



**EXAMINING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE THROUGH PUBLIC-PRIVATE
PARTNERSHIP: A CASE OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION,
SINDH, PAKISTAN**

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Abstract

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have gained increasing significance in advancing social policy, particularly within the education sector. This collaboration strengthens and enhances the accountability mechanism. Despite notable achievements, certain PPP models have proven cost-intensive and have failed to deliver expected outcomes in the local context, raising critical questions about their adaptability and sustainability. The current study aims to explore current practices through the adapted PPP model in the marginal region of Sindh, Pakistan. This single case study employed a qualitative approach. Empirical data were gathered through fifteen semi-structured interviews, and five non-participant observations were also supplemented. For face-to-face data collection, head teachers and direct educational stakeholders were involved purposively. Although the PPP model enhances collaboration, effective school leadership practices remain underdeveloped. Limited Head teacher empowerment created inequity and fairness concerns. The current study was limited to a small number of EMO schools in one region of Sukkur, Sindh, Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study provides actionable insights for local educational stakeholders and departmental policymakers to design contextually responsive PPP frameworks. Promoting equitable access, shared accountability, and community engagement can improve PPP practices to ensure inclusive, high-quality education for all, particularly marginalized groups in Sindh, Pakistan.

Keywords: PPP, EMO Schools, School performance, community support, school leadership, educational management

Introduction

In recent decades, the significance of public-private partnerships in social policy, including the education sector, has increased, with the private sector contributing to enhanced efficiency and productivity, resulting in quality education. A PPP is typically applied as a long-term contractual Memorandum of Understanding between the department of state concerned and a private independent consulting organization, in which it assumes significant accountability to provide required services. Over the past few years, such a setup has been widely used in addressing challenges in the health, transport, police, energy, and education sectors, aligned to Sustainable Development Goal 17 to promote inclusive partnership to gain demanding outcomes (Gideon & Unterhalter, 2017). Globally, PPPs revealed a spectrum of success and observed challenges. In New Zealand, risk mitigation strategies were embedded in PPP agreements that enabled more effective results (Rasheed et al., 2024). Similarly, in Uganda, critical success factors were examined, and best practices were identified that can help to leverage PPP to unlock the potential in different sectors with the growth promoting inclusive

and sustainable development (Mugarura et al., 2025). Conversely, a Nigerian comparative study on navigating public-private partnership identified critical factors and revealed that both countries account for the highest number of PPP projects in Africa but have not shared the actual success of their shortcomings (Deinde et al., 2024).

Similarly, the Philippines' model found substantial underscoring with the need for capacity building and community support to ensure the intended target. Such examples illustrate the frameworks promise; likewise, their effectiveness relies on factors such as risk-sharing arrangements, bilateral commitments, financial stability, and collaboration between the parties. In the education sector, PPP models are classified as initiatives to assist public schools in acquiring resources and providing access to remote areas (Ansari, 2021). Supporting partners, including the World Bank, UNICEF, and USAID, advocated bridging resource gaps to strengthen service delivery in underserved regions of Asia (Xiong et al. 2019). For instance, in Bangladesh, stakeholders engaged in economic viability to achieve consensus in education projects (Mannan, 2024). In China and Pakistan, such partnerships improved access to education in remote and scattered areas (Ansari, 2021). However, outcomes remain mixed because access to such interventions depends on sustained governmental support, merit, transparent monitoring, and adequate compensation for outreach partners (Luo et al., 2022). However, the Vietnam study highlighted that the private sector has more influential factors in the implementation of infrastructure setup (Hai et al., 2022). In the same vein, some opportunities and gaps need to fill with the provision of identified factors (Navarro 2024). Turning to the influencing factors, the government's willingness to compensate is crucial in the compensation process (Lu et al., 2025).

Pakistan, the second largest population in the world, faces steep challenges in fulfilling the right to education, which has been enshrined in Article 25A of the constitution since 2010. Public expenditure on education in Pakistan has hovered at around 2 percent of GDP in recent years, which is among the lowest in developing countries and well below international benchmarks. These constraints highlight the limited focus of the government to provide adequate resources in the education sector, particularly in rural and marginalized areas (Suhail et al., 2025). To address such gaps, the government of Sindh, Pakistan, has initiated the PPP model to deliver free and quality education. This model primarily supported the education of underserved people in rural Sindh, while also contributing to the support of local entrepreneurs in providing high-quality educational solutions (Barrera et al., 2022). In 2015, the government of Pakistan launched the EMO school system for the promotion of basic education programs under the PPP model, with support from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and USAID (Shah and Rind, 2023). was to reach out to marginalized areas that were unable to be reached due to a lack of required resources (SELD, 2017).

Under the Education Management Organization, this framework led to the establishment of around 245 schools, upgrading hundreds of them, particularly in rural districts. Notable organizations like HANDS Pakistan, SZABIST, Beaconhouse, and particularly Sukkur IBA University have been instrumental in managing these schools. Additionally, depending on donor support with compromised outcomes raises questions about the scalability and financial viability (Kusumasari, 2023). For the last few years, it promoted to mobilize the private sector, enhance delivery efficiency, and share its success rate in the health sector, but it is struggling in the education sector of Sindh, Pakistan. Cost overruns are about 11,663 per student. This unbalanced burden with low results, limited transparency, and weak monitoring mechanisms weakens public trust (Tagar et al., 2015). Resultantly, it brings attention to the fact that this

private capital for school performance fell sharply (Shah et al., 2021; Suhail et al., 2025). For such a crucial role, learning experience matters to rethink the adapted model.

Despite significant investment in the public-private partnership model that was expected to address schools' desired results by leveraging private-sector resources and efficiencies (Moschetti, 2017; Crawford et al., 2023). Hinder the achievement of Article 25A of the Constitution with the guarantee of SDG-4 of quality education, with related implementation challenges. In this way, delivery performance has been questioned due to higher per-student costs with limited school leadership empowerment. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of PPP models in improving school performance and to examine the challenges school stakeholders experience in implementing the PPP model for overall school improvement in the local context of Sindh.

EMO case

The Educational Management Organization framework is initiated in Sindh, Pakistan, under a public-private partnership program, where schools were handed over to third parties to look after for 5-10 years. In the current context of Sukkur, a large number of schools were handed over to IBA Sukkur University. This case study focuses on EMO schools in the rural-urban context of Sukkur rural urban context.

Literature Review

The emergence of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Model in the local context of Sindh

In the province of Sindh, there are a total of 40,339 schools, predominantly comprising 35,000 primary institutions, established to deliver fundamental education and enhance the quality of life for every kid. The extensive school system impedes excellent education due to inadequate infrastructure; hence, the department has implemented measures to provide compulsory education by engaging the private sector with financial assistance for collaboration. In this context, UN subsidiary agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO have significantly contributed to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (Gideon & Unterhalter, 2021; Afridi, 2018; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Likewise, the Sindh government initiated a framework for the Educational Management Organization to enhance school management through autonomy and a decentralized administrative approach (Arain, Fakir 2023). Administrative accountability improved due to the involvement of evaluative entities, but the overarching concept of educational reform in collaboration with the PPP model does not manifest in the anticipated outcomes. However, the role of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) became indispensable; there are concerns over their ad hoc nature and lack of a systematic approach (Rind 2022). Via cooperative agreements, Collaborative partnerships increase educational infrastructure by integrating private sector innovation, financial resources, and management knowledge to effectively improve public education systems (Takmazyan et al., 2019). Encompassed the EMO program in Sindh, incorporated physical enhancements to educational facilities, including the establishment of science laboratories and libraries that were previously lacking. Hodge and Greve (2007) assert that public-private partnerships are a necessary step in environments characterized by explicit legal frameworks. Consequently, these conditions foster a climate favorable, allowing private sector entities to uphold accountability (Nautiyal & Prasad, 2020; SEF, 2022). The PPP model, adapted in Sindh, enhanced the value that educational facilities can offer a pragmatic approach to address broader issues, particularly benefiting underprivileged regions with few resources.

Professional Development of School Staff for Better Learning Outcomes

The public-private partnership has significantly contributed to expanding educational infrastructure, providing the basic resources required (Takmazyan et al., 2019). Indeed,

teachers' professional development is a critical factor that strongly contributes to better school performance, particularly in facing difficulties and lacking essential resources. In addition, it increasingly emerged as a strategic model for addressing gaps in teacher development by bringing together private sector experiences, creativity, and resources (Patrinos et al., 2023). However, in Pakistan, the concerned Ministry contributed to improving teachers' professional skills with the support of international donors like the World Bank (Rizvi & Khamis, 2020). Therefore, effective PPPs in education promoted continuous professional development, mentoring, and encouraging teachers to modify and update teaching methods (Burns & Köster, 2016; Aslam et al., 2021). In another context, Pakistan, efforts by the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), including Gyan Shala and Bridge International Academies, worked on teacher training leading to better classroom behaviours and higher student results (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2020). Despite these benefits, PPP models need to align with the identified factors to support sustainability and equality (Unterhalter et al., 2020). Failure to design and regulate PPPs can result in new systems that deepen differences (Verger et al., 2022). Consequently, systematic responsibility, strong screening, and open policies can expand the success of PPPs in overall professional development that impact in the form of students' learning outcomes, as a central concern for education policymakers (Patrinos et al., 2023). Similarly, in well-established schools, students tend to perform better where teachers apply innovative practices (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2020; Aslam et al., 2021). Randomized control trials from Pakistan's Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) showed that teachers performed well incorporated learning techniques, likewise in India and Uganda (Newman et al., 2021). Similarly, a good approach to improve student learning Hafeez, Haider, and Zafar (2016), who emphasize the required infrastructure, which provides a better learning environment. Despite this, learning benefits from PPPs are only modest when their procedures are not straightforward, fair, or overseen carefully (Verger et al., 2022). In addition, professional development in PPP schools may pay more attention to individual children for general educational growth (Unterhalter et al., 2020).

Implementation of PPP Model: Outcomes and Challenges

PPPs in education offer potential benefits to improve resource use and services, but many face major contextual challenges when they are put into practice. These issues involve government bodies, collaborators from the private sector, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students, and they need encouragement for the success of PPPs. Babatunde and Perera (2021) pointed out that political stability and promises of safety for investors exist; in addition, governments put in place reliable governance systems such as robust laws, efficient organization processes, and independent institutions that support the growth of partnerships (Jamali, 2004; Mouraviev & Kakabadse, 2015; Sabry, 2015). So, sound contract management as well as clear partner selection, smart risk estimations, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation help ensure success in operations (Bloomfield, 2006; Field & Peck, 2004). They indicate that strategic set-up, sticking with plans over time, open two-way discussions, trust, and strong involvement with the community are key for PPP to perform well over the years. Despite these facilitators, PPPs usually deal with complex challenges. A big problem is that public and private partners do not always share the same outcomes. This gap can include weak decision-making processes that aren't well coordinated (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2022). In addition, the absence of defined rules, effective watchdogs and standards, and effective oversight mechanisms creates uncertainty. Such inconsistency makes it more difficult for school administrators and teachers to always meet different demands and standards, which in turn may reduce student performance (Unterhalter, Robinson, & Bogiakes, 2020). So, Financial sustainability is a key component to

address them (Barrera-Osorio, Patrinos, & Wodon, 2020). Trust building among directly stakeholders is important for achieving school performance (Aslam, Rawal, & Saeed, 2021). Difficulties within the government and its private partners prevent full implementation of assessing performance (Patrinos et al., 2023). The problems are highlighted further in developing and transitioning economies (Yang et al., 2013; Noel & Brzeski, 2004; Ménard & Shirley, 2002; Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017a, b; Queiroz, 2007). However, PPPs can greatly improve access to education and its standard, but efforts to use them depend on a range of favorable and unfavorable factors. So, closing legal gaps, making information more transparent, and working on institution building are necessary to ensure PPPs are both sustainable and fair for all students.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design within the constructivist paradigm to explore how school leaders perceive adaptation of the Public–Private Partnership (PPP) model for the improvement in the local context of Sindh. Secondly, examine the challenges school head teachers face in implementing models. The case study approach allows an in-depth, context-specific understanding of school performance, governance processes, and value creation within PPP-led schools. Using purposive sampling, this study includes 15 educational stakeholders representing multiple governance tiers involved in PPP implementation to ensure diversity and institutional representation: one policymaker, one teacher education/training representative, three regional education officers, and ten district education officers. Five non-participatory observations were supplemented to get more observed insights. This selection captures both policy and operational perspectives relevant to PPP delivery and management. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, enabling flexibility to probe emerging issues while maintaining consistency across key themes such as infrastructure delivery, cost efficiency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement. Each interview lasts 45–60 minutes and is audio-recorded with informed consent. Supplementary field notes document contextual insights and researcher reflections. Data was analyzed by applying the thematic analysis technique. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of perspectives and participant validation; transferability through rich contextual description; dependability through transparent documentation of analytic decisions; and confirmability through reflexive journaling and coding validation. Ethical considerations were highly applied where data was anonymized and securely stored.

Results

Perception of school stakeholders about the PPP model

The PPP model envisioned empowerment with accountability of school leaders. Since the last five years, the implementation of this model has contributed to the infrastructure of schools at the local level, but there is a significant gap on the academic side that needs to be filled. Stakeholders from the school education department reported that the Public Private Partnership model has intervened and brought visible changes, but it is seen as a cosmetic rather than a practical improvement. The school team reflected it as largely symbolic due to the non-irregularity of non-faculty staff, where required teaching staff could not be appointed; as one of the stakeholders stated: *“When visitors come, it looks good, but there is no focus on daily-based problems which remain the same”* (HM-F P2). In this way, although infrastructure improved and gives a sense of progress, the school team perceived it as temporary and unsustainable because it is external involvement that manages it for the time being, which may not continue in the future. In contrast, it is emphasized that these efforts are temporary with no future, as quoted *“Right now it is only because of third parties that contribute financially and*

monitor with low focus on long-term planning" (HM and TEO). This disjuncture highlights misalignment where administrators emphasized modernization while school staff viewed it as burdensome and disconnected from their academic realities.

School Staff Disempowerment and Workload

Under the PPP framework, EMO schools were established through USAID support under the Sindh Basic Education Program to improve overall school performance. Under this model number of established and upgraded infrastructures, but the vision to improve academia through professional development could not be met. Through monitoring and observation of third-party enhanced, the school staff's vigilance is described as overburdened and stripped of decision-making power. In this way, school staff expressed frustration and quoted as *"Decisions were taken outside; we are only informed"* (HM-1). It is interpreted that school decisions came from a third party, and none of the local school stakeholders were asked to join and contribute to the decision. Although there is 36 hours annual training framework for school teaching staff, due to frustration among school staff, they do not take an interest. In addition, female staff also perceived it as an overload, considering that more time in school activities exhausted them. So, the increased paperwork and lack of autonomy led to teacher demotivation, signaling a disconnect between reform design and the professional needs of educators. This monitoring from a private partner with no empowerment of school leaders voiced disillusionment, like: *"Initially enthusiasm, never again expectations"* (MT-1). So, despite officer optimism, school-level actors perceived PPP as creating dependency on external actors, with little government follow-up to ensure sustainability. In conclusion, Training remained tokenistic and disconnected from classroom realities, undermining its potential to foster meaningful pedagogical change. This mistrust gap demotivated school staff, leading to low performance in academic improvement.

Superficial Accountability and Short-Lived Student Gains

Empowerment and accountability function well when running in parallel. Likewise, in this case, accountability was perceived as upward and symbolic, designed for reporting rather than genuine problem-solving, while empowerment is always a demanding factor. Results reveal that school stakeholders face several challenges in addressing documentation that targeted routine base information, except for planning and sharing on required improvement. The PPP model aims to bring all school-age students, through this initiative, some initial improvements in student outcomes were reported, but proved unsustainable. Initially, students came in larger numbers because the school infrastructure attracted them, but this did not continue. Moreover, teaching staff encountered challenges in examinations procedural steps with low improvement in test scores due to no changes in the exam pattern. In addition, Partisan governance grounded on political influence and equity is resource distribution emerged as a contested issue, with many stakeholders pointing to favoritism. School selection observed on political support where needy schools were totally disregarded, which also highlighted the resource-sharing issue. As one of the senior school education officers argued, *"Resources flow to where there are links"* (MT-1)

However, politically grounded officers defend the program as local reform. In this way, the PPP program, while presented as equitable by officers, was widely perceived at the school level as reinforcing political favoritism, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities. So, this model temporarily boosted school establishment and enthusiasm, but its failure to address systemic challenges which have long term impact on learning outcomes.

Discussion

The visualized Educational EMO indicates improving basic education in the local context. The implemented model gave lessons to review its real vision, except for moments to prove long-lasting learning with quality and equality.

It is perceived that conspicuously substantive changes are demanding factors, considering local needs to reform the PPP model. This image-consciousness is also indicative of a donor-led reasoning were showing up is more fundamental than functional change, which aligns with Verger et al. (2022), who reported that PPP often value surface-level outcomes rather than real improvement in teaching and learning, which varies from context to context. The process of monitoring was shaped toward teaching and other forms of upward compliance as opposed to school-level problem-solving. The lack of connection was enhanced with an evident Disjuncture in Stakeholder Perceptions. This schism thermalizes the signature of a significant disconnect in communication in the nature of reform; it is thought that reforms are working on policy but are felt to be oppressive or meaningless by those on the ground tasked with actual work (Shah & Rind, 2021). Teacher Disempowerment and Workload, which emphasize professionalism with due respect, were stripped of their right to make a decision, and their roles and powers were replaced by external partners. This situation resembles the results of Barrera-Osorio et al. (2022) and Patrinos et al. (2023), who discovered that the bureaucratic layers that come with PPP systems tend to harm the teachers' autonomy and their professional confidence. Reforms, in addition to not motivating teachers, actually increased the frustration in the absence of recognition, incentives, or autonomy. Equity issues are also a weakness of PPP in terms of its structure, where the choice of schools and collections of resources were frequently politicized in favor of visible or connected schools, except from the perspective of marginalized contexts. In contrast, professional development to be continuous and contextually relevant to bring positive changes in the classroom is an integral part (Burns and Köster, 2016). Such a collision shows that the schooling system is systematically rigid, with the pressure of rote-based exams and curriculum educating out pedagogical creativity. The sustainability of the reforms carried out by PPP over the long term was questioned by a lot of stakeholders, who were carried out with the help of external funds and the donors themselves. Such reliance is indicative of the larger critique made by Navarro (2024) and Kusumasari (2023), who highlight that PPP projects in contexts of developing locations are often characterized by a low financial sustainability period and a lack of institutional ownership. So, Reforms may be short-lived and repetitive without serious commitment by the state and local capacity-building.

Conclusion

The EMO framework served step toward service delivery collaborating community. Yet the envisioned effectiveness is closely tied to how well this model fits within the local needs of the targeted context, particularly contributing to strong school leadership, community engagement, and professional development of school staff for better academic achievement. Step implies the current form of PPP in education is likely to be necessary, except become a perpetuated dependency, inequity, and superficiality. To overcome these deficiencies, policymakers should start concentrating on the substance rather than visibility, basic to the core issues of equity, administrative decentralization, teacher empowerment, school maintenance and sustainability, and integration of training with systemic reality. In the absence of such shifts, PPP is not expected to surpass cosmetic change to substantive education change envisioned under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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