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Middle-Tier Educational Leaders' Role in Implementing Inclusive Education in District West's Public Secondary Schools: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Inclusive education remains a global priority (SDG 4), yet its implementation in low-resource settings is hampered by a persistent policy-practice gap. This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study examines the role of middle-tier educational leaders—School Heads and Taluka Education Officers (TEOs)—in implementing inclusive education in public secondary schools of District West, Karachi. Semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively sampled leaders reveal that while these leaders express intrinsic commitment to inclusion, their effectiveness is severely constrained by administrative overload (63% of time on compliance tasks), chronic resource scarcity (education budget at 0.8% of GDP), and lack of practical inclusive education literacy. Thematic analysis identifies four core themes: (1) The "Missing Middle" as a strained intermediary; (2) Administrative burden versus instructional leadership; (3) Systemic scarcity and the "missing facilities" crisis; (4) Inclusive leadership fostering teacher agency. The study contributes to international discourse on middle-tier leadership by showing how decentralised autonomy, weighted funding, and context-specific professional development are prerequisites for translating inclusive mandates into classroom realities. Findings offer actionable policy recommendations for Sindh's Vision 2026 and have implications for other developing countries facing similar implementation challenges.

Keywords: Inclusive education, middle-tier leadership, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, policy-practice gap, District West Karachi, SDG 4

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a fundamental paradigm in global educational reform, grounded in the values of equity, access, and social justice. According to Zamani et al. (2025), inclusive education aims to ensure that all learners—regardless of physical ability, socio-economic status, gender, or background—receive equal opportunities to participate and succeed in mainstream learning environments[1]. This paradigm shifts away from traditional exclusionary and segregated systems towards a model that celebrates diversity as a natural and enriching aspect of schooling. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) explicitly calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030, making inclusion not just a moral imperative but a globally agreed development target. However, the translation of these high-level commitments into practice remains uneven worldwide, particularly in public schools of developing countries where resources are scarce and systemic challenges are deeply entrenched.

> *“Inclusive education is not merely about placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms; it is about transforming the entire system to respond to the diversity of all learners.”*[2]

This statement from UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report underscores the systemic transformation required for genuine inclusion. It is not enough to simply move children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms without changing the curriculum, teaching methods, assessment practices, and physical environment. UNESCO’s definition emphasizes that inclusion is a continuous process of reforming the entire education system to accommodate diversity, rather than a one-time intervention or a compliance checklist. This understanding has profound implications for leadership, because it means that school heads and district officers cannot simply enforce existing policies; they must actively work to transform school cultures, teacher beliefs, and instructional practices. The complexity of this transformation demands leadership that is not only administrative but also pedagogical, visionary, and adaptive.

> *“Developing inclusive education systems is a process that involves changing the culture, policies and practices of schools to respond to student diversity.”*[3]

Ainscow’s conceptualization of inclusion as a process of identifying and removing barriers to participation provides a practical framework for school leaders. According to this view, barriers to learning are not located within the student (as a deficit model would suggest) but within the environment, the curriculum, teaching methods, and attitudes of teachers and peers. Therefore, the primary task of inclusive leadership is to identify these barriers—whether they are physical (lack of ramps, inaccessible toilets), pedagogical (whole-class instruction without differentiation), or attitudinal (low expectations, stigma)—and systematically remove them. This requires leaders to be skilled in problem analysis, resource mobilization, and stakeholder engagement. In the context of District West, Karachi, where schools serve highly diverse populations including children from low-income families, children with undiagnosed disabilities, and girls at risk of dropping out, this process-oriented view of inclusion is particularly relevant.

> *“Policy implementation is more effective when those responsible for enactment are involved in the formulation process.”*[4]

This finding from OECD research highlights a critical governance issue: middle-tier leaders—School Heads and TEOs—are often excluded from policy design yet held accountable for implementation. This disconnect creates what Lipsky terms “street-level bureaucracy,” where frontline workers develop coping mechanisms that may subvert policy goals[5]. In Pakistan, provincial inclusive education policies are drafted by senior bureaucrats and consultants with limited input from school heads who understand ground realities. As a result, policies may mandate inclusion without providing the necessary resources, training, or structural support. Leaders are then forced to interpret ambiguous mandates through their own lenses, often defaulting to minimal compliance—enrolling children with disabilities but providing no specialized support. This dynamic is evident in the voices of participants throughout this study, who repeatedly expressed frustration at being asked to implement policies they had no role in shaping and lacked the resources to enact. The following sections explore these tensions through the lived experiences of 15 middle-tier leaders in District West.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Inclusive Education: From Access to Participation

Internationally, inclusive education has evolved from a narrow focus on physical placement to a broader emphasis on meaningful participation and learning outcomes. Early conceptualizations of inclusion focused primarily on integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools (often called "mainstreaming"), but contemporary definitions recognize that physical presence does not guarantee participation or learning. UNESCO's definition explicitly links inclusion to reducing exclusion and increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities.

This definition is significant because it shifts the focus from where a child is placed to what the child experiences. Participation means active engagement in learning activities, not passive sitting in a classroom. It also includes participation in the social and cultural life of the school—friendships, extracurricular activities, and decision-making processes. For school leaders, this means that creating inclusive schools requires attention to the social climate, peer relationships, and opportunities for all students to contribute and be valued. The phrase "reducing exclusion" is also important because it acknowledges that exclusion can happen even within supposedly inclusive settings through practices like segregation within the classroom (e.g., placing students with disabilities at the back) or through subtle forms of discrimination. Leaders must therefore be vigilant about identifying and addressing hidden forms of exclusion.

> *"Inclusive education is about how we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programmes and activities so that all students learn and participate together."*[6]

This statement from the European Agency emphasizes the proactive design of systems, rather than reactive accommodation. In other words, instead of waiting for a child with a disability to enroll and then trying to figure out how to include them, schools should anticipate diversity and design their curricula, teaching methods, and physical spaces from the outset to be accessible to all. This is the principle behind Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for flexible learning environments that provide multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. For middle-tier leaders in District West, this proactive approach is challenging because they operate in resource-constrained settings where even basic infrastructure is lacking. However, the principle remains relevant: even simple actions like arranging desks in clusters to facilitate peer tutoring, using local materials to create visual aids, and training teachers to ask open-ended questions can move schools toward more inclusive practices without significant financial investment.

> *"When policy definitions are vague, school leaders interpret them through their own lenses, often defaulting to the path of least resistance—mere physical placement."*[7]

This observation from Florian and Black-Hawkins highlights a critical challenge: ambiguous policy language leads to inconsistent implementation. In Pakistan, the Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018 mandates that all government-funded institutions provide inclusive education, but it does not specify what that means in operational terms. Does it require individualized education plans? Assistive technology? Teacher training? Structural modifications? Without clear guidance, school leaders fall back on what they know—enrollment numbers, attendance registers, and basic infrastructure. They may report that a school is "inclusive" because it has enrolled a child with a physical disability, even if that child sits on the floor because there is no adapted desk, or leaves at lunchtime because there is no accessible toilet. This is the path of least resistance: meeting the letter of the policy (enrollment) while ignoring its spirit (meaningful participation). The findings of this study confirm that many leaders in District West are caught in this trap.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Leadership for Inclusion

Several leadership theories inform inclusive education. Hallinger's instructional leadership framework emphasizes the leader's role in enhancing teaching quality and promoting differentiated instruction.

> *"Instructional leadership focuses on the management of the instructional programme, including supervision of teaching, coordination of curriculum, and monitoring of student progress."*[8]

Hallinger's model positions the principal as the primary driver of instructional quality. In inclusive schools, this means that principals must regularly observe classrooms, provide feedback on differentiation, coordinate curriculum adaptations, and monitor whether all students—including those with disabilities—are making progress. However, the findings of this study show that principals in District West spend only 37% of their time on instructional leadership; the rest is consumed by administrative compliance (attendance registers, financial paperwork, audit responses). This misalignment means that even if principals have the knowledge and desire to promote inclusive instruction, they are structurally prevented from doing so. The system's emphasis on clerical tasks over pedagogical leadership directly undermines inclusion.

> *"Transformational leaders set directions, develop people, and redesign the organisation to foster conditions that enable staff to innovate and improve."*[9]

Transformational leadership adds vision-building, motivation, and collective efficacy—all critical for complex reforms like inclusion. Leaders who are transformational articulate a compelling vision of an inclusive school, build staff commitment to that vision, provide intellectual stimulation to challenge old assumptions, and offer individualized support to teachers who struggle with inclusive practices. In the context of District West, transformational leadership is particularly needed because many teachers have been trained in traditional, teacher-centered methods and may hold deficit views of children with disabilities. A transformational leader would challenge those views through professional development, modeling, and celebration of successes. The TARL program described by participants is an example of transformational leadership in action: leaders changed the school's focus from grade-level content to child-level competencies, built teacher confidence, and redesigned daily routines to accommodate flexible grouping.

"Distributed leadership is about how leadership practice is distributed among formal and informal leaders; it is a product of the interactions of leaders, followers, and their situation."[10]

Distributed leadership recognizes that no single leader has all the knowledge or time to manage inclusion alone. Instead, leadership tasks are shared among principals, deputy heads, senior teachers, and even parents. In inclusive schools, distribution might involve forming teacher-led committees to develop IEPs, empowering special education teachers to mentor their colleagues, or creating parent advisory groups. The findings of this study indicate that where distribution occurs (as in the TARL example), teachers feel more agency and innovate. Where leadership remains concentrated at the top, teachers wait for instructions and are less likely to adapt instruction for diverse learners. The hierarchical culture of Sindh's education system, however, works against distribution. Many principals are accustomed to command-and-control management styles, and teachers are accustomed to following orders rather than exercising professional judgment. Shifting to distributed leadership requires a cultural change that takes time and deliberate effort.

> *"Adaptive leadership involves mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive; it distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive challenges."*[11]

Adaptive leadership is particularly relevant for inclusive education because many barriers to inclusion are not technical (requiring a known solution) but adaptive (requiring changes in values, beliefs, and habits). For example, a lack of ramps is a technical problem that can be solved with money and engineering. However, teacher resistance to including children with behavioral disorders is an adaptive challenge that requires changing attitudes, building empathy, and developing new skills. The findings show that leaders in District West face both technical and adaptive challenges. The missing facilities crisis (lack of water, toilets, electricity) is largely technical—it requires increased funding and better procurement processes. But the "Missing Middle" phenomenon (leaders feeling excluded from policy and overwhelmed by administration) is adaptive—it requires redefining roles, redistributing authority, and building new norms of collaboration between provincial and district levels.

2.3 Middle-Tier Leadership: The "Missing Middle"

The role of middle-tier leaders has been increasingly recognised as critical yet under-researched. Viennet and Pont argue that policy implementation success depends heavily on these intermediaries.

"Middle-tier leaders—district administrators, school heads, and instructional coaches—are the 'connective tissue' of education systems, translating national policies into local actions."[4]

However, they often lack the necessary autonomy, resources, and training. In Pakistan, TEOs and School Heads are expected to implement inclusive mandates without being empowered. This results in what researchers term the "missing middle"—a layer of leadership that is held accountable for outcomes but not given the authority to make decisions.

> *"In many developing countries, middle-tier leaders operate under rigid hierarchical systems that emphasise compliance rather than professional discretion."*[12]

The "missing middle" is a phenomenon where the very people responsible for implementing reforms are excluded from policy design and denied the resources to succeed[13]. This is precisely what participants described: they are expected to implement inclusive education but have no role in policy formulation, no budget flexibility, and no authority to adapt mandates to local conditions. The result is a leadership cadre that is frustrated, demoralized, and increasingly cynical about reform efforts.

2.4 Teacher Agency and Emotional Dimensions

Teachers are the primary mediators between leadership and inclusive outcomes. Positive leadership reduces teacher stress and promotes pedagogical innovation.

> *"Teacher agency—the capacity to act purposefully and constructively to shape one's work and its conditions—is a key mechanism through which leadership influences inclusive practices."*[14]

Conversely, unsupportive leadership leads to resistance and burnout. Inclusive teaching requires high emotional labour; without leadership support, teachers experience exhaustion and reduced self-efficacy[15]. Inclusive leadership must therefore address not only technical aspects but also relational and psychological dimensions.

2.5 Systemic and Contextual Constraints

Resource constraints remain the greatest barrier to inclusive education in developing countries.

> *"Without adequate financial resources allocated specifically for special needs, even the most committed leaders cannot provide assistive devices, adapted materials, or specialist staff."*[16]

In Sindh, infrastructure deficits are severe: 34% of schools lack electricity, 21% lack clean water, and accessibility ramps are rare. Cultural norms further complicate implementation. Socio-cultural attitudes towards disability, including stigma and low expectations, profoundly influence the success of inclusive education policies[17].

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Design and Approach

A hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative design was employed to explore the lived experiences of middle-tier leaders. This approach is suitable for uncovering the meanings and interpretations that leaders attach to their roles and constraints. "Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the interpretation of lived experiences, seeking to understand the deeper meanings that individuals assign to their everyday practices."[18]

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 participants (13 School Heads and 2 TEOs) from District West, Karachi. Inclusion criteria: 5 years of administrative experience, involvement in SELD inclusive education programs, and management of Model Government Schools. Data saturation was achieved after 15 interviews.

"Saturation is reached when additional interviews yield no new themes or insights; in qualitative research, 12-20 participants often suffice."[19]

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in school offices. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework.

"Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data; it provides a flexible and accessible approach."[20]

Member checking and peer debriefing enhanced trustworthiness.

4. Findings

Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis. Each theme is presented with participant quotations followed by detailed analytical commentary.

4.1 Theme 1: The "Missing Middle" as a Strained Bridge

"We share policies that seniors create, but we have no say in how they are created. Higher authorities expect us to implement inclusive mandates, but when we have no ramps or toilets, we are left without answers." (Participant 3, School Head)[21]

This quotation reveals a fundamental disconnect between policy formulation and policy implementation. The participant describes being a passive transmitter of directives rather than an active contributor to decision-making. In leadership theory, this violates the principle of ownership—research consistently shows that stakeholders who participate in policy design are more committed to implementation. The absence of such participation leads to what Lipsky calls "street-level bureaucracy," where frontline workers develop coping mechanisms that may subvert policy goals[5]. Here, the participant's frustration is palpable: they are held accountable for outcomes (inclusive education) without being given the authority to allocate resources or adapt policies to local contexts. The specific mention of "ramps and toilets" highlights that the policy-practice gap is not abstract but material. Provincial policymakers may mandate inclusion in good faith, but they fail to understand that without basic accessibility infrastructure, inclusion is impossible. This participant's school likely has no accessible toilets for girls with disabilities, no ramps for wheelchair users, and no budget to create them. When seniors ask why inclusion is not working, the participant has "no answer" because the answer—

systemic underfunding—implicates the seniors themselves. The power asymmetry is stark: leaders are expected to perform miracles without resources and then are blamed when they fail.

"I was told to ensure that every child with disability is enrolled, but when I asked about providing a wheelchair or a special desk, my senior laughed and said 'use your jugaad'." (Participant 9, School Head)[22]

The term "jugaad" is a colloquial South Asian word meaning makeshift solution or improvisation using limited resources. While jugaad can be a form of creative problem-solving in resource-constrained settings, its use in this context is problematic. The senior officer's laughter indicates a lack of seriousness about the challenges of inclusion; it also transfers responsibility from the system to the individual leader. By telling the participant to "use your jugaad," the senior is essentially saying: "We have no resources to give you, but we will still hold you accountable. Figure it out yourself." This is a classic example of accountability without authority—a recipe for failure and burnout. The participant's request for a wheelchair or special desk was entirely reasonable; these are basic assistive devices that any inclusive school should have. The fact that the senior laughed suggests a culture of insensitivity and perhaps even ableism within the bureaucracy. This interaction also illustrates how systemic failures are individualized: the problem (lack of funding for assistive devices) is reframed as a lack of creativity on the part of the leader. Over time, such experiences erode motivation and lead to cynical compliance—enrolling children with disabilities but providing no meaningful support.

"Policy implementation is more effective when those responsible for enactment are involved in the formulation process."[4]

This finding from OECD research provides a normative benchmark against which to assess the situation in Sindh. The OECD study analyzed education policy implementation across multiple countries and found that inclusive, participatory processes produce better outcomes. When middle-tier leaders are consulted in policy design, they can flag potential implementation problems (such as missing facilities, teacher training gaps, or cultural barriers) before policies are finalized. They can also provide realistic estimates of resource requirements. In Sindh, the opposite occurs: policies are designed in provincial capitals by senior bureaucrats and international consultants with limited ground-level input. As a result, policies are often unrealistic, unfunded, or misaligned with local realities. This participant's experience is not an isolated case but a symptom of a governance model that treats school heads as mere instruments of policy rather than partners in reform.

4.2 Theme 2: Administrative Burden vs. Instructional Leadership

"I am a clerk with a title. I spend 70% of my time on journals and attendance instead of helping teachers handle slow learners. I drown in DDO paperwork." (Participant 9, School Head)[23]

This powerful metaphor—"a clerk with a title"—captures the role distortion experienced by many school heads in Sindh. The participant contrasts their aspiration (helping teachers handle slow learners, i.e., instructional leadership) with the reality (journals, attendance, DDO paperwork). DDO (Drawing and Disbursing Officer) responsibilities involve financial management, including salary disbursement, procurement, and audit compliance. While these tasks are necessary, they require clerical skills, not pedagogical expertise. When school heads spend 70% of their time on such tasks, they are effectively performing the work of an administrator rather than an instructional leader. This role distortion has direct consequences for inclusive education. Without instructional leadership, teachers receive no feedback on how to differentiate instruction for diverse learners. They may continue using whole-class, teacher-centered methods that leave behind students with learning difficulties or disabilities. The phrase "drown in DDO paperwork" conveys a sense of helplessness—the participant knows what they should be doing (supporting teachers) but is overwhelmed by compliance demands. This is not a matter of individual time management; it is a structural issue. The education department could relieve heads of DDO responsibilities by appointing dedicated administrative officers, but budget constraints make this unlikely.

"I have not observed a single teacher's complete lesson in the last six months because I am always signing files, responding to audit queries, or compiling enrolment reports." (Participant 2, School Head)[24]

This quotation provides a concrete illustration of the time deficit. Six months without a single complete lesson observation means that this participant has no firsthand knowledge of what happens in their school's classrooms. They cannot say whether teachers are using inclusive pedagogies, whether children with disabilities are participating, or whether the curriculum is accessible. They are flying blind, relying on second-hand reports and test scores that may not capture the nuances of inclusion. The mention of "audit queries" is significant: in a system with high corruption risk, audits are frequent and detailed, consuming enormous amounts of leader time. The irony is that while audits focus on financial probity, they ignore instructional quality. A school head could be scrupulously honest with finances but completely neglect teaching quality—and the audit would find no fault. This misalignment of accountability systems (financial compliance prioritized over pedagogical effectiveness) directly undermines inclusive education. The participant's tone is resigned; they are not complaining so much as stating a fact. This resignation is dangerous because it normalizes instructional neglect.

"When principals are overwhelmed by administrative tasks, they cannot fulfil their role as instructional leaders, and student learning suffers."[8]

Hallinger's observation, though made decades ago, remains acutely relevant. The instructional leadership model has been validated across multiple contexts, showing that principals who focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment have schools with higher student achievement. The mechanism is indirect: instructional leaders hire better teachers, provide them with professional development, observe and give feedback, and create a school culture focused on learning. In inclusive education, this is even more critical because teachers lack training in differentiation. Without principal support, they will not develop inclusive practices. This participant's school is almost certainly failing to provide meaningful inclusion, not because the head is incompetent, but because the system has prevented them from doing their job. Hallinger's model assumes a certain level of administrative support that allows principals to focus on instruction. In Sindh, that support is absent. The implication for policy is clear: either create dedicated administrative positions to relieve heads of DDO tasks, or radically simplify compliance procedures. Otherwise, instructional leadership will remain an aspiration rather than a reality.

4.3 Theme 3: Systemic Scarcity and the "Missing Facilities" Crisis

"How can I accommodate a child with autism when my school building doesn't even have a proper wall or clean water? They spend 0.8% of GDP, but in practice, we cannot afford a single ramp." (Participant 12, TEO)[25]

This TEO's rhetorical question exposes the absurdity of expecting inclusion without infrastructure. A child with autism may have sensory sensitivities that make crowded, noisy classrooms unbearable; but even if the school could create a calm corner, the lack of clean water means basic hygiene needs are unmet. The mention of "proper wall" refers to boundary walls that secure the school—without them, schools are vulnerable to theft, vandalism, and even security threats. The participant links the macro level (0.8% of GDP education spending) to the micro level (no ramp). This linkage is crucial because it shows that infrastructure deficits are not accidents; they are direct consequences of chronic underinvestment. Pakistan's education budget is one of the lowest in the world as a percentage of GDP, far below the UNESCO-recommended 4-6%. Even within that small budget, the share allocated to capital development (infrastructure) is minimal, with most funds going to salaries. As a result, schools go decades without significant renovation. Ramps, accessible toilets, and adapted furniture are simply never budgeted. The TEO's frustration is compounded by powerlessness: they know what is needed, but they have no authority to reallocate funds or approve infrastructure projects. Their role is to report deficiencies upward, but those reports rarely result in action.

> *"Our school has 600 girls but only two toilets, and neither has a door. Parents of girls with physical disabilities refuse to send them because there is no accessible toilet." (Participant 6, School Head)*[26]

This stark description—600 girls, two toilets, no doors—illustrates the intersection of gender, disability, and infrastructure. The lack of toilets is a barrier for all girls, but for girls with physical disabilities it is an absolute deal-breaker. A girl who uses a wheelchair cannot access a toilet without a ramp and wide door. Even if she could, the lack of doors means no privacy, which is especially problematic for adolescent girls. Parents, understandably, refuse to send their daughters to such schools, and their refusal is rational, not backward. This means that schools are not just failing to include children with disabilities; they are actively excluding them through infrastructure neglect. The participant's tone is one of helplessness: they know why parents are keeping their daughters home, but they cannot fix the problem because infrastructure projects require approvals and budgets far above their pay grade. The gender dimension is critical: Pakistan has made progress in enrolling girls in primary school, but retention in secondary school remains low. Lack of safe, private, accessible toilets is a major contributor. For girls with disabilities, the barrier is even higher. This finding suggests that inclusive education policy cannot be separated from WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) policy, gender policy, and disability policy. Siloed approaches will fail.

> *"Inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities are a major barrier to girls' education, and even more so for girls with disabilities."*[27]

The World Bank's finding confirms that this participant's experience is not unique to Pakistan but reflects a global pattern. Across low- and middle-income countries, lack of WASH facilities is a leading cause of absenteeism and dropout for girls, especially after menarche. The additional barrier for girls with disabilities is well-documented but often overlooked in policy. This participant's school is a case in point: the provincial education department may have policies on inclusive education and policies on WASH, but the two are not coordinated. The school head cannot access WASH funding by citing inclusive education needs, and vice versa. This siloing of policy domains is a systemic failure that middle-tier leaders cannot fix on their own. The implication for international donors and development partners is clear: infrastructure projects for WASH must explicitly include accessibility requirements (ramps, door widths, grab bars), and inclusive education projects must explicitly include WASH components. The 0.8% GDP budget must be increased, but equally important, existing funds must be spent more strategically. Building a ramp costs far less than building a new classroom, but if ramps are not prioritized in budget allocations, they will never be built.

4.4 Theme 4: Inclusive Leadership Fostering Teacher Agency

"Through the TARL program, our teachers gained confidence to teach at the child's knowledge level. We adjusted routines and focused on core literacy and numeracy." (Participant 5, School Head)[28]

This positive quotation provides a counterpoint to the otherwise bleak findings. The TARL (Teaching at the Right Level) program is a structured intervention that shifts teaching from grade-level content to child-level competencies. It involves assessing all children on basic literacy and numeracy, grouping them by learning level (not age or grade), and providing targeted instruction for 60-90 minutes daily. The participant's school adopted this approach, and teachers initially resistant became confident as they saw children learn. The phrase "we adjusted routines" is significant: it indicates that the school head made structural changes (timetables, grouping, teacher assignments) to enable TARL. This is a form of distributed leadership—the head created conditions for teacher success, but teachers exercised agency in how they taught. The mention of "core literacy and numeracy" is telling because in many Pakistani schools, the curriculum is overloaded with content, and teachers rush to cover material rather than ensuring mastery. TARL focuses on foundational skills, which is especially important for children with learning difficulties who may have fallen behind. This intervention was not funded by the provincial government; the school participated through an NGO partnership. This illustrates how external partnerships can bypass systemic constraints, but it also raises questions about sustainability when NGO support ends.

"When principals trust teachers and delegate authority, teachers respond with creativity, ownership, and persistence."[10]

Spillane's observation is validated by this participant's experience. The principal trusted teachers to make instructional decisions, including grouping children, selecting materials, and pacing lessons. In return, teachers demonstrated creativity (developing local visual aids, peer-tutoring systems), ownership (taking responsibility for all children's learning, not just "their" grade), and persistence (continuing to try new strategies when initial attempts failed). This is the opposite of the compliance culture described earlier. In compliance cultures, teachers follow prescribed curricula and pacing guides; when children fail, teachers blame the children or their families. In trust-based cultures, teachers experiment, reflect, and adapt. The challenge is that trust-based cultures require time, stability, and leadership support—resources that are scarce in the Sindh system. However, the TARL example shows that even within constraints, trust-based leadership can emerge, especially when coupled with structured programs that provide clear guidance and early wins (visible student progress). The implication for professional development is that training should not only focus on pedagogical techniques but also on building trust and agency.

> *"We formed a small committee of senior teachers and asked them to design simple, low-cost ways to help slow learners. They came up with peer-tutoring, visual aids, and extra time for assignments. This came from them, not from a manual." (Participant 8, School Head)*[29]

This participant describes a distributed leadership practice: forming a teacher-led committee and delegating real authority. The committee was not a token body; it was tasked with designing practical solutions. Their innovations—peer-tutoring (pairing stronger with weaker students), visual aids (using local materials like bottle caps and sticks for math), and extra time for assignments (a simple accommodation that many teachers resist due to coverage pressure)—are low-cost but effective. The participant emphasizes "this came from them, not from a manual," which highlights the importance of local ownership. Top-down manuals may sit on shelves, but teacher-generated solutions are implemented because teachers believe in them. This finding has implications for the Sindh Teachers Development Authority (STEDA): instead of importing off-the-shelf training modules, STEDA could facilitate teacher-led design workshops where practitioners share and refine inclusive strategies. The participant's role as head was to create the space (committee, meeting time) and then step back to let teachers lead. This requires humility and restraint—qualities not always associated with hierarchical leadership. But where it occurs, it produces remarkable results.

> *"Participatory leadership—where teachers are involved in decision-making—increases their commitment to implementing inclusive strategies."*[30]

This research from Turkey confirms the participant's experience: participatory leadership enhances teacher commitment. The mechanism is psychological: when teachers have a voice in decisions, they feel respected and valued, which increases their motivation to implement those decisions. Conversely, when decisions are imposed, teachers may comply minimally or resist passively. In the context of inclusive education, where teachers often lack confidence and hold unconscious biases, participatory leadership is especially important. It provides opportunities for teachers to voice concerns, ask questions, and learn from peers. The committee described by Participant 8 became a safe space where teachers could admit difficulties ("I don't know how to teach this child to read") and receive support. This is more effective than one-day workshops where teachers sit passively and then return to unchanged practices. The implication for policy is that performance management systems should not only measure outcomes (enrollment, test scores) but also processes (teacher involvement in decision-making, existence of teacher-led committees). Sindh's education reforms should institutionalize participatory structures, not leave them to the discretion of individual school heads.

5. Discussion

5.1 Reconceptualising Middle-Tier Leadership

The findings challenge the conventional view of middle-tier leaders as mere policy implementers. Instead, they are **adaptive leaders** who navigate bureaucratic inertia, resource scarcity, and socio-cultural barriers.

"Adaptive leadership involves mobilising people to face their own challenges and learn new ways of doing things; it is not about top-down solutions but about enabling local problem-solving."[11]

In Sindh, leaders are forced to be adaptive out of necessity, but without the authority to reallocate resources or adjust policies, their adaptation often takes the form of "muddling through" rather than strategic change. The TARL example shows what is possible when leaders are given flexibility; the Missing Middle theme shows what happens when they are not. Adaptive leadership requires adaptive authority—the formal power to experiment, adjust, and learn. Without that authority, adaptation becomes survival, not improvement.

> *"When middle-tier leaders lack formal authority, they rely on informal networks, persuasion, and 'jugaad'—but these are unsustainable and can perpetuate inequities."*[12]

This observation is crucial: jugaad can be creative, but it is not a substitute for systemic resourcing. Relying on informal networks advantages those with better connections, perpetuating inequities. In Sindh, a school head who is well-connected to the district office may get a ramp built, while a less-connected head waits for years. This is not equity; it is patronage. The solution is not to eliminate informal networks (they will always exist) but to ensure that formal systems are so effective that informal networks are not necessary for basic needs.

5.2 Weighted Funding as a Structural Solution

The absence of weighted funding—allocating additional resources based on student needs—is a critical gap. Countries like Finland and Canada have successfully adopted needs-based funding models.

> *"In Finland, schools receive additional funding for students with special needs, which is then used for smaller class sizes, teacher aides, and adapted materials."*[31]

Finland's model is needs-based, not diagnosis-based. A school with many students from low-income backgrounds, many recent immigrants, or many students with learning difficulties receives more funding. This flexibility allows principals to allocate resources where they are most needed. In Sindh, the School-Specific Budget (SSB) portal provides some school-level budgeting, but it is not weighted by need. A school with no children with disabilities receives the same per-student funding as a school with many. This is manifestly unfair and inefficient. Weighted funding could be integrated into the SSB portal by assigning each student a need category based on functional assessment. The additional funds would be used for ramps, assistive devices, teacher aides, or parent counseling—whatever the school determines. Weighted funding is not a panacea; it requires honest assessment and accountability for spending. But without it, inclusion will remain token.

5.3 Professional Development for Inclusive Literacy

Leaders demonstrated awareness of inclusive concepts but lacked practical skills. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) must shift from theoretical lectures to practice-based coaching.

> *"Effective CPD for inclusive education involves classroom-based coaching, peer observation, and collaborative planning, not one-day workshops."*[32]

The TARL example succeeded in part because it included structured classroom observation and feedback, not just training. Teachers were coached by peers and mentors as they implemented new practices. This is time-intensive but effective. Sindh's STEDA and PITE should redesign CPD to include school-based coaching cycles, release time for peer observation, and teacher learning communities. This will require additional funding, but it is a more effective use of resources than one-day mass trainings that produce no change.

5.4 Teacher Agency as a Mediating Mechanism

The TARL example confirms that distributed leadership enhances teacher agency, which in turn improves inclusive practices. This aligns with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model.

> *"Leadership support acts as a job resource that buffers against stress and burnout, enabling teachers to innovate and persist in challenging tasks."*[33]

In high-demand environments like inclusive classrooms, job resources (support from principal, access to materials, collaborative culture) are essential. Without them, teachers experience burnout and leave the profession. The findings suggest that investing in leadership capacity is a form of teacher retention strategy. When principals provide instructional leadership, delegate authority, and create collaborative cultures, teachers feel supported and are more likely to persist. This is a cost-effective intervention: leadership development costs far less than recruiting and training new teachers after burnout.

6. Recommendations for International Publication and Policy

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are structured for global relevance:

- **Adopt Weighted Student Funding** – Implement a needs-based funding formula that allocates additional resources for students with disabilities, low-income backgrounds, and learning difficulties. Integrate this into the existing SSB portal for transparency.

- **Decentralise Decision-Making** – Grant TEOs and School Heads autonomy over school-level budgets, staffing, and curriculum adaptations to respond to local needs.
- **Mandate Infrastructure Standards** – Establish an "Inclusive School Standard" requiring ramps, gender-segregated WASH facilities, and safe boundary walls in all new and rehabilitated schools, with priority for high-density urban areas.
- **Shift from Administrative to Instructional Leadership** – Redesign performance metrics to prioritise classroom observations, teacher mentoring, and curriculum development over clerical compliance.
- **Foster Distributed Leadership** – Create teacher-led committees for inclusive education, delegate decision-making, and celebrate bottom-up innovations like the TARL program.
- **Invest in Context-Specific CPD** – Support STEDA and PITE to design practice-based modules on IEPs, UDL, and functional assessment, including school-based coaching and peer observation.
- **Promote Cross-Country Learning** – Facilitate South-South exchanges between Sindh and other developing regions that have successfully implemented middle-tier leadership reforms.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited to a single district in Karachi and a small sample (n=15); findings may not be generalisable to rural Sindh or other provinces. Future research should:

- Conduct longitudinal studies tracking how leadership practices evolve with systemic reforms (e.g., IEISU).
- Use multi-stakeholder designs (teachers, parents, students) to capture diverse perspectives.
- Compare inclusive education implementation across provinces.
- Investigate the impact of weighted funding on inclusion outcomes through quasi-experimental designs.
- Explore socio-cultural barriers (disability stigma, gender norms) using ethnographic methods.

8. Conclusion

The educational crisis in Sindh is fundamentally a crisis of leadership and systemic equity. Middle-tier leaders are intrinsically motivated to implement inclusive education, but they are functionally paralysed by administrative overload, resource scarcity, and lack of practical training. Closing the policy-practice gap requires a paradigm shift: from compliance-oriented "inspectors" to supportive "mentors" empowered with decentralised authority, weighted funding, and inclusive literacy. The successful TARL intervention in Orangi Town demonstrates that even in challenging urban contexts, pedagogical transformation is possible when leaders trust and enable their teachers. Achieving Sindh's Vision 2026 and SDG 4 will depend on the province's ability to develop a new generation of "literate" inclusive leaders.

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