The Non-formal Education for Dropout and Out-of-School Children from Parents' Perspectives

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History *Revised format:* *May 2025* *Available Online:* *June 2025* **Keywords** *Perspectives,* *Qualitative, Non-formal education,* *Interview protocol*	Pakistan is an underdeveloped country and is facing a lot of challenges, including the provision of quality education to all. Similarly, no appreciable work has been done in non-formal education. Hence, it requires a complete practical approach to address this issue. To check the practicality of the existing non-formal education in Punjab, Pakistan, this study was conducted to gather information on its workability and challenges from the parents of children studying in non-formal education institutions. The suggestions were also sought to be put in the current study. The qualitative phenomenological approach was used in this study. The interview parameters were defined, and the procedures were developed. A pre-study was conducted to assess the interview protocols to check their practicality. In this study, a sample of 2o parents was selected and interviewed. Some of them were conducted through face-to-face and some through telephonically. The gathered data were analyzed through a thematic analysis approach. In a sample of 20 parents, most of the parents showed satisfaction with the non-formal educational institutes, because of their close proximity and the safety of their children, especially for girls. The other satisfaction factor was the only available option, within proximity and within their budget. In parallel, the parents pointed to the lack of necessary infrastructure and facilities, and their poor conditions. Most of the parents suggested to provide the requisite structure and facilities like those available in formal schools.

Introduction

The literacy rate of Pakistan is about 60%, which is among the lowest in the world. Pakistan is facing a lot of challenges in the education sector. As per the statistical data of 2018, approximately 22.84 million children never attended primary school in Pakistan, which means these were out of school. The future

projections are also alarming, as the figure may touch 45 million by 2030. The dropout numbers are also higher. The 46% of children complete primary school education, and 36% secondary school education. The 25% youth were illiterate as reported in 2017, and 8.2% un-employment was recorded. The UN also reported serious results and rated 154th among the 189 countries, as per the 2020 UN Human Development Index (HDI) Report. Even India was in 131st place, and Bangladesh was in 133rd position. To address the issue, the government began work in collaboration with the private sector and NGOs. The government also initiated a non-formal education system along with formal education to cope with these challenges.

The government of Pakistan established the non-formal education sector in 1953 to expand access to education for all children. The major initiatives were the establishment of the National Education Foundation, the National Commission for Human Development, and the Basic Education Community Schools. In 2002, the Literacy and Non-formal Education Department was established and made a significant contribution to the sector. Over the years, it has designed and implemented several different initiatives, such as

- Adult Primary Education (1950)
- Village AID Program (1953)
- Literacy Programs (1964-1969)
- Iqra Pilot Program (1986)
- Nai-Roshni Schools (1987-1989)
- Quranic Literacy Project (1992-1994)
- Madrassah Schools.

These programs aimed to improve literacy and provide alternative educational opportunities for children and adults nationwide.

After the 18th Constitutional Amendment, education became a provincial subject. According to the Annual Statistical Report 2022-23, there were 31,522 non-formal education centers in Pakistan. Of these, 57% of learners were in the Punjab, 27% in KPK, 4% in Baluchistan, GB, and AJK, and 5% in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT). "Punjab Literacy and Non-formal Education Policy 2019" (PLNFEP 2019) was designed in Punjab by the Punjab Literacy and Non-formal Education Department in 2019. The aim of this policy was to increase the accessibility of education, improve the quality of learning and teaching, and strengthen the governance on a sustainable basis. The Punjab Literacy and Non-formal Education Policy 2019 also focuses on the following,

- Primary Education for Out-of-School Children
- Adult Literacy
- Life Skills

Currently, 20,292 centers operate in Punjab, serving 616,975 learners (Annual Statistical Report 2022-23). Various studies were conducted to evaluate the performance of Pakistan's non-formal education sector, and several different challenges were reported. Khalid Saleem (2009) reported poor governance in different programs, which led to the abandonment of these programs. Financial constraints remained hurdles in effective implementation, which were further deteriorated by the poor management by the government bodies. Malik et al. (2011) pointed out various issues, including the adult learners' issues, where they highlighted that the adults were not fully motivated towards learning, because no immediate employment and other benefits were visible in the short term. The different media platforms were not utilized effectively. Malik et al. (2011) also reported various shortcomings in the community-school partnerships programs. The committee members were unable to bridge the gap between schools and communities. Similarly, the teachers were not well-trained to get the support of the local community and to deliver education. The study suggested to create ownership among committee members to play an

active role in non-formal education.

Recent studies also pointed out various challenges in the non-formal education sector. The parents are unaware of the core values of education for their children and the literacy centers, as reported by Rafaqat and Ali Akbar (2017). Insufficient funds are available to teachers, especially in terms of their wages, which lowers their motivation level and their performance, and they remain unrecognized members of society. Resources are also limited, which reduces the effectiveness of the institutes. Later in 2018, Rohina Gul (2018) reported that the infrastructure and basic facilities were not provided to non-formal schools, but the parents and teachers were okay with non-formal schools and the outcome. Abdullah et al. (2022) conducted research on the role of Non-formal schools in District Rajanpur, wherein they reported improved literacy. The majority of the teachers, about 70%, showed satisfaction with the performance of non-formal schools, especially in deprived and low-income communities like Rajanpur. The study reported that non-formal schools upscaled the literacy. The study also pointed out the positive roles of female teachers. Most of the teachers in non-formal schools are female. This has increased the enrollment and also the confidence of the parents. Most NFBE schools operate from teachers' homes, thereby making education accessible to out-of-school children, especially girls.

This study presents parents' perspectives on current conditions, challenges, and recommendations for improving non-formal education in Punjab.

Objectives of the Study
- To explore how parents and teachers view the current non-formal education facilities for out-of-school and dropout children in Punjab.
- To highlight the challenges and gather suggestions for improving non-formal institutions.

Research Methodology
The Literacy and Non-formal Basic Education Department aims to provide basic literacy skills, with 20,539 single-teacher institutions in 36 districts, serving 434,133 participants (2022-23). This study examines non-formal education in Punjab, Pakistan, from parents' perspectives, employing a phenomenological approach. A qualitative phenomenological approach provides an in-depth worldview of the parents. This study has implied an interview to elicit parents' perspectives. In a qualitative interview, the participants' opinions and views are explored. Most commonly, open-ended questions or an unstructured format (Creswell, 2009) are used. This approach helped us understand parents' views and opinions in detail. The interviews consisted of two parts. The first part collected basic demographic information. The second part of the interview included open-ended questions. The open-ended questions provided free will to provide their actual point of view.

For a deep understanding of the case, rather than to collect numbers, a qualitative research approach was opted for. Hence, a small group of parents was selected for interviews. Therefore, a sample of 20 parents was selected. A sample included parents with low literacy, belonging to deprived communities, and with financial stress. These parents were also unaware of the formal procedures of the institutions. This sample was selected to move early to the saturation level. A few of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and others were conducted telephonically. The interviewees were also recorded after taking their consents for the accuracy of the data and the results.

Table 1

Participant Parents' Demographic Detail

Assign Code	Parent Relation	Age	Qualification	Occupation
M-1	Mother	30	Illiterate	Household helper
M-2	Mother	32	Illiterate	Household helper
M-3	Mother	30	Illiterate	Household helper
F-1	Father	34	FA	Employee
F-2	Father	30	Matric	Employee
M-4	Mother	23	Illiterate	Housewife
M-5	Mother	27	Illiterate	Housewife
M-6	Mother	28	Illiterate	Housewife
M-7	Mother	30	Primary	Housewife
M-8	Mother	33	Illiterate	Housewife
M-9	Mother	29	Illiterate	Housewife
M-10	Mother	36	Primary	Tailoress
M-11	Mother	32	Illiterate	Tailoress
M-12	Mother	38	Middle	Housewife
M-13	Mother	40	Illiterate	Agricultural laborer
F-3	Father	32	Quran	Agricultural laborer
F-4	Father	38	FA	Employee
M-14	Mother	39	Illiterate	Housewife
M-15	Mother	20	Primary	Housewife
F-5	Father	36	Illiterate	Vendor

Source: Author's work

The technique of qualitative data analysis is used to interpret the written or textual data to make it meaningful and to make it understandable (Creswell, 2009). In this present study, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, as this analysis represents data in a systematic way from patterns and key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A six-step thematic analysis process was used, and the analysis was of an inductive nature, as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006), to ensure a systematic analysis. In this process, both professional and ethical standards were adhered to strictly.

The concerned department, "The Board of Studies and the Literacy and Non-formal Education Department," was approached to take proper approval, and relevant permissions were sought to conduct a study in different districts and to get data. Similarly, the participants were also briefed about the study and its purpose, and full confidence was given for the confidentiality of the information. The audio recording of the interviews was also included in the permissions. They were also informed that they had the right to withdraw at any stage. These protocols were briefed for both face-to-face and over the telephone. The audios were recorded with permission. The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

Parents are the primary stakeholders in the non-formal education system; therefore, their views were collected using a brief interview guide. In this study, 20 interviews were conducted: 6 face-to-face and 14 on the telephone. The basic information about the parents is given below.

Table 2
Number of Participants

Participant	Frequency	Percentage
Mothers	15	75
Fathers	5	25
Total	20	100

Table 3
Qualification of Participant

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Illiterate	13	65
Primary	3	15
Middle	1	5
Matric	1	5
FA	2	10
Total	20	100

Table 4
Age of Participants

Age	Frequency	Percentage
21-25	2	10
26-30	7	35
31-35	5	25
36-40	6	30
Total	20	100

Table 5
Participant's Occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Housewife	9	45
Household Maid	3	15
Tailoress	2	10
Vendor	1	5
Employee	3	15
Agricultural Laborer	2	10
Total	20	100

Most parents had limited educational attainment and belonged to lower socioeconomic classes. They were not very familiar with the education system, so their views became repetitive early on, and a few themes emerged.

Reasons to opt for a Non-formal Institution
Parents chose non-formal schools primarily because they were easily accessible, as these schools were located nearest to their communities or homes. This reason was reported by 16 to 20 parents. Some parents provided additional reasons for their preference.

Three parents reported preferring non-formal schools for their young children, considering them the most suitable option. Another three parents reported that, due to the absence of formal education schools for girls in their area, they opted for a non-formal school, given safety concerns. The parent M-10 reported that her daughter attends a non-formal school, because the nearest girls' school is approximately 3-4 km away. As a parent, he must consider his daughter's safety, and therefore prefers this school.

One of the mothers reported that her child has disability, and it is difficult for the child to travel to the nearest formal school, which is located at a considerable distance. The four parents showed full confidence in the teachers of non-formal institutes, primarily due to their hard work and sincere efforts, as they are the teachers of their community.

F-1 parents also appreciated in a similar way, with the addition that they have no other available option of school in the nearby area. The parent M-6, found to be more comfortable for keeping his child in a non-formal school, is too young to send his child to a far school.

Lastly, a parent said, being a low-income family, since these schools charge no fee, this is the better option, as she can't afford any formal school in the public or private sector.

Satisfaction Level

Most of the parents were satisfied with the non-formal institutions, as the non-formal schools are free for all, and easily accessible. The community members were also supportive. Four out of twenty were very satisfied with the overall performance of schools, and three appreciated teachers for their hard work and teaching methodologies. The six rated institutions are good. The response of the F-4 parent was very appreciative of the teacher, her caring attitude, commitment, and work style.

A community volunteer has offered a building for the school, and everyone supports the teacher to ensure that the school remains functional under all circumstances.

The parent M-5 reported that the teacher demonstrates a high level of care and concern for the students and behaves like a sister. He stated that his fifth child is currently enrolled at the school and is very pleased with her teacher. He further shared that his older children completed their primary education at this school. One of the kids is pursuing matriculation at a public school, and another is enrolled in the FA at Allama Iqbal Open University.

However, the remaining seven parents rated the school as just satisfactory. Parent M-10 reported that "I am a widow and work as a housemaid. I have no other option for earning a livelihood. This school is acceptable; the teacher assigns household chores to my daughter, but I have not yet found a better option".

Challenges

The parents of students enrolled in these non-formal institutions face financial difficulties, and approximately 65% require literacy programs. A major proportion of parents (13 out of 20) reported insufficient facilities, particularly highlighting inadequate infrastructure to cope with hard weather conditions. On the other hand, four parents recorded no issues with the institutions and showed satisfaction.

The parent M-6 stated: "The children are sitting on the ground/floors on mats in a congested space and asked for the provision of basic facilities, keeping in view the electricity shortages to cope with the hot weather."

The parents, M-12 and M-13, reported that the schools lack boundary walls and electricity, which worsens their children's situation in hot weather. The parent M-13 stated, "The school was established

through the efforts of our parents. Through mutual efforts, the community has provided this yard for the school; however, it lacks basic facilities to protect children from the effects of hot weather. These facilities include fans and electricity. Before this, the children had to travel 2-3 km to a formal school." They also requested the provision of a formal school with facilities in their area.

The parents, F-3 and M-3, also reported building-related issues at their children's school. The parent F-3 stated that:

"The non-formal education does not have a proper school building. The students are studying in the teacher's home, where no separate space is available for students. As parents, we want our children to continue their education. Although a community volunteer has arranged a place for the school, there is still no electricity or washroom facility. We request the department to help resolve this issue."
Most parents reported a lack of basic facilities. These facilities include infrastructure, buildings, furniture, uniforms, washrooms, and drinking water, especially cold in the summer season.

Suggestions for improvement
The Punjab has a certain set of social and religious norms that necessitate the development of separate schools for girls. Financial constraints & inflation are also barriers to getting quality education. Every parent has a strong desire to make every effort for quality education for their children. The formal schools are far from certain areas, and the children have to commute on a daily basis to go to school, making it difficult for girls to attend school in far areas. The parents reported that formal primary schools are located far from their homes, typically 2-5 kilometers away. These distances create more problems for girls. The social and cultural norms in Punjab also require girls to attend separate girls' schools, which are usually even farther away. Families living in these remote areas face financial difficulties and cannot afford transportation to attend separate schools. Although parents strongly want to send their children to school, these problems make it very difficult. Poverty, social norms, and the lack of formal schools near their homes are the primary barriers to obtaining the desired formal education.

The parents suggested to provide infrastructure with all the required facilities pertaining to the education and natural requirements. These include proper classrooms with all required furniture, a blackboard/whiteboard, and a library. They also suggested the drinking water and washrooms, and above all, the provision of electricity. Twelve parents emphasized the provision of all facilities extended to the non-formal institutions.

One of the parents (F-3) stated that the lack of adequate facilities in non-formal schools is the main barrier to deciding on a school for their children. If the parents can afford it, then they have opted for the formal schools instead of the non-formal schools. Although the teachers at non-formal schools are cooperative, hardworking, and dedicated. Parent F-3 further stated that if the department provided an adequate school building, many more students would attend the school.

Additionally, three out of 20 parents reported that the nearest primary school for formal primary education is 2-3 kilometers away, and the community needs a primary school. The parent M-4 further explained that in his area, the primary school is approximately 3 kilometers away, and it is difficult for the children to walk to school a long distance daily. Therefore, he suggested that the government provide the basic facilities to these existing non-formal schools.

According to the parents' point of view, a subset of respondents (4 out of 20) reported that girls' schools are situated at a considerable distance, approximately 6-7 kilometers away, from their residences. These long distances increase the cost of transportation, and increases the concerns for the safety of girls. Hence, the girls are usually unable to continue their education. and concerns about child safety, especially girls, making it difficult to get or continue the education. Most of the parents suggested elevating schools and providing facilities and infrastructure, as in formal schools. The parent, M-5,

also expressed similar concern for the safety of her girl. The girls' school is about 7 kilometers away. She cannot afford a rickshaw or other suitable means of transport. She suggested upgrading non-formal schools to integrate their children into society by providing the necessary education.

Three parents shared similar views regarding facilities. The parent M-7 stated that a child from a deprived, low-income family can access education if the government assumes responsibility and provides books and stationery.

The parent M-11 shared her perspectives as: "In this school, the students do not have benches and chairs; instead, they sit on the grounds on worn-out mats, which should be provided once a year. Overall, 16 of 20 parents reported choosing the non-formal school because it was the nearest educational option in their area. Other reasons were also cited: three parents preferred these schools for their children, while three others stated that there are no girls' schools in their area and that they chose non-formal schools for their daughters' safety.

Most parents expressed satisfaction with the non-formal institutions. Specifically, four out of 20 parents rated them as very satisfactory, three appreciated the teaching practices, and six rated the institutions as good overall.

The parents of children studying in these non-formal institutions are financially weak and are in continuous struggle to make ends meet. About 65% of the parents are illiterate. As a result, they may be unable to fully articulate the problems they face. Of the 20 parents, four believe there is no problem with these non-formal institutions. Of 20 parents, four reported seeing no major issues with non-formal schools. Thirteen parents pointed out the absence of basic and essential facilities like cold water in summer.

The parents pointed out that the formal schools are established in towns, and are 2-3 km away from the small remote towns or villages, and this distance increases for girls' schools. The people in these area also financially weak and cannot afford the transportation charges. Although every parent wishes to give better education to their children, in better schools.

Simply, the parents suggested that the government should provide all facilities required for a better education system.

Conclusion

Unlike formal schools, the non-formal schools are established in remote areas, being cost-effective for the government. The people are financially weak and are struggling to meet their basic needs. Less information is available to them. These people are satisfied with the education of these non-formal schools, as these are the only option for schooling in their areas within their budget.

The people living in remote areas should not be deprived of quality education. The government should work hand in hand with other institutions such as Social Welfare, Bait-ul-Mal, School Education, Special Education, and TEVTA. Non-government organizations may be taken on board for the provision of facilities. An equal and better education is a basic right of a child, and the government should provide it.

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