

BRIDGING THE POLICY PRACTICE GAP: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN DISTRICT KARAK, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

Muhammad Furqan¹, Muhammad Asim², Muhammad Rowais³, Amjad Ur Rehman⁴,
Imran Ullah Khan^{*5}

^{1,2,3,4,*5}Department of Public Policy & Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, Hazara University, Mansehra, KPK, Pakistan 21300

¹furqankhattak925@gmail.com, ²asimkhattak522@gmail.com, ³rowaishkhattak@gmail.com
⁴amjadktk@hu.edu.pk, ^{*5}dr.imranullah@hu.edu.pk

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22653376>

Keywords

NEP, Policy Implementation, Policy-practice gap, District Karak, education governance

Article History

Received: 06 January 2026
Accepted: 19 February 2026
Published: 05 March 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *
Imran Ullah Khan

Abstract

There is a lot of good intentions in education policy in Pakistan, but not much in terms of execution. This paper highlights the implementation status of the National Education Policy (NEP) in district Karak of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and identifies the reasons for the gap in the implementation of the policy in the schools of the district. The data was gathered through a quantitative, cross-sectional survey which included 427 respondents, including District Education Officers, parents and students from Karak, Takht-e-Nasrati, and Banda Daud Shah tehsils. This research employed a 13-item, five-point Likert scale instrument to measure perceptions on four themes: policy and governance, teacher quality, infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers. The 12 items had scores significantly higher than the neutral middle with agreement ranging from 91.1% to 95.6%. A significant difference was found with all 13 items ($p < .001$) in one-sample t-tests and there was no significant difference among the tehsils or by the groups of respondents ($H(3) = 4.141$, $p = .247$) in a Kruskal-Wallis H test. These findings indicate that the policy-practice gap in Karak is not isolated to a specific place, or specific group of respondents. The weak feedback systems, the overburdened, under-trained teaching force, development funds that have never been used and entrenched socio-cultural barriers to girls' education appear as the most serious challenges. The paper ends with recommendations for the Provincial Government, District Education Office and School Administrators.

1. Introduction

The education is the lifeline of a country. It influences the economy. It shapes society. But good policy is not sufficient. As important as writing a policy is, is the way it is implemented (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010). This has been a problem for years in Pakistan. Governments have developed good education policies. They have clear objectives. However, there is a disconnect between the policy

and classroom reality. This gap is exacerbated in poor and remote areas (Hill & Hupe, 2014; Birkland, 2019).

The National Education Policy (NEP) is the more comprehensive attempt in education reform in Pakistan. It encompasses curriculum, staff development, school management, access and gender equity. These are binding guidelines, not suggestions. Despite that, the policy-practice gap

remains (Salimi, 2024; ASER, 2023; Anwar et al., 2023). There was one significant change in Pakistan's education management. With the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010, the education responsibility was transferred from the federation to the provinces (Khan, 2014; Mustafa, 2012). This will facilitate more autonomy to the provinces, but it will also introduce new difficulties in coordination and monitoring on the part of less developed districts. The situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is quite evident. One of the toughest provinces of Pakistan to govern. In recent years KP has implemented a number of changes to the education system, but these changes have not been exactly the same throughout each district. Poverty, poor infrastructure, lack of teachers, and social obstacles, particularly those preventing many girls from attending school, pose significant problems in southern areas like Karak (Farooqi & Forbes, 2020; Suleman et al., 2015).

This gap between policy and practice is the core problem this study addresses. The NEP establishes clear rules regarding the enrollments, the quality of teaching, teacher training, and school management. However, these rules are not always adhered completely (Akhlaq, Khan, & Sikander, 2024). Karak has insufficient number of science labs and teachers in schools. Poor condition of many buildings, absence of sanitation facilities, little on-going teacher training and weak monitoring systems. Because of these gaps, the real purpose of the policy gets lost before it even reaches students.

This study will employ Policy Implementation Theory of Mazmanian and Sabatier (1980) to make that explanation. The theory suggests that successful implementation requires five elements: policy goals need to be clear, institutions need to be capable, and there must be adequate resources, active monitoring, and cooperation among implementers. Without these, policy objectives lose focus from implementation. District Karak exhibits multiple of these gaps. There are two reasons why this research is important. First, there has been limited research that examines the implementation of national education policy at the district level in Pakistan, most of the research has examined the national education policy design

and/or compared the national education policy in different provinces (Viennet & Pont, 2017; O'Toole, 2000; Akhlaq et al., 2024). Secondly, Karak is indicative of the many underdeveloped districts in KP and Pakistan, and lessons learnt from Karak can benefit the underdeveloped districts as well. Another strength of this study is that it provides a voice for district education officers, school heads and teachers, whom Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) suggest are seldom consulted in policy evaluations.

The study has main four goals, (1) to see how much of the NEP has actually been put into practice in District Karak, (2) to find out what administrative, institutional, and resource problems are getting in the way, (3) to hear what parent, students, and education officers think about how well the policy is working, (4) and to suggest the practical steps to make implementation stronger at the district level. This raises the main question that will be explored. How effectively has the National Education Policy been implemented in District Karak and what are the factors accounting for the difference between the goals and the practice?

To answer this question, the study creates a conceptual model based on five variables, administrative capacity, resource availability, teacher training, monitoring and evaluation, and institutional coordination. These, combined, constitute policy implementation fidelity, the extent to which the NEP asks for and schools actually do what it asks for (Viennet & Pont, 2017).

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed quantitative (survey) cross-sectional research design. Data was gathered only on one occasion from each respondent, not over time. The design was positivist paradigm it assumed that perceptions of policy implementation were measurable and was tested using statistical analysis (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1980).

2.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in District Karak, which is located in the southern part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Karak was selected as it represents

the typical challenges of rural districts in Pakistan such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient staffing and poor policy execution. District Education Officers (DEOs), parents and Higher Secondary School students participated in the population in three tehsils of Karak, Takht-e-Nasrati, Banda Daud Shah, and Karak.

2.3 Sampling and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was done. Only respondents with knowledge of education policy and/or school practice were selected. The final sample consisted of 427 individuals (10 DEO employees, 208 parents and 209 students). This distribution is described in the original thesis in detail in Table 1, and is summarized by tehsil level in Table 2 below along with results.

2.4 Instrument

The data was obtained using a semi-structured questionnaire that was developed around 13 items. These items were categorized into four groups: (1) policy and governance gaps (3 items); (2) teacher quality and pedagogy (3 items); (3) infrastructure and resources (3 items); and (4) socio-cultural barriers and gender disparity (4 items). Five-point Likert scale was used for each item, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

2.5 Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was developed based on previous research and theory, and was pre-tested with the research supervisor and subject experts prior to data collection, resulting in good content validity. Pilot data was used for testing reliability with Cronbach's alpha and full sample data was used for validation. The overall coefficient obtained was $\alpha = 0.862$ which is higher than the acceptable coefficient of 0.70 (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally, 1978; George & Mallery, 2003).

2.6 Procedure

Data collection took place in four stages, formal approval from the education authorities and schools, a pilot test of the clarity and consistency of items, distributing the questionnaire face-to-face, explaining the study and informing the participants that they had the right to

confidentiality and voluntary participation, and collecting and verifying questionnaires completed.

2.7 Data Analysis

Responses were recoded and analyzed using Python libraries. Each item and each of the four thematic sections was summarized in descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations). One-sample t-tests were performed for each item between the answers and the neutral point of 3.0. A Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to compare the composite perception scores of the three tehsils and DEO Office group to see whether the perception of the policy-practice gap varied across respondent types or location.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance to standard ethical practice. There was no compulsion to participate, and participants could withdraw at any point. Consent was obtained in a knowingly manner. The answers were anonymous and for academic purposes only. During the data collection no respondent was coerced, harmed or discriminated against.

3. Results

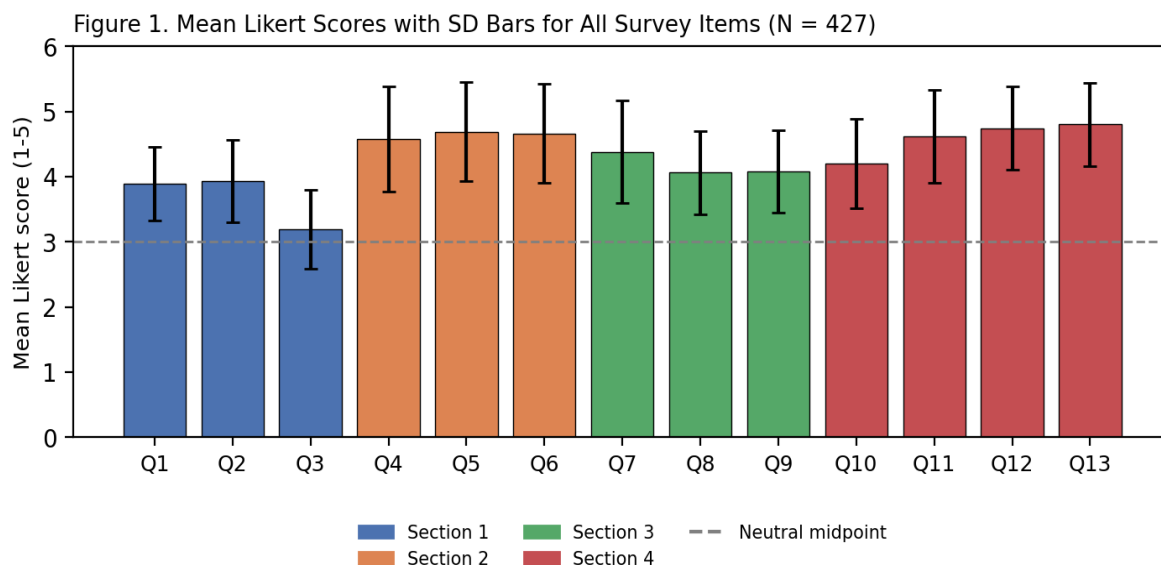
This section displays the survey results of the 427 individuals who responded to the survey. It provides descriptive statistics at item level, composite scores by theme, and by group of responders, and the inferential tests that were applied to verify the level of strength and consistency of these patterns.

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

The mean, standard deviation and percentage agreement for each of the 13 items are reported in table 1. Twelve of 13 items were rated significantly above 3.0 (neutral) with between 91.1% and 95.6% agreement. The only difference was Q3, which asks about the fairness of the District Education Performance Index (DEPIx) as a measure of the challenges in Karak: 17.1% agreed that it was a fair measure, with the majority opting in for neutral.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the 13 Survey Items (N = 427)

Item	Section	M	SD	% Agree/ Strongly Agree
Q1: Feedback loop absence	1	3.89	0.56	91.3
Q2: Policy inconsistency (leadership shifts)	1	3.93	0.63	93.0
Q3: DEPIx accuracy as an indicator	1	3.19	0.60	17.1
Q4: Non-teaching duties burden	2	4.58	0.81	91.1
Q5: Inadequate induction training	2	4.69	0.76	93.4
Q6: Lack of rural incentives	2	4.66	0.76	93.4
Q7: Absence of labs & IT resources	3	4.38	0.79	93.2
Q8: Multi-grade teaching	3	4.06	0.64	93.0
Q9: Unspent development funds	3	4.08	0.63	94.1
Q10: Inadequate cash grants	4	4.20	0.68	94.1
Q11: Absence of female teachers	4	4.62	0.71	94.1
Q12: Cultural perceptions of girls' education	4	4.74	0.64	94.8
Q13: Need for transport facilities	4	4.80	0.64	95.6

*Figure 1. Mean Likert scores with standard deviation bars for all 13 items. The dashed line marks the neutral midpoint (3.0).*

3.2 Composite Scores by Section and Respondent Group

View Composite Scores by Section and Respondent Group. A mean was computed for each thematic section. The teacher quality indicator received the highest score (M = 4.640), followed by Socio-Cultural Barriers (M = 4.590),

Infrastructure (M = 4.173) and Policy and Governance (M = 3.668). The neutral responses to Q3 have lowered the score for Policy and Governance, but excluding it brings the score in line with the other three sections at 3.91. These composite scores have been broken down by tehsil and respondent group in Table 2. There were

minimal differences between groups. However, DEO Office staff ranked Policy and Governance and Infrastructure as the highest in the organization with the highest proximity to

budgeting and monitoring. Banda Daud Shah had the lowest composite scores in all the four sections which is the most remote tehsil.

Table 2. Section-Wise Composite Mean Scores by Respondent Group (N = 427)

Respondent group	n	Sec 1 (Policy)	Sec 2 (Teacher)	Sec 3 (Infra.)	Sec 4 (Socio-cult.)	Overall mean
Karak	136	3.684	4.703	4.181	4.667	4.309
Takht-e-Nasrati	143	3.676	4.737	4.182	4.643	4.310
Banda Daud Shah	138	3.618	4.483	4.138	4.453	4.173
DEO Office employees	10	4.033	4.567	4.433	4.675	4.427
Overall (N = 427)	427	3.668	4.640	4.173	4.590	4.268

Figure 2. Section-wise Composite Mean Scores by Respondent Group (N = 427)

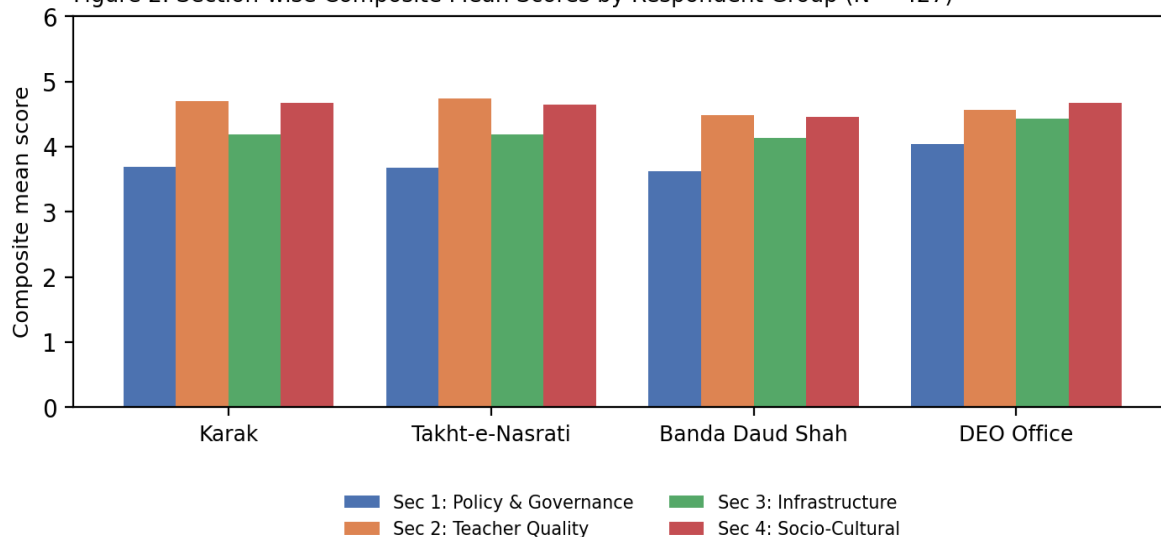


Figure 2. Section-wise composite mean scores by respondent group.

3.3

Inferential Statistics

One-sample t-tests were used to compare the mean score of each item to the neutral score of 3.0. Each of these 13 items was significantly higher than neutral ($p < .001$, $df = 426$) indicating that responses were not evenly distributed around neutral, but rather were consistent with the participants' shared response pattern of agreeing. The composite scores of the three tehsils and DEO Office group were compared using a Kruskal-Wallis H test. The result was not significant, $H(3) = 4.141$, $p = .247$. This implies that there was no significant difference in the policy-practice gap across location and type of respondents. It is a

district-level issue, not specific to one tehsil or to a specific set of stakeholders.

3.4 Reliability

The 13-item instrument demonstrated a satisfactory level of internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.862, which is higher than the 0.70 as suggested by (Nunnally 1978; George & Mallery (2003). This lends further evidence to the conclusion that the instrument measured the policy-practice gap in a consistent way across the items and the groups of respondents.

4. Discussion

The results of this study directly address the research goals and correspond to the implementation framework developed by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1980), including the dimensions of problem tractability, statutory structuring of implementation and non-statutory conditions influencing policy execution. Having devolved the responsibility of education governance to the provinces, the implementation of the NEP in higher secondary schools of District Karak is short of its desired goals for over a decade. The lack of effective feedback mechanism between schools and the provincial education authorities, excessive amounts of non-teaching work performed by teachers, inadequate information technology and laboratory facilities, and lack of any financial support to promote girls' education were the most cited implementation barriers from the respondents. The results show that there is a gap in several conditions which are critical for the success of policy implementation. Fears of poor communication between people and poor understanding of the DEPIx monitoring system are widespread, cutting across a lack of accountability rather than occurring as isolated instances of poor communication. Likewise, the fact that there are unspent development funds and ongoing under-resourcing in education indicates the implementation paradox frequently found in decentralized education systems, where the availability of financial resources does not correspond to the quality of school infrastructure, owing to lack of technical capacity and ineffective procurement mechanisms (Pont & Viennet, 2017; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1980). Moreover, teacher-related factors such as overworked teachers, scarcity of professional development opportunities, and poor teacher incentives for working in rural areas indicate that teachers are still overstretched and under-supported, which aligns with the results of Akhtar et al. (2024) who found teacher-related factors to be major determinants of the success in implementing the policy. The other significant finding is that there was no statistically significant difference between the three tehsils in the District of Karak. The non-significant Kruskal-Wallis test shows that there are

no significant differences among parents, students, teachers and district education officials for implementation challenges, indicating that the policy-practice gap is not confined to specific locations, as a systemic district-wide problem. The socio-cultural observations also indicate that there is a lack of female teachers, negative attitude towards girls' education, and unsafe transportation perceived as major hurdles to girls' enrolment. The high degree of consensus on these factors reflects respondents' awareness of them as factors affecting educational participation, not the endorsement of these beliefs. The results support the findings of Farooqi and Forbes (2020) who stressed the significance of tackling socio-cultural obstacles when it comes to educational gender parity. In general, the high and steady answers given in relation to the teacher-related aspects, infrastructure, administration and the socio-cultural aspects show that the implementation problems of the National Education Policy is not just an administrative issue but a complex and interconnected one. It supports the idea of "wicked problem" proposed by Rittel and Webber (1973) that meaningfully improving outcomes will require coordinated action by policymakers, educational administrators, school leadership, communities, and other stakeholders as opposed to isolated policy interventions.

5. Limitations

The findings of this study might not be generalizable to other districts or provinces of Pakistan because it only included higher secondary schools in District Karak. The research also depended mainly on the responses from the questionnaires, which were subjective and subjective responses and thus only showed the stakeholders' perception of various aspects of the policy and not the actual implementation. The use of a cross-sectional design also limits the ability to assess changes in implementation over time.

6. Future work

Further studies are recommended to cover a wider geographical area, such as several districts and provinces to make wider comparisons of implementation of the National Education Policy.

Qualitative methods, including focus group discussions and interviews, would help understand the issues related to the perspectives of policymakers, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Longitudinal studies are further recommended for assessing the effectiveness of interventions for enhancing teacher support, educational infrastructure and the access of girls to higher secondary education, as well as for the assessment of the evolution of policy implementation over time.

7. Conclusion

The present study aimed to find out the extent of implementation and to elucidate the difference between the National Education policy and the on-ground practice in District Karak. The evidence clearly shows that there is a real, uniform and common policy-practice gap across tehsils and among the respondent groups. The results of the survey indicated that, with one exception (DEPIx accuracy, which was confused, not confident, about the district's primary monitoring tool) there was strong agreement, with statistically significant scores, that implementation is inadequate.

There are three patterns to note. First, district to provincial authority relationships is broken and feedback is lacking, leading to less accountability and slower correction. Second, teachers have heavy workloads, inadequate training, and lack of incentives to remain in rural schools, reducing their ability to implement the policy as intended. Third, socio-cultural barriers continue to be strong constraints on girls' education despite the policy's rhetoric; in particular, teacher shortages and the absence of safe transport. Given the results of this research, some measures might be taken to narrow the gap. DEO could set up a formal system for feedback from the schools to the province and explain how to determine and apply the DEPIx. Resources for infrastructure development should be matched with greater local capacity in planning and procurement to ensure that existing resources are spent. Teacher training must be strengthened and incentive packages for teachers in rural areas must be improved; and non-teaching activities must be decreased if necessary to allow for instructional time. Lastly, increasing the number of

female teachers and improving the means of safe transport for girls would directly tackle two of the most robust barriers found in this study.

These recommendations are not only relevant to Karak but to any other area as well. Limited resources and institutional capacity, and socio-cultural barriers to girls' education are some of the challenges faced by many districts in KP and other parts of Pakistan. The lessons learned in this study can serve as a foundation for other districts with similar structural problems. The analysis of this study used only one scale which was a Likert scale and direct feedback from teachers or school administrators was not included, which reduces the in-depth explanation of the existence of these patterns. Future studies should be combined with interviews or focus groups, be extended to other districts, and be conducted over time to determine whether the policy-practice gap is diminished as a result of targeted reforms.

References

- Ahmad, I., & Hussain, M. A. (2014). National education policy (NEP 2009-2015) in Pakistan: Critical analysis and a way forward. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 53(2), 53-60.
- Akhlaq, M., Khan, M. A., & Sikander, L. (2024). A critical analysis of paradoxes in National Educational Policy of Pakistan (2017-2025). *Global Regional Review*, 9(2), 114-123.
- Akhtar, M., Andleeb, Z., & Akhtar, S. (2024). Problems of education system in Pakistan: A critical analysis and solution. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 8(2), 200-210.
- Anwar, J., Khan, S., Shah, M., Brown, S., Kelly, P., & Phillips, S. (2023). Education, teacher education and sustainable development in COVID 'normal' Pakistan. In *COVID-19 and the (broken) promise of education for sustainable development* (pp. 1-19).
- ASER Pakistan. (2023). Annual status of education report (ASER Pakistan 2023). Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi.

- Birkland, T. A. (2019). An introduction to the policy process: Theories, concepts, and models of public policy making (5th ed.). Routledge.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika*, 16(3), 297-334.
- Farooqi, M., & Forbes, S. (2020). Barriers to girls' secondary education in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 75, 102-112.
- George, D., & Mallery, P. (2003). *SPSS for Windows step by step: A simple guide and reference*, 11.0 update (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2010). Education and economic growth. In *Economics of education* (pp. 60-67). Elsevier.
- Hill, M., & Hupe, P. (2014). *Implementing public policy: An introduction to the study of operational governance* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Khadim, A., et al. (2021). Policy formulation versus implementation: Gaps in Pakistan's education reforms. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 8(1), 45-63.
- Khan, R. (2014). Devolution and education governance in Pakistan after the 18th Amendment. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 34(1), 1-15.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mazmanian, D. A., & Sabatier, P. A. (1980). The implementation of public policy: A framework of analysis. *Policy Studies Journal*, 8(4), 538-560.
- Mustafa, G. (2012). The 18th Constitutional Amendment and its impact on education in Pakistan. *Journal of Political Studies*, 19(2), 141-155.
- Nunnally, J. C. (1978). *Psychometric theory* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- O'Toole, L. J. (2000). Research on policy implementation: Assessment and prospects. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 10(2), 263-288.
- Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), 155-169.
- Salimi, S. (2024). National education policy reforms and implementation challenges in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Education*, 41(1), 23-40.
- Suleman, Q., Hussain, I., Shakir, M., Khan, F. U., & Nisa, Z. U. (2015). Barriers to girls' education in rural areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Journal of Sociological Research*, 6(1), 79-90.
- Viennet, R., & Pont, B. (2017). *Education policy implementation: A literature review and proposed framework* (OECD Education Working Papers No. 162). OECD Publishing.