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Navigating the "Grammar of Resistance": A Micro-Political Analysis of How New Contractual Head Teachers Overcome Institutional Inertia in Rural Pakistani Schools

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ABSTRACT

The educational system of Sindh is marked by a long-standing and deep-seated system crisis that has remained untouched by the conventional top-down reform initiatives over the decades. Having about 23 million out-of-school children in Pakistan, and almost 7.4 million of that number living in Sindh alone, the province is struggling with some of the worst educational pointers in the South Asian region. In addition to the sheer number of out-of-school children, the quality of teaching in government schools is also utterly dismal, with standardized testing like the ASER and the SAT having repeatedly revealed that a large majority of students are not even able to master basic grade level skills in literacy and numeracy skills. This has been seen to fail in the past due to a recruitment system that is entrenched in the concept of political patronage whereby head teachers and faculty are not necessarily hired because they are more meritocratic or demonstrating leadership skills but due to their long tenure or political affiliation. This paper discusses one such ambitious policy reform by the Government of Sindh, namely the merit-based hiring of contractual head teachers or IBA head teachers, charged with the responsibility of becoming change agents in some of the most under-resourced and bureaucratically stuck schools in the province. This paper is based on a qualitative multiple-case study of three such head teachers in rural District Khairpur, and it states that the school change process in these settings is micro-political in nature. Although policy texts tend to present leadership in a technical-rational manner, the actual life of these new head teachers is one of perpetual negotiation, conflict and maneuvers. The main argument is that these leaders were successful not because of their formal positional authority, which was frequently compromised by their contractual position, but because of their capacity to mobilize an extensive arsenal of symbolic, relational and procedural tactics to defeat deep-seated "institutional inertia". The paper will compare three different schools (Sojhro Khan, Thar Deep, and Shahpur) and will show that the nature and the intensity of resistance are highly situational, as the passive resistance experienced by HT1 was relatively low-stakes, whereas the opposition faced by HT3 was high and even life-threatening. Using this

micro-political prism, the research hypothesizes that political cunning and local legitimacy-creating capacity is as important as managerial skill among leaders working in the weak institutional contexts in developing states.

Keywords: *Navagating, Resistance, Micro-Political, Contractual, Organization, Feudalistic.*

Introduction

Sindh is an example of a society that has a very bleak socio-political environment in terms of any organizational reform initiative. The province has long been an asylum of “feudalistic” organization and managerial neglect in education, both in the distribution of resources and in the office assignment of officials(Sain, 2023). The outcome is a “grammar of schooling” characterized by teacher absenteeism, the existence of ghost schools and the absence of any real relationship between the school and the community that it serves(Barber, 2010). The literacy rates in rural Sindh have been in stagnation with the Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25 showing a literacy rate of about 57.54% compared to the last several years of 61.6% which is an indicator of a failed system to maintain improvement. The infrastructure disparities are drastic, with almost 69 percent of schools having no electricity and 43% having no toilets that work, making this an especially unfavorable environment in which female students can remain(Nazar, 2025).

Reaction to such "parlous" conditions was a competitive recruitment process of head teachers by the provincial government under the Sindh Education Reform Program (SERP II) and through the support of the World Bank(World Bank Group, 2025). These IBA head teachers have been chosen after high-stakes testing by the Sukkur IBA University, which was aimed at making sure that only the candidates with substantial pedagogical and management knowledge found themselves in the leadership positions. But these new appointees joined the system on five-year contracts, a position that created a major micro-political imbalance: they were merit-based outsiders who had to handle permanent civil servants who in many cases had longer institutional life and political support.

The major question, which this research answers, is as follows: Why were such dramatically different success and opposition paths faced by such head teachers, even though they were chosen based on the merit system, and they all were given the same mandate? The solution is in the micro-politics of the respective school locations as the study examines. At School 1 (Sojhro Khan), the head was comparatively easily acquitted; at School 2 (Thar Deep), the

head had to deal with an organized community backlash against a uniform policy; and at School 3 (Shahpur), the leader had to contend with a critical case of highly organized opposition, including physical threats and a turnover of teachers. This difference highlights the idea that the school leadership in Sindh is not an easy task of introducing a decree but a complicated process of managing the power relations of the localities.

Theoretical Framework

In order to examine the performance of the IBA head teachers, we need to go beyond the traditional-rational theories of organizational performance that focus on distinct hierarchies and common values. In its place, this paper applies the micro-political approach that perceives schools as arenas of struggle where power and influence are fought out on a daily basis (Rodríguez Revelo, 2017, Achinstein, 2002).

Micro-Politics of Educational Organizations

Micropolitics can be defined as the act of people and groups using both formal and informal powers to accomplish their objectives in organizations (Grissom et al., 2015). Schools are neither monolithic nor perfectly coordinated, but, as (Ball, 1987) and (Blase, 1991) established, they are conflict-ridden, ideologically diverse, and poorly coordinated (Kairienė, 2018). In this political system, actors employ the different sources of influence, which can be formal power to social sanctions and the ability to give support in order to achieve their interests (Spaulding, 2000). Micropolitics in the rural Sindh context usually centers on the management of limited resources, including the School Management Committee (SMC) funds, and the preservation of the traditional ways of doing things, which will not be willing to accommodate new, reform-oriented leaders.

The Institutional Inertia and Grammar of Schooling

The difficulties that the IBA head teachers encountered may be put into perspective as an expression of confrontation with the grammar of schooling. This term is coined by Tyack and Cuban (1997) to refer to the organizational and pedagogical regularities (age-graded classrooms, rote learning, and teacher-centered teaching) underlying old age that have stayed the same and are difficult to change. These regularities are ingrained to the point of being invisible and thus create the foundation of what is regarded by the stakeholders as a real

school(Labaree, 2021). This grammar has a status quo bias in the fragile state context of Pakistan, which safeguards teacher absenteeism and deters community involvement. Having new head teachers who are trying to break this grammar, such as the imposition of a time table or the institution of student-centered activities, meet with institutional inertia, a force that cannot be overcome easily, and is striving to drag the school back into its customary condition.

Resistance to Change

Resistance in the school environment is not just a mere unwillingness to follow, but a complex political reaction to a perceived threat to his or her status, comfort or professional identity(Altinyelken, 2013, Pillay, 2004). Two main types of resistance are differentiated in academic literature:

- **Active Resistance:** Open actions that include verbal resistance, media pressure, threats and non-compliance that is organized(Seidel and Tanner, 2013, Dağhan and Aktaş, 2024, Yüksel, 2006).
- **Passive Resistance:** Indirect measures such as avoidance, refusing to act, non-cooperation through silence and pretending to be incompetent(Seidel and Tanner, 2013, Dağhan and Aktaş, 2024, Yüksel, 2006, Tobin, 2017).

In the case of the IBA-HTs, the opposition was frequently based on the fear of the unknown and the change of long-established patterns. This resistance was in certain instances fueled by entrenched interests as seen in school 3, where the teachers also had their own schools running privately and therefore the upgrading of the government school posed a threat to their private source of livelihood.

Strategic Agency under Constricted Circumstances

The IBA head teachers needed to make use of tactical agency as opposed to strategic plan due to their contractual position and absence of strong bureaucratic backing. This framework is based on the writing of de Certeau (1984) who differentiates between the strategies of those who are in power and the tactics of the weak. Strategies assume the management of some sort of place of power, whilst tactics is the art of making do (bricolage) with a space dominated by

others. The IBA-HTs with a precarious status employed a tactical agility to move in uncertain environments using small opportunities to create legitimacy and co-opt opposition.

Analytical Framework for Tactical Leadership

The paper recognizes a three-component analytical model of the tactical reactions of the merit-selected head teachers:

- **Symbolic Tactics:** Visible high impact actions are used to enact change. It consists of role-modeling (e.g. being the first to get to school) and visible indications of a new regime (e.g. painting school walls or establishing parks)(Plaku and Leka, 2025).
- **Relational Tactics:** The act of coalition and winning hearts and minds. These include the strategic communication with the parents, finding supportive teachers and establishing dependencies whereby the stakeholders desire the reform to succeed(Preston and Barnes, 2017, Vanlommel et al., 2025).
- **Procedural Tactics:** The creative application of formal meetings, open decision-making, and the subjugation of stakeholders into the formal school systems such as the SMC to strip them of their outside manipulative capabilities(Blase and Anderson, 1995).

Research Methodology

This research used a qualitative multiple-case study in order to attempt to encompass the holistic and meaningful nature of the experiences of the head teachers in their natural environments. The study was confined to Basti, District Khairpur, which is a region that represents a combination of rural and semi-urban environment.

Sampling and Participants

In selecting the three schools to be used in the study, purposive sampling was employed, in that the schools were chosen based on different levels of performance based on the identification of the local Taluka Education Officers (TEOs). A total of 29 stakeholders participated in the study, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives on the performance of the IBA head teachers.

Table 1 Participant Demographics Across the Three Case Study Schools

S. No.	Participant Category	School 1	School 2	School 3	TEOs	Total
1	Head Teachers	1	1	1	-	3
2	Teachers	1	1	1	-	3
3	Students	4	4	4	-	12
4	Parents	2	2	2	-	6
5	SMC Chairmen	1	1	1	-	3
6	Taluka Education Officers	-	-	-	2	2
Total		9	9	9	2	29

Data Collection and Analysis

The method of data collection depended on semi-structured interviews and document analysis. A semi-structured interview supported the exploration of the lived experiences of the participants in depth whereas document analysis of school records (e.g. attendance registers, inward/outward registers, SMC minutes, and cash books) was employed to triangulate the results and create a baseline of the conditions in the institution before and after the arrival of the IBA head teachers. Data were studied on the basis of within-case and cross-case thematic analysis, which made it possible to identify patterns, differences, and contingencies in contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were employed to make sure the participants were not harmed. The Director of Education was contacted and informed consent was taken out of all the participants. In students whose age was below 18, consent was obtained. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity of schools and individuals and data were stored in a password-controlled environment.

Finding 1: The terrain of resistance

The three schools prior to the coming of the merit chosen head teachers were symbolic of the institutional inertia that pervades the Sindh education system. The analysis of documents and interviews with stakeholders showed the existence of an old regime of pre-appointment, characterized by a loose approach and the normalization of failure.

- **Chronic Absenteeism:** The pre-IBA attendance record revealed an over-all trend of student and teacher inconsistency. According to TEOs, the teachers did not teach before these HTs and the schools were frequently useless.
- **Instructional Neglect:** Teaching has been referred to as being traditional and teacher-centered, usually restricted to dictation or rote memorization through the use of solved papers and guides. No period-system or time-table was in existence, and the result was a confusion of the system.
- **Lack of Community participation:** Parents had little participation in the school life. They were uneducated, uninterested, and therefore no worry about the degradation of the condition. The grammar of neglect thrived without any outside responsibility due to this disconnection.
- **Bureaucratic Silence:** Inward registers revealed a pathetic state of communication between the officers and the schools implying that the top-level authorities were hardly involved in checking or aiding such distant locations.

This was the landscape- the grammar of schooling- that every new IBA head teacher was required to face when he/she assumed office. They came in not only as building managers, but as political actors who dared a long-established system of unwritten regulations.

Finding 2: Sources and Forms of Resistance Encountered

The shift to the merit-based leadership was received with a different level of opposition, starting with passive to active and structured opposition. The cross-case comparison shows that local micro-politics determined the degree of resistance.

School 1 (Sojhro Khan): Weak Resistance

School 1, the head teacher (HT1) encountered what can be described as soft resistance. The main problems were put in the context of the lack of motivation and lack of resources. Although the teachers were not initially motivated, there was no active opposition against the initiatives of the head teacher. Parents were not engaged, but were mostly supportive once they were contacted. The absence of a consequential local rivalry implied that HT1 did not have to be continuously engaged in political confrontations but could be satisfied with gradual improvement of the organization.

School 2 (Thar Deep): Active and Organized Community Resistance

The micro-political environment at school 2 was more confrontational. The head teacher (HT2) faced some aggressive opposition after he tried to introduce a compulsory uniform policy. This transformation was viewed as an innovative policy that went against the local traditions. Teachers attested that there was indeed a challenge by teachers, students and parents initially on HT since he was attempting to alter that traditional system but all opposed. The opposition grew to the point of becoming a social affair where parents contacted media that compelled HT. Such mobilization through the media as a form of resistance shows just how high-level political repertoire community stakeholders possess when their grammar of schooling is at stake.

School 3 (Shahpur): Intensive Multi-Source Resistance

School 3 is the critical case of extreme opposition. The head teacher (HT3) was confronted by a multi-front political battle. The resistance sources were deep-rooted and complex:

- **Physical Threats:** As he tried to shut a back door that was a point of uncontrollable entry, HT3 was threatened by the members of the community and those teachers who were non-cooperative. This door was a literal representation of the loose coupling that had existed before with respect to absenteeism and the absence of oversight amongst the teachers.
- **Teacher Exodus:** Two teachers even left the school instead of complying with the new accountability measures, which left HT3 in an immediate staffing crisis.
- **Competing Private Interests:** The chairman of the SMC also headed their own private school so there was a conflict of interests. He was less concerned about the betterment of this government school since its collapse sent students to his own school.
- **Community Trust Deficit:** In Shahpur, parents continued to have a trust deficit towards the government school in favor of the private sector. HT3 needed to engage in a narrative warfare to make parents believe that a government school could be delivering quality education.

The experience of HT3 is indicative of the emotional work and personal danger involved in leading a school in a high-resistance environment.

Finding 3: The Tactical Repertoire -Making the resistance

The head teachers who became selected using merit were able to sail through these micro political minefields using a tactical repertoire that was not grounded in bureaucratic power but personal legitimacy.

Symbolic Tactics: Movements of Presence

The head teachers in the three schools used symbolic behavior to represent the end of the old regime. Role-modeling was the most effective symbolic strategy.

- **Punctuality and Teaching:** HT2 and HT3 concentrated on "himself becoming regular and punctual" which "convinced all to follow him". They established moral power by serving eight periods a day, activities that the subordinates were traditionally assigned. As one teacher in School 3 noted, "First of all, HT considers himself a teacher not an officer".
- **Visible Markers of Change:** Head teachers used limited SMC funds for "painting the school" and "doing plantation". These efforts were documented in small parks and picture galleries, which formed a new visual narrative to the community.

Relational Tactics: Forging Accountability Bridges

Relational strategies that centered on avoiding non-compliant intermediaries and establishing direct alliances with amenable stakeholders.

- **Direct Parent Communication:** The strategy of getting the phone numbers of parents was first used by HT1 and HT2. This was an informal way of circumventing formal teacher-managed procedures and also established a direct accountability bridge between home and the head teacher. In cases where the child was unavailable, the HT contacted the parents directly, which led to parent communication with HT and increased student regularity.
- **Winning Hearts and Minds:** HT2 specifically employed the formula of winning their hearts and gaining their confidence in the solution of media crisis as the solution to uniforms.
- **Empowering Supportive Actors:** In School 3, where there was a lot of opposition, the HT used the support of likeminded teachers to assist in carrying out his plans.

At School 1, the HT successfully got the SMC chairman on board the school reform process, transforming him into a moral and financial partisan.

Procedural Tactics

Formal procedures were employed by head teachers to sanitize their changes so that they could sound objective and collaborative solutions instead of arbitrary.

- **Transparency and Involvement:** HT2 and HT3 had a meeting of all stakeholders prior to making decisions. They minimized the resistance ground later on by including parents and teachers in the planning process of the future events.
- **Objective Accountability Tools:** The implementation of the so-called biometric attendance (School 3) and scheme of studies (School 2) turned the accountability into a technical system, transferred to a personal confrontation.
- **Leveraging Formal Structures Creatively:** HT1 leveraged SMC meetings as the means of not only getting financial approval, but also as the opportunity to report the outcomes and request the community to step in to provide furniture or staffing shortages.

Finding 4: Differential Outcomes – Explaining Success and Struggle

The comparative analysis reveals that the "trajectory of success" for an IBA-HT is not a linear result of their merit, but a product of the interaction between their tactical agency and the local micro-political context.

Table 2 Comparative Trajectories of the Three Case Study Head Teachers.

Trajectory Category	Case	Micro-Political Context	Tactical Response	Outcome
Relatively Smooth	HT1	Supportive SMC; low active opposition; community willingness to donate.	Relational and procedural tactics used early and effectively.	High performance; school became "famous at district level."
Crisis & Recovery	HT2	Active media-based resistance from parents over specific policy (uniforms).	Symbolic role-modeling; intensive relational "heart winning" to rebuild trust.	Convinced community; purchased electric transformer; improved regularity.

The Long Siege	HT3	Toxic micro-politics; physical threats; teacher exodus; competing private interests.	Reactive and slow; initially "disturbed" but relied on persistent symbolic work.	Slower, harder-won progress; gradually won over parents; removed trust deficit.
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HT1 was successful due to the fact that his environment was a fertile soil when it comes to relational leadership. He had fewer challenges and could use the backing of the community (such as the trees to make furniture) to his fast academic success. On the contrary, HT3 was a victim of such predicaments that unsettled him psychologically. His success was not characterized by a quick fame but rather his perseverance in the face of a grammar of resistance which tried to get him ousted. His slower development is evidence that the personal cost of change is high in high-opposition situations, and the role of head teacher is that of principled survival and not merely management.

Discussion

The results of the current research give micro-political theories empirical support and they present new understandings of leadership in weak institutional environments.

The Centrality of Legitimacy-Building

In a context where formal control is frequently compromised through patronage, the merit chosen head teacher has no choice but to engage in an ongoing process of legitimacy-building. Their contractual position required them to use referent power (character) and expert power (pedagogy) instead of legitimate power of their position. What enabled HT3 to survive in Shahpur was not his Grade 17 status, because teachers did not heed this, but rather his performance as a moral agent in teaching eight periods per day.

Contextual Contingency of Tactics

The research indicates that no leadership style that fits in the change of schools is a one-size-fits-all model. The strategic repertoire has to be modified in accordance to the micro-political audit of the school. School 1 Transparency in School 1 prompted some support but in School 3, it initially provoked threats. Good leaders are the ones who are politically savvy those who

can read the room and decide whether they should be a collaborator or a quiet resistor to the local norms that are not cooperative.

The Reform of Emotional Labor

Lastly, the paper highlights the “emotional labor” of institutional inertia. Mental distress of HT3 is a significant piece of data; it demonstrates that leadership in such situations is not only a technical process but an emotional one. The personal burden of dealing with a grammar of resistance may result in “burnout and reduced job satisfaction”, unless leaders receive clinical supervision or peer support groups.

Conclusion

The practice of the IBA head teachers in rural Sindh indicates the fact that school change is essentially micro-political work. Although recruitment based on third-party merit testing is an essential initial measure, it is the agency of the individual leader that enables reform to take root or be smothered by institutional inertia.

Implications for Policy

Policymakers should understand that it is not sufficient to hire leaders who are meritorious. New heads must be explicitly prepared to the “micro-political realities” of their schools in terms of induction programs that include conflict management, stakeholder management and strategic communication skills. Although the status of the contract produces high initial alertness, it also produces an “overwhelming fear” of job insecurity. To make the change sustainable, the government needs to transition towards a more permanent system that offers security but upholds high levels of accountability.

Implications for Practice

Within their first 90 days, new leaders ought to undertake a “micro-political audit” and figure out who is on their side and who might be resisting their major changes. The construction of moral legitimacy by performative acts of symbolism (such as teaching and punctuality) should be undertaken before the introduction of a controversial procedural change such as uniforms or biometric systems.

Implications for Research

More comparative micro-political research is urgently needed in the non-Western, weak-state settings. The future research ought to be done into how such tactical repertoires change over time, whether the merit agents become eventually co-opted into the “*grammar of schooling*” or whether or not they can maintain their aspect of change agents once they have had their aspect of being regularized.

Finally, HT1, HT2 and HT3 can be considered as a tale of resourcefulness during hard times. It demonstrates that though the grammar of resistance in the rural Sindh is potent, it can be changed. A blend of symbolic role-modeling, relational coalition-building and procedural transparency can enable and indeed is enabling merit-selected leaders to start rewriting the rules of the possible in schools in Pakistan.

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