

Strengthening the quality of front-line education provision

Insights from the DARE-RC Community of Practice

**Insight
Note**

DARE-RC Theme
Strengthening the quality of
front-line education provision

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ABOUT

This report was produced by the DARE Research Consortium as part of a series exploring learnings across each of the four themes of the research portfolio: Improving Drivers of Learning for Marginalised Children, Strengthening the quality of frontline education provision, Building resilient education service delivery, & Strengthening accountability, scalability and use of evidence

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DARE-RC is Pakistan's largest education research programme, generating rigorous, actionable evidence to improve education policy and practice. DARE's 44 research studies and scoping papers offer critical insights on inclusion, teaching and learning, governance, data, accountability, and system resilience.

1. Introduction

The quality of teaching remains one of the most significant determinants of educational outcomes in Pakistan. Despite considerable policy attention over the past two decades, concerns persist regarding teacher preparation, professional support, accountability mechanisms, and the conditions under which teachers work (Ahmad, Sewani, & Channa, 2025). Improving educational quality therefore requires a clear understanding of teaching not simply as a technical activity but as a profession that develops over time through appropriate preparation, continuous learning, supportive institutional arrangements, and conducive working environments.

This report synthesises insights emerging from a series of meetings held under the Priority Area Theme focused on strengthening the quality of frontline educational provision in Pakistan. The discussions brought together researchers working across multiple studies on teacher effectiveness, teacher management, professional development, leadership, curriculum reform, language policy, and educational governance. Although the meetings were limited in scale, they generated important reflections on the factors that shape teacher performance and the challenges facing professionalisation efforts in Pakistan. The studies on this theme and researchers' contributions to this report are listed in Box 1, 2 and 3.

A central finding emerging from these discussions was that many of the challenges affecting teaching quality can be understood through the lens of the teacher professional development cycle. Rather than viewing professional development as a discrete training event, participants emphasised the need to consider the entire professional journey of teachers, beginning with pre-service preparation and induction, extending through continuous professional development, operating within systems of accountability and standards, and ultimately shaped by the realities of frontline working conditions. This report therefore uses this professional lifecycle as an organising framework for understanding the challenges facing teachers and identifying practical recommendations for reform.

Boxes 1–3: The three thematic foci of the studies in this priority area, and the studies within each

Box 1 Diverse settings

Improving teacher effectiveness in diverse educational contexts of Pakistan

- **TaRL Scalability:** Evaluates the feasibility of scaling accelerated foundational literacy and numeracy programmes to address poor learning outcomes in Sindh's government schools (Ricardo Sabates et al.).
- **STEM Pedagogy:** Analyses how factors like teacher gender and school type influence participatory teaching in maths and science across 17 districts, and its impact on student learning (Dr Sadia Muzaffar Bhutta et al.).
- **Language Policy:** Explores how teachers, parents, and communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh navigate the tension between official language-of-instruction policies and students' home languages (Dr Fauzia Shamim & Dr Aliya Khalid et al.).

Box 2 Teaching management

Improving teaching workforce quality through achieving coherence in teacher management and professional development policies, and supporting teacher well-being

- **Transfers:** Evaluates the impact of Punjab's 2019 merit-based e-transfer system on school equity and student outcomes (Dr Masooma Habib, Dr Farooq Naseer, and Dr Yasira Waqar).
- **Training:** Assesses the effectiveness of digital continuous professional development (CPD) tools and mentoring in Punjab (Nighat Lone, Dr Farah Nadeem, and Dr Jessica Albrent).
- **Quality:** Examines how formal and informal learning shapes teaching quality in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly in marginalised areas (Prof Tahir Andrabi, Dr Soufia Siddiqi, et al.).
- **Hiring:** Analyses the shift from patronage-based to merit-based recruitment systems across Punjab, Sindh, and KP (Dr Faisal Bari, et al.).
- **Licensing:** Compares Sindh's 2023 teacher licensing policy with Punjab's approach to determine the feasibility of national scaling (Dr Muhammad Aamir Hashmi, et al.).

Box 3 Leadership

Improving quality of education through supporting school leadership

- **Leadership:** Develops a contextualised typology of effective school leadership practices and their impact on school culture and student outcomes across secondary schools in Punjab and Sindh (Abbas Rashid et al.).
- **Curriculum:** Explores how schools and teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Islamabad Capital Territory are experiencing the shift to a Student Learning Outcomes (SLO)-based curriculum and assessment framework (Dr Aliya Khalid & Dr Hafiz Inamullah, et al.).

2. Methodology

The report is based on evidence generated through three thematic meetings with researchers contributing to the broader programme of work on strengthening frontline educational provision. Participants were invited to reflect on the emerging findings from their respective studies and identify common issues affecting teaching quality and teacher professional development across different contexts in Pakistan. Additional written notes and observations submitted after the meetings supplemented these discussions.

The evidence informing this report also draws upon the conceptual materials developed within the broader research programme and the collective experiences of researchers working in diverse educational settings. These include studies examining merit-based recruitment, teacher licensing, digital professional development, language policy, school leadership, curriculum reform, teacher learning, and classroom practice. Together, these studies provide a broad perspective on the institutional, professional, and contextual factors influencing teaching quality.

The analysis adopted a narrative and thematic approach. Rather than focusing on individual studies, the objective was to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and priorities that emerged across multiple contexts. Through this process, a coherent framework centred on teacher professionalisation emerged, highlighting the interconnected nature of teacher preparation, professional learning, accountability systems, and working conditions.

3. Findings

3.1 Understanding the Challenge of Teacher Professionalisation in Pakistan

The evidence emerging from the meetings and supporting research suggests that teacher quality in Pakistan is influenced by a complex interaction of policy, institutional arrangements, professional learning opportunities, and workplace realities. Participants consistently argued that educational reform initiatives often focus on isolated interventions rather than viewing teacher development as a continuous professional journey. As a result, efforts to improve teaching quality frequently fail to produce sustainable improvements in classroom practice. The findings indicate that teacher professionalisation is best understood as a lifecycle that begins with pre-service preparation, develops through continuous professional learning, is shaped by accountability and standards, and is ultimately influenced by the conditions under which teachers work.

3.2 The Policy-Practice Disconnect

One of the most significant themes emerging from the discussions was the persistent disconnect between educational policy and classroom practice, an issue often discussed in the context of Pakistan (Khurram, 2025). Participants observed that many reforms are designed with clear intentions to improve educational quality, yet they often fail to consider the practical realities faced by teachers in diverse and resource-constrained settings. Consequently, teachers are expected to implement new policies without receiving the necessary preparation, resources, or ongoing support required for successful implementation.

The introduction of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) provides an important example of this challenge. While the shift towards competency-based learning and assessment represented a positive policy direction, many teachers lacked the pedagogical skills and assessment knowledge needed to translate these reforms into classroom practice. Participants reported that this mismatch created uncertainty and anxiety among teachers, particularly those who had previously worked within more traditional, content-focused systems. The findings therefore suggest that policy reform alone is insufficient; successful implementation requires corresponding investments in teacher development, professional support, and contextual adaptation.

3.3 Challenges in Pre-Service and Induction

The discussions highlighted significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education and early-career induction processes (Mughal, 2021). These issues have been highlighted in other studies as well (Shaukat & Chowdhury, 2021). Participants repeatedly noted that teacher preparation programmes continue to emphasise theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical classroom experience. While prospective teachers often graduate with an understanding of educational concepts and theories, they may have limited opportunities to apply these ideas in authentic teaching environments before entering the profession.

The transition from student teacher to classroom practitioner emerged as a particularly vulnerable stage in the professional lifecycle. Many newly recruited teachers enter schools without structured induction programmes, formal mentoring arrangements, or opportunities for guided professional reflection. This often results in a difficult adjustment period during which novice teachers are expected to manage classrooms, implement curriculum reforms, and address diverse learner needs with minimal support. The findings suggest that a stronger emphasis on practical pedagogy, extended school placements, and structured induction would improve teacher readiness and confidence during this critical stage of professional development.

3.4 Challenges in Continuous Professional Development

Participants expressed widespread concern about the effectiveness of existing approaches to continuous professional development (CPD). While substantial resources have been invested in teacher training initiatives, many participants argued that traditional models of professional development have had limited impact on classroom practice (Iftikhar et al., 2022). Training programmes are often delivered through cascade models, where information is transmitted through multiple administrative layers before reaching teachers. As a result, key messages can become diluted, disconnected from local contexts, and difficult to implement effectively.

The findings indicate that much professional development remains focused on attendance rather than learning outcomes. Teachers frequently participate in workshops or short courses that are disconnected from their day-to-day teaching challenges and rarely receive follow-up support to help them apply new ideas in practice. In contrast, participants emphasised the value of school-based professional learning characterised by peer collaboration, coaching, classroom observation, and reflective practice. The increasing availability of digital observation tools and administrative data also presents opportunities to develop more targeted and evidence-informed professional learning systems.

3.5 Challenges in Accountability and Standards

The relationship between accountability and professional autonomy emerged as one of the most complex issues discussed during the meetings. In Pakistan there is an ongoing dialogue to support the need for improving accountability mechanisms (Ambreen et al., 2026). Participants generally agreed that accountability systems are necessary to ensure educational quality and maintain professional standards. However, many expressed concern that existing mechanisms are often perceived as punitive rather than developmental.

Teachers frequently experience accountability processes as systems of monitoring and compliance rather than opportunities for professional growth (Nawab, 2020). When classroom observations, performance reviews, or administrative inspections are primarily associated with sanctions or criticism, they can undermine professional motivation and discourage innovation. Participants argued that effective accountability systems should provide constructive feedback, support professional learning, and recognise the contextual challenges that teachers face.

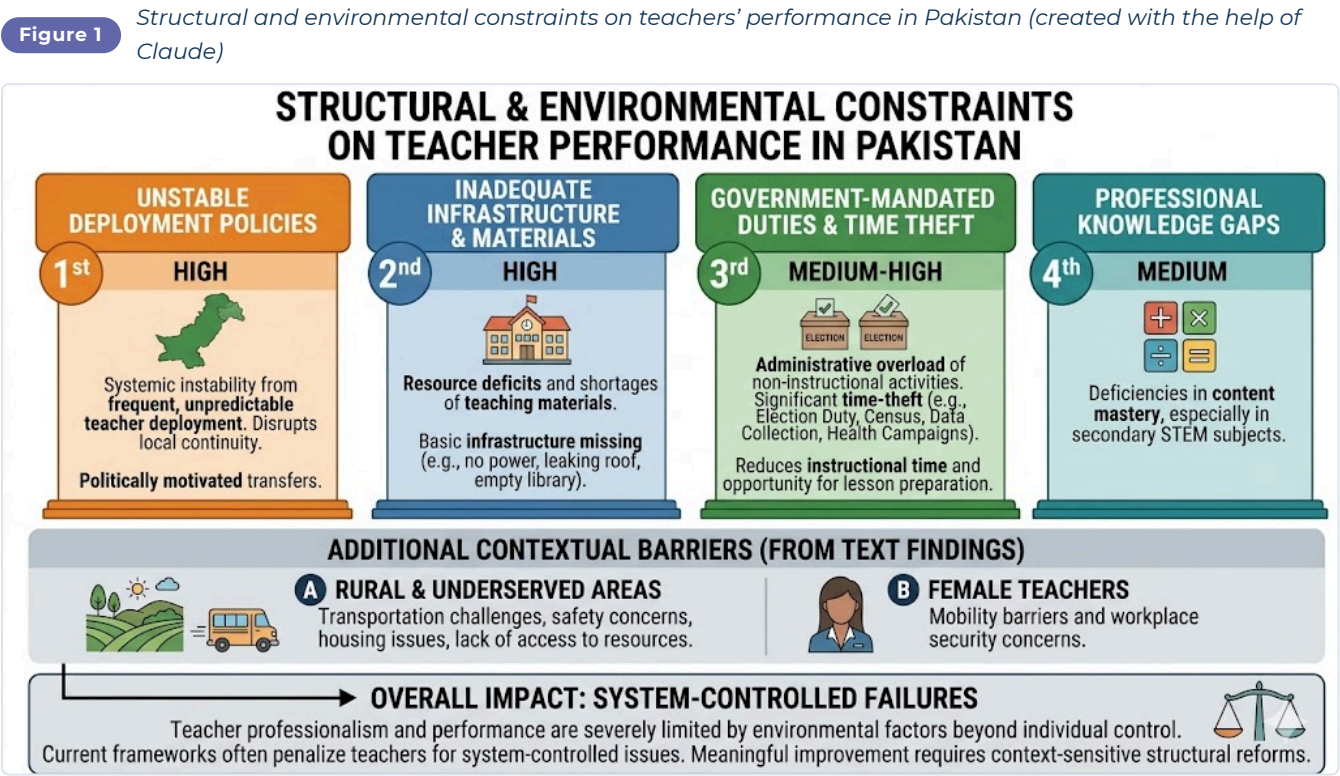
Discussions also highlighted the importance of establishing clearer professional standards and career pathways. The development of teacher licensing systems, merit-based recruitment processes, and professional recognition frameworks was viewed as an important step towards strengthening the status of teaching as a profession. At the same time, participants emphasised the need to create opportunities for highly effective teachers to remain in classroom-focused leadership roles rather than being required to move into administrative positions for career advancement.

3.6 Challenges in Frontline Working Conditions

The findings demonstrate that teacher professionalism cannot be understood independently of the conditions in which teachers work, an issue often highlighted in literature (Ali, 2018). Participants consistently stressed that many of the factors limiting educational quality are beyond the direct control of individual teachers. These include unstable deployment policies, inadequate infrastructure, shortages of teaching materials, and the growing administrative burden placed on schools.

A particularly significant concern was the amount of time teachers spend on activities unrelated to teaching and learning. Election duties, census activities, data collection exercises, and other administrative responsibilities reduce instructional time and limit opportunities for lesson preparation and professional learning. Participants referred to these demands as forms of “time theft” that divert teachers' attention away from their primary educational responsibilities.

Working conditions were especially challenging in rural and underserved areas where teachers may face difficulties related to transportation, safety, housing, and access to resources. Female teachers were reported to encounter additional barriers associated with mobility and workplace security concerns. The findings suggest that improvements in teacher quality will remain limited unless reforms also address the structural and environmental factors that shape teachers' daily experiences. Figure 1 illustrates the constraints affecting teacher performance, ranging from systemic instability and resource shortages to professional knowledge gaps.



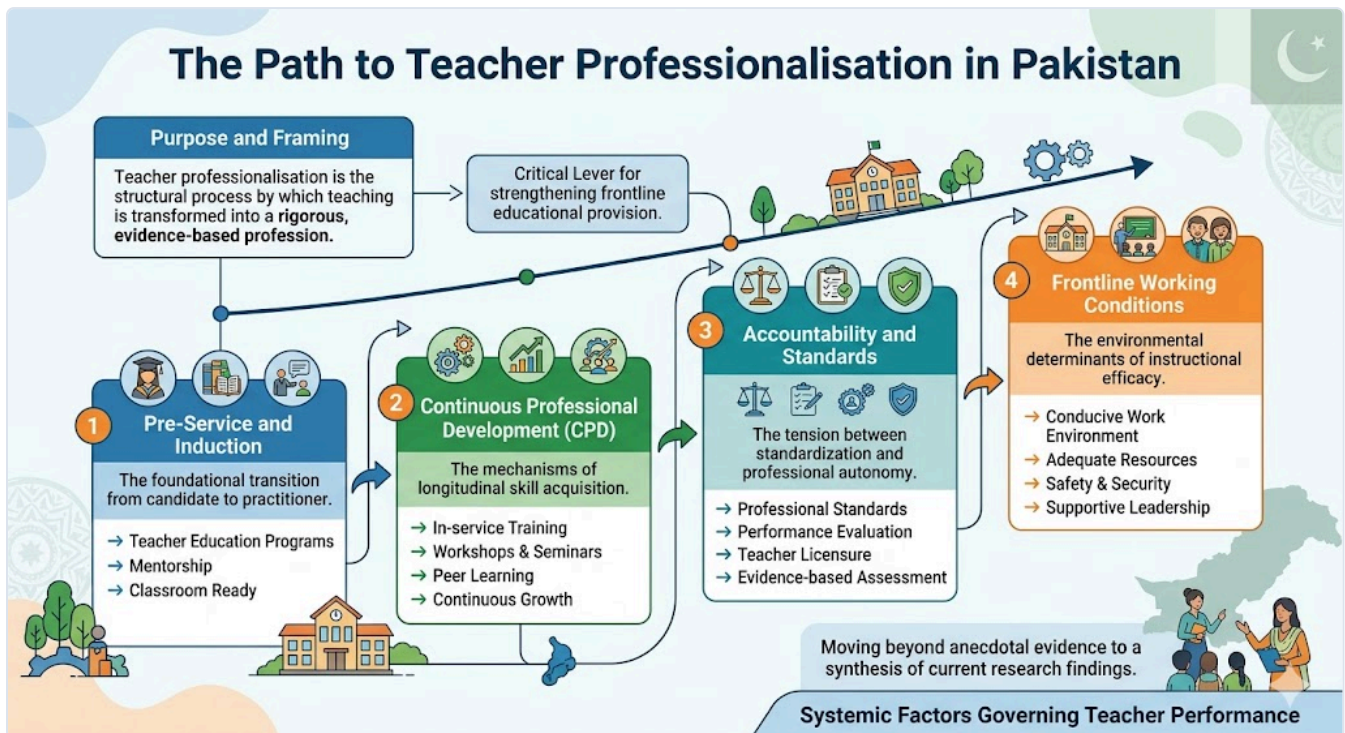
3.7 Towards a New Understanding of Teacher Professionalisation

The evidence collected through the meetings points towards a broader reconceptualisation of teacher professionalisation elsewhere and in Pakistan. Rather than viewing teacher development as a series of disconnected interventions, participants advocated for a more integrated framework that recognises the interconnected nature of preparation, professional learning, accountability, and working conditions.

At the centre of this framework is the concept of learning measurement ('Measuring Teacher Professional Learning', 2023). Participants argued that meaningful professionalisation requires clear benchmarks that allow teachers, schools, and education systems to monitor progress and identify areas for improvement. However, these measurements should be used primarily as tools for learning and development rather than instruments of surveillance or punishment. When implemented effectively, they can support professional growth, strengthen accountability, and improve educational outcomes.

The resulting framework suggests that sustainable improvements in teaching quality require coordinated action across all stages of the professional lifecycle. Investments in pre-service preparation, effective induction, school-based professional learning, supportive accountability systems, and improved working conditions must be pursued together rather than in isolation. Figure 2 presents this integrated model and illustrates how the various dimensions of teacher professionalisation interact to support improved teaching quality and student learning outcomes in Pakistan.

Figure 2 Path to teacher professionalisation in Pakistan (created with the help of Claude)



4. Practical Recommendations for Teachers' Professionalisation in Pakistan

The following are some actionable steps for teachers' professionalisation reform in Pakistan.

Mandating Pre-Service Training

To address gaps in teachers' subject knowledge, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and university education departments need to revamp Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programmes. Instead of relying solely on traditional coursework, these programmes should adopt a hybrid model featuring one year of educational theory followed by a full-year clinical residency in a school. This hands-on experience ensures that new teachers are fully equipped for the classroom before they are officially deployed. Success will be measured by the percentage of newly hired teachers who meet localised performance benchmarks indicating they are truly ready for the classroom.

Institutionalising Peer Coaching

Traditional off-site teacher training often fails because the information gets diluted and ignores the realities of under-resourced classrooms. Furthermore, a lack of classroom follow-up means theoretical knowledge rarely translates into teaching habits. To fix this, provincial institutes like the Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational Development (QAED) and the Provincial Institute of Teacher Education (PITE) should replace standard workshop models with school-based "Instructional Rounds." By using district subject experts to guide teachers within their actual schools, training becomes continuous and relevant. The goal of this shift is to see a measurable increase in official classroom observation scores, particularly in the area of student engagement.

Creating Master Teacher Tracks

Currently, the education system often unfairly penalises teachers for systemic failures, leading to professional disillusionment. Furthermore, promotions usually pull the most effective educators out of the classroom and into administrative roles. Provincial Education Departments should introduce dedicated “Instructional Specialist” positions at higher government pay scales (BPS-18 and BPS-19). This structural change provides elite teachers with prestigious career advancement and better pay while allowing them to stay in the classroom to teach and mentor their peers. This initiative aims to improve the retention rates of the top-performing teachers in the public system.

Automating Administrative Processes to Lessen Teachers’ Load

Teachers frequently face an administrative overload from government-mandated duties like census data collection, health campaigns, and election work, which leads to significant “time theft”. To combat this and give teachers their time back, the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB) and the School Education Departments need to fully integrate existing digital systems, such as the School Information System (SIS) and performance-tracking tools. Automating data collection will eliminate redundant manual paperwork for educators. Success will be tracked by calculating the net gain in direct instructional hours teachers recover each week.

Aligning Resources with Learning Outcomes

Severe resource deficits, such as missing infrastructure and inadequate teaching materials, heavily limit educational quality. This lack of resources compounds existing knowledge gaps, which is especially problematic for secondary STEM subjects like Math, Physics, and Biology. To support teachers operating in these challenging environments, Curriculum and Textbook Boards should create and distribute comprehensive, bilingual Teacher Guides. These guides must be directly tied to specific Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) so that complex concepts can be taught effectively regardless of a school's physical condition. The success of this step will be measured by improved student achievement scores in STEM subjects.

5. Conclusion

The evidence synthesised in this report suggests that improving teaching quality in Pakistan requires a shift from fragmented reforms towards a more integrated understanding of teacher professionalisation. The challenges identified are interconnected and span the entire professional lifecycle, from initial preparation to ongoing development and workplace realities.

The professionalisation framework developed through these discussions provides a useful lens for understanding how policy, practice, and institutional conditions interact to shape teaching quality. By strengthening pre-service preparation, rethinking professional development, balancing accountability with professional autonomy, and improving frontline working conditions, policymakers can create the conditions necessary for a more professional, effective, and respected teaching workforce.

Ultimately, educational reform will succeed only when teachers are recognised not simply as implementers of policy but as skilled professionals whose development and well-being are central to improving learning outcomes for all children in Pakistan.

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