

EXPLORING UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING ACADEMICALLY UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY AND NUMERACY DEFICITS IN MAKRAN DIVISION, BALOCHISTAN

Mukhtar Bashir^{*1}, Dr. Abdul Rahim², Dr. Asma Alvi³, Shagufta Ambreen⁴

^{*1}PhD Scholar, Department of Education Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta

²ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, Department of International Relation Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta, Pakistan

³Assistant Professor, Department of Education Alhamd Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

⁴Head of department, Department of Education Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta, Pakistan

^{*1}mukhtar.bashir@ug.edu.pk, ²raheem_qta@hotmail.com, ³asmaalvi6@gmail.com,
⁴shagufta.umbreen@alhamd.pk

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Corresponding Author: *
Mukhtar Bashir

Abstract

University teachers in Makran Division, Balochistan, Pakistan, encounter a structural challenge that remains largely unexamined in the qualitative literature: teaching incoming undergraduate students who lack the foundational literacy and numeracy competencies presupposed by university-level study. This qualitative study explores the nature, structural origins, and pedagogical consequences of academic underpreparedness as experienced and articulated by 18 university teachers across three institutions in Makran Division – the University of Gwadar, the University of Turbat, and the University of Makran (Panjgur). Grounded in a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2016), the study employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) of 18 semi-structured interviews conducted between March and June 2026. Initial coding (Saldaña, 2021) produced 80 initial codes consolidated into 29 focused codes and three overarching themes with nine sub-themes: (1) Arriving Without the Tools, documenting the pervasive foundational literacy and numeracy deficits teachers encounter; (2) The Pipeline of Failure, tracing the structural conditions – social promotion, examination malpractice, and admission practices – that produce and conceal these deficits; and (3) Teaching in the Void, capturing teachers' improvised pedagogical adaptations, the institutional vacuum they inhabit, and the structural reforms they identify as necessary. Results show that the lack of student academic preparation is systematic, multidimensional, and structurally repeated in Makran Division. The contribution of this research lies in its qualitative findings, which will be relevant to teacher training institutes, university foundation programs, the examination system, and higher education policy.

INTRODUCTION

A significant and deeply concerning phenomenon is being witnessed in the seminar rooms and classrooms of universities in Makran Division. The university lecturers responsible for teaching degree level courses in Education, Management Sciences, Political Science, English Literature, Economics, Sociology and Balochi are, year after year, dealing with incoming classes of students who are unable to comprehend a university level text, unable to construct an academic argument through writing and unable to read a simple statistical table or do the percentage calculation assumed by their respective degree program. These are students who have completed 12 years of schooling, have obtained their Secondary School Certificates and Higher Secondary School Certificates, have cleared their entry test, and have successfully enrolled in degree programs. However, these students are, as one eight-year veteran lecturer of these universities put it, as if they did not have the twelve years behind them.

The Makran Division includes the districts of Gwadar, Kech (Turbat), and Panjgur in the coastal and southern part of Balochistan province of Pakistan. The developmental path taken by this division has been greatly influenced by its location in the middle of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), raising hopes of gaining the relevant qualifications to befit future economic opportunities. Providing access to higher education in this area by creating three public universities and expanding their intake capacity can be viewed as a sincere effort towards educational equity. Nevertheless, mere access without proper preparation does not make up for educational equity, and access has not gone hand in hand with improvements in the quality of the educational pipeline.

The phenomenon of academic underpreparedness among college students is well-documented internationally (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Conley, 2010). In Pakistan, the ASER Pakistan report reveals that the

majority of children who have completed five grades of primary school in rural areas are unable to read a text in Urdu at the second-grade level or perform two-digit division (ASER Pakistan, 2023). Balochistan province is known to have the worst foundational skills among all provinces (UNICEF Pakistan, 2022). The universities of Makran division are the recipients of the end result of this system: students who, despite having spent 12 years in schooling and having obtained the required certificates of completion, lack the foundational skills that should have been acquired by that time, according to the system.

Despite the seriousness of this issue, no qualitative research exists on how academic underpreparedness among university students appears from the perspective of university teachers in the peripheries of Pakistan (Sain, 2023; Sain & Li, 2023; Yasir et al., 2025; Zitha et al., 2024). Existing research is predominantly quantitative or policy-focused; it demonstrates the existence of this problem in Pakistan but is unable to capture the experiences of university teachers working in such conditions, their understanding of its causes, and their coping strategies.

Objectives and Research Questions

The purpose of the qualitative study is to investigate university teachers' experiences concerning teaching the academically underprepared students in Makran Division, Balochistan. The research was framed around three questions.

RQ1: How do university teachers in Makran Division view the nature of foundational literacy and numeracy deficits of new admission undergraduate students?

RQ2: How do teachers justify the structural conditions that produce and deliver academically underprepared students to their classrooms, namely social promotion, exam malpractice, and university admission practices?

RQ3: How do the teachers respond pedagogically to the challenge of teaching academically

underprepared students? What structural reforms do the teachers identify as necessary?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on an ontological constructivist and epistemological interpretivist approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Regarding constructivism, academic underpreparedness should not be viewed as an objectively existing phenomenon that requires documentation, but rather as a socially constructed phenomenon that acquires its meaning within the particular institutional, cultural, and political context of the Makran Division. From an interpretivist perspective, the purpose of this research is not to test hypotheses but to develop an in-depth, context-specific understanding of how teachers perceive a particular structural situation.

Vygotsky's (1978) socioconstructivist perspective guides the theoretical underpinning of this research on foundational skills acquisition and university pedagogy. Cognitive development, according to Vygotsky (1978), occurs through the mediation of cultural tools such as language, literacy, and symbolism, as well as through social interactions in which these tools are learned. University students without foundational literacy and numeracy skills lack the mediating tools without which no further intellectual development can occur in an academic setting. The university instructor who faces such students serves as an important mediator. Another important theoretical aspect of Vygotsky (1978) is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development that explains the scaffolding processes described in this study.

The structural critique of educational technologies offered by Selwyn (2011), now applied to foundational skills, represents the sociological framework needed to comprehend the underpreparedness phenomenon as structural rather than individual. What can be observed in the classrooms of the universities in Makran

Division is the expected and preventable result of the structural problem: decades of under-investment in education, inadequately staffed and equipped schools, a faulty assessment system, and admissions based on enrollment that has not been fixed for decades (Lall, 2020; Selwyn, 2011).

Academic Underpreparedness in Higher Education

According to Conley (2010), the term college readiness refers to four dimensions: cognitive strategies, academic knowledge and skills, academic behaviors, and contextual knowledge. The students analyzed in this research demonstrate deficiencies mainly in the first two dimensions. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) find similar patterns among first-generation university students from under-resourced school systems who cannot make the jump to the higher-order thinking required at university because they lack the literacy building blocks. In Pakistan, ASER Pakistan (2023) reports that in rural Balochistan, less than a third of grade 5 students can read a sentence in Urdu, and less than a quarter can perform two-digit division. According to Lall (2020), the recurrent failure of the school system in Pakistan to develop foundational competencies is a structural under-investment that causes the under-prepared teachers, under-prepared students cycle.

Social Promotion, Examination Malpractice, and Assessment Invalidity

Social promotion, whereby students are promoted to higher grades irrespective of whether they have mastered the required learning outcomes, is recognized as the main institutional vehicle by which such deficits accrue in silence over many years of schooling (Shepard & Smith, 1989). In Pakistan, social promotion has been enabled by an incentive structure built around pass rates, social stigma associated with being retained in a particular grade level, and the lack of remedial structures that would ensure such

retention is productive educationally rather than punitive (Lall, 2020).

Pakistan's system of board examinations further aggravates the situation by validating the non-existence of the deficit. Rampant leakage of question papers, collusion among invigilators, and the use of outside help in answering questions are widespread in Pakistani boards' examinations (Khan, 2019; Academy of Educational Planning and Management [AEPAM], 2020). Apart from malpractice, Popham (2001) contends that the very design of these exams – which test one's ability to recall material learned from textbooks – makes them structurally incapable of being valid measures of literacy, numeracy, and analytical skills. Secondary school certificates, which are treated as evidence of being ready for university admissions, are now meaningless because of a combination of these two factors.

The Interpretive and Methodological Gap

The extant literature on academic underpreparedness in Pakistan, with its quantitative and policy-related findings, shows how serious the issue is. However, this literature fails to provide a qualitative perspective on how university teachers in Pakistan's geographical periphery make sense of their situation, interpret and respond to the issue in their classroom settings. To date, no qualitative research literature in the field of education has addressed the unique context of the Makran Division, which comprises three recently formed universities in geographically remote districts lacking foundation programs or other remedial frameworks.

Method

Research Design

In the current research project, the interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology is applied. The phenomenon to be studied, namely the experience and understanding of university teachers regarding academic underpreparedness

in Makran Division, cannot be researched using any other means but sustained participant-based interpretation offered by the qualitative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) has been chosen as the methodology owing to its epistemological malleability, interpretive design suitability, and capability to produce thematically thick descriptions of participants' experiences. This methodology was chosen instead of interpretive phenomenological analysis because it allowed for the discovery of cross-participant thematic patterns rather than in-depth phenomenology of each participant (Smith et al., 2009), and instead of grounded theory due to the goal of producing a thematic account rather than theory-building (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher himself will serve as the primary tool for data generation and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the current research, and the quality of analysis will be grounded in interpretive and theoretical sensitivity.

Participants

Purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) was employed to select 18 university teachers from three institutions in Makran Division: the University of Gwadar, the University of Turbat, and the University of Makran (Panjgur). The selection criterion was a minimum of one year of undergraduate teaching experience in the Makran Division. Participants were drawn from eight disciplinary departments – Education, Management Sciences, English, Political Science, Economics, Sociology, Social Work, and Balochi – to ensure disciplinary variation. Sample size was determined by the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016): the combination of a specific research aim, participants with directly relevant experience, and a data-generation approach yielding rich, detailed accounts produced an analytically sufficient dataset with 18 participants. Participant profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Code	Gender	University	Department	Designation	Experience	Duration
T-01	Male	U. of Gwadar	Education	Lecturer	7 yrs	62 min
T-02	Female	U. of Gwadar	Education	T. Fellow	2 yrs	65 min
T-03	Male	U. of Gwadar	Education	T. Fellow	3 yrs	60 min
T-04	Female	U. of Gwadar	Mgmt. Sciences	Lecturer	8 yrs	63 min
T-05	Male	U. of Gwadar	Mgmt. Sciences	T. Fellow	2 yrs	68 min
T-06	Male	U. of Turbat	Education	Lecturer	8 yrs	64 min
T-07	Female	U. of Turbat	English	Lecturer	7 yrs	62 min
T-08	Male	U. of Turbat	Political Science	Lecturer	5 yrs	63 min
T-09	Female	U. of Makran (P)	Education	Lecturer	3 yrs	61 min
T-10	Male	U. of Makran (P)	Education	Lecturer	3 yrs	62 min
T-11	Female	U. of Makran (P)	Education	T. Fellow	2 yrs	60 min
T-12	Male	U. of Makran (P)	Education	T. Fellow	1 yr	60 min
T-13	Male	U. of Turbat	Balochi	Lecturer	5 yrs	60 min
T-14	Female	U. of Turbat	Sociology	Lecturer	2 yrs	61 min
T-15	Male	U. of Makran (P)	Social Work	Lecturer	4 yrs	63 min
T-16	Male	U. of Turbat	Economics	Lecturer	5 yrs	65 min
T-17	Male	U. of Turbat	Mgmt. Sciences	Lecturer	8 yrs	70 min
T-18	Female	U. of Turbat	Mgmt. Sciences	Lecturer	8 yrs	67 min

Note. T. Fellow = Teaching Fellow. U. = University. (P) = Panjgur Campus.

Data Collection

Interviews using semi-structured questions were held from March to June 2026. The interview guide was designed through continuous interaction with the literature, feedback from peers in research, and two pilot interviews with teacher educators at a similar institute (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2019). Seven open-ended questions were included in the guide, which were: (a) Deficiencies of literacy and numeracy skills among students, (b) Consequences on their academic achievements, (c) Reason for students being underprepared, (d) Malpractice in exams and validity of assessments, (e) University admissions criteria, (f) Teaching difficulties and adaptation and (g) Needs for reforms. Participants decided on the interview location. Interviews ranged from 60 to 70 minutes and were conducted in Balochi. Field notes were taken after each interview. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection; the participants

are coded using numbers and letters (T-01 to T-18).

Data Analysis

The study was subjected to analysis using the six-step reflexive thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). After becoming familiar with the data through several rounds of reading and writing reflexive memos, initial coding was carried out using the line-by-line technique suggested by Saldaña (2021), resulting in 80 initial codes that formed 9 clusters. The focused coding technique (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021) narrowed down the 80 initial codes to 29 focused codes, forming 7 analytical groups based on recurrence, analytical weight, and coherence. Three main themes and 9 sub-themes were generated after engaging analytically with the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Trustworthiness

Reliability was ensured through member checks with five participants across three universities; one participant's views led to the recasting of the first definition of examination malpractice from an individualistic to a structural/systemic phenomenon. Peer debriefing and negative case analysis were done systematically (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The transferability is guaranteed through thorough contextualization of the participants and the study's processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The dependability is ensured through an audit trail of the entire analytical process. Confirmability is ensured through journaling throughout the data collection and analysis phases to ensure that results are based on the data and not on any researcher's assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

Three overarching themes were developed from the data, each comprising three sub-themes, together constituting a coherent account of the nature, structural origins, and pedagogical consequences of academic underpreparedness in Makran Division. Cross-participant convergence across all three university sites was the defining analytical feature. Data traceability is maintained through participant codes (T-01-T-18). Quotations of 40 or more words are presented as indented block quotations (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020); shorter quotations are embedded within the analytical text. The full thematic map is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Map: From Initial Codes to Overarching Themes

Overarching Theme	Sub-Theme	Selected Focused Codes	IC Count
T1: Arriving Without the Tools	ST1a: Reading Without Meaning, Writing Without Thought	FC-01, FC-02, FC-03	13
	ST1b: Numbers as Foreign Language	FC-04, FC-05	6
	ST1c: From Substitution to Learned Helplessness	FC-06 to FC-10	11
T2: The Pipeline of Failure	ST2a: Promoted But Not Prepared	FC-11 to FC-16	12
	ST2b: The Certificate That Lies	FC-17, FC-18, FC-19	10
	ST2c: The Last Open Gate	FC-20, FC-21	7
T3: Teaching in the Void	ST3a: Absorbing the System's Failure	FC-22, FC-23	2
	ST3b: The Scaffold That Should Not Exist	FC-24, FC-25	9
	ST3c: The Reform That Cannot Wait	FC-26 to FC-29	10

Note. IC = Initial Code; FC = Focused Code; T = Theme; ST = Sub-Theme.

Theme One: Arriving Without the Tools

The most analytically foundational finding of this study is the pervasiveness and depth of

foundational literacy and numeracy deficits among students entering universities in Makran Division. All 18 participants, across all three

university sites and five departments, with teaching experience ranging from 1 to 8 years, described, with structural convergence and without exception, a student population that arrives at university without the foundational intellectual tools that degree-level study requires and presupposes.

Reading Without Meaning, Writing Without Thought

At all three sites, the same foundational problem in literacy was recognized: students decode written text but do not understand it. They convert symbols into words but are unable to derive argumentation, inference, and opinion, or to synthesize across paragraphs. T-01, who has worked at the University of Gwadar for seven years, explained how he conducts an informal reading diagnostic test for all his new classes:

“I usually give an informal diagnostic test to my students – a reading passage followed by a set of questions. My experience shows that many students find it difficult to comprehend a moderately complex academic passage. They have difficulties with vocabulary and an inability to understand the meanings of words in context. They are unable to determine the central idea and arguments in a paragraph. Overall, their reading comprehension is very low at the secondary school level. (T-01, Q1)”

T-06 at the University of Turbat pointed out the same thing: many students “cannot comprehend academic texts independently. They read word by word rather than extracting meaning from paragraphs.” T- 11 emphasized the pedagogical aspect: “students have been taught to read texts but not to understand them. Active reading techniques such as prediction, inference, self-monitoring, and connection of new information with old ones were never explicitly taught to them.”

In writing skills, the deficit was reflected in and exceeded the problem in reading comprehension. T- 10 noted: “Students write by putting together sentences – not by developing arguments.

Student assignments resemble the definition of terms and facts without any line of reasoning.” T-01 described more grammatical and stylistic aspects:

They submit papers full of basic mistakes in grammar – wrong subject-verb agreement, misuse of tenses, misplacement of punctuation marks and incomplete sentences. Students cannot organize their ideas coherently into paragraphs. A topic sentence followed by details and a conclusion is not familiar to many of them. I have seen students enrolled in a university who cannot write a single complete sentence, let alone a paper. (T-01, Q1)

The specific context-related, yet analytically important aspect emerged in the University of Turbat’s Balochi Department. T- 13 revealed the paradox of students being fluent in their mother tongue while being illiterate in it: “Most notable is the difference between oral proficiency and writing skills. Many students are not literate in Balochi, although they are native speakers of it.”

Numbers as Foreign Language: Procedural Numeracy Masking Conceptual Absence

Similar to the literacy deficit, the numeracy deficit was also extensive and structurally grounded. Students described having performed various mathematical procedures throughout their lives without establishing any conceptual connection with numerical thinking. Participant T-01 noted one of the more basic ways in which this deficit manifests: “Students cannot interpret a simple table or a bar graph. They do not even have rudimentary numerical reasoning.” T- 17, a participant with eight years of teaching experience at the University of Turbat, explained the structural cause:

These students memorized formulas in their mathematics classes at school. However, when they apply the formula to a different setting, they fail to adjust it. I have been teaching for 8 years, and what I can say is that these are not individual problems; they are systematic outputs of a school

system that does not teach what it is supposed to teach. (T- 17, Q1)

Participant T- 10 mentioned the emotional side of the problem: “Many students confess to me that numbers scare them. For them, mathematics has always been a source of anxiety and failure.” This math anxiety, created by years of procedural deficiency without any conceptual learning, acts as an independent emotional barrier to learning mathematics at the university level.

From Substitution to Learned Helplessness: Cascading Consequences

The foundational deficit ripples out into all aspects of the students’ educational experience. T- 08 at the University of Turbat highlighted the following classroom phenomenon as particularly analytically insightful:

Students use description rather than analysis. They are supposed to analyze a political theory critically, but instead provide a summary. They know, on some level, that they did not do what was required – but they lack the intellectual skill set necessary to do anything else. The move from description to analysis requires explicit instruction and practice. (T-11, Q2)

The psychological process behind it is described by T-02 as follows: “the cognitive effort required to translate thoughts into proper English grammar is so great that very little room remains to retrieve and organize substantive knowledge. Students have told me before, after examinations, that they knew the answers but could not complete them in time.” The trajectory experienced by the students in response to this is described by T-01 as follows:

“Students experience academic shame. They know they are struggling; they see that their peers are struggling, and they come to believe they are not able to do what is required of them, not that they were not properly prepared to do so. (T-01, Q2)”

The stakes of such a trajectory, specifically for teacher education, were pointed out by T-02 with analytical urgency: “If they cannot read, write,

and reason, they cannot teach reading, writing, and reasoning. We risk repeating the cycle of underprepared teachers creating underprepared students with every graduating class we have.” This point aligns with Lall’s (2020) findings on intergenerational educational poverty as an inherent problem in schooling.

Theme Two: The Pipeline of Failure

Theme Two concerns the architecture of causality for the deficit highlighted in Theme One. This deficit does not arrive at the university; it is delivered there via a 12-year pipeline of institutions, where failure leads to production, stockpiling, and hiding, and academic ill-preparedness is delivered without being revealed or remedied. Three mechanisms within the structure serve as sub-themes.

Promoted But Not Prepared: Social Promotion and the Hidden Accumulation of Deficit

Social promotion was identified as the key mechanism behind the accumulation of deficits over the 12-year schooling period by 17 of the 18 participants (Shepard & Smith, 1989). T-01 explained the logic of institutions underpinning this phenomenon:

“School performance, both formally and informally, is measured based on the number of students that have passed, not how much they have learned. Parents have expectations about their children’s progress. Administrators do not want to deal with the controversy surrounding large-scale failure. Students keep getting promoted year after year without ever building their foundations at all.” (T-01, Q3)

Teacher quality was the proximate cause identified by T-02: “Many teachers at the schools of Makran have been educated in a weak educational environment. Their foundations are weak. They have not got a pedagogically sound education. They teach how they have been taught through dictation, memorization, and recitations.” T- 09 provided details about

resource poverty faced by the Panjgur Campus: “Very severe resource constraints are faced by schools in this district: there are serious shortages of teachers. Here in these multi-grade classes, one teacher teaches the students of different years, and there are practically no supplementary materials available for them.” T- 17 provided the structural framing that kept repeating throughout the participant statements:

“The students that come to me unprepared are, for the most part, students who have done everything that they have been expected to do. They have gone to school. They have taken exams. They have passed. They have gotten certificates. The system has worked on them and issued them certificates. These students have not failed the system; the system has failed them.” (T-17, Q3)

The Certificate That Lies: Normalized Malpractice and the Collapse of Assessment Validity

While the education system generates the underlying deficit, the system of board examinations authenticates it by making it seem non-existent. T- 08 described the ecosystem of malpractice in the context of the examination process and its normalization:

The modus operandi of malpractice is well understood: the distribution of the question paper before the exam, outside help providing answers, and the invigilator looking the other way or being in on the process. Malpractice is common, not occasional; what is even more analytically relevant is that it has become normalized: students do not regard cheating as cheating when the class is involved, and when the system does not prepare them for success in any other way. (T-11, Q4)

In addition to active malpractice, T- 08 pointed out the structural assessment invalidity: “a student who studies diligently and a student who understands the subject matter equally well will get pretty much the same score since the exam is unable to differentiate between the two. Thus,

malpractice creates a kind of academic fraud which is perfectly legal.” T-03 documented structural examination invalidity in the context of diagnostic assessment:

I give my students a quick diagnostic reading and writing exercise at the beginning of the academic year. I find that the results consistently show a discrepancy between the grades and the students’ actual literacy levels. For instance, students who have a B grade in English/Urdu at the board level cannot compose a coherent paragraph. (T-03, Q4)

Long-term institutional implications were explained by T- 17 as follows: “I no longer consider the secondary school grades informative at all. The discrepancy between the information the transcript provides and the ability of the student is so consistent that ignoring the transcript would be analytically misleading.” The above findings confirm Popham’s (2001) suggestion that instructionally insensitive examinations represent a structural, not just technical, problem in education.

The Last Open Gate: University Admission as the Final Structural Failure

The university admission process can be seen as the final stage of the structural pipeline. As T-01 explained:

“I have been in admission committee meetings where questions about the academic preparation of some students were brought up and pushed aside due to ‘the need to fill our seats.’ There is a structural incentive to admit as many students as possible, even if they are not properly prepared. As for the entry test, there is a whole industry based on training students to achieve better results, but without improving their fundamental skills.” (T-01, Q5)

This structural pressure during the admissions process was noted by T-05: “The number of students applying to our program was not high, and the admission threshold was very low by default, as we had the need to fill our seats.” However, as noted by T-02, “the entry test shows

whether the student meets the minimum criteria, but it does not show whether he/she is prepared for the academic challenges of university study.” Furthermore, according to T-01, “we are admitting the students and expecting them to do well at the level they are not prepared to perform at, and without creating proper structures for success.”

Theme Three: Teaching in the Void

The third theme focuses on the experience of the university teacher at the end of the structural pipeline mentioned in Theme Two – that of facing all the results of twelve years of structural breakdown in his/her classroom without any framework from the institution, without policies and without any extra workload, and acting upon that situation through moral rather than institutional means.

Absorbing the System’s Failure: Institutional Vacuum and Personal Cost

Each interviewee shared the same structure of their predicament. For instance, T-01 stated the key contradiction:

There is no structural provision for either remedial or supplementary instruction. I provide such classes out of a sense of professionalism and moral responsibility towards my students, rather than because of any structural support. When I put myself through the extra work of providing foundational education – helping students learn to write a paragraph, read for comprehension, and paraphrase an academic text – I am doing what they should have done in primary and secondary school. (T-01, Q6)

T-01 also highlighted that the pedagogical predicament was inherently unresolvable: “Should I adhere to the academic standards but know that many students will fail, or should I lower the complexity but be aware that I am not teaching them the university course?” Moreover, T- 12, the first-year Teaching Fellow of the Panjgur Campus, said about the dimension of professional isolation:

What I have the greatest difficulty with in my work is its isolation. As a Teaching Fellow, fresh on the job, I have not been provided with any mentoring, professional development, or collegial support regarding teaching foundationally deficient students. I make it up as I go, adapt when I can. Sometimes I feel like I have to reinvent the wheel each semester. (T- 12, Q6)

The Scaffold That Should Not Need to Exist: Improvised Pedagogical Adaptation

While there was no lack of an institutional framework for these practices, individual participants had become proficient in creating their highly elaborate systems of pedagogical adjustment. T-02 explained her approach to scaffolding of reading and writing over the span of seven years:

I do not simply give out readings; I give reading guides that highlight important passages and pose questions to encourage students to focus on their reading. I do not simply assign essays; I break down the writing process into several stages and provide instructions and feedback at each. I demonstrate how to write an academic paper by explaining the process of making up a paragraph. (T-02, Q6)

T- 09 had developed a system of “incremental release”: “I offer extremely structured templates to complete initial assignments and then slowly reduce the structure throughout the semester.”

T-06 relied on bilingual code-switching as a necessity for practical understanding: “I use Balochi in addition to English for explanation, especially when the material is complicated, in order to ensure that linguistic barriers do not hamper the understanding. Technically, it is against the medium of instruction policy, but practically inevitable.” T-02 articulated the underlying temporal paradox of the strategy:

The students who participate in this do benefit from it. Nevertheless, the problem is that it takes time, and by the time the results start showing, it is already too late in the semester. The deficit has accumulated over the years; the remediation

period is just weeks long. No amount of pedagogical creativity can be done within this time constraint. (T-02, Q6)

The Reform That Cannot Wait: Structural Imperatives at Every Level

Reform visions proposed by participants were analytically rigorous, structurally consistent, and multi-level. T- 18, who had been teaching for eight years, noted the fundamental basis for reform:

The quality of teachers is the key lever. Not curriculum documents. Not an examination system. Not even a policy framework. Teachers! An adequately trained, motivated teacher who knows how to teach literacy, numeracy and mathematical thinking is the necessary and sufficient condition for everything else to follow. Nothing else will work until this problem is solved. (T- 18, Q7)

For T- 17, the most powerful systemic lever was the redesign of examinations:

If the examinations require genuine understanding of what they assess: analysis, application of ideas, mathematical reasoning, writing about knowledge – then all of the system will be changed, because the examination tail wags the pedagogical dog: Change the examinations and you will change the teaching. (T- 17, Q7)

The most urgently needed university-level reform, according to T-01, is as follows:

The most urgent university reform is adequate foundation programs – not stigmatized remediation or additional courses, but academic preparation which is recognized as an entitlement of students coming from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. (T-01, Q7)

T- 12 pointed out the necessary policy-level condition:

There is a lack of data on children's fundamental literacy and numeracy levels in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan. No good, reliable and publicly available data to design interventions and hold institutions accountable. (T-15, Q7)

T- 09 highlighted the gender-equality dimension: Educational attainment of girls in Makran Division is significantly lower than that of boys' attainment due to specific social and structural barriers, which are neglected in general reform designs. (T- 09, Q7)

Discussion

This research has investigated the experience of teaching academically underprepared students from the perspective of university teachers from Makran Division. Themes One, Two, and Three, taken together, present an extended and qualitative addition to the existing quantitative literature on quality education in Balochistan and Pakistan.

What is analytically significant is not the presence of foundational deficits – these have been well-studied (ASEP Pakistan, 2023; UNICEF Pakistan, 2022)- but their structural form and mode of production. These deficits are not random individual failures in the classroom; they are the result of structural mechanisms that produce, obscure, and deliver them to the university. Social promotion eliminates the structural trigger that could disrupt the accumulation of deficits. Examination malpractice and poor assessment practices eliminate them. Enrollment-driven admissions accept them without disclosure. The mechanism is analytically consistent with Selwyn's (2011) concept of structural educational inequalities and with Conley's (2010) view of college readiness as a system-wide phenomenon rather than an individual accomplishment.

The fact that university teachers from three different institutions independently stopped using secondary school transcripts as an indicator of academic preparation is important from a policy perspective. In fact, this finding shows that the secondary school certificate validity collapse (AEPAM, 2020; Khan, 2019) has reached a point where the first recipients of information provided by this certificate no longer treat it as valid. The situation can be described as a systemic legitimacy

crisis and not just a technical problem related to examination validity and reliability, according to Popham (2001).

The pedagogical strategies university teachers use in Theme Three are analytically relevant in two directions at once. First, scaffolding techniques such as reading guides, staged writing, releasing responsibility incrementally, and using bilingual code-switching work and help students learn when they do (Hammond, 2015). Second, the consistent lack of structural support for these strategies reveals another dimension of the phenomenon that is usually not addressed in the pedagogical innovations literature. Improvising an approach to teach which works within an institution that offers no support for it, nor is it sustainable, nor equitable. Access to the scaffolding strategies that work depends only on the teacher's individual effort.

The reform priorities mentioned in Theme Three are consistent with and extend the literature on systemic reforms necessary in Pakistan to provide quality education (Andrabi et al., 2009; Lall, 2020). The key importance of teachers' professional qualities, the systemic value of examination reforms, the necessity of foundation programs in universities, and the possibility offered by data on transparent accountability are all included in an internally coherent reform agenda. What this study contributes to the policy literature is the urgency created by experienced testimony: demands from practitioners who spent many years and their own money dealing with structural problems they did not create and cannot solve. Lincoln & Guba (1985) warn about the impossibility of generalizing from qualitative findings to the population. However, the structural pipeline described above is theoretically transferable to other parts of Pakistan and similar situations in the Global South.

Conclusion

This paper is intended to investigate the challenges university teachers face in teaching academically underprepared students. However,

what the research findings show goes beyond the teaching challenge and becomes the structural reality of how university teachers deal with twelve years of education producing foundational deficits, hiding them through social promotion and invalid assessment, validating them as non-existent through malpractice-compromised board examinations, and delivering them to universities without any disclosure and provision. Therefore, university teachers face this challenge at the end of this structure and have to address it through their personal moral responsibility, scaffolding, and emotional labour to compensate for structural gaps and failures.

The most significant contribution of this study is the qualitative analysis of the mechanism by which structural failure is transformed into the challenge experienced by university teachers. The three themes – Arriving Without the Tools, The Pipeline of Failure, and Teaching in the Void – represent an account that has been provided in quantitative studies and policy literature within the framework of the phenomenon but does not include its insider narration. University teachers in Makran Division know the origin, cost, and consequences of the deficit in question, and the necessity of structural reform to address it.

The implications of the study are multiple: at the school level, teacher quality and training are the key foundations; at the examination level, the competency-based design of tests is the only available systemic lever (Popham, 2001); at the university level, foundation programs are the necessary structural provision that the students coming from educationally disadvantageous backgrounds deserve; and at the policy level, the provision of reliable data on foundational learning outcomes, gender-responsible educational services, and accountability mechanisms is an enabling condition without which all other reforms will remain uncontrolled (Lall, 2020; UNICEF Pakistan, 2022).

The limitations of this study require further investigation. The study's sample is limited to teachers; thus, students' voices are mediated

through their teachers' accounts. Future research should involve student participants to evaluate the deficit problem from the students' perspective. Longitudinal research will enable researchers to observe students' deficit trajectories over one or more academic years. Comparative qualitative research across other districts of Balochistan will reveal whether the described mechanism applies only to Makran Division. The main point of this research is the analytical frame: what happens in the universities of Makran Division is not a problem of individually underprepared students.

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