

A Framework to Achieve Universal Primary Education Targets in Pakistan - Existing Practices, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Abstract

This research critically analyses the challenges hindering the attainment of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Pakistan, exploring the challenges faced by the various stakeholders such as policymakers, administrators, head teachers, and implementers. Although the government is making efforts, Pakistan still has the largest number of out-of-school children, and UPE attainment is a major challenge. The research analyzes the major factors influencing UPE such as the lack of proper educational infrastructure, socio-economic challenges, government policy, and cultural hindrances. It also delves into opportunities and new ways of enhancing UPE efforts. The study, through a mixed-method study, used a stratified random sample of 678 stakeholders representing different regions of Pakistan, i.e., Punjab, Sindh, KPK, Balochistan, AJK, and GB. The findings highlight a policy disconnect between federal and provincial systems, poor infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, economic constraints, and cultural resistances, particularly in rural areas. The study calls for urgent reforms in resource distribution and more inclusive, context-sensitive policies to address these challenges and achieve UPE in Pakistan.

Keywords: UPE, Localized education, Cultural resistances in education

Introduction

The Human Development Index (HDI) provides a broader assessment of overall human development outcomes, with education being a key component (Stewart 2019). Education for All (EFA) stress Integral Inconsistencies and identifying opportunities in the Global effort to ensure equal access to Education for all Children, The EFA and MDG education goals significantly narrowed the educational scope by concentrating on targets, while the quality of education was not addressed in the MDGs (Ahmed 2014). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) goal 4.1 emphasizes promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and equality between girls and boys in primary equitable quality education (Costantini 2019). Achieving UPE contributes to advancing human development objectives and is reflected in countries' Human Development Index (HDI) scores as they strive to improve the well-being

and opportunities of their populations (Chaaban, Irani et al. 2016).

Universalization of Primary Education holds paramount importance for individuals, communities, and societies, contributing to personal development, economic growth, and social progress, most of the countries have reached or near to the targets of universalization of primary education, some countries are still far behind from achieving UPE targets and faces different kind of challenges (Sachs 2012). Pakistan is still having the largest number of out of school children. The government of Pakistan striving to achieve the targets of universalization of primary education but facing some known and unknown challenges in providing basic education to achieving the mandatory targets of universalization of primary education (Wulff, 2020).

This study evaluates current institutional practices, challenges, and opportunities and was develop a framework to achieve universal primary education goals in Pakistan. The research was comprehensive in covering the dualistic issues of low level of Universal Primary Education in Pakistan, challenges and opportunities in realizing the nation's progress in accomplishing the international targets captured in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The research was encompassing a review of several factors influencing universalization of primary education rates, access to education, socio-economic inequality, gender inequality, policy implementation, and the education programs at large.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan still shows a serious problem on attaining Universal Primary Education (UPE) and the country boasts one of the largest out-of-school populations in the world. Although the government has tried to achieve the objectives that are set in UPE, there are systemic impediments that discourage the proper adoption of education policies and practices. Among these barriers, there are insufficient educational facilities, economic factors such as poverty and child labor, insufficient trained teachers, large ratios of students to teachers and cultural barriers, especially in rural and marginalized areas. As well, both the federal and provincial education systems have a broad policy disconnect, which leads to disengaged and inefficiencies in educational practices. In addition, gender inequality in education still remains, especially in such provinces as KPK and Balochistan. Although there have been different programs and initiatives that have been put in place to tackle these problems, the absence of localized and context sensitive policies coupled with the ineffective monitoring and evaluation systems further contribute to the problem. This paper seeks to critically discuss these issues, determine the major factors hindering the implementation of UPE, and come up with a model of work to improve the successful implementation of the current initiatives to implement UPE in Pakistan.

Objectives of the study:

1. To study the existing policies, programs, and practices implemented by educational institutions and government aimed at achieving UPE in Pakistan.
 2. To identify the key factors that affect universalization of Primary education in Pakistan, including educational infrastructure, socio-economic indicators, government policies, and cultural variants.
 3. To identify opportunities, innovative approaches, and best practices that could be
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leveraged to enhance the effectiveness of existing initiatives towards achieving universal primary education in Pakistan.

4. To develop a comprehensive strategic framework that outlines actionable steps, policies, and interventions for policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders to foster sustainable progress towards universal primary education targets.

Research Questions

1. What are the existing policies, programs, and practices implemented by educational institutions and the government aimed at achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Pakistan?
2. What are the key factors that affect the universalization of primary education in Pakistan, including educational infrastructure, socio-economic indicators, government policies, and cultural factors?
3. What opportunities, innovative approaches, and best practices can be leveraged to enhance the effectiveness of existing initiatives towards achieving Universal Primary Education in Pakistan?
4. What strategic framework can be developed that outlines actionable steps, policies, and interventions for policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders to foster sustainable progress towards achieving UPE targets in Pakistan?

Significance of the study:

1. The study provides a comprehensive framework for achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) goals in Pakistan, guiding policymakers and stakeholders in their educational initiatives.
2. It identifies key socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors affecting primary education, offering targeted insights for improving educational access and outcomes.
3. The research highlights the role of technology in enhancing education and performance outcomes, relevant to the digital era's challenges.
4. It emphasizes the importance of community involvement in educational programs, advocating for more inclusive and sustainable schooling practices.
5. The study's findings will inform future policies and practices, bridging the gap between theoretical commitments and practical challenges in primary education in Pakistan.

Literature Review

ASER (Annual Status of Education Report): ASER reports consistently show high enrollment rates in urban areas but significant gaps in rural regions. A large proportion of students in grade 5 lack basic literacy and numeracy skills expected of lower grade levels. Enrollment and learning outcomes for girls are generally lower than for boys, especially in rural areas (Assessment 2019).

i. UNESCO and UNICEF Reports

- a) a) UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report: Highlights the problems of gaining UPE in Pakistan, such as insufficient funding, decreased infrastructure and the deficit of qualified teachers. Proposes more investment into education, policy changes, and specific interventions in order to enhance access and quality (Citaristi, 2022)
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- b) UNICEF's Education Reports: Emphasize the need for inclusive education policies that address the specific barriers faced by girls, children with disabilities, and those from marginalized communities. Support programs that enhance community involvement and provide alternative learning pathways for out-of-school children (Unicef, 2021).
- ii. World Bank Studies: Points out that while Pakistan has made strides in increasing primary school enrollment, retention rates remain a concern. Suggests policy measures to improve governance, teacher training, and accountability in the education sector (Sheikh, 2023)
- iii. Pakistan Education Statistics Reports: Gives details on enrollment, school facilities, teacher qualification and student teacher ratio. Points to differences in provinces and to the need to distribute resources more equally (Zakar et al., 2020).
- iv. Government Reports and Plans: Pakistan Education Statistics provided by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training provides comprehensive statistics on the numerous educational indicators of developments in the country and reveals weaknesses and difficulties in attaining UPE. Reports about the positive change in enrollment rates, but mentions the high rates of dropout and gender disparities (Halai and Durrani, 2021).
- v. National Education Policy Framework (2018): It is aimed at enhancing access, quality and equity in education. Suggests interventions, including the standardization of the curriculum, improving teacher education and training, and the use of technology to improve learning results (Osarenren-Osaghae and Irabor, 2018).
- vi. NGO and Think Tank Reports: The reports by the Pakistan Coalition for Education (PCE) examine the policy implementation and propose more investments in education by the people. Emphasize the civil society in checking on the government and encouraging education reforms (Lozada, 2008).
- vii. Brookings Institution: speaks about the effects of educational policies on economic growth and social integration. Underlines the significance of public-private collaborations in solving the issue of education (Lewis et al., 2017).
- Progress Made in Promoting Primary Education in Pakistan
- i. Access to education:
- a) Enrolment Rates: The past few decades have experienced a tremendous rise in the rate of enrolment to primary school. Pakistan Education Statistics (2018-2019) indicate that the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) of primary education is increased and amounts to approximately 77% (Shah, Khatoon et al.).
- b) School Infrastructure: More schools have been constructed and the existing infrastructure upgraded particularly in rural areas (Farooq & Kai, 2017).
- c) Policy Initiatives: The National Education Policy Framework (2018) and the Single National Curriculum (2020) are some of the programs designed to bring about standardization in education and open it up to everyone (Jamil et al., 2024).
- ii. Equity
- a) Gender Disparities: Both boys and girls have better equal enrollment rates, but there are improvements in the gender disparity (Umar and Asghar, 2017) as gender disparity still exists.
- b) Inclusive Education: Initiatives that are directed at marginalized populations such as NGOs and international organizations endeavor to offer access to child with disabilities and those who belong to the minority community (Rafiq, 2019).
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iii. Quality

- a) **Teacher Training:** Involvement in teacher training programs have been done in effort to improve the quality of education. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) represents a remarkable introduction in favor of the teachers (Fazal et al., 2014).
- b) **Curriculum Reforms:** The development of the Single National Curriculum aims to standardize the quality of education across public and private schools (Jamil, 2009).
- c) **Learning Outcomes:** There has been a gradual improvement in learning outcomes, though challenges remain in ensuring all students achieve the required competencies (Rahim, 2017).

Research Design

Survey method used to gather data from key stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, head teachers, and frontline educators. Five-point Likert scale was used across diverse provinces—Punjab, Sindh, KPK, Balochistan, and Gilgit-Baltistan—to capture regional and national perspectives.

Sample of the Study

Table 1: Sample of the Study

Sample/ Stakeholders	Federal	Punjab	Sindh	KPK	Baluchistan	AJK	GB
Policy Maker-HODs	13	5	5	4	6	2	2
Administrators	5	12	12	12	12	4	4
Implementors-Head Teachers	20	120	120	120	120	40	40
Total	38	137	137	136	138	46	46
Grand Total	678						

The study involved a diverse group of stakeholders across various levels of Pakistan's education system. At the national level, 13 policymakers were included, such as the Secretary of the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (M/o FEPT), Joint Education Advisor, and Directors General from various educational organizations like the Federal Directorate of Education (FDE), Special Education, and the National Commission for Human Development (NCHD). At the provincial level, 24 policymakers participated. Additionally, 5 federal-level administrators/ implementers, including Directors of Schools and Education from FDE, Special Education, NCHD, and BECS, were involved. The study also gathered input from 52 district education officers across six districts per province, as well as two districts each from AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan. Furthermore, 520 school teachers were selected through a purposive sampling method, with 10 teachers from each district represented, to gain insights from the school-level implementors.

Results of the Study

Table 2: Existing Approaches and Practices

Sr. No.	Test Component	t-value	df	p-value	Interpretation
1	Mean difference in "Current policies and strategies alignment"	2.34	29	0.030	Significant at 0.05
2	Mean difference in "Decentralized governance's impact on UPE"	2.12	29	0.041	Significant at 0.05
3	Mean difference in "Teacher professional development effectiveness"	2.71	29	0.009	Significant at 0.01
4	Mean difference in "Curriculum meeting diverse learning needs"	2.25	29	0.035	Significant at 0.05
5	Mean difference in "Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in UPE"	2.05	29	0.050	Significant at 0.05

The table provides the outcome of the t-tests that analyze several aspects concerning Universal Primary Education (UPE). Significant difference in means is observed in all the components, and p-values are lower than the 0.05 threshold (except in Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in UPE, which is significant at 0.05). The elements assessed are compatibility of existing policies and strategies, effects of decentralized forms of governance in UPE, teacher professional development efficacy, how the curricula are able to accommodate various learning requirements and monitoring and assessment systems that exist. The results indicate that they are important factors that determine the outcomes of UPE.

Table 3: Accessibility of Schooling and Enrollment

Sr. No.	Test Component	t-value	df	p-value	Interpretation
6	Mean difference in "Feedback from stakeholders"	1.84	29	0.079	Not significant at 0.05
7	Mean difference in "Organizational support for UPE strategies"	2.56	29	0.016	Significant at 0.05
8	Mean difference in "Reliability of district-level monitoring"	2.20	29	0.034	Significant at 0.05
9	Mean difference in "Adequacy of UPE budget allocation"	3.05	29	0.004	Significant at 0.01
10	Mean difference in "Student-to-teacher ratio and its impact"	3.10	29	0.003	Significant at 0.01

Outcomes of t-tests of other elements of Universal Primary Education (UPE) are presented in the table. There were significant differences in mean status values of "Organizational support of UPE strategies," "Reliability of district-level monitoring," Adequacy of UPE budget allocation, and Student-to-teacher ratio and its impact, and the p-values were less than 0.05

(except in case of Feedback from stakeholders, which was not significant). The results suggest that organizational support, quality monitoring, sufficient budgeting, and teacher-to-student ratios are crucial to meeting UPE goals, and Adequacy of UPE budget allocation and Student-to-teacher ratio have significantly higher significance of the 0.01 level.

Table 4: Problems in Accomplishing Universalization of Primary Education

Sr. No.	Test Component	t-value	df	p-value	Interpretation
11	Mean difference in "Availability of schools in rural areas"	2.15	29	0.037	Significant at 0.05
12	Mean difference in "Increase in girls' enrollment due to campaigns"	3.01	29	0.005	Significant at 0.01
13	Mean difference in "Rural school infrastructure adequacy"	1.99	29	0.060	Not significant at 0.05
14	Mean difference in "Staffing adequacy in rural schools"	2.30	29	0.026	Significant at 0.05
15	Mean difference in "Effectiveness of community engagement campaigns"	3.10	29	0.003	Significant at 0.01

The table shows the outcomes of t-tests of other components of Universal Primary Education (UPE). Large differences in the means were observed in terms of Availability of schools in rural areas, increase in girls' enrolment following campaigns, Staffing adequacy in rural schools and Effectiveness of community engagement campaigns, with p-values less than 0.05 (excepting Rural school infrastructure adequacy). It is worth noting that, the significance of the performance of campaigns such as, increase in girls' enrollment because of campaigns and Effectiveness of community engagement campaigns, were significant at the 0.01 level. The findings also point to the importance of having an available school, staffing, and community engagement in enhancing the UPE outcomes, especially in the rural areas.

Discussion

The obstacles that inhibit Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Pakistan cannot be interpreted without policy failures, lack of financial efficiency, and socio-cultural impediments. One of the problems is the absence of integration between federal and provincial governments and, as a result, a disjointed policy implementation that does not meet local requirements (Ahmed et al., 2021). The problem is enhanced by misappropriation of education funds especially in the less developed regions such as Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. The use of resources (unspent education budgets, employment of unqualified teachers, and political tensions and politicization of policies) disrupt progress in the improvement of infrastructure and the recruitment of qualified teachers, thus worsening the situation (Zaidi et al., 2020).

Cultural norms and poverty are socio-economic factors that are vital in restricting access to education, particularly among the girls in the conservative areas. Safety and traditional values make children especially girls to be out of school (Ali and Shams, 2022). To attend and stay in school, even in rural and remote regions, geographic and infrastructure barriers, such as

distances to schools and the inability to access basic facilities, are discouraging (UNESCO, 2022). A multi-faceted solution is required to these challenges, such as specific investments in infrastructure, community participation and culturally relevant curriculum development that can embrace the regional languages and values. Also, the systemic barriers can be overcome by motivating teachers in rural settings and enhancing parental engagement to contribute to the achievement of the long-term success of education (Siddiqui et al., 2023).

Conclusions

1. Effective UPE in Pakistan requires enhanced coordination between federal and provincial governments to address regional disparities in education policy implementation.
2. Financial mismanagement and underutilization of education funds hinder the development of essential infrastructure and teacher recruitment.
3. Socio-economic barriers, including poverty and cultural norms, significantly impede access to education, especially for girls in rural areas.
4. Geographic isolation and lack of basic facilities in schools further exacerbate attendance and retention rates in remote regions.
5. A culturally sensitive curriculum and regional language integration are essential for enhancing student engagement and academic success.
6. Investing in teacher incentives, professional development, and community engagement is crucial to overcoming systemic barriers and ensuring long-term educational progress.

A Framework to Achieve UPE Targets in Pakistan: National Framework on Educational Access (NFEA) is a radical and all-inclusive move towards mitigating the challenges that adversely affect Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Pakistan. The framework ensures the establishment of a holistic ecosystem, which responds to the needs of every child by working on the improvement of infrastructure, the equity, strengthening governance, and integration of technology. The framework is necessary to be used to make sure all children, irrespective of their gender, socio-economic background, and ability, are provided with access to education in form of targeted interventions, including school construction in underserved districts, teacher recruitment and training initiatives, and community-based efforts. Technology and innovation also increase efficiency and access as another step towards a sustainable, equitable and quality-oriented education system. These concerted efforts can make the NFEA change the face of education in Pakistan and realize the long-lived dream of UPE.

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