
Building a Supportive Learning Environment: A Qualitative Study on Conducive School Culture in Public Secondary Schools

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Abstract

A conducive school culture is essential to promote academic excellence, encouraging students overall development, and enhancing teacher effectiveness at the secondary school level. The aim of this study was to investigate the contribution of curricular and co-curricular activities, parental involvement and administrative practices in a conducive school culture for the overall wellbeing of the student. The nature of this study was purely qualitative where the sample size was kept small and smart; the data was collected through semi-structured interviews from the five elementary and secondary school principals in the district of Khyber, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The data was thematically analyzed and the study explored the importance of community and school relationship, parental connection with school administration, elimination of corporal punishment through parental support and Jarga system to discuss students' affairs for a conducive school culture in elementary and secondary schools in the merged district of Khyber. Furthermore, this study recommended for a favorable educational climate where every student and teacher contributes meaningfully, targeted professional programs for teachers, school safety protocol and active participation of the parents and community with school administration.

Keywords: District Khyber, school culture, parental support, co-curricular activities, students

Introduction:

A conducive school culture is one where students, teachers, administrators, and staff feel respected, motivated, and supported. It is shaped by shared values, norms, and practices that promote learning, cooperation, and open dialogue. This kind of environment embraces diversity, nurtures strong relationships, and prioritizes the well-being and success of all members of the school community. Ultimately, it is a space where individuals feel safe, connected, and inspired to pursue common educational objectives. A conducive school culture refers to a supportive and collaborative environment where educational goals are met through motivation and collective effort (Robiatun & Putrawan, 2020). According to Khattak et al. (2021), such a culture promotes trust, mutual respect, student motivation, and a shared vision by incorporating democratic principles into the decision-making process. Ashraf and Ali (2018) emphasize that cultivating a positive school culture requires effective leadership that balances intellectual capabilities with emotional intelligence. The influence of school culture on academic success is examined through key factors such as leadership, instructional strategies, student involvement, and parental engagement (Khattak et al., 2021).

The Merged Districts (MDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), have long faced substantial challenges in education due to prolonged political marginalization, limited infrastructure, and socio-cultural constraints (Shinwari, 2011). The integration of the Federal Administrative Tribal Area (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 brought renewed attention to improving the quality of education in the region. Among the key areas needing reform and development are curricular and co-curricular activities, which play an essential role in students' holistic development. Curricular and co-curricular activities in the MDs have historically been under-resourced, with outdated syllabi and a lack of trained teachers (ICG, 2015). Aslam (2009) emphasizes that effective curriculum implementation requires not only the provision of learning materials but also professional development for teachers. However, in MDs, curriculum coverage has been irregular due to teacher absenteeism, insecurity, and inadequate monitoring (Ahmad & Khan, 2017). The current national curriculum offers a comprehensive framework for academic subjects, but its uniform application in the MDs has been difficult. The disparities in language proficiency, teacher qualification, and access to textbooks have adversely impacted the learning outcomes (Rehman et al., 2020). Moreover, the curriculum often lacks local contextualization, which could enhance student engagement and relevance (Nawab & Qureshi, 2020). Co-curricular activities, including sports, debates, arts, and student clubs, are important for fostering social, emotional, and leadership skills among students (Marzano, 2003). However, in the MDs, such activities are often underemphasized due to a lack of facilities, cultural resistance, and insufficient funding (Afridi & Khan, 2019). Girls' participation, in particular, is severely restricted due to conservative norms and a lack of secure environments (HRCP, 2019). A study by Ali and Zeb (2022) on student engagement in North Waziristan found that schools with even minimal sports and arts programs saw improved attendance and student motivation. This suggests that co-curricular activities can be a strategic tool in post-conflict educational recovery and student retention in the MDs. The integration of both curricular and co-curricular components is essential for achieving holistic education. Malik et al. (2021) argue that when students are engaged in both academic and extra-academic domains, their cognitive and non-cognitive skills are more likely to develop harmoniously. Yet, in the MDs, most secondary schools operate without playgrounds, science labs, libraries, or auditoriums, making a well-rounded educational experience difficult (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Policy initiatives such as the KP Education Sector Plan (2019–2023) emphasize the need for activity-based learning and student engagement through co-curricular channels, but implementation in the MDs remains inconsistent due to logistical, financial, and administrative bottlenecks.

Effective school administration is essential in ensuring educational quality, institutional stability, and student performance. In the context of the Merged Districts (formerly FATA) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, administrative practices are particularly significant due to historical underdevelopment, insecurity, and recent integration into the provincial system. School administration encompasses planning, organizing, directing, and controlling the educational activities of a school (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012). Effective administrators are responsible for implementing educational policies, managing staff and resources, maintaining discipline, and fostering a conducive learning environment (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). In marginalized regions such as the MDs, administrative efficiency plays a vital role in addressing infrastructural deficits, teacher absenteeism, and curriculum implementation challenges. Schools in the MDs face significant administrative challenges due to their complex socio-political history. The legacy of the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), poor infrastructure, and lack of trained personnel have severely hampered school functioning (Khan, 2020). Reports from the Independent Monitoring Unit (IMU) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reveal high levels of teacher absenteeism and non-functional schools in many areas, pointing to weak administrative oversight (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2020). The merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under the 25th

Constitutional Amendment brought new hopes for governance reforms, including in education. However, administrative practices in schools have not fully aligned with provincial standards due to inadequate capacity building, lack of monitoring, and limited understanding of provincial education regulations among local administrators (Ali, 2021). Research by Ahmad (2022) emphasizes the need for decentralized decision-making at the school level to improve responsiveness and accountability.

Leadership plays a key role in school administration. In the MDs, school heads often lack formal training in leadership and management practices, which affects instructional supervision and staff motivation (Rehman et al., 2021). The authoritarian leadership style, prevalent in many MD schools, has been shown to stifle teacher creativity and reduce student engagement (Aslam & Amin, 2020). Transformational leadership practices, which focus on collaboration and goal-setting, are rarely applied due to cultural and institutional constraints. Monitoring and evaluation systems are weak or inconsistent in the MDs. According to UNICEF (2021), administrative structures in the region are under-resourced and lack data-driven decision-making processes. This limits school improvement efforts and makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of interventions. Moreover, community involvement in school governance, such as through Parent-Teacher Councils (PTCs), is minimal due to security concerns and traditional barriers (Shah & Zeb, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The difficulties in student learning in Merged Districts (MDs) stem from several interrelated factors, including poor learning environments, limited parental involvement, curriculum shortcomings, administrative inefficiencies, insufficient teacher training, a lack of social-emotional learning programs, and inadequate school infrastructure. These challenges are often multifaceted one-another and create a difficult educational environment for students. These Poor learning environments may also involve physical discomfort or safety concerns, while parental involvement is important for maintaining student motivation. Additionally, flaws in the curriculum, gaps in teacher preparation, and the absence of emotional support programs can meaningfully hinder the educational process in merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the curricular and co-curricular programs implemented in secondary schools within the Merged Districts (MDs)
2. To assess the parental supportive role in school at secondary school level of the Merged Districts (MDs)
3. To evaluate the administrative practices followed by secondary schools in the Merged Districts (MDs)

Methodology

This qualitative study paradigm was used which aimed to explore a deeper understanding of the conducive school culture. The sample size of the study was kept small and smart (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) as five principals of the district Khyber for data collection. The data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide, designed on the basis of research construct, sub-constructs, and its indicators were drawn from the related literature of the study. Data was collected from the respondents in Pashto, and Urdu language, and the researcher also recorded the whole process in his self-phone. The collected data from the respondents were transcribed into the English language, and then reduced, concluded, clarified, coded, and de-coded for thematically analyzed.

Findings of the study

1. School and Community Relationship

When asked about the interaction between the school and the community, the principal responded "A solid relationship between the school and the community is founded on trust and mutual respect. We make a conscious effort to include parents and community leaders in our decision-

making processes to ensure their input is acknowledged and appreciated" (P-3). In this regard, another principal shared his viewpoints "We recognize the community's important role in shaping students' values and behaviors. Through collaborative efforts like career guidance sessions, health campaigns, and cultural programs, we work to strengthen this connection" (P-5). When asked the question, the principal replied "Effective communication is the foundation of our engagement with the community. We share regular updates via newsletters, social media, and parent-teacher meetings to keep everyone informed and engaged" (P-2). Similarly, responses were also recorded when asked a question from the principal in these words,

"Our school functions as a community center, offering access to facilities such as libraries, sports areas, and training workshops. In return, the community supports us through sponsorships and volunteer efforts. He further added that "Understanding the specific needs of the local population helps us tailor our programs—such as skills development workshops and inclusive practices for marginalized groups—to better serve them" (P-1).

The study's findings revealed that building trust and mutual respect is key to developing a strong school-community relationship. Schools that engage parents and community stakeholders in important decisions create a sense of belonging and value for students. This partnership is further reinforced through joint activities like career counseling, health awareness initiatives, and cultural events, which help cultivate a supportive and collaborative environment for effective teaching and learning.

2. Conducting Co-curricular Activities

When asked about the physical and mental well-being of students, several principals shared their views emphasizing the importance of co-curricular activities in promoting overall student development. In this regard, the respondents of the study replied as:

"Such types of activities are important for fostering overall development of the students to allowing them to discover their interests, enhance their abilities, and gain confidence. He emphasized designing inclusive and engaging programs that cater to a variety of student preferences" (P-2). Another respondent of the study replied to the question as "working collaboratively with teachers, parents, and community members to create meaningful co-curricular opportunities, ensuring enrich the learning environment for students" (P-5). In this regard, one of the school principal (P-3) shared a specific example as "Mentioning the successful organization of a school-wide science fair with over 200 participants and the launch of a mentorship program that paired senior and junior students. These initiatives reportedly led to enhanced academic achievement and improved social skills".

The data of the study exposed the role of co-curricular activities in nurturing students' personal growth, emphasizing inclusivity, skill-building, and confidence development by addressing a wide range of interests and needs.

3. Parents-Teachers Relationship

The study participants shared their views on parental involvement and co-curricular participation. In this regard, one principal shared his views as, "Trust forms the foundation of a strong parent-teacher relationship" and further elucidated, "Collaboration of the parents and teachers encouraging both sides to exchange ideas and work together to support the child's development, ultimately creating a positive learning atmosphere at both school and home" (P-4). In this connection, the principal respondent said, "To equip teachers with the necessary training and resources for effective communication with parents. This includes developing skills such as active listening, constructive feedback, and practicing cultural sensitivity to ensure respectful and productive interactions" (P-2). The respondent of the study also shared his viewpoints as that "Occasional disagreements between parents and teachers are inevitable. They serve as a mediator, resolving conflicts promptly and constructively, always prioritizing the student's well-being (P-1). Similarly, another respondent responded to the same question as, "The integration of technology to strengthen parent-teacher communication and the use of digital tools help parents monitor their

child's academic progress, attendance, and assignments in real-time, promoting transparency and active involvement" (P-5).

The study data revealed that trust is fundamental to effective parent-teacher relationships. This trust supports meaningful collaboration, allowing both parents and teachers to contribute insights and solutions that enhance the student's educational experiences and promote a nurturing environment both at school and at home.

4. Reducing Corporal Punishment through Parent's Role

Schools provide counseling services for parents who may turn to corporal punishment out of stress, frustration, or a lack of awareness about non-violent disciplinary methods. By tackling these issues and offering ongoing support, schools aim to guide parents toward more constructive approaches. In this regard, one of the principals shared his views as, "As school administrators, it is our responsibility to involve parents in workshops and seminars that promote positive and non-violent discipline techniques. These initiatives should emphasize the psychological and emotional harm caused by corporal punishment and introduce practical, effective strategies for behavior management" (P-2). Similar responses were also noted from respondents of the study when asked the same question, "Building a strong, collaborative relationship between schools and parents is important for maintaining a consistent disciplinary approach. Schools should facilitate open communication to ensure parents understand and support the school's stance against corporal punishment" (P-5). In response to a related question, a school head stated "Rising awareness through campaigns, parents about the legal and ethical consequences of using corporal punishment. Schools can use platforms like newsletters, social media, and parent-teacher meetings to promote nurturing, supportive environments and stress that physical punishment hinders a child's development" (P-3). Additionally, one respondent highlighted, "Counseling services can support parents who use corporal punishment due to personal stress or limited knowledge of alternatives. Addressing these root causes and offering sustained guidance can help parents adopt healthier and more effective disciplinary practices" (P-1).

The data of the current study revealed that the vital role of school leadership in organizing educational programs introduces and aware parents of positive discipline methods. These efforts are essential in demonstrating the harmful impact of corporal punishment and equipping parents with better tools for guiding their children's behavior.

5. School Annual Day

One of the primary goals of education is to prepare students to become democratic, patriotic, and responsible citizens. In this context, one of the respondents of the study replied as, "As the head of the school, I take great pride in our students' academic success. We are dedicated to creating a learning environment that encourages every student to achieve their best, with a strong focus on critical thinking and creativity. This year, our students have excelled not only in academics but also in co-curricular activities, highlighting our commitment to well-rounded education" (P-2). Similarly, another respondent of the study emphasized the role of co-curricular engagement in these words, "Co-curricular activities play a very important role in shaping balanced individuals. Our students have been recognized in various competitions, including debates, sports, and the arts. These opportunities help boost their confidence and prepare them for real-world experiences" (P-4). Another respondent in this regard added "Our vision is to nurture an inclusive and supportive atmosphere where students grow academically, socially, and emotionally. We strive to instill 21st-century skills in our learners to ensure they are equipped for the challenges ahead. Our ongoing efforts aim at fostering innovation and a genuine passion for learning" (P-3). These points were also recorded by one of the respondents, "I deeply appreciate the dedication of our teaching staff, who are the foundation of our institution. Their constant pursuit of professional growth and innovative teaching ensures our students receive a high-quality education." He further said, "We greatly value the partnership between parents and the school, which is essential in helping our students succeed. Together, we have cultivated a strong,

supportive school community" (P-1). Reflecting on future aspirations, a principal (P-2) shared his views in these words as, "On the occasion of the annual day, we also look ahead with hope and determination. Our school is focused on integrating technological advancements, promoting inclusivity, and nurturing responsible global citizens. With sustained effort and teamwork, I believe we can achieve even greater success."

The findings of the study highlight the school's strong focus on fostering a nurturing environment that promotes critical thinking, creativity, and overall development. The student's academic performance and achievements in co-curricular domains reflect a well-rounded educational approach that supports their academic, social, and emotional growth while equipping them with essential skills for the future.

6. Education Jirga System

The Jirga serves as a forum for addressing issues related to school administration, student conduct, and conflicts between teachers and parents. When participants were asked about this, they shared the following:

"The Jirga system has long been used to resolve community matters through collective agreement. Incorporating it into the education sector can enhance community participation in school-related decisions, such as tackling dropout rates, promoting girls' education, and improving educational facilities. This method fosters a shared sense of responsibility and accountability among all involved" (P-4). A school head also commented when asked the same question, "Integrating the Jirga system into education honors and utilizes cultural traditions, making educational reforms more culturally acceptable and sustainable" (P-1). A similar response was recorded from another school head "The Jirga system provides a platform for addressing issues like school authority, student discipline, and parent-teacher disputes. Its participatory nature ensures decisions are inclusive and reflect the community's interests, contributing to a more cohesive and supportive school environment" (P-2). Another participant responded in this regard "Through the education-focused Jirga system, underrepresented groups—such as women and low-income families—can take part in discussions about educational needs. This inclusive process supports reasonable resource distribution and improved access to education for all members of society." (P-5)

Data of the study explored that the Jirga system plays a significant role in involving communities in educational decision-making. It can help tackle important issues like dropout rates, access to girls' education, and resource improvements. By fostering consensus, it builds collective ownership and accountability among stakeholders.

Discussions

This finding of the current study revealed the impact of administrative practices on student performance in secondary schools in the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The study highlights that effective leadership, efficient resource management, professional development of teachers, and a positive organizational climate are pivotal in improving academic outcomes. Afridi and Khan (2019) also support these findings, emphasizing that innovation, teamwork, and perseverance contribute to school success in competitions, debates, sports, and arts, especially during annual events. These experiences build student confidence and equip them with life skills beyond academics.

The educational Jirga system has played a significant role in giving marginalized groups—such as various tribal communities and low-income families—a platform to engage in dialogue about educational needs and priorities. This initiative promotes equitable resource distribution and better educational access, echoing the findings of Ali and Zeb (2022) and Malik et al. (2021). The findings indicate that Curricular Engagement and School Safety/Administration positively influence the teaching and learning process, ultimately enhancing student performance. These results align with those reported by Shinwari (2011) and Aslam (2009).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that effective curricular engagement practices basically enhance the teaching-learning process, thereby directly improving student performance in secondary schools of the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Strong correlations between curricular engagement and a stable, supportive school environment, as well as with school development, affirm the key role of curriculum and leadership in fostering the academic success of the students. Parental engagement and classroom resources revealed a complex and varied impact contributing to a conducive school culture. The study also revealed the importance of inclusive initiatives like the education Jarga system, promoting equity and community participation. Parental contributions' emphasis on student-centric development builds institutional trust. The based on findings the following recommendations are framed:

1. Schools should implement targeted professional development programs that focus on innovative and contextually relevant teaching strategies, coupled with regular monitoring and evaluation of curriculum implementation.
2. Policymakers must develop and enforce comprehensive safety protocols, conduct regular safety drills, and provide leadership training to school heads for improved governance and accountability.
3. Schools ought to expand and formalize inclusive platforms like the Education Jarga to promote community engagement, especially among marginalized groups, thereby fostering trust and transparency in the education system.
4. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should introduce regular audits and community oversight to ensure efficient and equitable use of resources.
5. It is suggested that the government should create clear policies for the collection and use of parental contributions and actively involve parents in decisions related to learning environments and student welfare.

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