



RESEARCH PAPER

Organizational Culture, Micropolitics and Resistance to School Transformation: Ethnographic Insights from Pakistan for the Global South

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how organizational culture and micropolitical dynamics shape resistance to reform in semi-government secondary schools in Pakistan, with particular attention to how school actors interpret and mediate externally introduced transformation initiatives. Educational reforms frequently assume linear implementation; however, research increasingly shows that school change is mediated by institutional culture, informal authority relations, and professional identities. In hierarchical schooling systems across the Global South, these contextual forces may reshape reform initiatives in subtle but consequential ways. Using an ethnographic design, data were collected over eleven months in four semi-government secondary schools through prolonged observations, semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers, leadership shadowing, and document analysis. Findings indicate that resistance rarely appears as overt opposition. Instead, reform was mediated through normative inertia, bureaucratic ritualism, informal authority structures, cultural risk aversion, symbolic compliance, and identity-protective responses. These patterns produced selective enactment of policy rather than substantive organizational change. The analysis culminates in an emergent conceptual model positioning resistance as a relational and culturally embedded phenomenon. Policy design should account for school-level cultural dynamics and micropolitical negotiation processes, with focus on contextual responsiveness and participatory development. Relational leadership and trust building would be instrumental for managing resistance; therefore, school leaders ought to create dialogic conditions.

KEYWORDS Organizational Culture, Micropolitics, School Transformation, Change Management, Global South Education

Introduction

The challenges, facing educational reform efforts in the Global South, often go beyond technical or design procedural layouts and underline the complexity of organizational culture, leadership, and social norms (Mincu, 2022). In Pakistan, semi-government secondary schools are an ideal place to look at such processes given that they have hybrid governance structures coupled with hierarchical leadership practices and situational resource constraints. Despite legislative efforts that promote pedagogical innovation, accountability systems, and spread leadership, there is still a large gap between policymaking goals and classroom practice (Waslander et al., 2022). The importance of this gap in this aspect is the need to explore formal organizational

structures as well as the embedded cultural and micropolitical processes that shape the participation of teachers and administrators in reform processes.

Organizational culture is a set of shared beliefs, conventions and assumptions that govern behaviour in learning institutions (Torres, 2022). Cultural norms define the views of the authorized practices, allowable risks, and professional competency and therefore, affect change implementation both indirectly and directly. Similarly, the application of policy is affected by the work of the micropolitical processes, which includes informal systems of authority and identity-defensive mechanisms. All these organizational and cultural factors together bring together complex barriers to change that can be in the form of symbolic compliance, bureaucratic ritualism or resistance; sometimes wrongly perceived as implementation failure rather than as adaptive negotiation (Fullan, 2007).

In spite of the fact that the mechanism of school leadership and organizational change has been studied internationally (Truong et al., 2016; Bellibaas et al., 2025; DeJaeghere et al., 2024), little is known about how such processes work in the Pakistani semi-governmental schools, especially in terms of reform-active and reform-passive environments. The problems raised by the previous studies in the field (patriarchy, lack of resources, hierarchical power, etc.) have demonstrated how sociocultural norms affect professional agency (Shah and Lashari, 2023). This research aims to bridge this gap, as it generates the empirically grounded results, which are context-specific and theoretically generalized to hierarchical educational systems of the Global South. The study is guided by the following:

Literature Review

Schools are recognised more and more as organisational milieus in which cultural conventions, institutional expectations and micro-political negotiations interact to shape the directions of change through educational transformation programmes. In this paradigm, schools are no longer considered neutral places of implementation; however, schools choose to interpret, adapt, or reject policy changes in terms of implicated cultural and relational patterns. The current international literature suggests that organisational culture is a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of educational change, which defines common meanings and behavioural norms and the approaches to leadership (Torres, 2022).

School leadership cannot be left out in the change process of culture. Analyses of the comparative studies indicate that cultural context contributes significantly to the efficacy of leadership instead of universally applicable approaches (Bellibaş et al., 2025). The cross-cultural studies also highlight the fact that leadership models developed in the Western environment should be interpreted through the prism of culture when applied to the Asian and Global South context, where hierarchical power, collectivism, or value-based cultures have a strong impact on organisational expectations (Dimmock, 2019). It is proven empirically that leadership orientations influence the results of reforms by developing institutional culture, harmonization of values, and distributed decision-making structures (Plaku & Leka, 2025). Parallel to this, leadership agency is complicated by governance processes and accountability systems, often limiting change efforts on the policy-based expectations (Mincu, 2023).

The micropolitics is highly detrimental to the implementation of reform, as it predicts negotiations, power and strategy behaviour on the organisational relationship.

Schools are places where people pursue interests, maintain power or bargain obedience and, therefore, the effort to reform them is inherently political (Ball, 1987). Studies have shown that hyper-compliance or figurative compliance is a common outcome of policy implementation instead of real change (Colman, 2020). Likewise, distributed leadership and democratic decision-making may obscure latent micropolitical conflicts influenced by cultural norms and power structures (Or & Berkovich, 2021). Recent qualitative research from semi-government schools in Pakistan indicates that distributed leadership operates not merely as structural delegation but as a negotiated social process influenced by trust, professional connections and prevailing hierarchies inside the institution (Javed et al., 2025). Evidences from several contexts, such as teacher assessment, administrative networks and corporate restructuring, highlights how organisational players strategically uphold or modify institutional norms in reaction to reform pressures (Hopkinson & Aman, 2019; Hughes, 2020).

Institutional approaches elucidate the reasons behind the frequent resistance to reforms. Organisations pursue legitimacy by conforming to prevailing institutional logics instead of maximising performance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As a result, subordinate actors frequently participate in institutional preservation or symbolic compliance when faced with forceful reforms (Xiao & Klarin, 2019). Research on policy implementation indicates that reform attempts engage with established organisational routines, resulting in localised applications that deviate from the original policy aims (Waslander et al., 2022). These processes are bolstered by neoliberal governance narratives and regulatory frameworks that redefine professional identities and organisational agendas (Sellami, 2025).

Cultural and identity factors additionally influence reactions to educational transformation. Research indicates that teacher norms and professional identities are influenced by personal, institutional and social expectations, which affect their openness to reform attempts (Rose, 2023). Opportunities for contributing to the change of school culture are disproportionately allocated, frequently limited by hierarchical authority or institutional expectations (Reinius et al., 2023). Cultural embeddedness influences reform trajectories in various situations, including curricular reform, professional networking and the implementation of multilingual policies (Makramalla & Stylianides, 2024; Mavioglu, 2024; Ralebese et al., 2025). Ethical challenges in leadership and tensions of integrity similarly illustrate the convergence of cultural norms and institutional limitations (Oduol & Cornforth, 2019; Khadka & Bhattarai, 2021).

Investigations in Global South contexts underscore the impact of socio-cultural frameworks, such as patriarchy, religion and indigenous belief systems, on educational engagement and institutional practices (Arif et al., 2025). Research in Pakistan similarly indicates that leadership efficacy is influenced by cultural expectations and organisational limitations within interconnected school systems (Raza et al., 2021). Comparative research in Vietnam, Scandinavia and other contexts highlights that entrenched cultural beliefs can facilitate or obstruct system transition (DeJaeghere et al., 2024; Nordanger & Egeland, 2024). Incorporating local cultural values into educational methods may improve socio-emotional and organisational outcomes, emphasising the contextual aspect of reform processes (Niman, 2025).

Regardless of such development, current scholarship frequently analyses leadership, culture, or micropolitics in isolation. There is a scarcity of ethnographic investigation into the intersection of these characteristics within organisational contexts experiencing transformation, especially in semi-government educational systems of the

Global South. This study used an anthropological approach to identify cultural and micropolitical obstacles influencing reform participation, with the objective of producing conceptual insights relevant across multiple country contexts.

Material and Methods

This paper assumes an ethnographic approach that is directed in nature to examine the role of organisational culture and micropolitical forces in resistance to school change in semi-government secondary schools in Pakistan. Ethnography is particularly useful in studying cultural meaning, informal relations and power dynamics in the everyday organisational practice to allow the researchers to record the sharing of the meaning that constitutes organisational practice not solely based on the formal structures (Langenberg, 2016).

Research Design and Site Selection

The study was carried out at four semi-government secondary schools within the same institutional network. The selection of sites was purposely made to allow analytical comparison between reform-active and reform-passive schools and thereby increasing the degree of theoretical inference by variation instead of statistical generalisation. Ethnographic studies give more focus to depth than breadth and focus on contextual meaning and relational understanding of organisational processes (Madison, 2011).

The cultural framework of Schein (2010) is used to analyse organisational context of schools. This framework defines culture as a range of overlapping assumptions that affect behaviour and meaning-making, in addition to the institutional perspectives that see organisational actions located within wider normative rules and systems of legitimacy (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Institutional theory points out that the organisational practices are often reflections of the conformity and legitimacy pressure as opposed to efficiency thus influencing the response to reform action (Meyer, 1977).

Data Collection

The necessary data were gathered in an eleven-month gap (January 2024-November 2024) using various qualitative methods that allowed achieving methodological triangulation and deepening the depth of the analysis. There were 35 interviews undertaken in the four schools and each took a certain period of 45-75 minutes and involved the respective principals and 31 teachers at the different career levels. The attitude to the reform projects, leadership practices, informal structures of authority, risk assessment, and professional identity were studied in interviews. The audio tape of all interviews was transcribed. The interviews that were held in Urdu were translated into English and semantically checked.

A roughly cumulative 224 hours of participant observation were conducted in the four schools. Observations were carried out in both teaching settings (classrooms) and informal organizational contexts (staff rooms, corridors, administrative offices) to record formalized and informal micropolitical practices respectively. The classroom observations (approximately 148 hours) focused on implementation of instructional reform, pedagogical routines and observable compliance techniques. The staff room and informal spaces (approximately 76 hours) were observed and focused on the relationships among the staff, informal networks of authority, change-related discussions and the activities of meaning-making in the backstage.

The observation sessions lasted between 60 and 180 minutes. The field notes were documented on the spot and then expounded within 24 hours as detailed descriptive accounts. Analytic notes were created weekly so that the emergent patterns could be documented. Each principal was observed for 3-4 full working days (total 26 hours). The observation enabled the researchers to observe decision-making processes, administrative negotiations and principal's relationships with staff and external agencies. Likewise, forty eight institutional documents were reviewed. These documents included reform implementation plans, performance monitoring instruments, internal circulars, meeting minutes and teacher evaluation frameworks. Documents were analysed for comparing official reform narratives with the actual practices. The breakdown is given below:

Table 1
School Sites and Interview Distribution

School	Reform Engagement	Interviews (n)	Principal Interviews	Teacher Interviews
School A	Reform-Active	9	1	8
School B	Reform-Passive	8	1	7
School C	Reform-Active	10	1	9
School D	Reform-Passive	8	1	7
Total	–	35	4	31

Table 2
Distribution of Observation Hours across Sites

School	Classroom Observation Hours	Staffroom / Informal Space Hours	Total Observation Hours
School A (Reform-Active)	40 hrs	18 hrs	58 hrs
School B (Reform-Passive)	34 hrs	20 hrs	54 hrs
School C (Reform-Active)	42 hrs	19 hrs	61 hrs
School D (Reform-Passive)	32 hrs	19 hrs	51 hrs
Total	148 hrs	76 hrs	224 hrs

Observation continued in each site until thematic saturation was reached, operationalized as the point at which no substantively new categories related to reform interpretation or organizational resistance emerged.

Analytical Orientation

The theory based the analysis and was not considered as purely descriptive. The organisational culture became the theoretical basis on explaining shared assumptions and symbolic practices; institutional logics were used to interpret the conflicting normative frameworks affecting individual and collective behaviour; and micropolitical analysis applied to the school hierarchies with the help of educational organisational theory.

The analysis of the sense-making theory relied on the sense-making theory (Dervin, 1998) to consider how people develop meaning about reform activities, with identity formation, reflection and social interaction as the main aspects of the process of interpretation. In this school of thought, the reality of organisations is signified by sense-making as an ongoing developing accomplishment of discourse and narrative formation as opposed to hard structures.

The research employed iterative coding, sequence mapping of interactional patterns through narrative approach, and cross-case pattern discovery. The task was to promote conceptual elaboration instead of only providing detailed descriptions; this

involved creating a typology of mechanisms of resistance and developing a model that explains limitations in organisations that affect the adoption of reforms. This approach describes itself as consistent with institutional and organisational research, which is focused on developing the theory based on qualitative data using the methods of abstraction and comparison of situationalised cases.

Results and Discussion

Ethnographic experiences in the four semi-government secondaries made it clear that organisational reactions towards change were much influenced by the deeply ingrained cultural expectations, relational patterns of authority and negotiated meanings of change compared to the official policy mandates. In spite of the fact that, institutional instructions offered encouragement towards instructional innovation, distributed leadership, and accountability practices, daily encounters, informal hierarchies and collective professional norms mediate their implementation. The analysis created six thematic constructs, which are linked, that shed light on organisational and cultural barriers to change.

Normative Inertia: Stability as Professional Security

A strong continuity was observed among the participants in all sites whereby stability of the position was viewed as critical to professional competence and institutional credibility. Reform movements were often seen as disruptive and not progressive.

One senior teacher stated:

“It is this way we have been teaching. Students have passed exams, parents are happy, therefore why disrupt something that is already working?”

The field observations showed that there were fewer interactions with proposed instructional innovations during the departmental meetings. The teachers tended to turn the conversation in the direction of preparation of exams or administration and this indicated that there was a group shift in favour of status quo.

Field note excerpt:

Talk about the collaborative learning in few minutes was redirected on the board exam result targets; no one went back to pedagogical experimentation.

The pattern represents normative inertia, a cultural tendency, according to which compliance with the existing norms is interpreted as professionalism and risk avoidance. The reform-active schools showed more discussion on innovation, but there was a bit of caution in the background.

Bureaucratic Ritualism: Compliance Through Procedure

Adherence to the reform orders can be in the form of procedural implementation other than real change. The visible compliance was formed through documentation, reporting, and meeting structures whereas classroom practices stayed mostly unchanged.

One of the principals explained how he came up with reform reports:

“We mail the necessary reports and photos. Head office would like to see the evidence and we give it. However, it is the teachers who determine what is practical in classrooms.”

The documents analysed showed detailed records of workshops, implementation plans and monitoring schemes; however observational data did not show many behavioural changes.

Field note excerpt:

During observation, teacher presented a template of reform lesson plan but used a traditional lecture format and did not refer to the activities mentioned.

This fashion is a symptom of bureaucratic ritualism, where strict adherence to administrative formulas to maintain legitimacy is not to alter practices but is systematically practised in reform-passive organisations and appears in a slightly transformed form in reform-active schools.

Informal Authority Networks: Hidden Governance Structures

Decision-making often happened through informal relationship networks and not through leadership channels. Older teaching staff and long-service employees, as well as trusted intermediaries, influenced the choices made on the instructional and administrative level.

A teacher with few years of experience said:

“We technically take orders issued by the principal, but we normally consult with older personnel. They understand what is expected in reality.”

Shadowing principals also showed that they relied on informal consultation before taking action. These relation forms served to act as stabilising mechanisms, filter or distort reform expectations.

Field note excerpt:

Prior to changing the timetable, principal privately discussed the change with two senior teachers; subsequent staff meeting echoed their recommendations.

These networks are also representative of very micropolitical processes of negotiating where power is created through relational legitimacy instead of just formal hierarchy.

Culture Risk Aversion: Avoidance of Visibility

Respondents also feared professional exposure that comes with innovation especially where experimentation could result in failure or a case subject to administrative review.

A teacher remarked:

“It is dangerous to have something new. In the case of poor student performance, the policy does not hold us accountable, but the students do.”

The practice of prudent teaching behavior was observed to be true particularly in examination years. Schools that were reform-active were characterized by slow experimentation; however, the educators continued to view innovation as dependent on the performance security.

Field note excerpt:

Teacher delayed group activity because of being too close to exam time and not knowing the result.

This cultural risk aversion highlights the interplay of accountability structures and professional identity, which do not encourage experimentation in spite of its official sanctioning.

Symbolic Compliance: Performance of Alignment

Schools often showed the shallow agreement with reform discourses through the use of specific discourses and the use of staged performances but never resulted in radical structural change. Meeting and documentation were full of terminology related to innovation.

One of the principals said at the staff briefing:

“Collaborative learning and student-centered methods must be demonstrated on our part - this is what will be inspected.”

But it was observed to enact performatively as opposed to being inherently changed.

Field note excerpt:

Group set up in classroom on day of scheduled observation; changed back to lecture style sitting in follow-up visit.

Symbolic compliance was employed as part of strategic adjustment, a way of adjusting institutional demands and cultural persistence.

Identity Protective Resistance: Reform as a Threat to Professional Self

The participants were sometimes of the opinion that reform proposals were implicitly questioning their professional competence. This view drew in protective meanings that interpreted change as outward criticism.

One of the veteran teachers remarked:

“Policies come and go. They presume that we are failing to do our job. However, we are familiar with our students and conditions.”

Interview accounts revealed that there was a strong professional ethic that was associated with the traditional modes of teaching with discontent being associated with a want to maintain dignity over an actual refusal to improve.

Field note excerpt:

Teacher replied to reform training recommendation by saying that the decades of service and the successful history of exams.

An identity-defensive resistance was thereby found to be an emotive and symbolic nature of organisational culture that was driving the participation in reforms.

Cross-Site Comparative Patterns

Comparison of reform-active and reform-passive schools showed variation in the strength of the barriers and not in nature. Reform-active environments were more open in dialogue, facilitated leadership and experimental in gradual change; there were no disappearance of all six constructs. Reform-passive schools demonstrated heightened normative inertia, intensified bureaucratic ritualism and more centralised informal authority networks.

The findings indicate that organisational culture functions as a stratified system influencing the implementation of reforms, irrespective of institutional classification, with variations reflecting the extent of mediation rather than categorical change.

Emergent Conceptual Model

Collectively, the findings suggest that organisational resistance cannot be only attributed to individual dissent or structural limitations. Resistance arises from the interaction among cultural expectations, relational authority frameworks, identity preservation processes and compliance behaviours aimed at obtaining legitimacy. This interaction creates organisational contexts in which reform ideas are understood, modified, or symbolically performed instead of being implemented in a linear fashion. The ethnographic data thus endorses the conceptualisation of resistance as systemic and negotiated, rather than oppositional or static.

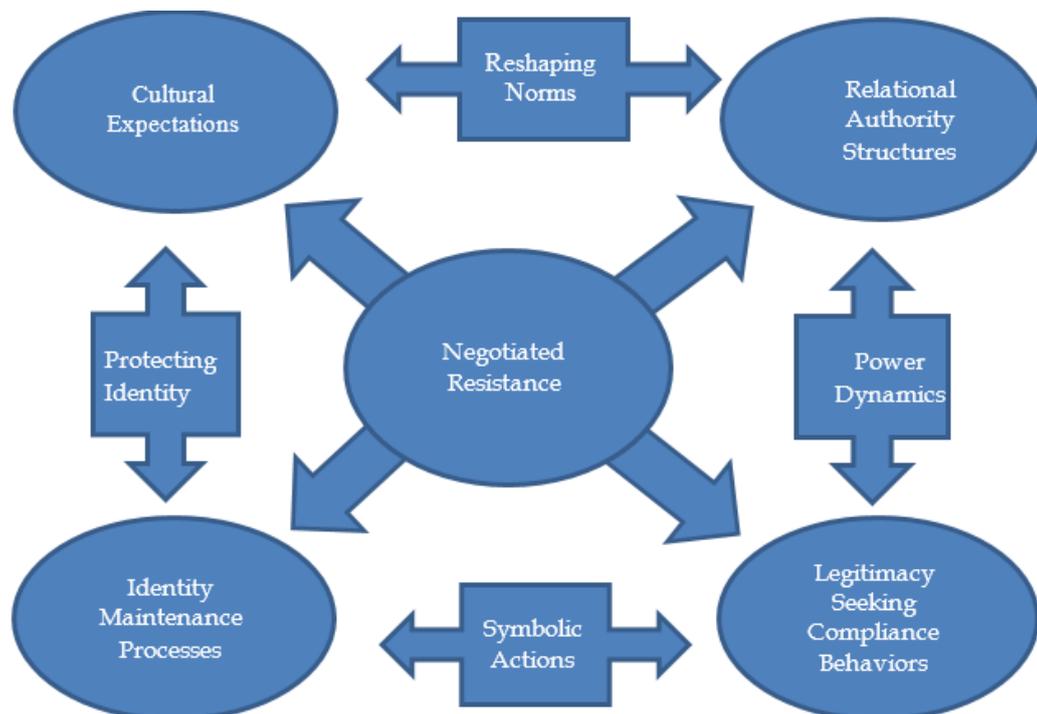


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Organizational Resistance to School Transformation

Conceptual Model

This study's conceptual model integrates ethnographic observations into a relational framework, which exhibits how organisational and cultural factors influence responses to reform initiatives in the schools. The paradigm reframes resistance, not as an individual or oppositional act, but as a systemic phenomena, which arises from interactions among cultural norms, relational power dynamics, identity processes and pressures of institutional legitimacy.

The paradigm is essentially founded on intrinsic organizational-cultural, normative inertia, cultural risk aversion and informal authority networks, that affect the interpretive context within which transformation is viewed. These aspects create the deep structural environment, which dictates sense-making and behavioural choices of actors. Normative inertia strengthens the already adopted practices, and cultural risk aversion discourages risk-taking in the eyes of accountability requirements. Through the relational legitimacy frameworks, informal authority networks mediate the institutional expectations, which may either be adopted or not adopted by different projects.

These cultural roots translate to organisational responses that are discernible at the interactional level. The process of bureaucratic ritualism and symbolic conformity are adaptive strategies that help schools to maintain credibility with the governing bodies and minimize disruption to the existing practice. Such responses signify an intentional fit instead of a passive opposition and the way players reconcile institutional demands with the local reality.

Identity-protective resistance acts as a mediation process whereby the cultural environment is connected with organisational reaction. Reform efforts that are viewed as a threat to professional competency or institutional image categorize defensive interpretations, and hence promote both symbolic and procedural compliance behaviours.

The paradigm eventually conceptualizes reform outcomes as bargained and not a direct translation of policies. Cultural expectations, micropolitical bargaining and institutional forces influence transformation paths through an iterative interaction. By emphasising these dynamics, the model provides a process-oriented approach relevant to hierarchical educational institutions beyond Pakistan, enabling analytical insight for investigating reform mediation in similarly organised academic settings.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the influence of organisational culture, micropolitical dynamics and institutional norms on opposition to school transformation in semi-government secondary schools in Pakistan. The ethnographic data demonstrate that resistance is seldom explicit or ideological; rather, it manifests through culturally ingrained practices, relational hierarchies and symbolic acquiescence. These trends correspond with academic discourse that characterises school transformation as a socially negotiated process influenced by meaning-making and institutional context, rather than only by technological execution (Fullan, 2007). Furthermore, the current findings build upon previous research in semi-government schools in Pakistan, which defined distributed leadership as a negotiated social process influenced by trust and relational hierarchies (Javed et al., 2025). The aforementioned study emphasised the conditions conducive to innovation, whereas the present ethnography uncovers the

opposite dynamic; it illustrates how analogous relational and cultural frameworks can engender symbolic compliance, identity-preserving resistance and normative inertia in response to reforms that challenge established authority structures.

Organizational Culture as a Structuring Constraint

The persistence of normative inertia and bureaucratic ritualism across several sites substantiates theoretical assertions that organisational culture influences leadership behaviour and the adoption of reforms. Organisational norms about hierarchy, authority and uncertainty avoidance, shown in employees' hesitance to contest commands, reflect research indicating that cultural elements profoundly affect management efficacy and reform initiatives in educational institutions. These ethnographic notes correspond to comparative research that states the degree of leadership performance depends on the cultural background and on the values inherent in it (Bellibaş et al., 2025; Dimmock, 2019).

Moreover, the risk-averse decision-making is correlated with the research that the institutional and cultural beliefs on education shape the transformation paths (Mincu, 2022; Torres, 2022). These insights are augmented by the findings in that they demonstrate how these assumptions are made real in the everyday micro-interactions of everyday life, such as meeting discourse, hallway conversations and lesson planning, hence the point of making emphasis on culture not as an abstract atmosphere but as a practiced reality. Plaku and Leka (2025) also found that leadership behaviour actively reproduced or mediated such norms and thus the role of leaders as cultural brokers, but not as reform agents.

Micropolitics and Informal Authority Networks

Subversion of formal structures of authority and identity-defensive resistance confirms the persistence of micropolitical perspectives on education (Ball, 1987). The selective cooperation and strategic reluctance of teachers are the tendencies that are used in the studies of participatory decision-making, the rhetoric of distributed leadership in which power negotiations are in the background (Or & Berkovich, 2021). Similarly, meeting compliance behaviours are indicators of hyper-enactment dynamics observed in inspection-based settings (Colman, 2020).

Along with education, organisational studies reveal that micropolitical manoeuvring is an instrument of organisational change management (Hopkinson and Aman, 2019), which suggests cross-sector relevance of studying school-level behaviour. These results are in line with the research of subordinate organizations that maintain institutional structures despite the pressure of the coercive reforms (Xiao and Klarin, 2019). This work shows how maintenance processes clash with collectivist cultural expectations, which contributes to the strengthening of cohesion but, at the same time, restricts creativity.

Cultural Identity, Professional Selfhood and Resistance

The resistance of the teachers was usually the wish to retain their identity and not the disagreement with policy. Such a dynamic can be related to the research that stated that reform discourse transforms professional identity and could provoke defensive response (Spanò et al., 2021). Determined inconsistencies between reform demands and own teaching ideology support the results that suggest that the possibility to change the

norms depends on the alignment of personal beliefs and situational demands (Hwa, 2024).

Institutional expectations would reinforce broader social inequalities that affect participation and expression, in tradition-influenced and patriarchal situations (Arif et al., 2025). Gendered participation in the leadership interaction is ethnographically observed, and it is consistent with the methodological factors of navigating the patriarchal framework when studying the situation in Pakistan (Shah and Lashari, 2023). These interconnections highlight the significance of putting the organisational analysis into the contexts of the sociocultural domains outside of the educational institution.

Leadership, Governance and Reform Translation

The paper highlights the indispensability of leadership mediation in the realisation of the reform. The observation of symbolic enactment and selective prioritisation would demonstrate the conclusions that the application of instructional leadership of the principals is indirectly determined by the national and institutional context (Ganon-Sharon and Schechter, 2019). Comparable tensions manifest in governance research, illustrating the conflict between various policy objectives and established organisational routines (Waslander et al., 2022).

The statistics corroborate findings from Pakistani school networks, suggesting that leadership success is contingent upon contextual negotiation rather than only on administrative techniques (Raza et al., 2021). International studies on instructional leadership indicate that the efficacy of reforms depends on leaders' capacity to manage resource limitations and stakeholder expectations (Ralebese et al., 2025). The current findings enhance the existing research by demonstrating how leaders' micropolitical positioning influences the internalisation or mere performance of changes.

Comparative and Global South Implications

Comparative research emphasises that educational reform should be seen through culturally contextualised perspectives (Truong et al., 2016; DeJaeghere et al., 2024). Comparable patterns of cultural mediation have been recognised across various contexts, ranging from multilingual policy implementation (Mavioglu, 2024) to the sustainability of distributed leadership (Hickey et al., 2024). The symbolic compliance noted here mirrors the neoliberal reform negotiations recorded in other studies (Sellami, 2025; Smith & Rowe, 2024).

The discovered mechanisms; bureaucratic ritualism, informal networks and identity-protective resistance, collectively imply that they may serve as transferable constructs relevant to hierarchical education systems throughout the Global South. Research on organisational change further substantiates that leadership behaviours and entrenched norms collaboratively influence participation with transformation processes, hence enhancing the comparative significance of this paradigm outside Pakistan.

Contribution toward Model-Building

This study offers a conceptual typology of resistance mechanisms inherent in organisational culture, rather than providing context-specific descriptions. This study integrates ethnographic evidence with institutional and cultural theory to address demands for analytically grounded insights into school transformation processes (Mincu, 2023). According to the findings, resistance should not be viewed as a failure of

implementation but it is a negotiation of relationship based on identity, hierarchy, and meaning-making which justifies the claim that sustainable change is a product of cultural interaction, not a product of procedure imposition (Fullan, 2007).

Recommendations for Policy

The development of policies in Pakistan, as in the context of the Global South, should focus on contextual responsiveness and participatory development in policy design. Policies that are formulated with the primary goal of compliance measures can actually increase symbolic behavior, rather than actual change. Formalisation of teacher voice systems, iterative consultation and culturally sensitive leadership formation may increase the sense of ownership of the reform and the depth in the implementation. Therefore, there is the need of system-level support structures appreciating local leadership mediation.

Recommendations for Practice

The results highlight the importance of relational leadership and trust building to practitioners as a way of managing resistance. School leaders ought to create dialogic conditions in which they can bring out the issue of professional identity without consequence and therefore convert resistance into productive engagement. Professional learning practices that put collaborative reflection and shared agency into the limelight can make reform not a forced change by outsiders, but a shared effort, in line with the scholarly investigation on the effectiveness of culturally responsive leadership.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should expand comparative analysis in a wide range of sociocultural settings to determine whether the conceptual model developed herein is applicable or not. Evolution of cultural mediation through reform cycles could be studied using longitudinal and mixed-methods research, whereas cross-regional trends in micropolitical bargaining may be revealed with the help of multi-site ethnographies. The study would contribute to the advancement of theory regarding the organisational culture and change in education in response to the needs of the culturally sensitive scholarship on leadership and change.

Conclusion

This research paper demonstrates the fact that structural and cultural barriers to change management in secondary schools are not merely issues that arise in the course of procedures or as a result of routine, but rather, are deeply seated phenomena of social and institutional nature. Hierarchical norms, identity preservation and micropolitical bargaining are identified as ethnographic findings that affect the process of reforms, which implies that resistance must be interpreted as contextual sense-making instead of the implementation failure. The results support the idea that school reform that is to be sustained and long-lasting requires contact with organisational culture as a dynamic system of meaning and relationships, and not just a technical element to be altered (Fullan, 2007). Put simply, it is important to realize that considerable school change is based not on getting rid of opposition, which can only be achieved by understanding and being involved in the cultural logics behind it.

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