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Making Multilingual Education Policy Work in Pakistan: Evidence, Coherence, and Stakeholder Engagement for Sustainable Reform

Evidence from the DARE Research Consortium

Policy Brief









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ABOUT
This policy brief was produced by the DARE Research Consortium. It summarises the findings from a full report (forthcoming) detailing research conducted as part of the DARE-RC portfolio, and was authored by the researchers of that report. This brief forms a part of a series to provide actionable evidence to policymakers in Pakistan to improve education.

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AT A GLANCE DARE RESEARCH CONSORTIUM · POLICY BRIEF SUMMARY

Making Multilingual Education Policy Work in Pakistan: Evidence, Coherence, and Stakeholder Engagement for Sustainable Reform

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Methodology

- **Phase 1–2:** desk research on language policy (1947–2025), plus field research in Sindh and KP – 4 villages, 16 teachers, 8 head teachers, 4 parents and 2 community groups per province.
- **Phase 3:** two Policy Dialogues (one per province) for stakeholder feedback and engagement.

Key Figures

70+ languages spoken across Pakistan

60% of Sindh's population speaks Sindhi

81% of KP's population speaks Pashto

2 provinces studied – Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

32 teachers interviewed across both provinces

1947–2025 period covered by the policy history review

Findings

1
Policy instability leaves LoI a core problem
Frequent policy shifts since 1947 mean a clear language-of-instruction policy is still missing, despite rich evidence favouring mother-tongue education.

2
Linguistic hierarchies persist
Urdu and English are privileged in practice, while regional and local languages remain marginalised despite growing legal recognition.

3
Translanguaging is widespread but unrecognised
Teachers routinely use local languages to aid comprehension, but this strategy has no institutional backing in training or supervision.

4
Parents value home language, but also Urdu and English
Communities support foundational learning in the mother tongue, while seeing Urdu as communication and English as both aspiration and obstacle.

5
Frontline educators are often unaware of policy
Most teachers are unaware of language-in-education policy, which is typically handed down through departmental notifications and circulars.

6
Instruction, textbooks and assessment are misaligned
The language of classroom instruction frequently does not match the language of textbooks and assessments at the same stage.

Policy Implications

- **Policy needs to recognise children's home languages as the foundation for learning, anchoring early schooling in local languages up to Grade 5.**
- **Assessments and textbooks must be aligned with the language of instruction at each stage of schooling.**
- **Structured, school-based CPD is needed to support teachers in using translanguaging pedagogies effectively.**
- **Systemic coherence is required between policy, frontline educators, and parents and communities.**

Recommendations

FRAMEWORK
Establish a Multilingual Framework
- Anchor early grades (1–3) in children's mother tongue.
- Introduce Urdu and English gradually using a laddered approach.

TEACHERS
Invest in Teacher Development
- Provide school-based training in translanguaging pedagogies.
- Recognise and build on existing classroom practices.

MATERIALS
Align Curriculum & Assessment
- Match textbooks and assessments to the language of instruction.
- Introduce language proficiency assessments at key transitions.

COMMUNITIES
Engage Communities & Resource Implementation
- Use school management committees to guide language choices.
- Conduct district-level language mapping and monitoring.

Key Messages

Language of Instruction (LoI) is a core problem for provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh where classrooms operate in a multilingual environment, but the dominance of English as the LoI and the marginalisation of local languages lead to poor learning outcomes.

Parents and communities support foundational learning in children's home language, but also recognise Urdu's role in communication, and view English as both an aspiration and an obstacle.

Despite growing legal recognition of mother tongues, Pakistan still lacks a clear and stable language-in-education policy. A multilingual education framework is needed that anchors early schooling in children's home language and introduces Urdu and English gradually rather than immediately.

The language of classroom instruction does not match the language of textbooks and assessments. These need to be aligned at each stage, with regular language proficiency assessments introduced at key transition points.

Teachers use local languages and 'translanguaging' in the classroom to help students understand, but this strategy is unrecognised in teacher training or supervision and lacks institutional backing.

There is a deep lack of coherence between language-in-education policy, classroom practice, and communities. Bridging this gap is essential to making language policy work in Pakistan.







Introduction

This brief highlights an evidence-based approach to language planning and policy to improve access, equity, and learning for linguistically diverse learners in Pakistan, a country which is home to 70+ languages. Contributing to SDG 4 targets, this brief emphasises the need for system-wide coherence to ensure effective implementation of language-in-education policy and sustainable learning gains.

70+
LANGUAGES
Spoken across Pakistan's linguistically diverse population

> ***Pakistan's multilingual reality is not a problem to be managed, but a resource to be harnessed.***

Presently, Pakistan confronts a policy vacuum in the wake of a politico-historical dominance of English and Urdu over home languages. The province of Sindh presents a rich mosaic of languages with Sindhi being a dominant language (60%), alongside Urdu (22%), Pashto (5%), Punjabi (4%), Balochi (2%), and less dominant languages. Similarly, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is linguistically diverse with Pashto as a dominant language, spoken by 81% of the population. As per policy, English is the primary medium of instruction in KP with Urdu retained for Islamic and social studies. However, classrooms in both Sindh and KP function in a multilingual environment with an interplay of Sindhi, Pashto, Urdu and English. In the wake of policy gaps, minority languages continue to face marginalisation with the subtractive effects of English dominance leading to poor learning outcomes.

Additionally, systemic incoherence persists. This calls for a tangible language-in-education policy and implementation plan that draws on actionable insights from the present study, particularly those addressing the missing links – frontline educators, parents and communities – to achieve greater coherence between policy and practice (Pritchett, 2015).

Study Methodology

This is a multi-site research study examining language-in-education policy and practice in the multilingual contexts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh, Pakistan. The study investigates how teachers, parents and community members experience and perceive current language policies, with a particular focus on the use of mother tongue(s) in education, guided by the central question: *What are the teachers', parents', and community's perspectives on language-in-education policy and practice in Pakistan's multilingual landscape?*

Phase 1: Desk research for a politico-historical analysis of language policies and activism from 1947–2025.

Phase 2: Field research in Sindh and KP, with data collection in each province covering 1 district, 4 villages/schools, 16 teachers, 8 head teachers, 4 parents, and 2 community groups (male and female).

Phase 3: A feedback loop with two Policy Dialogues, one each in Sindh and KP, for stakeholder engagement. The data analysis is anchored in schools as the hub to ensure linkages between school and community data.

Findings

The following findings are based on both Desk and Field Research.

Policy Instability and Linguistic Hierarchies

1 Language of instruction remains a core, unresolved problem

Pakistan's history from 1947 to the present shows frequent policy shifts and an ambivalence about language of instruction, in particular. Presently, there is a policy gap about the language(s) of instruction (LoI). Hence, LoI remains a core problem despite various Acts of Parliament and the rich data present nationally and globally in support of mother tongue based multilingual education.

2 Linguistic hierarchies privilege Urdu and English

Urdu and English are privileged, while regional/local languages are marginalised. Article 251(3) of the 1973 Constitution provided political space for promoting linguistic richness by giving mother tongue languages the right of preservation and promotion. The Sindhi Language Act 1972, the Baluchistan Mother Language Act 2014, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Regional Languages Authority Act 2012 have gradually led to the recognition of mother tongue/regional and local languages in education, as evidenced in the recent National Educational Policy Development Framework's propagation of mother tongue as the preferred language of instruction (NEPDF, 2024).

Classroom Adaptations and Translanguaging

3 Teachers recognise the value of learners' own language

Teachers recognise the value of using learners' own language for confidence-building, comprehension, and conceptual understanding, as excluding it produces silence, rote memorisation, and disengagement. Teachers routinely use local languages and translanguaging strategies to support comprehension and concept development. These adaptations reflect professional judgment and contextual knowledge, but they function as survival strategies rather than as part of a supported pedagogical framework.

4 Translanguaging remains unrecognised institutionally

These grassroots adaptations remain fragile and inequitable due to systemic challenges and lack of institutional planning and support. Translanguaging is widespread but remains unrecognised in teacher training or supervision.

Parent and Community Perspectives

5 Communities support home-language foundational learning

Parents and communities recognise the benefits of using children's home language in the classroom and support that foundational learning should occur in it. Parents and communities also recognise the language hierarchies: Urdu is considered ‘rabtay ki zaban’ (language of oral communication); mother tongue is important for identity and group belongingness; English continues to function as both aspiration and obstacle.

Misalignment Across Policy, Materials, Assessment, and Teacher Development

6 Frontline educators are often unaware of policy

There is a gap between language-in-education policy and classroom practice. Most frontline educators are unaware of the language-in-education policy, often handed out through departmental notifications and circulars. Teachers engage in responsive teaching using local languages (e.g. Pashto, Urdu or Sindhi) to aid comprehension in their classrooms. The language of classroom instruction does not align with the language of textbooks and assessment.

Findings reveal a systemic incoherence between policy, frontline educators and communities including parents. This disconnect between policy and the reality of people at the grassroots level, including their needs for identity and belonging, in addition to aspirations for being part of the global world, makes these policies ineffective in serving the people for whom they are made.

Policy Implications

1. Pakistan's language-in-education policy needs to recognise children's home languages as the foundation for learning for access and equity. It should anchor early schooling in recognised provincial/local languages up to Grade 5, introduce Urdu and English gradually using a laddering approach (TCF, 2022), develop structured school-based CPD programmes to support translanguaging pedagogies, and align assessments and textbooks with the language of instruction at each stage.

> ***Bridging the gap between policy, frontline educators, and communities is essential to making language policy work in Pakistan.***

2. There is a dire need for a tangible language-in-education policy within a multilingual education framework. Equally important is a sound implementation plan, based on classroom realities, to remove language barriers and address the 'learning poverty' of children, particularly in the foundational years.

3. Systemic coherence is required between policy, frontline educators and parents and communities: policy must provide clarity, stability, and resources rather than shifting directives; teachers must be given situated and systematic support in multilingual pedagogy rather than relying on survival strategies; and parents and communities must be equipped and engaged rather than left excluded by language barriers.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations centre on Pritchett's systemic coherence framework (2015), which conceptualises education systems as interdependent structures in which coherence between policy, frontline providers, and communities determines the effectiveness of learning outcomes. The recommendations reiterate the importance of mother tongue-based multilingual education, with Pashto/Sindhi and other local languages as the primary LoI in rural schools and Urdu in urban/semi-urban schools for foundational literacy/numeracy in Sindh and KP.

Priority Policy Actions

1. Establish a Clear Multilingual Education Framework

- Anchor early grades (1–3) in children's mother tongue or most familiar language.
- Introduce Urdu and English gradually using a sequenced, laddered approach.
- Delay English as a medium of instruction until after strong foundational learning is established.

2. Invest in Teacher Professional Development

- Provide targeted, school-based and practice-oriented training in multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies.
- Recognise and build on existing classroom practices rather than penalising them.

3. Align Curriculum, Textbooks, and Assessment

- Ensure that the language of instruction matches textbooks and assessments at each stage.
- Introduce regular language proficiency assessments at key transition points.

4. Engage Parents and Communities as Partners

- Use school management committees and local forums to guide language choices and build ownership.
- Communicate policy clearly to families to strengthen trust and acceptance.

5. Support Implementation Through Planning and Resources

- Conduct district-level language mapping to inform policy decisions.
- Allocate dedicated resources for multilingual materials and teacher support.
- Establish monitoring mechanisms to track implementation and learning outcomes.

Key Implementation Challenges for Multilingual Education Policy

- **Development of high-quality multilingual teaching materials:** lack of well-designed bilingual/multilingual textbooks and resources limits effective classroom implementation.
- **Specialised teacher preparation in multilingual pedagogy:** insufficient pre-service and in-service training undermines teacher confidence and effectiveness.
- **Systematic language proficiency assessment at transition points:** the absence of regular, structured assessment weakens instructional planning and policy alignment.
- **Inadequate financial and institutional resource allocation:** limited dedicated funding constrains sustainable implementation.
- **Limited community and parental engagement:** without structured engagement, misconceptions about MTB-MLE and EMI can reduce public trust and policy acceptance.
- **Weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms:** the lack of clear benchmarks and data systems hampers evidence-based review and continuous improvement.
- **Insufficient flexibility for regional linguistic diversity:** uniform policy approaches often fail to accommodate provincial and district-level linguistic variations.

Conclusion

Pakistan's multilingual reality is not a problem to be managed, but a resource to be harnessed. Evidence from Sindh and KP shows that teachers and communities already recognise this, adapting daily to support children's learning despite limited systemic support. For policymakers, the challenge is to convert these grassroots practices into a coherent, equitable, and sustainable language-in-education policy framework. By aligning policy intent with classroom realities and community aspirations, Pakistan can make meaningful progress towards improved foundational learning, reduced inequities, and the achievement of SDG 4.

For More Information

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- Dr Aliya Khalid, University of Oxford, UK (Co-PI).

- Date of the report/brief: 29 January 2026
- Full report available at: https://darerc.org/

The DARE-RC project is funded by UK International Development from the UK government. Its implementation is led by Oxford Policy Management in partnership with its consortium partners.

Appendix – Who Should Act, and How

The full study identifies detailed actions and lead responsibilities for each recommendation, at federal and provincial level. Key recommendations and lead responsibilities are summarised below; full action detail is available in the complete report.

Federal Level

Policy Recommendation	Suggested Lead Responsibility
Development of a Multilingual Education Policy framework, to guide provinces in developing their own policies and implementation plans.	Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Development, PIE
Include most familiar language in addition to mother tongue in the next household survey, to map linguistic needs of learners by district.	PIE + notified committee/think tank

Sindh

Policy Recommendation	Suggested Lead Responsibility
Adopt Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE): Sindhi as MoI for foundational learning in rural schools; Urdu in urban/semi-urban schools; local languages as MoI where linguistic minorities exist.	SELD; RSU & District Education Officers; DCAR, STBB
Use language laddering: mother tongue as the foundational step, with Urdu and English introduced incrementally once a strong base is established.	DCAR, STBB, ECE Directorate; STEDA, PITE, SELD
Reform and align curriculum, textbooks and assessments to address linguistic inclusivity, including bilingual assessment frameworks up to Grade 8.	Sindhi Language Authority, STBB, private partners; DCAR, STEDA
Establish Community Based Language Committees (CBLCs) at school level to incorporate local wisdom and assist teachers.	SELD, District Education Officers, Head Teachers
Institutionalise translanguaging as a formal pedagogical strategy for classrooms and teachers' CPD (Grades 1–10).	PITE, STEDA, universities, private partners; SELD
Introduce language bridging programmes for linguistic minorities, with bilingual materials in local languages.	RSU; SELD, STBB, DCAR, PITE

The above recommendations can be implemented within the Sindh Cluster-based schooling model, focusing on decentralisation to include community languages. It can align with the FLN policy and CPD framework, and community wisdom can be harnessed through expanding the role of current SMCs. While Sindhi is currently the MoI in 70% of schools in Sindh, learning poverty persists (see ASER reports); Pritchett's coherence framework helps identify gaps at structural, operational and capacity-building levels.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

Policy Recommendation	Suggested Lead Responsibility
Adopt Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE): Pashto as MoI for foundational learning in rural schools; Urdu in urban/semi-urban schools; other minority languages as MoI where relevant.	Elementary & Secondary Education (E&SE); Directorate of E&SE; DCTE; District Education Officers
Use language laddering: mother tongue as the foundational step, with Urdu and English introduced incrementally.	DCTE, KPK Textbook Board; Directorate of Professional Development, E&SE
Reform and align curriculum, textbooks and assessments to address linguistic inclusivity, including bilingual assessment frameworks up to Grade 8.	KPK-TB, private partners; DCTE, DPD, E&SE

Establish Community Based Language Committees (CBLCs) at school level.	E&SE, District Education Officers, Head Teachers
Institutionalise translanguaging as a formal pedagogical strategy for classrooms and teachers' CPD (Grades 1–10).	DPD, universities, private partners; E&SE
Introduce language bridging programmes for linguistic minorities, with bilingual materials in local languages.	Directorate of E&SE; KPK-TB, DCTE

These reforms need to be introduced within a multilingual education policy so that all initiatives lead to the same goal. For example, three CPD projects currently underway in KP could, brought under a multilingual education policy umbrella, ensure that SLO-related training also accounts for the language(s) of instruction at each level, so linguistic barriers do not prevent learners or teachers from achieving student learning outcomes.

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