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Leadership Strategies in Addressing Out-of-School Children: A Comparative Study of Heads of Government and Public–Private-Managed Schools in Sindh, Pakistan

Irfan Ahmed Rind

Faculty of Language Studies, Sohar University, Sohar 311, Oman; iahmed@su.edu.om

Abstract: The issue of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) presents a significant policy challenge in Sindh, Pakistan, where 44% of 5–16-year-olds are not attending school. This study examines how different leadership strategies in government and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) schools address this crisis. Drawing on transformational leadership theory and institutional theory, this research investigates the influence of school governance structures—specifically government schools, Education Management Organizations (EMOs), and Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) schools—on school leaders' abilities to increase student enrollment and retention. Through a multiple case study design, this study collects qualitative data from three school heads, augmented by perspectives from vice principals and teachers. The findings indicate that leadership agency is constrained in government schools due to centralized decision-making, while PPP schools, particularly SEF schools, offer more autonomy, enabling more adaptive and community-centered leadership strategies. This study concludes that decentralized governance in SEF schools is more effective in addressing the OOSC issue, particularly in marginalized areas. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to enhance educational access in regions with similar socio-economic challenges. The implications of this research underscore the need for flexible, context-specific leadership models to combat the OOSC crisis.

Keywords: out-of-school children; public–private partnership; education management organization; Sindh education foundation; leadership dynamics

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1. Introduction

Out-of-school children (OOSC) are a major issue worldwide, with more than 263 million school-age children being deprived of education. According to UNESCO [1], 20 countries have more than 30% of school-going-age children becoming OOSC. Pakistan falls in second place on that list with more than 22.8 million OOSC children. Within Pakistan, this issue is pronounced in the province of Sindh, which houses 52 percent of school-age children deprived of schooling. While these statistics are highly alarming and disheartening, they also offer prospects to look for innovative educational intervention, school leadership dynamics, and public–private synergies to deal with OOSC challenges [2,3].

Among others, the primary issue is the unavailability of government schools in some neighborhoods, particularly the remote rural regions of the province [4,5]. Thus, the provincial government showcased a proactive approach by supporting the notion of public–private partnerships (PPP) in education. Government policies promoted PPPs as a potential collaborative effort that can harness the strengths of both governmental mandates and private sector agility to drive educational outreach and quality. Various modalities emerged within this PPP framework, each tailored to address a specific challenge [6,7].

The Education Management Organization (EMO) model emerges as a significant and unique modality. In this setup, private organizations, labeled EMOs, are entrusted with the governance, administrative, and operational management of government schools. However, the leadership roles, particularly principals, in these EMO-operated schools remain an

appointment of the government, blending public oversight with private operational efficacy. The EMOs are given certain educational objectives, the achievement of which is measured using certain Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The EMOs receive governmental funding dependent on the achievement of these KPIs. Student enrollment and retention are among the key KPIs for the EMO to achieve, reflecting the government's overarching goal of addressing the OOSC issue via PPP [8].

Within the PPP framework, the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) emerged as another novel strategy. Functioning under government authority, SEF financially empowers individuals to operate schools in the province's most underserved areas. This initiative's success hinges on an enrollment-driven model, where funding to school operators correlates directly with the number of students attending these schools [9,10].

This research examines Sindh's education system, aiming to understand the intricate details of PPPs and compare them with the government schools. Specifically, it focuses on examining the influence of the governance and management of these schools on the school heads, particularly their agency, motivations, and leadership strategies to tackle student enrollment and retention, and ultimately the OOSC challenge in Sindh.

The complex interplay between public intent and private efficiency, along with the mix of government-appointed leadership and performance-driven funding, makes Sindh's educational intervention a compelling case study. As we delve into this story, a key question emerges: "How do the distinct PPP modalities, represented by EMOs and SEF, leverage leadership strategies in addressing Sindh's OOSC crisis by increasing students' enrollment and retention, and what insights can be gleaned regarding their effectiveness"?

Given the seriousness and urgency of the OOSC problem in Sindh and the innovative solutions that it has inspired, the lessons, challenges, and successes observed in this study can not only inform readers of the strategies of a specific province but also offer invaluable insights for regions that are dealing with similar issues globally.

2. Public–Private Partnership in Education in Pakistan

The education system in Pakistan is mainly divided into public and private schools, with 189,748 (62%) public schools and 116,015 (38%) private schools, 31,115 of which are religious schools, or Deeni Madaris [11]. Despite a larger number, government schools find it challenging to enroll OOSC, mainly due to issues with quality and infrastructure [1]. The motivation for launching PPP-operated schools was driven by the desire to meet global objectives, such as ensuring education for everyone, along with the goals set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). A rise in national NGOs also nudged the adoption of the PPP model [8]. Moreover, the World Bank has been an active participant in funding projects aimed at boosting student enrolment and keeping them in schools [12]. With these efforts, Pakistan has seen the sprouting of cost-effective schools and incentive schemes aimed at increasing enrolment and maintaining student attendance [2,4,6].

The roots of PPP in Pakistan can be traced back to the late 1990s, when the government, in collaboration with international development organizations, began exploring the potential of leveraging private sector efficiency to improve public service delivery, especially in sectors like infrastructure, health, and education. In the education sector, the adoption of PPPs emerged as a response to the persistent challenges of low enrollment rates, the poor quality of education, and a large number of OOSC. The public sector's inability to provide equitable access to quality education in both urban and rural areas prompted policymakers to explore alternative models [13]. This shift was also influenced by global trends that encouraged developing nations to integrate private sector participation in education to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Sindh province became a key player in this development, with the provincial government initiating a variety of PPP models. The Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), established in the mid-1990s, played a pivotal role by partnering with private individuals

and organizations to operate schools in underserved areas. SEF's Assisted Schools (SAS) program, launched in 1997, was one of the early interventions aimed at improving access to education through PPPs. The SEF model provided funding to schools based on student enrollment, with the goal of incentivizing school operators to increase enrollment and retention rates [6].

Another significant development occurred with the introduction of the Education Management Organizations (EMO) model in Sindh, in 2015, which represented a more structured approach to PPP in education. Under this model, private organizations were contracted to manage public schools, focusing on improving administrative efficiency and student outcomes. The EMO model was supported by international donors, including USAID, and aimed to combine public oversight with private sector innovation [10]. This model emphasized the importance of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as student enrollment, attendance, and retention, to ensure accountability and transparency.

In Punjab, PPP in education took a slightly different trajectory. The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), established in 1991, became the cornerstone of PPPs in the province's education sector. PEF's flagship programs, including the Foundation Assisted Schools (FAS) and the New School Program (NSP), were designed to improve access to quality education by providing financial support to private schools in low-income areas [6]. These initiatives were particularly effective in addressing the needs of out-of-school children in rural and marginalized communities.

To support PPP initiatives, each province has a dedicated PPP Policy Board, a PPP unit in the Finance Department, and specific divisions within educational bodies. In Sindh province, the Sindh Education & Literacy Department (SELD), which is responsible for managing education up to higher secondary, has a dedicated PPP unit. The scope of various partnerships based on PPP is wide, covering primary education, advanced academic courses, and skills training [10]. As of 2023, there are around 2300 schools of various levels operating on PPP arrangements in Sindh [14]. Most importantly, the students at these schools are found to consistently outperform their counterparts in government-only schools during standardized tests. At the same time, these schools house competent educators and superior facilities compared with their governmental counterparts [15].

Limitations of Public–Private Partnership in Education

While PPPs in education have been widely implemented in low-resource contexts like Pakistan, their effectiveness in addressing the educational needs of marginalized populations remains a subject of debate. Although the PPP model is often presented as a solution to the challenges of access, quality, and resource constraints, a growing body of the literature points to several limitations that need to be critically examined [9,13,16,17]. These limitations center around issues of equity, accountability, sustainability, and the influence of donor and private sector agendas on national educational policies.

One of the primary critiques of the PPP model is that it may prioritize private financing and efficiency over equitable access and public accountability. As Ansari [16] highlights, while PPP schools have been successful in increasing enrollment rates, there is evidence of "cream skimming", where private partners focus on enrolling students who are easier to educate, potentially excluding the most marginalized children. This selective approach undermines the core goal of addressing educational disparities in low-income regions. Similarly, Aslam and Kingdon [13] argue that PPP schools in Pakistan and India, despite their success in increasing access, often fail to reach the poorest and most disadvantaged children due to hidden costs, such as school fees and additional charges, which make these schools inaccessible to the very populations they are intended to serve.

Further compounding this issue is the global critique that PPPs can lead to the commercialization of education, with multinational corporations and private entities benefiting from the arrangement rather than the local communities. Robertson and Verger [17] suggest that PPPs, particularly in low-income countries, often reflect the agendas of international donors and corporations rather than local educational needs. This has been observed in

Pakistan, where donor-funded PPP models are sometimes aligned more with the objectives of external agencies than with national priorities. For instance, large-scale PPP projects funded by organizations like the World Bank and USAID have been criticized for imposing global education standards that may not always be contextually relevant or aligned with local socio-cultural needs [9]. This raises concerns about the erosion of national sovereignty over education policies and the prioritization of global targets over local realities.

Accountability is another critical issue in PPP arrangements. One of the inherent challenges of PPPs is the division of responsibility between public and private actors, which can blur lines of accountability. As noted by Rind and Shah [10], the governance structure of PPP schools often lacks transparency, making it difficult to hold private operators accountable for their performance. This is particularly problematic when the focus is on meeting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tied to funding, such as student enrollment and retention, rather than on broader educational outcomes like quality of learning or long-term social impact. The result is that while private operators may excel in meeting short-term targets, there is little evidence to suggest that PPPs have significantly improved the quality of education or contributed to poverty reduction and social equity in the long term [16].

Moreover, the sustainability of PPP models in education is often questioned. Many PPPs are heavily reliant on donor funding, which raises concerns about their long-term viability once external financial support is withdrawn. This has been observed in Sindh, where several PPP initiatives struggled to maintain operations after initial donor funding expired [10]. Without sustainable financial models, PPP schools may face challenges in continuing to provide quality education, especially in marginalized communities where government support is minimal. This calls into question the extent to which PPPs can be a reliable solution to systemic educational challenges in low-resource contexts.

Despite these concerns, PPPs have contributed significantly to expanding access to education in Pakistan. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) have also been major supporters of PPP models in the country, offering financial and technical assistance to enhance education outcomes. Studies indicate that PPP schools in Sindh and Punjab often outperform their fully government-operated counterparts in standardized assessments, largely due to better resource allocation and management practices [10].

3. School Types and School Heads' Responsibilities

3.1. Government Schools and the Role of School Heads

The SELD holds the mandate of imparting primary and secondary education throughout the Sindh province. The administrative structure of this department is layered and organized for efficiency. At the grassroots, many primary schools consist of just one classroom, led by a sole teacher who assumes the head's role. For schools with multiple teachers, the senior-most educator becomes the school head. Moving up the ladder, school heads at elementary and secondary schools are either appointed through the Sindh Public Service Commission examinations or attain their position upon reaching a specific basic-pay scale (BPS), typically BPS-16 or 17 [18].

These school heads report to Taluka Education Officers (TEOs), who present the foundational level within the administrative hierarchy of the SELD, serving as the primary unit of governance and administrative oversight. Dedicated TEOs are positioned for both primary and secondary schools, differentiated by gender. District Education Offices (DEO) present the next tier in the administrative hierarchy, where DEO (Primary) oversee the operations of TEOs (Primary) (Male and Female). Similarly, TEOs (Secondary) (Male and Female) report to DEO (Secondary). Sequentially, all DEOs report to the Divisional Education Officer, referred to as the Director Schools. The hierarchy concludes with the Director of Schools reporting to the Secretary Education, who, in collaboration with the Minister of Education, makes critical decisions [18]. In essence, this administrative structure is fundamentally centralized with major directives flowing from the Secretary Education

level and cascading downward, whereas foundational data, mainly regarding teacher attendance and student registration, percolates upwards.

The official Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) allocate a wide range of responsibilities to government school heads. At the core, they are to uphold teacher punctuality, create a conducive learning environment, and instill a professional ethos amongst the staff. Other duties range from record maintenance, community representation, and curriculum supervision to financial management [19].

However, the on-ground application of these SOPs is not without its roadblocks. Often, these idealistic expectations stand at odds with the ground realities. School heads grapple with issues like resource constraints, the daunting task of meeting high-stakes testing benchmarks, catering to a varied student populace, managing inconsistent parental engagement, and navigating the intricate maze of government bureaucracy. Consequently, their role, which should ideally be comprehensive, becomes somewhat diminished [20]. The broader objectives take a backseat, and the focus narrows to fundamental operations like tracking teachers' attendance and communicating key data to district-level supervisors. This chasm between SOPs' vision and its real-time application highlights the challenges entrenched within the government school system.

3.2. SEF-Managed Schools and Responsibilities of School Heads

The SEF, under the umbrella of the provincial government of Sindh, initiated innovative models of PPP to bolster the province's educational infrastructure. Among its many initiatives, the SEF-Assisted Schools (SAS) program is its flagship program. Dedicated individuals are partnered to manage schools in deprived areas. SEF claims such partnership as a symbiotic relationship between the foundation and dedicated individuals. These individuals are expected to be passionate about education and community upliftment and with this spirit they are handed the reins of SEF schools. These individuals are entrusted to carry forth the SEF's vision, ensuring that each child stepping into these schools receives quality education in a conducive environment [6].

Each individual is assessed to have a clear intent and commitment to nurturing young minds. They must align with SEF's ethos, emphasizing quality, inclusivity, and progress. They should also have strong management and administrative skills. Although they are dubbed as school heads, their daily operations range from administrative tasks to teacher guidance. Furthermore, they are tasked with fostering an environment of growth, both in terms of academic prowess and the personal development of the students. They are expected to be driven and apply innovative ways to bring OOSC of their local community back to schools and retain them [6].

SEF has a vigilant and supportive oversight mechanism to monitor the progress of these schools and their custodians. Regular on-ground visits are scheduled, ensuring that schools maintain the set standards. During these visits, the SEF representatives immerse themselves in the school's daily rhythm, observing classes, interacting with staff, and understanding student progress. Based on the satisfactory performance of the school, the custodians are paid per head count. To aid the schools in this journey, SEF integrates technology-driven solutions. Online student information systems, which capture crucial student data, to online learning platforms are expected to amplify students' learning experience. However, considering that these schools are operating in the remotest areas of the province and catering to the poorest of the students, access to computers and the internet raises questions about the SEF's claims of a technology integration approach [9,21].

3.3. EMO Schools and Responsibilities of School Heads

The EMO model, introduced under the PPP banner, represents an innovative effort by the SELD to elevate the quality of education in Sindh. This model, conceived in 2015, entails strategic partnerships between government-owned schools and private entities to elevate educational standards and manage school operations more efficiently. This model was introduced when USAID, as part of its commitment to the provincial government,

generously funded the construction of state-of-the-art school buildings, equipped with the latest facilities and infrastructure. To effectively use these resources, it was decided to hand over the management of these schools to third-party EMOs. The government signs contracts with EMOs with specific objectives, such as increasing students' access to these schools and ensure students' attendance and retention. To effectively monitor the performance of EMOs, specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were defined, the meeting of which ensured continued government funding to EMOs. One of the main KPIs is related to student enrollment, attendance, and sustained retention [19].

The EMO framework provides a great level of autonomy to the EMOs to hire new teaching staff, but the role of the school head remains a government-appointed one. Furthermore, existing government-appointed teachers continue to serve, and it is the EMO's task to seamlessly integrate and work in tandem with them [22]. Interestingly, before the EMO model's inception, the school heads were not specifically incentivized to bolster OOSC numbers or amplify school enrollment, attendance, and retention. However, with the EMO structure's introduction and its emphasis on KPIs like attendance and enrollment, school heads now find themselves under the EMO's lens. EMO management often incentivizes school heads to achieve these KPIs, fostering a more driven, results-focused approach to school leadership. In essence, the EMO model under PPP introduces a level of accountability and drive previously absent [10].

4. Theoretical Framework

The primary aim of this study is to explore how school heads from different types of schools implement various strategies to tackle the issue of OOSC. To achieve this goal, we adopted a range of theoretical perspectives that offer a comprehensive framework for understanding leadership styles most effective in addressing the OOSC challenge. In addition to focusing on leadership styles, we aimed to conceptualize leadership in relation to teacher motivation, ensuring that the chosen theories reflect both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. Another objective was to identify a theoretical foundation that could capture the institutional cultures within which these school leaders operate, examining how these environments shape leadership strategies. Lastly, we focused on understanding the tensions between the agency of school heads and the structural forces that may either constrain or empower their decision-making, particularly in relation to achieving positive educational outcomes.

To this end, we employed an integrated theoretical framework that draws upon transformational leadership theory, institutional theory, and additional models of motivation, organizational change, and bureaucracy. This combination provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how leadership behaviors and school governance interact to address the OOSC issue in Sindh, Pakistan.

Transformational leadership theory, developed by Burns [23] and expanded by Bass and Bass [24], focuses on leaders who inspire and motivate their followers to achieve high performance. Key components of this theory include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration [25]. In this study, we used this theory to analyze how school heads utilized their intrinsic motivations—such as their passion for education and commitment to social change—to overcome structural challenges and improve student enrollment and retention.

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, plays a crucial role in leadership behavior. Ryan and Deci [26] Self-determination theory highlights how intrinsic motivation, such as personal fulfillment, and extrinsic factors, like financial rewards, influence leadership effectiveness. Studies from Finland and the United States indicate that leaders who are intrinsically motivated by educational values are more likely to drive sustainable reforms [26,27]. In this context, we sought to understand how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations shape the strategies of school leaders in addressing student access, retention, and progression.

Maslow's [28] hierarchy of needs complements this by suggesting that leaders are motivated by both basic needs (such as security and esteem) and self-actualization. In

educational settings, leaders who feel secure in their roles and receive recognition are more likely to engage in transformational leadership. For instance, Prinsloo [29] found that school heads in South Africa who had their basic needs met were more effective in motivating teachers and driving school improvements.

Institutional theory, as articulated by DiMaggio and Powell [30], provides insights into how organizational structures, norms, and cultures shape leadership behavior. The centralized governance structures in government schools may limit the agency of school heads, while the semi-flexible structures of EMO and SEF schools offer greater autonomy, allowing leaders to respond more effectively to local challenges. Meyer and Rowan's [31] concepts of isomorphism and decoupling further illuminate how institutional cultures influence leadership strategies across different types of schools.

Archer's [32] theory of agency versus structure examines the tension between individual autonomy and institutional constraints, a framework that has been extensively used in educational research to explore how teachers exercise agency within structured environments. For example, Priestley [33] applied this theory to study how teachers navigate the pressures of educational reforms in Scotland, showing that their agency is shaped by both structural conditions and individual experiences. Similarly, Emirbayer and Mische [34] provided a broader conceptualization of agency, informed by Archer's work, that helps to understand how teachers' past experiences, present contexts, and future aspirations interplay in decision-making processes. These studies collectively highlight the dynamic interaction between structure and agency, illustrating how teachers respond to institutional constraints while maintaining a degree of autonomy in shaping their professional practice.

By integrating these theories, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between leadership, motivation, institutional culture, and governance. This approach offers valuable insights into how school leaders can navigate institutional challenges to improve educational access and outcomes, particularly in addressing the OOSC issue.

5. Methodology

In this study, we employed a multiple case study design to explore the leadership dynamics of three school heads, each representing a distinct school governance model in the district of Khairpur, Sindh. The analysis of their recruitment pathways, motivations, and leadership strategies provides a rich understanding of how different school systems operate in addressing the issue of OOSC. The three school heads—representing a government school, an EMO school, and an SEF school—each bring unique experiences and perspectives to this study.

5.1. Government School Head

The government school head, a 38-year-old male, holds an M.A. degree and is currently working toward completing his M.Phil. He has been in his principalship role for eight years, and his journey into leadership was shaped by the provincial government's recruitment system. Leadership positions in government schools are typically attained through two distinct pathways: fresh graduates take the Sindh Public Service Commission (SPSC) examination, while in-service teachers are promoted based on tenure. This head followed the former route, successfully passing the exam for a principal position. However, he humorously shared that he had failed the exam for a lecturer, underscoring how these leadership pathways sometimes place individuals into roles for which they may lack formal leadership training.

For this government school head, teaching was a calling rooted in his deep respect for the profession. He described teaching as "an honorable duty", citing the balance between his spiritual beliefs and a desire for a stable, fulfilling career. His motivation was not driven by financial gains alone but rather by societal respect and the security offered by a government job—factors that align with broader cultural sentiments. Over time, his leadership role ignited a passion for systemic change, motivating him to focus on

transforming the educational landscape of his school. As he stated, "My drive to transform our school system keeps me going", revealing how his personal values have shaped his leadership strategy in addressing the OOSC issue.

5.2. EMO School Head

The EMO school head, aged 56, leads his school with a B.Sc. and B.Ed. background and has held the principalship for two years. His entry into leadership was more circumstantial than planned. After a long tenure as a senior teacher, he transitioned into the role following the departure of the previous principal, a progression that sometimes favors experience over aptitude. This pathway into leadership highlights the nature of EMO schools, where private-sector management often brings greater flexibility in leadership selection compared with the more structured government system.

Like the government school head, the EMO school head's motivation for teaching stems from positive experiences with education and a strong commitment to improving the educational outcomes of his students. He reflects fondly on the influence of past educators, noting how these experiences have shaped his leadership philosophy. His role in the EMO school system has furthered his ability to implement strategies aimed at improving enrollment and retention, as EMO schools operate under KPIs that incentivize such outcomes. The combination of his intrinsic motivation and external pressures from the EMO system shapes his leadership in ways that reflect both personal and organizational goals.

5.3. SEF School Head

The head of the SEF school, a 31-year-old male with an M.A. in English Literature, has been a principal for four years. His journey into leadership is distinct from the others, as it was driven by a deep commitment to social equity and a desire to uplift marginalized communities. Unlike the government and EMO school heads, the SEF school head actively chose this path, seeking to make a difference in underserved areas. The SEF recruitment process, which ensures that school leaders are appointed based on their alignment with the foundation's mission, reflects a rigorous selection process aimed at finding candidates with the right combination of skills and passion.

The SEF school head's dedication to his role, even in the face of financial challenges, is evident in his leadership style. His colleagues admire his perseverance and commitment to providing quality education in challenging socio-economic conditions. By focusing on the needs of marginalized students, he has adopted a leadership approach that is both community-driven and rooted in a desire for social change. His leadership reflects SEF's emphasis on decentralization and autonomy, allowing him to implement strategies tailored to the specific needs of his school and its students.

Though our primary focus was on the three school heads, we felt the need to augment our understanding by incorporating views from two support participants for each case: the vice principal/second in command and a teacher. This allowed us to enrich our data and validate our findings. In terms of data collection, we relied heavily on semi-structured interviews. One of the team members, who was local to the area where the schools were situated, was specifically trained in conducting interviews to ensure a more comfortable and trusting environment for the study participants. Being familiar with the local language, culture, and social dynamics, this individual played a crucial role in facilitating open and honest communication during the data collection process. This approach helped to mitigate any potential discomfort or apprehension the participants might have felt, allowing for more candid responses and richer insights into the research findings. Each school head was interviewed twice, with a follow-up interview scheduled after analyzing the preliminary data. The aim was to gather richer and more refined information. In between the two interviews of the school heads, interviews with the supporting participants were conducted. All interviews were in the regional language, which was later translated and transcribed for analysis. Additionally, we engaged in three participatory observations for each school. These observations provided firsthand insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of the

schools and allowed us to triangulate our findings against the opinions of school heads. Every step of this study was informed by a rigorous code of ethics. For example, the informed consent of participants was ensured, their confidentiality was maintained, and participants' comfort and respect throughout the process were maintained.

In reflecting on our research journey, we acknowledge a significant limitation. Our study predominantly captures male perspectives, as all of our research participants were male. This inadvertently led to the omission of female voices, which might have offered different, equally valuable insights into the research topic. This was mainly because all the selected schools were boys-only schools situated in the less developed regions of the Khairpur district in Sindh. Interestingly, they share similar geographic, socio-cultural, and political influences, which offers a consistent backdrop for our study. At the same time, it deprived us of adding female voices.

6. Findings

6.1. Exploration of Agency Within Organizational Structures

In qualitative research, the exploration of complex phenomena like agency requires a nuanced understanding. For this study, we sought to comprehend how organizational structures in schools impact the head's agency. The term 'agency' is defined as an individual's inherent capacity to act, express, or think based on one's volition [33]. This dynamic is profoundly influenced by the surrounding structure, which delineates roles and expectations [35]. Using transformational leadership theory and institutional theory, we attempted to shed light on the multifaceted interplay between different organizational structures and the consequent spaces they afford school heads to exercise their agency. Distinctively, this space, or lack thereof, profoundly affects their motivation, decision-making, and subsequent actions.

The head of the government school operates within a rigid, bureaucratic structure where power is centralized. Such centralization offers scant room for his agency, constraining his ability to act as a transformational leader. Consequently, this head's role aligns more with managerial duties rather than transformational leadership. Recalling his experiences, the government school head lamented: "The centralized system has effectively curtailed my authority. While I may bear the title of principal, my decision-making power feels symbolic at best". These findings complement Chingara and Heystek [36], who found that the agency of their research participants who assumed the role of leadership weakened to mere policy implementers due to bureaucratic constraints.

In contrast, the head of the EMO school enjoys a semi-flexible structure that provides greater autonomy and resources. This environment enhances his agency, allowing him to implement transformational leadership practices more effectively. Thus, the head was found to enjoy enhanced agency which was reflected in his confidence, attitude, and actions to achieve the KPIs. Sharing his experience, the EMO school head stated: "The implementation of a 75% attendance policy, despite facing initial resistance, ultimately cultivated a culture of academic commitment and led to a noticeable increase in enrollment numbers. This achievement was made feasible through the consistent support and dedicated resources provided by the EMO authorities". His ability to leverage available resources and community support reflects the intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation components of transformational leadership [24].

Among the three school types, the SEF school has a more adaptive organizational structure based on a decentralized governance system. The governance system of the school empowers the principal in decision-making. In this system, the principal assumed the role of a chief executive officer who enjoys great autonomy and authority. Reflecting upon this autonomy, the SEF school head stated, "Unlike the government officials who work within strict regulatory boundaries, our organizational structure gives us a considerable degree of independence in making decisions". This autonomy enables him to act as a transformational leader, adopting community-centric approaches and innovative strategies tailored to the unique needs of his students. His proactive engagement with the community

and personalized support for students exemplify individualized consideration, a core aspect of transformational leadership [23].

In summary, the centralized structure of government schools in Sindh limits the agency of school heads, reflecting the concept of institutional isomorphism, where uniform practices across institutions result in rigidity and inflexibility [31]. This bureaucratic environment stifles innovation and constrains the ability of school heads to implement effective strategies to address the OOSC issue. The semi-flexible structure of EMO schools provides a middle ground, where school heads have more autonomy compared with government schools but still operate within certain institutional constraints. The enhanced agency in EMO schools is reflected in the ability of school heads to respond to local challenges and implement innovative strategies. This aligns with the concept of decoupling, where formal policies and actual practices diverge, allowing for greater flexibility [37]. The decentralized governance of SEF schools offers a supportive environment that maximizes the agency of school heads. This structure allows for the implementation of context-specific practices and innovative solutions, reflecting the institutional logics perspective, which emphasizes the alignment of organizational practices with local needs [38,39]. The autonomy enjoyed by the head of the SEF school enables him to act decisively and implement strategies that effectively address the OOSC issue.

6.2. Strategies for Student Enrollment: A Function of Motivation and Structure

Earlier chapters highlighted the relationship between school heads' agency and motivation with the institutional governance system. This section explores the various ways in which different forms of school heads' motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic—affect their strategic approaches to increasing school enrollment. The data analysis suggests that all school heads share a common intrinsic commitment to improve educational accessibility for the children of their region, but the nuances of their extrinsic motivation are intricately woven into the governance system of their respective schools. These differences in extrinsic motivation significantly influence the enrollment enhancement strategies employed by each head, showcasing the intricate interplay between personal ambition and organizational dynamics.

While analyzing the responses of the government school head, we found him highly intrinsically motivated to increase educational access for the OOSC; however, his extrinsic motivation, shaped by the school governance system, appears to be somewhat muted [31]. The lack of a direct correlation between his salary and enrollment numbers, coupled with the stability offered by Pakistan's government educational sector, results in a less urgent approach towards expanding enrollment. Although he argues the need to supply his school with more sophisticated classroom equipment, well-resourced labs, and carpeted playgrounds that may attract more students, self-motivated enrollment drives are not his agenda. He notes, "We can only make our school look good for potential students to join us. [. . .] We were never asked to start any campaigns for enrollment [. . .], and it is not even our job to do so [. . .] my promotion or salary is also not bound by the number of students I have in my school. Although I want more students in my school, even if there is not a single student, I will keep getting my salary".

Unlike the head of the government school, the head of the EMO school is buoyed both intrinsically and extrinsically to boost enrollment. The dynamic nature of his compensation, infused with performance-based incentives and job security concerns, mandates enhanced enrollment as a KPI. Consequently, he receives extensive support from the private sector in terms of resources, accolades, and financial perks to fulfill these goals. He outlines "We've adopted a multi-pronged approach for student enrollment. From leveraging our ILMversity software to social media advertisements, community outreach, and even conventional methods like banners, our strategies are diverse".

In the context of SEF schools, where the salary of the school head is directly linked to student enrollment, the extrinsic motivation is notably intensified. This, in combination with a strong intrinsic desire to advance educational access, drives the head of the SEF

school to adopt highly proactive and aggressive strategies. These strategies encompass a broad spectrum of activities, from intensive community engagement to enhancing the quality of the school itself. The head of the SEF school vividly describes their journey: "In our initial years, we were tireless in our community outreach, clearly articulating the benefits of our school to parents, and in some instances, personally facilitating enrollments. Over time, as our school's reputation grew and our infrastructure improved, these efforts naturally began to draw students from even farther afield and from a diverse array of backgrounds".

The overarching theme that emerges from these observations is that while a fundamental educator identity motivates all school heads, it is the external, structural factors that significantly influence and shape their strategies for enrollment growth.

6.3. Strategies to Enhance Student Retention Before and Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section explores the various ways in which different forms of school heads' motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic—affect their strategic approaches to increasing student retention. Grounded in prior literature and our findings, it is discernible that student retention is intricately intertwined with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors.

At the governmental school level, the organizational structure does not position student retention as a school head's primary responsibility. Consequently, the school head's remuneration and job security remain unaffected by fluctuations in student numbers. Neither does the system provide accolades for retention successes. This paucity in external incentives curtails the ability of school heads to act significantly, even if intrinsically driven. Yet, as the head of the government school illuminates, internal passion fuels some endeavors: "You know we put so much efforts to keep our students engaged in their studies. Of course teachers teaching is important, but we also try to arrange many events and organized activities for that our students remain with us. [. . .] We do what we can to keep our students interested and the school relevant for them".

Although there is no external motivation for the school head to focus on student retention, some teachers were driven by tangible extrinsic factors. For instance, having more comfortable air-conditioned faculty rooms and the school's proximity to their homes compelled them to ensure student retention in this particular school. Failing to maintain a specific number of students could lead to the closure or merger of the school. In essence, their professional stability relies on maintaining the required student–teacher ratios, as emphasized by one of the teachers: "Our roles revolve around the student-teacher ratio policy. We are obligated to maintain these ratios annually".

During the pandemic, the leadership of governmental schools displayed a similar lack of external motivation. Their efforts towards online education were perfunctory, lacking genuine educational intent. The disconnect between their actions and their stated goals is succinctly captured: "While homework assignments were distributed, they were largely symbolic".

In the context of the EMO school, students' retention is one of the KPIs, thus the school head has a strong extrinsic motivation to retain students in his school. His intrinsic motivation for social change coupled with extrinsic motivation resulted in an array of infrastructural enhancements and resources, seldom witnessed in other government schools. The motivation of the EMO school head is reflected in the words of the EMO teacher we interviewed: "Our principal emphasizes leveraging available resources to elevate the student's learning experience to that they would not even think to discontinue their study. He always reminds us of the importance of each student enrolled in our school. He also reminds us of the extraordinary support we get from our EMO and that we must ensure that we fulfill the expectation of our EMO".

Boasted by his intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the EMO school head put great effort into fostering robust community ties to ensure community involvement to retain students who are at risk of dropping out. He was found to be highly active during parent–teacher meetings and meetings with members of the school management committees, and, as the EMO school teacher said, "Speaking with passion and enthusiasm with parents on the

importance of education and schooling for their kids is very important. And this passion is reflection of your belief on what you are doing". While responding to questions on his strategies for student retention, he maintained that "Our success, including increased students' enrollment and retention, is rooted in collaborations with parents and the broader community. Without their endorsement, integrating EMO's blueprint into the school would have been difficult".

The EMO school head, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, showed unparalleled agility in adapting to the crisis. Recognizing the potential for a loss of student engagement amid the suspension of traditional teaching and learning activities due to the pandemic, the school head proactively implemented online teaching strategies to mitigate this issue. Despite challenges such as limited access to computers or smartphones, internet connectivity issues, and a lack of experience with online teaching methods among both students and teachers, the effective delivery of education is underscored by the commitment and dedication of the school head. This commitment is reflected in the words of the EMO school teachers: "Our principal motivated us a lot especially when we and our students were facing technical issues. He simply reminded us not to give up. He said that if our students couldn't get to us, we went to them, making sure they stayed connected by going out into the community".

The SEF school experienced a major dropout rate among all three types of schools. The school head at the SEF underscored that retention is their foremost challenge. This is largely attributed to the rural backdrop of these schools where students hail from the most economically challenged backgrounds in comparison with the other two schools. Earlier studies corroborate this, stating a negative correlation between rural settings and school retention [40–42]. This problem poses a formidable challenge to the head of the SEF school, whose professional security and recognition are contingent on student enrollment, making him intensely extrinsically motivated. Highlighting the daily challenges, the head of the SEF school noted: "When parents leave for work, students are burdened with household responsibilities, from hospital visits to farm work. There's a stark disconnect with the value of education—many parents, being laborers themselves, aren't actively involved".

SEF, as a school management organization, combats the irregular attendance of students through unannounced "headcount" visits to schools to ensure the veracity of student attendance records. Given the rampant dropout issue, the head of the SEF school often assumes the role of an advisor. The vice principal of the SEF shared, "We frequently visit the neighborhoods of those students who don't attend classes regularly. Sometimes, the principal also visits these neighborhoods [...] and we talk to counsel students and approach their families. [. . .] It's a mixed bag of results".

Furthermore, the head of the SEF school has instilled a sense of accountability in teachers regarding student attendance. He advocates that "consistent teacher attendance can inspire a similar commitment in students". The SEF school head emphasized the role of local teachers in maintaining student attendance in classes, thus their retention. He argues that the knowledge and influence of local teachers play a vital role in bridging communication with parents. Unlike government school teachers, SEF school teachers' job security is tied to the number of students in the school. Thus, like the school head, the teachers are extensively motivated to ensure maximum student retention. The SEF school head maintains that "our local teachers are like monitors. They know every student by name, particularly those who are not regular in classes. And whenever they find these children or their parents on the streets, they talk to them and convince them to be regular. [...] Likewise, they willingly take part in our student recruitment drives and help me identify the parents of those children who left school in the middle of the academic year".

In addition to the role of local teachers, the SEF school head highlights the importance of formal parent–teacher meetings in tackling the dropout issue. In his words: "When we invite parents into the formal school setting and give them respect and acknowledge their contribution as part of the community to the success of the school, and then tell them to ensure their kids' attendance, they listen. Not only do they listen, but they also agree

to convince those parents who usually don't attend these meetings. [...] The number of parents attending our meetings increases every semester because of this". Using the local tradition of giving respect to parents, the SEF school head and teachers ensure regular attendance and the retention of students in the most challenging situations with the support of the wider community.

In addition, the SEF school head realizes the importance of extracurricular activities to retain children in school. Considering that there are hardly any events for entertainment in the extended region where this school operates, the SEF school head teachers arranged regular extracurricular activities, particularly sports events, and kept them open for all the local community members. Using these events, the SEF school head showcases his school and the successful students who have improved their education. This approach, in his words, "makes some parents to consider sending their children to our school". The SEF school head also prepared a passionate talk aligned with religious references to convince the parents to provide their children with education. Recounting his efforts, the head of the SEF school mentioned: "They [parents] need to be convinced, and what is more convincing than our religion, which promotes education. So, I use religious references along with the social and financial benefits of education in my speech. [...] This strategy works well for some parents. But, you know, we have to repeat this cycle many times before we get some good results".

Student attendance and retention is a huge challenge for SEF schools under normal circumstances, but it worsened during the pandemic. During the school closures, the only way to engage students was through online education, which was not viable due to the rural location and lack of access to computers and the internet for both teachers and students. Moreover, as parents lost their daily wage jobs due to the pandemic, their children were forced to find any labor for survival. This presented a huge challenge for the SEF school head, who would have lost a significantly large number of students if he had not intervened. Thus, he initiated community outreach, similar to the approach of EMO schools. However, unlike EMO schools, the intensity and seriousness of the SEF school head and his team displayed remarkable dedication and gravity in their endeavors. The SEF school head intensely trained his teachers to develop interactive material for homework to keep students engaged. Moreover, the nature of the activities in the homework was designed in a way that each assignment was connected to another. The SEF school teacher argued that this approach "engaged students in their studies. [...] We ensured that students refer to their previous homework exercises to complete their current ones. This helped us to keep them connected with the subject as a whole".

Since students could not come to school, the SEF school head persuaded his team to implement a system for distributing and retrieving students' homework directly to and from their homes. Each teacher was assigned a specific area close to their residence or commuting route for the distribution and collection of homework. Teachers prepared the homework for their respective subjects or classes and then handed it over to those assigned to specific areas for delivery. This collaborative approach ensured that all teachers worked as a team, facilitating the efficient distribution and collection of homework, thereby maintaining academic engagement despite the challenges.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This study attempted to understand how school heads deal with OOSC within three unique school systems. Specifically, this study examines how school heads' motivation, agency, and leadership approaches are shaped by the school governance and administrative dynamics and how they navigate their ways to deal with OOSC issues within their schools, particularly in the extraordinary challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that school heads' motivations and the school structures that govern the school heads' actions must be considered in addressing the OOSC challenge, an issue that stands at the crossroads of policy, economics, and societal values.

The findings of this study have stimulated a discourse concerning the motivational factors driving school heads. It has been well-researched that leadership motivations stem from both intrinsic and extrinsic factors [43]. In this study, the significant motivators for all three school heads were job security, financial rewards, and acknowledgment, aligning with Maslow's [28] hierarchy of needs, particularly underlining physiological and esteem needs. Although all the school heads were self-motivated, school structure shaped their external motivations to plan and implement strategies to deal with OOSC issues. The government school head operates in the rigid structure of the government system, which allows him little to no external motivation to address the OOSC issue, whereas the EMO school head, who operates within a semi-flexible governance system, usually finds himself straddling both domains, i.e., he deals with the demands of a result-oriented EMO system while also being driven by his ethical responsibilities to address the OOSC issue. This approach resonates with Bass and Riggio's [25] transformational leadership model where leaders drive for a greater good beyond personal gains. This spirit and commitment were found to be at their peak in the SEF school head, who, driven by his intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, plans and implements strategies to deal with the OOSC in socio-economically challenging environments. His intrinsic motivation to make a tangible difference and extrinsic motivation to continue obtaining funds from donor agencies to sustain his efforts emerge as a beacon of transformative leadership. The UNICEF [44] report dubbed socio-economic disparities, conflict zones, gender biases, and other regional factors as the root causes of OOSC, whereas this study shows that addressing root causes requires a transformational role supported by the PPP models of SEF and EMO.

This study also aligns with broader critiques of PPP models, which suggest that while such models can improve access and efficiency, they may not always reach the most marginalized populations. As observed in similar contexts, PPPs may inadvertently "cream skim", prioritizing students who are easier to educate and neglecting those who are more challenging to engage [13,16]. This is particularly relevant in the case of government schools, where the rigid structure fails to provide the necessary flexibility to address the needs of the most disadvantaged students. The SEF model's community-driven approach, in contrast, proves more inclusive by involving local stakeholders, reflecting global trends where localized solutions yield better outcomes [45].

Unlike PPP models, the centralized governance structures of government schools promote stability but potentially stifle innovation. Such a governance approach lacks the agility needed to address localized OOSC challenges. This resonates with Weber's theory of bureaucracy, which, while ensuring efficiency, can sometimes result in inflexibility [46]. The autonomy enjoyed by the EMO school head due to the semi-flexible governance system of the PPP approach of the EMO aligns with the overarching guidelines of institutional theory [31] which suggests that organizations will often incorporate practices and procedures because of external pressures. Finally, the decentralized approach of the SEF schools emphasizes the importance of context, a theme dominant in Paauwe's [47] contextualized perspective on organizational design, emphasizing the role of environmental factors in shaping organizational practices. Which organization structure is ideal for dealing with OOSC has been a matter of debate in various studies [48,49]. This study suggests that in areas that have high poverty and other social disparities, and also have high OOSC numbers, a decentralized approach like SEF's would be more effective.

However, this study also echoes the concerns raised by Rind and Shah [10] regarding the long-term sustainability of PPP models. The reliance on external funding, particularly for SEF schools, raises questions about the viability of these initiatives once donor support diminishes. This is consistent with findings from other contexts where PPP schools, though successful in the short term, face sustainability challenges in the long run [8]. Without a strong financial model supported by both government and local resources, the future of these schools remains uncertain.

Additionally, the variance in strategies for student enrollment, particularly evident between government and SEF schools, can be interpreted through the lens of Fullan [50]

change theory. Fullan proposes that meaningful change, especially in educational settings, requires the involvement and buy-in of the local community. SEF schools, with their community-centric initiatives, embody this by leveraging local connections and addressing specific reasons for children being out of school, whereas the enrollment strategies of the EMO school head often necessitate a balance between local needs and organizational policies. The semi-flexible nature of the EMO ensures that the head and his team can quickly adapt to local challenges (like OOSC) while also abiding by larger organizational mandates.

The role of leadership in navigating the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic further underscores the importance of flexibility. The EMO and SEF school heads demonstrated their ability to adapt swiftly, implementing online learning solutions and engaging communities to ensure student retention during school closures. This aligns with Lewin's [51] change management model, where rapid adaptation ("unfreeze–change–refreeze") is crucial in times of crisis. Such agility was less evident in the government school system, where bureaucratic constraints hampered the ability to implement innovative solutions. Similar patterns have been observed in other educational systems globally, where decentralized models have proven more effective in crisis management [45].

In light of these findings, educational policymakers can benefit from a deeper appreciation of the school head's role in school leadership. Recognizing and supporting their intrinsic motivations, alongside addressing their extrinsic needs, can lead to better educational outcomes, particularly addressing the OOSC issue, especially in socio-economically challenging environments. Furthermore, the balance between centralized and decentralized structures merits revisitation. While centralized systems provide stability, the grassroots efficacy of decentralized structures, as evidenced by SEF schools, hints at the potential merits of a more hybridized approach.

The findings of this study resonate with global critiques of PPPs, particularly in terms of equity, sustainability, and accountability [13,16]. While PPP models like SEF and EMO offer valuable lessons in improving access, they must be critically examined to ensure they do not exacerbate existing inequalities or become overly reliant on external funding sources.

One notable limitation of this study is its focus solely on male school heads, which inadvertently excludes the perspectives of female leadership. Gender plays a critical role in shaping leadership approaches, especially in contexts like education, where female leaders often face unique challenges and opportunities. The exclusion of female leadership in this study limits the generalizability of the findings, as research suggests that female leaders bring distinct leadership styles and approaches that could potentially offer different strategies for addressing the issue of OOSC.

Studies have shown that female leaders, particularly in educational settings, often emphasize relational leadership, nurturing environments of collaboration and support [52]. This could be especially important in contexts where community engagement is crucial for addressing issues like OOSC. In patriarchal societies like Pakistan, where gender roles are deeply embedded in societal structures, female school heads might navigate leadership differently, balancing traditional expectations with modern leadership demands [53].

Additionally, female leadership has been linked to transformational leadership styles, which prioritize individualized consideration, a key factor in dealing with marginalized groups such as OOSC. This perspective resonates with the work of Bass and Riggio [25] on transformational leadership, where female leaders are often found to excel in providing personalized support and motivation to their teams and students, which can play a vital role in tackling educational challenges [54].

The absence of female school heads in this study not only limits the scope of understanding how gender dynamics influence leadership in addressing OOSC but also misses the potential insights that could arise from examining how female leaders in government, EMO, or SEF schools may respond differently to the challenges posed by their unique governance structures. Future research should incorporate female perspectives to provide a more holistic view of leadership in educational contexts, ensuring that the strategies and solutions proposed are inclusive and reflective of the diverse leadership styles that exist.

By not covering female leadership, this study may overlook important nuances related to gender equity in leadership roles within PPP models. Given that gender biases in leadership selection and promotion are well-documented in educational systems globally, the exploration of female leadership could also provide insights into how institutional structures either support or hinder gender-balanced leadership in educational governance [53]. The need for inclusive leadership perspectives is critical in developing comprehensive strategies to address OOSC and other educational challenges, especially in regions where gender disparities in education remain significant.

In closing, this research offers a reflective synthesis of the school heads' leadership dynamics across diverse institutional frameworks, using theoretical constructs to interpret findings. While the challenges posed by the external environment, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have reshaped the educational landscape, the central role of motivated and empowered leadership remains paramount in steering schools toward positive futures.

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