displease a politician, my school suffers. They can block funding, transfer good teachers. So I navigate carefully. I maintain relationships without compromising my principles.”

Delayed salaries emerged as a persistent demotivator and a source of tension between principals and teachers. P9 (6 years experience, female): “My teachers' salaries are delayed by 3–4 months. They are demoralized. I can only encourage them I cannot pay them.”

Teacher interviews confirmed the demoralizing effect of salary delays. T4 from School 6 explained:

“We are committed, but it's difficult. We have families. We need to pay bills. The principal encourages us, she says be patient. But patience has limits.”

T1 from School 10 added:

“The principal works hard, but even he cannot fix salary delays. This is the system. We understand, but it's still demoralizing.”

This finding reflects the broader systemic challenges documented in Balochistan research, where bureaucratic procedures and scarce resources limit the implementation of effective leadership practices. Teachers' motivation is undermined not by leadership failures but by systemic constraints.

### 5.5 Theme 5: Teacher Motivation and Support

Principals employed diverse strategies to maintain teacher morale, aligning with research on transformational leadership and teacher motivation:

- **Recognition:** Praising teachers publicly, rewarding effort with simple gestures
- **Professional support:** Mentoring struggling teachers, arranging peer observations
- **Personal concern:** Addressing teachers' personal needs and constraints
- **Inclusive decision-making:** Involving teachers in school decisions to build ownership

P2 (24 years experience) noted: "A simple 'thank you' goes a long way when salaries are delayed. I recognize every extra effort. This keeps teachers going."

P8 (22 years experience) emphasized: "I meet each teacher weekly. I ask about their challenges personal and professional. When people feel cared for, they stay motivated."

P6 described involving teachers in decision-making: "I ask my teachers for their opinions. When we decide something together, they own it. They work harder. This is important when resources are limited."

Teacher interviews corroborated these accounts. Teachers consistently identified principal recognition and personal support as key motivational factors, even when material resources were scarce. T3 from School 2 reflected:

"Our principal recognizes our effort. He thanks us publicly, he appreciates our work. In a difficult environment, this matters. It keeps us going."

T2 from School 7 noted:

"My principal listens. He asks about my problems. He helped me when my child was sick he arranged a substitute teacher. This is leadership. This is why I stay."

These findings align with research demonstrating that recognition and supportive leadership significantly improve teacher morale and job satisfaction, even in challenging circumstances.

### 5.6 Theme 6: Cultural and Gender Dynamics

Female principals faced unique challenges navigating cultural expectations, reflecting findings from research on gendered dynamics in rural Pakistani schools. P3 described:

"Being a female principal is difficult. Men question my authority. But I assert myself respectfully show competence, I build relationships, I earn their respect."

P9 (6 years experience) added: "I cannot travel alone to distant villages for community visits. I need a male colleague or family member. This limits my mobility and effectiveness."

P6 described her strategy for asserting authority: "When I first became principal, some teachers did not accept me. They tested me. I had to be firm. I showed I knew the rules, I knew education. Now they respect me."

All principals navigated cultural expectations around honor, gender roles, and community hierarchy. P5 (31 years experience) explained:

"Understanding tribal dynamics is essential. I know which families hold influence, which elders to approach, which conflicts to avoid. Leadership here is as much about community relations as it is about school management."

The intersection of gender, geography, and culture created distinctive leadership challenges for female principals. P3 noted that male teachers "tested" her authority during her first year, a finding that aligns with research on gendered dynamics in Pakistani schools (Jomezai et al., 2023). However, female principals also demonstrated distinctive strengths. P6 described how her approach to community engagement was informed by her gender:

"As a woman, I can talk to mothers in ways male principals cannot. I understand their concerns about daughters' education. This is my strength."

This finding suggests that female principals in Balochistan develop context-specific strategies that leverage their gender while navigating cultural constraints contribution to the literature on

gender and leadership in the Global South. P3 reflected:

"I am proud to be a female principal. Yes, it is difficult. But I am a role model. Girls see me and thinking can do this too. This is important for our society."

Teacher interviews confirmed that gender significantly shaped leadership practices, with female principals facing additional barriers but also demonstrating distinctive strengths in community engagement. T1 from School 9 reflected on her female principal:

"She is strong. She faces many challenges being a woman, being young. But she works hard. She visits homes, she talks to families. She is an example for us."

T2 from School 3 added:

"Our principal understands us the mothers, the daughters. She speaks our language. She knows our struggles. This makes her effective in ways male principals sometimes are not."

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Extending Leadership Socialization Theory

This study confirms Grant's (2024) "sink or swim" thesis in a Pakistani context. All principals entered the role without formal preparation, relying on mentorship and trial-and-error learning. This reflects a systemic failure in Pakistan's educational leadership development, where professional standards exist on paper but implementation remains absent in rural regions. The findings suggest that the "sink or swim" model is not a temporary phase but a persistent feature of leadership pathways in last-mile contexts.

This socialization pattern has significant implications for leadership effectiveness. Principals who learn through trial and error may develop valuable practical knowledge, but they also risk developing inconsistent or ineffective practices. The findings from this study suggest that structured mentoring programs, such as those identified by principals as their primary source of professional learning, could provide an accessible and cost-effective alternative to formal training.

The absence of formal preparation also shapes principals' relationships with teachers. Teacher interviews revealed that teachers recognize

principals' lack of training and sometimes compensate for it. This suggests a distributed, informal leadership dynamic where experienced teachers support novice principals finding with implications for professional development and school governance.

### 6.2 Adaptive-Resourceful Leadership in Practice

The study extends the Philippines adaptive instructional leadership model (Frontiers in Education, 2026) to Pakistan's Balochistan context. Principals in District Kech exercise what we term Adaptive-Resourceful Leadership (ARL) a practice that simultaneously:

1. Navigates systemic constraints (adaptive dimension)
2. Mobilizes community resources (resourceful dimension)
3. Sustains teacher motivation (transformational dimension)

This extends the Philippines study's finding that adaptive practices include community engagement, resourcefulness, and building "holding environments" (Frontiers in Education, 2026). In District Kech, these practices are intensified by greater resource scarcity, geographic isolation, and bureaucratic complexity. The ARL framework also incorporates insights from trans-theoretical leadership research demonstrating that crisis contexts activate multiple leadership demands simultaneously (Puspitasari et al., 2026). The ARL framework contributes to the literature by identifying how principals integrate adaptive and transformational practices in contexts where single-theory approaches prove insufficient. Specifically, the framework extends adaptive leadership theory by identifying resourcefulness as a distinct adaptive practice in resource-constrained settings dimension underrepresented in Heifetz et al.'s (2009) original framework.

The paradox that resource scarcity enhances creativity (Puspitasari et al., 2026) was evident in District Kech. Principals and teachers developed innovative solutions improvised laboratories, low-cost teaching aids, community bartering that challenged deficit narratives of rural schooling. This suggests that resource constraints can catalyze creativity and collaboration.

### 6.3 The Boundary-Spanner Role

Principals emerged as boundary-spanners mediating between the state education bureaucracy, local communities, and resource-scarce school environments. This extends the UNESCO (2023) *Ubuntu* leadership model's emphasis on community collaboration, but adds a crucial dimension: principals simultaneously manage upward accountability (bureaucratic compliance) and downward accountability (community relationships), often navigating conflicting demands.

This dual accountability creates leadership tensions: satisfying bureaucratic reporting requirements while engaging communities and maintaining teacher morale. The "cleanliness first" phenomenon where school appearances receive more attention than student learning reflects a bureaucratic logic that prioritizes visible compliance over substantive improvement. This aligns with Noor and Nawab's (2022) findings in rural Sindh and extends them to Balochistan's more challenging context.

The boundary-spanner role requires significant cultural competence. Principals described learning tribal dynamics, identifying influential families, and navigating complex social relationships. This cultural work is essential for school survival but is not recognized in formal leadership frameworks or training programmes.

### 6.4 Comparative Insights and Theoretical Contribution

Comparing findings with international research reveals both commonalities and distinct features. The resource scarcity and community engagement patterns documented in District Kech parallel findings from the Philippines (Frontiers in Education, 2026), Indonesia (Puspitasari et al., 2026), and Sub-Saharan Africa (Grant, 2024). However, the intensity of bureaucratic pressure, the pervasiveness of political interference, and the specific gender dynamics in Balochistan represent distinctive features of this context.

The study contributes to the theoretical literature in three ways:

First, it demonstrates the need for integrative frameworks in last-mile contexts. Single-theory

approaches (TL or AL alone) are insufficient to capture the complexity of leadership practices where principals must simultaneously inspire teachers, navigate systemic constraints, and mobilize communities. This finding aligns with the trans-theoretical leadership approach documented in Indonesian pioneer schools (Puspitasari et al., 2026) and the adaptive instructional leadership model from the Philippines (Frontiers in Education, 2026).

Second, it extends adaptive leadership theory by identifying resourcefulness as a distinct adaptive practice in resource-constrained settings dimension underrepresented in Heifetz et al.'s (2009) original framework. The paradox that resource scarcity can enhance creativity (Puspitasari et al., 2026) challenges deficit narratives of rural leadership.

Third, it challenges deficit narratives of rural leadership. Principals in District Kech are not passive victims of resource scarcity; they are resourceful, culturally competent, and innovative practitioners who sustain schooling against significant odds. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that crisis conditions can activate dormant organizational capabilities (Puspitasari et al., 2026) and that leadership in resource-constrained contexts requires continuous adaptation and context-sensitive strategies (Rosel et al., 2025).

### 6.5 Practical and Policy Implications

Several implications emerge for policy and practice:

**For leadership preparation:** Pakistan's provincial education departments should develop contextually-relevant induction programmes for rural principals, replacing the "sink or swim" model with systematic mentoring and training. Given resource constraints, peer-mentoring networks similar to the informal mentorship principals in this study identified as valuable could provide a cost-effective starting point. The absence of formal preparation was identified as a significant source of anxiety and inconsistency, suggesting that even modest interventions could have substantial impact.

**For professional development:** Programmes should address adaptive challenges (resource management, community engagement, cultural competence) rather than abstract leadership theories unsuited to rural contexts. This aligns with findings from research on middle leadership in rural Balochistan, which emphasizes the importance of dialogic, trust-building practices (Jogezai et al., 2023). Professional development should also address gender-specific challenges faced by female principals.

**For systemic reform:** Addressing the implementation gap requires reducing bureaucratic burden, ensuring timely salary disbursement, and shifting accountability from appearances (cleanliness) to substantive outcomes (learning). This requires addressing the political economy of education in Balochistan, where bureaucratic and political interests often override educational quality concerns. Principals cannot be expected to sustain teacher motivation when systemic factors delayed salaries, political interference undermine their efforts.

**For community engagement:** SMC strengthening programmes should equip communities to support schools effectively while respecting local cultural norms. This should include training SMC members in their formal roles while acknowledging the informal community structures that actually shape educational governance in rural Balochistan. Principals' cultural competence and community relationships were essential for school survival, suggesting that these capacities should be developed and recognized.

**For gender equity:** Leadership development programmes should address the specific challenges faced by female principals in Balochistan, including mobility constraints and cultural expectations regarding authority. This aligns with recommendations from research on gendered dynamics in rural Pakistani schools. Female principals demonstrated distinctive strengths in community engagement, suggesting that diversity in leadership can bring valuable perspectives.

## 6.6 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is confined to 10 principals and 25 teachers in one

district; findings may not be generalizable to other Balochistan districts or Pakistan's provinces. Second, while teacher interviews were conducted to triangulate findings, the study did not include student or parent perspectives. Third, the cross-sectional design captures leadership at a single point; longitudinal research could reveal how leadership evolves over time and in response to changing conditions. Fourth, the study relied on self-report data, which may be subject to social desirability bias, though triangulation with teachers mitigated this concern. Finally, the researcher's positionality as an academic from Balochistan with prior knowledge of the district's educational challenges may have influenced the interpretation of findings. Reflexive journaling was employed throughout the research process to document and interrogate assumptions, but the potential for interpretive bias remains a limitation. Future research should involve researchers from diverse positionalities to enhance the breadth of interpretation.

Future research should investigate: (a) leadership practices in other under-researched Balochistan districts; (b) the effectiveness of different leadership development models in rural contexts; (c) comparative studies across Pakistan's provinces; (d) the relationship between principal leadership and student learning outcomes in resource-constrained settings; (e) the specific strategies employed by female principals to navigate cultural and institutional barriers; and (f) student and parent perspectives on leadership effectiveness in resource-constrained schools.

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study explored secondary school leadership in District Kech, Balochistan, revealing that principals navigate extreme resource constraints through what we term Adaptive-Resourceful Leadership (ARL). Principals enter the role through "sink or swim" socialization, learn through trial and error, and develop resourceful strategies to mobilize community support, improvise teaching materials, and maintain teacher morale. They act as boundary-spanners between the state bureaucracy, local communities,

and schools managing conflicting demands while sustaining schooling. Female principals face distinct challenges navigating cultural expectations regarding mobility and authority.

The findings reveal a complex interplay between leadership practices and systemic factors. Principals' adaptive resourcefulness compensates for institutional deficits, but systemic barriers bureaucratic burden, political interference, delayed salaries persistently undermine their efforts. Teacher motivation is sustained through recognition, support, and inclusive decision-making, but these efforts are constrained by factors beyond principals' control. This suggests that sustainable improvement in resource-constrained contexts requires both leadership development and systemic reform.

### 7.2 Contributions

This study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it proposes the ARL model, integrating adaptive and transformational leadership frameworks for last-mile contexts and extending adaptive leadership theory by identifying resourcefulness as a distinct practice. Empirically, it provides the first investigation of school leadership in District Kech, addressing a critical geographic gap and generating rich qualitative data on leadership practices in Pakistan's most marginalized region. Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for leadership preparation, professional development, and systemic reform in Balochistan and similar contexts.

### 7.3 Implications

The findings underscore that effective leadership in resource-constrained settings is not merely about instructional supervision; it requires adaptive capacity, community engagement, cultural competence, and resourcefulness. Pakistan's education reforms must recognize these realities, replacing bureaucratic compliance models with leadership development approaches that build adaptive capacity and community mobilization skills. The findings also highlight the importance of addressing systemic factors bureaucratic burden, political interference, salary

delays that undermine leadership effectiveness. Investing in school leadership without addressing these systemic constraints will yield limited returns.

### 7.4 A Call for Action

District Kech's school leaders are resourceful, resilient, and committed despite systemic neglect. Their practices offer powerful lessons for educational reform in Pakistan's most marginalized regions. Investing in their professional growth, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and strengthening systemic support is not just a matter of policy it is a matter of justice for the 26 million out-of-school children who depend on their leadership. The ARL model provides a framework for understanding and developing leadership capacity in resource-constrained contexts, but its implementation requires political will, resource allocation, and sustained commitment to educational equity. Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Pakistan's most marginalized regions requires investment not only in infrastructure and resources but also in leadership capacity.

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