

Navigating the Classroom: Challenges Confronting Teachers in Public Sector Education

Wajiha Hussain¹, Tasneem Saifuddin², Mahwish Hasnain³

¹. Public School Teacher, Sindh Education and Literacy Department

². PhD, Lecturer, NUML University Karachi Campus

³. Lecturer, MITE University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1579>

Abstract

Teachers in Pakistan's public-sector schools work under persistent systemic constraints that affect their motivation and instructional practices. This qualitative narrative case study explores the intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing teacher motivation in a public secondary school in Karachi and examines the role of leadership-mediated strategies in improving classroom practices. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four teachers, the school principal, and a district education officer, along with ten unannounced classroom observations conducted over four weeks. Guided by self-determination theory and instructional leadership frameworks, the findings reveal that delayed salaries, overcrowded classrooms, and shortages of basic teaching materials significantly undermine teacher motivation and promote teacher-centered instruction. Conversely, supportive leadership practices such as formative feedback, peer-learning communities, and short coaching cycles enhanced teachers' sense of autonomy, competence, and professional confidence. The study concludes that integrated, school-based interventions combining stable working conditions with instructional leadership and collaborative professional learning are essential for improving teacher motivation, instructional quality, and student engagement in public-sector schools.

Keywords: Teacher Motivation, Peer-Learning Community, Quality Education, Public Sector

Introduction

Education quality in Pakistan's public secondary schools has long been constrained by systemic factors that undermine both teacher motivation and student learning (Shoaib et al.). Although enrolment rates have risen, national assessments show fewer than half of grade-five and grade-eight pupils meet minimum literacy and numeracy benchmarks (ASER Pakistan, 2020). In Karachi, schools vary widely: some face overcrowded classrooms and outdated materials, while others struggle with irregular teacher attendance and limited leadership capacity (Kanwal et al., 2025). This study uses a qualitative narrative case study design to explore how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators interact with leadership practices in one urban school. Self-determination theory posits that satisfying autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs drives sustained motivation, yet many Karachi schools rely on top-down supervision and episodic workshops that satisfy neither intrinsic nor basic "hygiene" factors (Mansoor, 2020). Distributed and instructional leadership models emphasize peer collaboration, formative feedback, and reflective practice, offering potential pathways for aligning resources and professional supports to daily teaching challenges (Zulfiqar et al., 2025). Despite policy prescriptions advocating multifaceted interventions, combining resource enhancements, leadership development, and peer-learning communities, there is scant evidence on their feasibility and impact in Karachi's public secondary schools (Zohra et al., 2023). Evaluations focus on large-scale reforms or one-off training programs at provincial level, leaving school leaders and district authorities without context-

sensitive guidance. As a result, motivation strategies risk remaining superficial or unsustainable, perpetuating low teacher morale and subpar student achievement thereby the study is there to explore intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing teacher motivation in the selected Karachi public secondary school and to evaluate the impact of leadership-mediated motivation strategies on teacher instructional practices and student engagement.

This study pilots an integrated motivation intervention within a Karachi government secondary school. First, it examines how targeted strategies for example timely provision of classroom materials, structured peer-learning sessions, and ongoing formative feedback affect teachers' autonomy, competence, and relatedness (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021). Second, it equips provincial and district education authorities with evidence on aligning resource allocations with professional supports, bridging the gap between policy and practice. Third, narrative and observational data enrich theoretical understanding of teacher motivation in low-resource settings, illustrating how self-determination constructs operate under instructional leadership interventions. The research is confined to one government secondary school operating under the Sindh Education Directorate in Karachi. Participants include four purposively selected teachers (two male, two female), the school principal, and one district education officer. Over a four-week period, the study implements motivation strategies that include classroom resource enhancements, peer-learning communities, and formative feedback cycles the study also employs semi-structured interviews and ten unannounced classroom observations to assess impacts on teacher practices and student engagement.

Literature Review

Drawing on national surveys, narrative research, multilateral policy briefs, and leadership scholarship, it lays the groundwork for an explanatory-action study designed to pilot teacher motivation strategies and assess their impact on classroom practice and student achievement (Kanwal et al., 2025; ASER Pakistan, 2020; UNICEF Pakistan, 2021; Zohra et al., 2023; Mansoor, 2018). Robust evidence base shows that structural weaknesses constrain teacher performance across Pakistan's public schools. Narrative analyses chronicle systemic underfunding, dilapidated facilities, gap in teacher preparation, and governance shortfalls that shape daily classroom life (Kanwal et al., 2025). Household surveys link these factors to substandard learning outcomes, highlighting irregular teacher attendance, oversized classes, and limited instructional time as core drivers (ASER Pakistan, 2020). Multilateral reports further identify chronic teacher shortages, erratic salary disbursements, and politically motivated posting practices that erode morale and disrupt instructional continuity (Shohaib et al., 2025). Together, these findings underscore that teacher challenges are deeply structural and require interventions addressing both material conditions and professional supports (Saifuddin, 2025; Zohra et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on two perspectives: contextual constraints and school-level dynamics that influence teacher behavior. The study adopts an integrated theoretical model (Jabeen et al., 2025). From motivation theory, it distinguishes between extrinsic hygiene factors such as reliable compensation and secure working condition and intrinsic drivers like recognition, mastery, and autonomy (Ikram et al., 2026; Mansoor, 2018). Self-determination theory argues that nurturing autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters sustained engagement more effectively than one-off incentives (Mansoor, 2018). Leadership perspectives add that school leaders act as crucial intermediaries through distributed and instructional leadership. Through peer coaching, formative feedback, and collaborative problem solving, they can translate systemic inputs into meaningful classroom improvements (Sahil, 2026; Iqbal et al., 2026). Comparative studies of low- and middle-income countries frequently point to centralized management, episodic in-service training, and tight budget constraints that stifle teacher development (Jabeen et al., 2025; Alam et al., 2026). Pakistan's ASER data align with these patterns but reveal unique urban complexities, such as intra-city variability in resource distribution and challenges arising

from multiple languages of instruction (ASER Pakistan, 2020). UNICEF's country profile highlights equity gaps and unresolved infrastructure deficits, reinforcing the need for integrated policies blending facility upgrades with systematic teacher development and supportive leadership practices (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021). Gross enrollment rates in Pakistan have risen over the past decade, yet foundational learning outcomes lag behind regional peers. Performance on basic literacy and numeracy assessments remains low and unevenly distributed across provinces and socio-economic groups (ASER Pakistan, 2020). Public expenditure on education as a share of GDP is among South Asia's lowest, contributing to worn-out classrooms, scarce teaching materials, and weakened state capacity for sustained, school-based professional learning (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021; ADB, 2019).

The Public Sector School System: Karachi Context

Karachi's public schools reflect the city's socio-economic fragmentation. Some schools grapple with severe overcrowding and resource shortages, while others suffer from declining enrollment and neglect (Sahil, 2026). Governance is split across provincial directorates, district education offices, and local management committees, creating uneven administrative practices and inconsistent professional development delivery (Mansoor, 2018). Political patronage influences teacher hiring and transfers, destabilizing professional communities and undermining leadership continuity. At the same time, Karachi's dense concentration of NGOs and training providers presents opportunities for piloting school-level interventions, though scaling these initiatives requires navigating complex governance structures (Zulfiqar et al., 2025). Public-sector teachers cite low salary scales, delayed payments, and heavy teaching loads as persistent factors of demotivation. Classes sometimes exceed fifty students, leaving little time for planning, formative assessment, or reflective practice. Professional development is often limited to short, workshop-style sessions that lack relevance to classroom realities, constraining teachers' capacity to adopt student-centered pedagogies (Kanwal et al., 2025; ASER Pakistan, 2020; Mansoor, 2018). Supervision tends to be hierarchical and compliance-driven, offering scant opportunities for mentoring, feedback, or collaborative problem solving. School heads frequently lack training in instructional leadership, impeding the formation of teacher learning communities and reflective practices essential for pedagogical innovation (Iqbal et al., 2026; Alam et al., 2026). Opaque recruitment and transfer systems, shaped by political patronage, foster instability and perceptions of unfairness. Frequent transfers disrupt community ties and erode institutional memory. The absence of transparent performance appraisals and clear career progression pathways further undermines teachers' intrinsic motivation to pursue continuous professional growth (Shoaib et al., 2025). National survey findings indicate that a large share of students fail to achieve grade-level competencies in foundational literacy and numeracy. Limited exposure to effective instructional practices such as differentiated teaching and formative assessment, contribute to low achievement, which in turn elevates dropout risks and diminishes future schooling returns (ASER Pakistan, 2020). Instruction in non-mother tongues, household poverty, and indirect schooling costs impede student engagement and retention, especially among marginalized communities. These barriers interact with teacher-centered constraints to deepen educational inequities (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021). Rigid curricula, prescriptive supervision, and centralized decision-making foster a culture of rule compliance rather than adaptive, student-centered teaching. Accountability systems focused on mandates rather than formative improvement dissuade teachers from experimenting with innovative instructional methods (Ali and Skandrani 2026).

Many public schools operate in substandard facilities that include crumbling classrooms, poor sanitation, unreliable electricity, and insufficient learning materials. While infrastructure upgrades can yield short-term improvements in morale and attendance, however, lasting instructional change requires coupling these enhancements with leadership development and pedagogical support structures (Zulfiqar et al., 2025). Teacher motivation in Pakistan's public sector arises from the interplay of extrinsic and intrinsic factors (Sahil, 2026). Extrinsic demotivating factors like erratic pay, heavy workloads, unclear career paths

establish a low motivational baseline. Intrinsic drivers such as opportunities for professional mastery, recognition, and autonomy still remain underleveraged. Policy and program literature advocate for school-centered, multifaceted interventions that blend modest material support (e.g., teaching-aid stipends) with sustained coaching, leadership training, and peer learning communities to address hygiene needs while fostering deeper engagement (Jabeen et al., 2023). The literature reveals a causal chain: structural constraints and weak leadership undermine teacher motivation, leading to suboptimal classroom practices and depressed student learning outcomes (Zohra et al., 2023). Despite international evidence supporting multifaceted, school-level interventions, rigorous evaluations of such strategies in Pakistan particularly action-research in urban centers like Karachi are scarce. This study addresses that gap by piloting context-sensitive motivation strategies and systematically evaluating their effects on teacher behavior and student performance, with a special focus on leadership-mediated mechanisms of change (Alam et al., 2026).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, narrative case study design to explore teacher motivation strategies within a public secondary school in Karachi. The narrative approach prioritizes teachers' lived experiences, allowing participants to express how intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence their professional motivation and classroom practices (Kanwal et al., 2025). Through the integration of semi-structured interviews and systematic classroom observations, the design captures both the subjective meaning teachers attach to their work and the observable dynamics of teaching and learning. The case study format enables an in-depth understanding of one school's context, uncovering site-specific challenges and opportunities, while offering transferable insights for other urban public schools across Pakistan facing similar conditions. A purposive sampling strategy guides the selection of one government secondary school that represents the typical conditions of public education in urban Karachi. The selected school must have enrolment of at least 500 students and demonstrated administrative willingness from the principal and district education officer to participate. Within this school, the study sample includes four teachers (two male and two female), each with a minimum of five years of teaching experience, along with the school principal and one district education officer overseeing school operations. This small yet balanced group provides a range of perspectives on teacher motivation, leadership practices, and classroom realities, enabling a holistic understanding of motivational dynamics in the public-school setting.

Data Collection Methods and Tools

Data are collected through semi-structured interviews and direct classroom observations conducted over a four-week period. The combination of these two methods enhances data triangulation, ensuring that reported experiences are corroborated with real-time classroom behaviors. Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 30 to 45 minutes, are conducted in private spaces within the school premises to ensure comfort and confidentiality. The interview guide provides structure while allowing flexibility for deeper exploration of participants' stories and perspectives.

Interview Guide

- What factors most influence your daily motivation to teach?
- How do school leaders contribute to or hinder your professional growth?
- Can you describe a recent classroom experience that made you feel fully engaged?
- In what ways do material conditions such as class size or infrastructure affect your teaching?
- What changes could strengthen your sense of autonomy and professional master

All interviews are audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim. The researcher also writes field memos immediately after each interview to document nonverbal cues, tone, and contextual observations that may enrich later analysis.

Observations

A total of ten unannounced classroom observations are conducted, each lasting one complete teaching period (approximately 40-50 minutes). An observation checklist guides note-taking across four key dimensions:

- Teacher–student interaction (questioning, feedback, peer engagement)
- Instructional strategies (use of formative assessment, group work, differentiation)
- Classroom management (discipline, routines, student participation)
- Learning environment (seating arrangement, teaching aids, infrastructure)

The researcher records detailed field notes describing not only actions but also classroom atmosphere, student engagement, and contextual conditions that provide a holistic picture of motivational practices in action. In order to maintain rigor and ethical integrity, the study follows established qualitative standards:

Credibility: Participants review their interview transcripts and thematic summaries to verify accuracy (member checking). Dependability: Reflective research journal documents methodological choices, field challenges, and emerging insights throughout the study. Confirmability: An audit trail connects original data, coded excerpts, and analytic memos to ensure objectivity. Transferability: Rich contextual descriptions of the school, participants, and setting allow readers to judge the relevance of findings to other environments. Ethical safeguards include written informed consent, institutional ethical approval, and confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. All digital files are stored on password-protected devices, and participants retain the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. The qualitative narrative case study methodology is used to explore teacher motivation in a Karachi public secondary school. Through purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and structured classroom observations, the study generates rich, triangulated data that illuminates the interplay between leadership, motivation, and teaching practice. Thematic analysis ensures coherence between participant experiences and classroom realities, while ethical and trustworthiness measures enhance the study's validity. The next chapter will present the findings, highlighting how motivational strategies and leadership dynamics shape teachers' engagement and instructional approaches.

Data Analysis and Findings

The findings derived from semi-structured interviews with teachers, analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The data revealed two overarching themes that illuminate the motivational, pedagogical, and infrastructural realities of teaching in resource-constrained school environments.

Theme 1: Professional Motivation and Growth in Challenging Contexts

Teachers consistently identified extrinsic “hygiene” factors as immediate demotivators in their daily practice. These included delayed salary payments, frequent shortages of basic classroom materials such as markers, chalk, and visual aids, overcrowded sections, and poor classroom infrastructure. Despite these challenges, non-material supports such as predictable pay, availability of basic supplies, clear role expectations, and simple recognition for instructional effort were reported to enhance motivation. One teacher noted, [*“When I know I’ll get paid on time and have chalk and a working board, I feel more prepared to teach.”*] Observations in these settings revealed a reliance on whole-class recitation, minimal use of manipulatives, and significant time consumed by behavior management, largely due to overcrowding and lack of resources. Leadership practices emerged as a critical factor in shaping professional growth. Teachers described two contrasting patterns: supportive leadership, characterized by brief, non-punitive coaching and instructional modeling, and compliance-focused leadership, which emphasized punctuality and register maintenance without pedagogical support. In the former, teachers felt encouraged to experiment and adopt new strategies, while the latter fostered risk-averse behavior and limited innovation. As one teacher shared, [*“Our head teacher shows us how to ask better questions. It makes me want*

to try new things.”] Lessons in coached environments featured formative checks and interactive questioning, whereas compliance-driven classrooms showed rote delivery and low student engagement. Teacher engagement was highest during peer planning sessions and lessons where formative feedback led to visible student responses. These experiences boosted confidence and encouraged the use of pair work, scaffold questioning, and brief formative checks. One teacher reflected, [*“When I planned with my colleagues, I felt more confident. The students responded better too.”*] Observed lessons following peer collaboration included more group tasks and interactive questioning than those planned individually, highlighting the value of shared instructional design.

Theme 2: Pedagogical Adaptation and Autonomy Amid Material Constraints

Material conditions significantly shaped pedagogical choices. In classrooms with large student populations and limited supplies, teachers gravitated toward control-oriented, teacher-centered methods to manage time and behavior. However, when modest, timely supplies such as handouts and simple manipulatives were available, especially alongside coaching support, teachers employed more interactive techniques. One teacher explained, [*“I used cut-out shapes for math. The students were excited and understood better.”*] Use of low-cost aids was evident in better-resourced lessons, which demonstrated higher student participation and engagement. Teachers also expressed a strong desire for autonomy and professional mastery through practical supports. They emphasized the importance of regular peer learning, developmental coaching cycles, protected time for collaborative planning, and recognition tied to instructional practice rather than attendance. Small, consistent supports were preferred over large, one-off trainings. As one teacher noted, [*Short coaching sessions helped me try new strategies. It made a real difference.”*] Post-coaching lessons included partner tasks and formative checks, visibly improving student participation and reinforcing the impact of sustained, context-sensitive professional development.

Table 1 *Summary of Findings*

Research Questions	Findings
RQ1: Factors influencing daily motivation	• Delayed salary and lack of supplies reduce motivation. • Predictable pay and basic materials improve daily morale. • Resource shortages cause reliance on whole-class teaching.
RQ2: Role of school leadership	• Coaching-based leadership boosts teacher confidence. • Compliance-focused supervision discourages innovation. • Supportive leaders encourage interactive teaching.
RQ3: Experiences of full engagement	• Collaborative planning increases teacher engagement. • Formative feedback boosts student response and teacher motivation. • Peer-learning leads to more interactive classroom strategies.
RQ4: Effect of material conditions	• Lack of resources pushes teacher-centered methods. • Simple, timely materials enable active learning. • Better supplies increase student participation.
RQ5: Strengthening autonomy and mastery	• Teachers want regular peer learning and short coaching cycles. • Need dedicated time for collaborative planning. • Recognition should reward instructional effort.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how intrinsic and extrinsic factors shape teacher motivation in a public secondary school in Karachi, and how leadership-mediated strategies influence instructional behavior and student engagement. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between material conditions, leadership practices, and teachers’ professional

needs, offering valuable implications for practice, policy, and school-level reform. The study concludes that teacher motivation in Pakistan's public-sector schools is largely shaped by systemic constraints that limit teachers' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Extrinsic conditions, for instance delayed or inconsistent salary payments, shortages of basic teaching materials, and overcrowded classrooms have emerged as major demotivating reasons affecting daily practice. These factors create a baseline of stress, reduce preparedness, and force teachers to rely on teacher-centered methods such as whole-class recitation and strict behavior management. However, intrinsic motivators were found to play an equally influential role in sustaining teacher engagement. Teachers reported higher motivation when they received recognition for their classroom efforts, collaborated with peers, or participated in supportive coaching that built their instructional confidence. Such experiences enhanced their sense of professional mastery and encouraged experimentation with interactive strategies such as pair work, scaffold questioning, and formative assessment. Leadership emerged as the most influential school-level factor in shaping teacher motivation and instructional quality. Supportive, instructional leadership characterized by brief coaching, modeling of questioning techniques, and formative feedback created an environment where teachers felt respected, guided, and empowered to improve their practice. Conversely, compliance-based supervision discouraged risk-taking and reinforced passive, teacher-centered instruction.

Material conditions also influenced pedagogical choices. When simple teaching aids such as handouts or manipulatives were available, especially alongside coaching support, teachers adopted more interactive instructional approaches. Lessons with even low-cost materials demonstrated higher student participation, illustrating how modest improvements can transform classroom engagement when aligned with leadership support. Overall, the study concludes that improving teacher motivation in public-sector schools requires a balanced focus on stabilizing foundational working conditions and cultivating school-based professional support systems. Interventions must be integrated, consistent, and responsive to everyday classroom realities rather than isolated or one-time initiatives.

Recommendations

District authorities must prioritize regular salary disbursement and uninterrupted provision of essential classroom materials. Stable working conditions set the foundational baseline for teacher morale and performance.

School leaders should receive structured training in coaching, classroom observation, and formative feedback. Shifting from compliance-based supervision to developmental support can significantly improve teacher motivation and instructional quality.

Schools should institutionalize weekly or biweekly peer-learning sessions where teachers collaboratively plan lessons, analyze student work, and exchange instructional ideas. Such communities build shared responsibility and strengthen professional autonomy.

Instead of infrequent workshops, teachers should receive ongoing coaching cycles focused on small, achievable instructional strategies. Follow-up observations should reinforce new practices and sustain growth. Timetables should allocate protected periods for joint lesson planning. Structured planning time enhances lesson design, reduces dependence on lecture-based methods, and supports more interactive teaching.

Recognition systems should value effective teaching such as meaningful questioning, formative assessment, and student engagement rather than focusing solely on attendance or administrative compliance. Schools should allocate funds for simple but effective resources such as charts, cut-outs, manipulatives, and handouts. Even low-cost materials, when used strategically, promote better learning experiences. Provincial and district authorities should design reform models that combine material support, leadership development, peer learning, and structured coaching. Sustainable motivation requires aligned interventions rather than fragmented efforts.

Summarizing, the study affirms that motivated teachers are central to improving learning outcomes in public schools. When their basic needs are met, when school leaders support their growth, and when they work within collaborative professional cultures, teachers become more confident, innovative, and committed to student learning. This integrated approach offers a practical and scalable pathway for strengthening teacher motivation and enhancing the quality of education in Pakistan's public-sector education.

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