

What do we know about school management systems in Pakistan? Evidence from a study of government and NGO schools

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Key messages

- An absence of designated posts and lack of positional recognition of head teachers at the primary school level is creating a leadership vacuum.
- Design gaps in professional development mechanisms (pre- and in-service) may be compromising the level of preparedness of head teachers in the government system for doing their jobs.
- The current policy and governance setup is effectively clipping the wings of head teachers, blunting their authority and capacity for responding to challenges.
- Feedback loops that facilitate information flows within management hierarchies and improve organizational trust are missing.

The policy brief presents key findings from an exploratory comparative study of school management systems in government and NGO schools, undertaken to understand current practices of school management, the policy environment in which these practices are observed, and the structural and institutional barriers that may stand in the way of effective school management practices.

The study, funded by British Council, was undertaken to address the gap in knowledge in this area¹, and adopted a mixed-methods approach to documenting practices of school management and the level of autonomy available to head teachers in different but comparative school systems.

The findings draw on data from a survey of 119 heads of schools, including 89 head teachers of government schools and 30 principals in an NGO school system, from Lahore, Faisalabad and Sargodha districts in Punjab in 2017. The government school sample comprised of three types of schools: primary standalone schools, primary attached to middle schools, and primary attached to high schools. The survey was complemented by a series of interviews with head teachers in the government and NGO systems.

¹ A small but important collection of ethnographic studies undertaken in Sindh, Punjab and Gilgit Baltistan offer insights about the daily professional lives and struggles of head teachers in schools. While in depth, they offer snapshots of a couple of schools at a time.

Situating school management practices in the reform discourse

Empirical literature links school leadership to improved quality of education service delivery including learning outcomes.² The link works indirectly with effects being mediated through an improved school environment (climate), safe and inclusive classrooms, and increased teacher motivation and effort. According to the literature, effective schools are not mere administrators but are leaders above and beyond that.

This impact is realized and strengthened under conditions of greater school autonomy, i.e. where head teachers are supported, empowered and ready (have skills and training) to make substantive decisions about school management. Major arguments for decentralization of authority to the school level (including to school heads) are that by giving school heads ‘more direct influence over teachers, teachers will become more responsive to student needs’ and that school heads have a better sense of their own school’s needs, and can meet these quickly where they have access to resources.³ Both have the potential to drive up school performance and student learning.

High performing systems are associated with higher levels of autonomy at the school level – observed in practice – which also explains differences in school environments, school quality and learning outcomes. It is also the case that non-governmental schools are more autonomous than government schools, i.e. principals in NGO schools are more autonomous than head teachers in government schools. In Pakistan, there is growing recognition that service delivery may be breaking down in the government system at the school level.

Systems that structure education service delivery impact practices of frontline service delivery agents and outcomes of frontline units (schools), including quality. Punjab has undertaken a number of reforms to improve school quality. It is, however, unclear a) how far school leadership and management practices are part of the reform thinking and agenda, and b) whether systematic constraints in the way of effective school management practices are being considered.

This policy brief highlights four critical gaps of school management practices in the public sector in Punjab that have emerged as key findings of the comparative study, and must be considered for policy design. The discussion is focused primarily on the government system; comparisons with the NGO school system are drawn in places.

² Witziers et al, 2003; Leithwood et al, 2004; Nettles and Herrington, 2007; Robinson et al 2008; Hallinger & Heck 2010

³ World Bank (2018), World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education’s Promise, p. 149

1. An absence of designated posts and lack of positional recognition of head teachers at the primary school level is creating a leadership vacuum

There are approximately 53,000 schools in Punjab and primary standalone schools account for 36,695 of these.⁴ There are no officially designated posts for head teachers in primary standalone schools (unlike in middle and high schools). Here, school heads are referred to as ‘head-designates’. The annual school census or EMIS does not report the number of head-designates in Punjab but it can be inferred that there is one in each primary standalone school.⁵

One reason cited for the absence of an officially designated post of head teacher in primary standalone schools⁶ is that shortage of staff in these schools prohibits the establishment of a coherent managerial structure. Almost 55% of all primary standalone schools in Punjab are single-teacher or two-teacher schools. The process of appointment of “head teachers” in primary schools simply involves assignment of administrative responsibilities associated with the role to one of the teachers, for a nominal extra income of Rs. 500 a month.

These teachers are often fresh recruits, most junior within the hierarchy of the teaching and management cadre⁷, and learning on the job. A majority of teachers with administrative responsibilities in primary schools in our sample have less than 5 years of experience (Figure 1). Seniority brings more authority and better networks within the education department. The junior status of primary school head-designates is reinforced through asymmetries in the reporting hierarchies. They not only report to and interact with Assistant Education Officers (AEO), but also to head teachers of the local model high school. In contrast, head teachers of middle and high schools report to and interact with more senior administrative officers (the District Education Officer or DEO and the Executive District Officer or EDO) many of whom are also their peers.

Taken together these factors create a vacuum of leadership in primary schools.

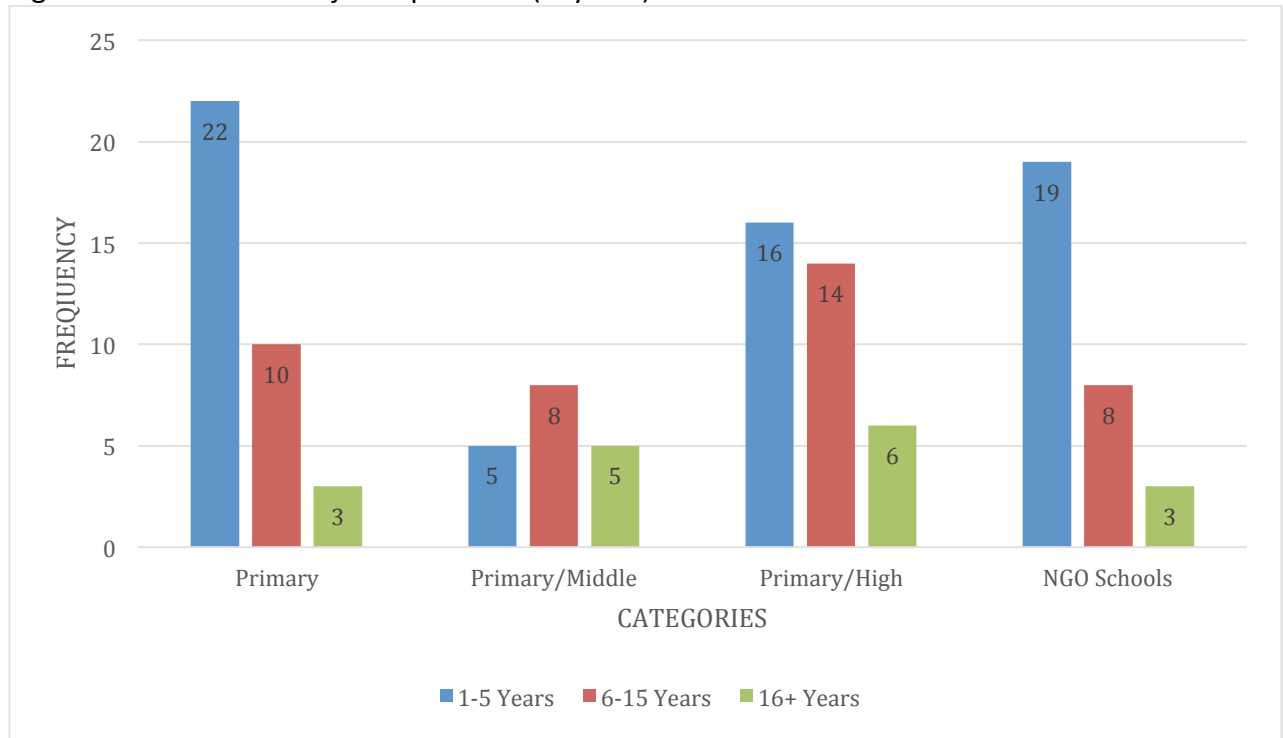
⁴ Programme Monitoring and Implementation Unit (2016) Annual School Census data, Retrieved from: <http://www.pesrp.edu.pk/datacenter>

⁵ EMIS does report school heads at higher levels of schooling and according to the latest data available (2016-2017) there are close to 12,000 deputy headmasters, headmasters, senior headmasters and principals in Punjab

⁶ As reflected in our interviews with representatives of the education department

⁷ In our sample the majority of primary school teachers (25 of the 36 surveyed) are grades 9 and 12 i.e. entry grade level. Middle school head teachers are between grades 14 and 18, and high school head teachers are grade 16 and above.

Figure 1: Head teachers’ job experience (in years)



Note: the figure reports the number of individual responses rather than percentages

In contrast, middle and high schools in the government system and NGO schools (at all levels) recruit specifically for the post, are coherently staffed, and create clear management structures. Differences in school environments between government primary standalone schools and government middle, high and NGO schools (all levels) come through in the study. While causation cannot be attributed on the basis of data from this study, variations in levels of authority – recognized and exercised – emerge as a key difference in the operational environment of different school types.

Primary standalone schools are the most resource poor (in terms of infrastructure, finance and human resource⁸. They also perform poorly on student assessments relative to other schools⁹ and are most in need of reform. Arguably the most important rung of the schooling ladder, primary schools are also the first point of contact for communities – particularly the poorest ones. These schools have the potential to become focal hubs for spearheading coordinated efforts to increase enrollment, retention, and learning. These changes cannot be triggered in the absence of a recognized post for head teachers, vested with effective authority and resources to address challenges.

⁸ Programme Monitoring and Implementation Unit (2016) Annual School Census data, Retrieved from: <http://www.pesrp.edu.pk/datacenter>

⁹ Punjab Examination Commission, Grade- 5 student assessment data from 2013-2014

The Punjab government has recruited 80,000 new teachers in 2017 with the express purpose of staffing each primary school with between 4 to 5 teachers. A step in the right direction, this move also necessitates the creation of a designated post of head teacher, with complete authority necessary for instituting changes in schools.

2. Design gaps in professional development mechanisms (pre- and in-service) may be compromising the level of preparedness of head teachers in the government system for doing their jobs

Both the government and NGO systems operate and direct school management practices through job descriptions for head teachers that emphasize the dual role of a head as administrator and instructional leader. The list of responsibilities is long and varied, encompassing the generic and broad (such as oversight of overall functioning of the school), to the very micro (such as ensuring school cleanliness, and overseeing timely arrival of all students and teachers), to the administrative (planning school expenditures, developing and implementing the annual development plan, and completing administrative reporting). In the government sector these job descriptions are also frequently revised and added to with every new reform initiative (such as school enrollment drives). Additionally, a very big part of their job involves human resource management, oversight of pedagogic practices in classrooms, and capacity building of teachers. Effective execution of these duties requires training specific to the role of headship.

A key finding of the study is that a large number of head teachers in the government system - 57 of the 89 surveyed - reported receiving no training at the time of appointment. This lack of support is institutionalized in the case of primary school heads who assume administrative responsibilities in standalone schools and are excluded from leadership-specific training provided during promotion-linked trainings. In contrast, head teachers in middle and high schools are receiving capacity building support. For example, approximately half of the head teachers of government primary attached to high schools (i.e. 17 of the 35 heads) reported receiving training prior to assuming their position. In some cases, this would have been the promotion-linked training that is received by any teacher (not just heads) when they progress to a higher grade/ Basic Pay Scale. The middle and high school head teachers are also more likely to be nominated for and to participate in programs such as Punjab Education and English Language Initiative (PEELI) that are designed to dovetail with promotion-linked training programs.

This emerges as a significant policy blind spot: a negation of the importance of equipping young, relatively inexperienced head teachers entering the system at the primary school level with the skills they need to become effective administrators.

In contrast, the NGO school system has a universal and systematic system for training and support of heads. All principals, regardless of the level of school they are heading or years of experience, receive training at the point of assumption of duties as well as after. The NGO system studied has regular and separate mechanisms in place for “pre-service initiation” and continuous support for head teachers. The continuous support is provided through annual ‘academies’ comprising of weeklong training sessions. These academies are policy oriented, specific in their focus each year, and informed by the needs, requirements and priorities of school heads. Such a practice of universal training and support reduces the variation in capacities and asymmetry of knowledge within school management systems.

While there are forums where government head teachers convene on a regular basis, the meetings are not intended for capacity building.¹⁰ School-based pedagogical support and capacity building was provided, until recently by District Teacher Educators and at present by AEOs, however, this is only to teachers and not to school heads. Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational Development (QAED) is currently working with the British Council to design and implement a more comprehensive mandatory training program for heads starting in 2017. However, primary standalone teachers have not yet been made part of this training process.

Table 1: Areas in which head teachers are trained in pre- and in-service programs (frequency & percentage)

¹⁰ Head teachers in government schools gather every month for a cluster-level training. Most of the meeting is spent, however, reviewing teacher attendance registers and communicating new education policies or directives to school heads.

	Pre-Service		In-Service	
	Government	NGO	Government	NGO
	%	%	%	%
Child Psychology	35	47	48	60
Multi-grade teaching	25	20	48	40
Teaching in a multi-lingual classroom	19	20	25	30
Teaching slow learners	22	43	46	63
Teaching children with disabilities	8	10	7	10
Teaching children from poor backgrounds	22	47	28	60
School administration or head-teacher training	28	53	61	87
Instructional leadership course	19	53	46	73
Human resource management	26	53	46	73
Financial management	25	57	53	77

Another key finding regarding the level of preparedness for school management and performance of headship duties emerges from the data on the topics covered in pre- and in-service training. As can be seen in Table 1, a greater proportion of NGO school heads, compared with government school heads, have received in-service training in areas such as child psychology, teaching slow learners, teaching children from poor households, school administration, instructional leadership, human resource and finance management. More government school heads, compared with NGO school heads, have received in-service training in multi-grade teaching reflecting conditions of schools in the government sector.

- 3. The current policy and governance setup is effectively clipping the wings of head teachers blunting their authority and capacity for responding to challenges**

The notion of autonomy refers to the space for effective decision-making available to and exercised by frontline service providers. Autonomy is interpreted to mean decisions that can and are taken by heads at the school level. The table below compares areas in which heads can and do take decisions at the school level in both schooling systems.

Table 2: Categories of decisions reported taken by heads at the school level

Area	Tasks	NGO	Government
School administration and planning	Developing the school improvement plans		
	Maintaining enrolment and attendance records		
	Maintaining teacher attendance records		
	Establishing student disciplinary policies		
	Deciding the structure of the school day		
	Planning extra-curricular activities		
Pedagogy and student related	Observing classrooms		
	Choosing teaching and learning materials		
	Allocating students to sections		
	Deciding who repeats classes		
	Devising strategies for slow learners and monitoring their progress		
Teacher management and support	Writing annual confidential reports		
	Hiring full-time teachers		
	Hiring contract and part-time teachers		
	Hiring non-teaching staff		
	Nominating teachers for bonuses and promotions		
	Managing teacher holidays		

Note: Only those categories where more than 60% respondents identified the decision to be taken at the school level are reported here.

Table 2 shows a comparable level of autonomy available to and exercised by school heads in both systems. There is one important difference: Any effective decision-making regarding human resource and staff management is virtually absent at the school level in the government system. Principals in NGO schools are taking decisions at the school level to hire contract or part-time teachers and non-teaching staff, to suspend teachers, to recommend teachers for bonuses, and to manage teacher holidays. While head teachers in government schools do review their teachers’ annual performance in an Annual Confidential Report (ACR) that can potentially be used as an accountability check, interviews reveal that the ACR is considered to be an ineffective measure. It is the education department and not the head teacher that handles matters relating to teacher promotions and holidays.

Head teachers in the NGO system are able to wield both carrots and sticks. Having a balance of both makes a difference to the nature of their interactions with teachers and the ability to bring about effective change. Heads in government schools cannot exert

the kind of influence over their teachers that can potentially help improve school performance.

Another key difference in decision-making authority is that the provincial government has created conditions for exercise of considerable autonomy by government school heads in the area of financial autonomy (even in comparison with the NGO system¹¹). This is, in particular, through the institutionalization of the school-specific Non-Salary Budget (NSB) to make financial resources available directly in schools' bank accounts. While there are rules for oversight, the provincial government has made an effort to encourage and empower head teachers to spend money on school improvement in line with their visions for their schools.

Empirical investigations¹², including ours, found that i) funds remain unspent- a large chunk of school funds were not spent by heads in all schools, especially in government primary attached to high schools, and ii) visions for improvements in schools are limited to infrastructural improvements and provision of facilities. These issues are also apparent in the NGO system. There is deep-rooted lack of agency amongst head teachers that is compounded, in the government system, by lack of clarity about rules and constraints to them.

4. Feedback loops that facilitate information flows within management hierarchies and improve organizational trust are missing

Interviews reveal that principals in the NGO system are well versed in their responsibilities and the rules of the system. In the government system, complete

¹¹ NGO school heads can only spend small amounts of money without the approval of higher education authorities. For use of funds above this amount, heads require the approval of the area or regional administrative support persons. These approvals are normally easy to come by as they are submitted with justification.

¹² Cambridge Education (2015), Non-Salary Budget Expenditure Review: Punjab, Pakistan, pp. 1 - 90

understanding and knowledge of rules, responsibilities, and expectations comes with years of service.

A number of feedback loops exist in the NGO system: test results are made available to and discussed with principals, yearly targets for schools are set in collaboration with principals, and support is tailored to needs of principals. It is difficult to find similar feedback loops at any level within the government system, where governance and policy making overall is top-down.

This needs to be rectified through the establishment of effective feedback loops and communication channels between heads and higher authorities in the government system. Head teachers need to be engaged by higher-level officials at both the district and provincial levels when formulating priorities and education reforms. Head teachers are keenly aware, by virtue of their placement within the school, of challenges and solutions and their voices need to be heard at such forums. This will also help in creating head teacher buy-in and ownership of government policies that need to be implemented at the school level.

Recommendations

- Particular attention must be paid to addressing structural and policy gaps causing neglect of primary standalone schools; starting with the creation of a dedicated and recognized post of head teacher in these schools.
- Recruitment of head teachers as a special cadre of government servants, with coherent career progression possibilities needs to be considered
- Universal coverage of job specific pre- and in-service capacity building support for head teachers at all school and seniority levels within the government systems needs to be ensured.
- Substantive changes should be made in the areas of training provided to head teachers at all levels in the government system.
- Decision-making authority at the school level in the government system in a number of areas, particularly in human resource and staff management needs to be increased, even if gradually.
- Feedback loops with improved information flows within governance hierarchies must be established in the government system.