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Transition of Adolescent Learners from Non-Formal Centers to Formal Schools of Sindh Province: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to understand how adolescents from NFE centres in Sindh transition into the formal education system. Through interviews with learners, educators and stakeholders, the report found that proximity, free access and female teachers lead people to enrol in NFE, while issues like needing documents, limited steps from NFE to formal schooling and teaching methods differing from formal schools hold many back. Traditions and beliefs about female education are another reason why it is hard for girls' education to continue. The study points out that NFE teachers are involved in student admissions, the lack of organized mentoring or counselling at schools and the infrequent use of digital technologies in education. It is clear from the results that policy changes are necessary to put bridge programs in place, accept NFE certificates and offer gender-sensitive resources and assistance. The results help explain how inclusive education can be achieved through thoughtful and coordinated approaches that are appropriate for communities.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Poverty, traditional gender beliefs and poor infrastructure keep millions of students in developing countries outside the school system (Nasreen et al., 2024; O'Regan et al., 2025). In Sindh, Pakistan, nearly six million children are not attending school, most of them adolescent girls in rural areas, due to issues such as cultural rules, shortage of women teachers and a lack of services designed for their needs (Ali et al., 2024; Rind, 2024). NFE centers that team up with organizations like the Sindh Education Foundation



(SEF) are now offering a chance for those who miss out on formal education to learn basic numeracy and literacy skills (Dato et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2024). Yet, the impact of these early learning projects is connected to how effectively participants enter formal education. This is an important area the study will examine.

Even though a lot of work is being done, there are numerous practical problems preventing the process from moving forward. The lack of appropriate programs for transition, differences in curriculums and poor accreditation systems stop many children from smoothly starting their formal education (Nasreen et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2022). Being in a new learning setting and being pressured by schoolwork make students more likely to leave (Parson & Parson, 2019). Due to early marriages, limited ability to move around and unsafe school settings, girls in poorer countries face many challenges (Gull & Sarwar, 2020; Rind, 2024). Teachers who have received little training, the unavailability of basic resources and no adequate support from schools hurt both NFE centers and formal schools, resulting in fewer students continuing their studies (Haider, 2024; Kushtiwala & Iqbal, 2023).

There is currently a lack of research on what it is like for adolescents to move from one level of education to the next in rural Sindh. Researchers tend to concentrate on student numbers and city schools, while paying little attention to how students and schools work emotionally, academically and institutionally (Channa, 2024; Dato et al., 2024). Further research is needed into how SEF and other stakeholders contribute to sustainable transition mechanisms (Rind, 2024; Shah et al., 2024). This research fills these gaps by using qualitative methods that take local realities into account.

Objectives of the Study

RO 1. To investigate the role of the NFE Centers in facilitating the transition of learners from non-formal education centers to formal schools in Sindh province.

RO 2. To analyze the effectiveness of strategies and interventions made by NFE Centers to ensure the smooth transition from a non-formal to a formal education system.

Significance of the study

This research looks at the major problem of educational access and the process of transitioning out-of-school children in Sindh to formal education. This study looks at the troubles faced by the students and examines the role of groups such as the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) in creating this transformation. The study focuses on improving policies that assist with student retention and an easy transition. It further stresses that strategies should be gender-inclusive, the community should be involved, teachers need training and the curriculum should be aligned. In general, the findings suggest long-term changes to improve fair and lasting education for disadvantaged adolescents in Sindh.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was based on interpretivist philosophy and followed an inductive method to investigate the shift of adolescents into formal schools after attending NFE centers in Sindh. SEF officials, implementation partners, teachers and development experts from different districts were chosen through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were held using a thematic structure that centered on learners' experiences and the activities at the institution. All interviews were conducted with 20 participants from NFE centers and related entities. A thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke, was carried out to find common themes in the data. The research was conducted in line with ethical rules such as getting informed consent, preserving anonymity and respecting the participants' decision to leave the study anytime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-Formal Education in Sindh

Community-based centers across Sindh run NFE for populations struggling with literacy and numeracy, including life skills teaching. The SEF and other partners, including various NGOs and community

organizations, manage them using public-private partnerships and aim to reach out-of-school children (Dahar, 2024; Dato et al., 2024). Problems such as poverty, children working, gender inequality, early marriages and living far from schools are serious barriers to education in this province. This situation is especially hard on adolescent girls because of travel restrictions and strong community beliefs. NFE creates a new route for learning, allowing children to study in their local language and with support from the community (Joyo & Memon, 2023; Rafiq & Malik, 2024). Still, most NFE centers struggle with having enough infrastructure, skilled teachers and supplies which leads to students not being ready for regular school subjects. Learning in a different language at school is a challenge for many, especially if there is a lack of institutional aid which may lead to more students leaving school (Rind, 2024; Shahid et al., 2022). For NFE students to move smoothly into formal education, bridging programs and mentoring, remedial support and teacher training should be introduced, along with making the subjects taught in schools match NFE standards. To maintain and improve the success of NFE, good policies, community connections and efforts by organizations are extremely important (Lakhan et al., 2021; Mangkhang, 2021; Sheikh et al., 2015).

Transition from Non-Formal to Formal Education

Integrating learners from non-formal education into formal schools plays a key role in supporting their personal and work life development. NFE supports marginalized groups such as those who dropped out of school, those with jobs and adults, by giving them access to flexible and suitable programs (Gada, 2022; Kicherova & Trifonova, 2023). Challenges have arisen from this shift. Learners encounter challenges with recognition of prior learning, curriculum, school assessment methods, and NFE. Standardized testing, official certification, classroom rules, and social interactions, learners, limit social interactions. NFE graduates are also not able to obtain formal education due to financial barriers (Caldana et al., 2023; Johnson & Majewska, 2022). To mitigate these issues, governments and other concerned bodies are advised to come up with recognition policies of NFE achievements, incorporation of flexible learning options and accommodative bridge programs. Things like academic counseling, having a mentor, orientation events and financial aid support greatly reduce challenges students experience during their integration (Gada, 2022; Pasha et al., 2022). Overall, transitioning learners to adult life succeeds only if there are inclusive education settings and good transition strategies that empower them to achieve and help others (Johnson & Majewska, 2022; Kushtiwala & Iqbal, 2023).

Barriers to Educational Transition

Shifts in education, like those from informal to formal learning, are made difficult by several financial, social, cultural and administrative obstacles. In a lot of cases, not having enough funds is the major difficulty. Expenses for school, travel, uniforms and study materials keep many students away from classes and cause higher dropout rates, mainly for students who must support their families by working (Rafiq & Malik, 2024; Ullah et al., 2021). A lack of access to education is often experienced by girls who are burdened by cultural traditions, early marriages and must be cautious about safety issues. The challenges are even greater in rural and undeveloped locations due to the extra difficulty of going far for education, not having single-gender facilities and shortages of female teachers (Gada, 2022; Gull & Sarwar, 2020; Shah et al., 2021). Institutions are limited by outdated courses, crowded classrooms, not enough teachers and poor infrastructure like little to no electricity, scarce clean water and lacking digital tools. Since formal education is strict and organized, it provides few opportunities for students shifting from non-formal learning systems (Junejo et al., 2018; Mufti, 2019). The lack of education regulation and oversight in Pakistan amplifies these challenges due to social disparities and economic instability. Though primary education is technically free, inequitable implementation and associated costs create barriers to education (Joyo & Memon, 2023; Rafiq & Malik, 2024). It is important to implement wide-ranging reforms, including support for infrastructure projects, guidelines for gender sensitivity, better training for teachers and financial assistance for poor students. Ensuring that non-formal education connects smoothly with

formal schools allows for inclusive and equitable progress at all stages for all students (Joyo & Memon, 2023).

Role of Government in Education Policy and Reform

Governments influence education through making rules, developing curriculum, regulating schools and funding them. When schools adopt a strong framework, countries experience more economic progress, greater fairness for all and an increase in innovative ideas (Bellei & Muñoz, 2023; Kumar, 2021). They also aim for uniformity in teaching and assessment and are in charge of reviewing education results so they can adapt to changing social needs (Artipah et al., 2024). With the help of public funds, states are able to make schools more accessible and ensure that education can be had by those lacking educational opportunities, like girls, youth with disabilities and poor communities (Ahmed et al., 2021; Akhtar et al., 2022). The need for technology has become more important and officials are required to upgrade systems with online tools and train teachers to match modern education. While the Sindh government has introduced the SESP to improve teacher training, school buildings and access in remote regions, various challenges remain. Issues such as absent teachers, old instructional plans, biased treatment by gender, no accountability and funds being misused are all found in education systems (Hafeez et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2022; Jahantab, 2021). In order to achieve effective reform, the government in Sindh needs to make policies stronger, distribute funding transparently, improve monitoring and introduce gender-friendly moves like girls' schools and incentives for families. Stronger accountability and capacity improvements can support the connection between what is set as policy and what happens in practice (Halai & Durrani, 2021).

Stakeholder Engagement in Education Transition Programs

Ensuring academic, emotional and financial continuity for learners in non-formal to formal education programs needs active involvement from various groups (Hoang et al., 2024). The purpose of governments is to make educational policies, standardize teaching plans, supply schools with resources and unite with well-known agencies like UNESCO and UNICEF. Promoting fairness in education matters involves setting up inclusive policies and providing financial aid to less fortunate groups (Topaloglou et al., 2024). Implementing structured transition plans is best done by educational institutions, including schools, colleges and universities. Examples of these measures can be found in academic counseling services, remedial classes, mentoring and joining hands with different teaching institutes to close learning gaps and help students adapt (Adeniyi et al., 2024). Teachers find students who may need support and help them both in their studies and emotionally. Their responsibilities are to give additional lessons, act as mentors and give personal guidance. For teachers to handle these duties, they must receive the right training (Rohmah et al., 2024). Educational choices for children are highly influenced by their parents. They assist students by holding meetings, counseling them and engaged regularly in schools which makes students more confident and committed to learning (Koh & Askell-Williams, 2021). Students are the key individuals in any transition effort. When students are involved in planning lessons, getting career advice and receiving feedback, they feel empowered and their needs and goals are better met in the program (McLure & Aldridge, 2023). NGOs and community groups help students by granting scholarships, offering assistance and running campaigns to help those living on the margins. The local style helps community members trust the schools and boosts their attendance in schools (Barrenechea et al., 2023). In Sindh, Pakistan, combining efforts of various stakeholders helps boost retention rates, resolve gaps between boys and girls and improve educational infrastructure. The plan highlights the role of unity among governments, schools, teachers, parents and NGOs in making education better (Ahtesham, 2024; Kandhro et al., 2024).

Competency

Competency, meaning putting together knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors, is crucial in education, gaining new skills and finding work in the fast-changing global market (Channa, 2024). Competency-based education matches what is taught with the requirements of the workforce, by placing importance on



hard and soft skills including critical thinking and solving problems (Dattoo et al., 2024). Both formal and non-formal education systems in Sindh, Pakistan are now being required to use competency approach to address the gap in skills among out-of-school children. Under the guidance of the Sindh Education Foundation, learners participating in non-formal education now acquire important skills for the classroom as well as for work. It not only strengthens learning but also helps integrate people into the society and workforce by matching things learned in school with actual job expectations. Even so, making education successful requires having reliable curriculum frameworks, highly trained teachers and systemic changes within the institutions. Without such confidence, graduates could find it hard to deal with the demands of everyday work (Pasha et al., 2022; Ullah et al., 2021). Building on competency-based education will help improve the quality of the Pakistani workforce, boost productivity and support sustainable progress at every level of government.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Enrollment Motivations in NFE Centers

There are many determinants of the accessibility of Non-Formal Education (NFE) centers; among these are the financial capabilities of the families and the accessibility of the centers themselves. Different families were constrained by expenses related to getting uniforms and the daily transport to and from the schools. One participant stated, *“My family couldn’t afford school-related costs like uniforms and transport. The NFE center was free and close to home”* (R1). Similarly, one of the learners expressed this concern, although his education was curtailed because of displacement due to the floods. *“After our house was damaged by floods, we had to relocate, and I stopped going to school. The NFE center was close and free”* (R3). Due to the combined effects of the economic hardships and transport, many NFE centers that are within close proximity are preferred. With such centers, the NFE center staff were more innovative and flexible in their outreach. As one of the respondents pointed out, *“When someone from the NFE center visited and explained it was free, my mother agreed”* (R4). Personal contact by field worker was decisive. Similarly, the availability of digital equipment was an added incentive. *“The center was accessible, free, and offered digital tools—this helped families agree,”* volunteered one of the respondents (R7).

The enrollment of children was affected by community customs and attitudes. Society at one point did not support girls continuing their education. One girl said, *“My mother wanted me to study, but my father and relatives thought girls should stay home. She convinced him when she heard about the NFE center run by female teachers”* (R5). This is an example of female teachers and the absence of transport fees helping to break the barrier of opposition. More home visits and bridge programs were introduced to boost people’s involvement. According to one respondent, *“Families join when digital tools and bridge programs are offered”* (R13). It was important to support and increase the placement of women through policy and by fixing the financial obstacles, according to a policymaker: *“In our policies, we emphasize female staffing, zero cost, and awareness”* (R15).

These results strengthen the overall argument that barriers to formal education such as pressures on families, norms regarding gender and a lack of access are still very important. When NFE centers are planned to suit the community’s needs, this increases their inclusivity and makes them more helpful for local people (Rafiq & Malik, 2024; Rind & Knight Abowitz, 2024; Sain et al., 2024).

Learning Environment and Teaching Methods in NFE Centers

The learning environment in Non-Formal Education (NFE) centers was widely described by participants as supportive, inclusive, and culturally familiar. Various course participants thanked the instructors for creating a comfortable and friendly environment. One respondent shared, *“The environment was friendly, and the teacher was kind and from our community. We learned through stories and group activities”* (R1), while another noted, *“The teacher treated us kindly, used real-life examples, and explained things slowly”* (R6). They show that using empathy and familiar set-ups stimulates students and comforts them. Frequently, learners said they found it simpler to understand abstractions when storytelling, drawing and

visuals were used. As one explained, *“The class was small, and the teacher used charts, drawing, and sometimes videos”* (R5). Leaders also noted that it is an intentional approach to use children-focused teaching in the education sector, *“Our policy promotes child-friendly and learner-paced methods”* (R19). These centers used methods that focused on learners and involved a lot of activities, often led by participatory strategies. Instructors learned to adopt techniques that make students more involved in learning. *“Teachers are trained in participatory and child-centered methods”* (R8) and *“We encourage community-based instructors using visuals and practice-based modules”* (R10), emphasized stakeholders. The teachers used storytelling, role-play, group activities and peer-led methods to keep the lessons interesting and help students remember them better. One participant described, *“Our centers use storytelling, role play, and visual tools”* (R11), while another noted, *“We are working on standardizing joyful, activity-based content”* (R15). These educational tools were flexible, inclusive and contained pictures which made them suitable for a variety of students.

Ultimately, NFE centers in Sindh have made learning enjoyable and accessible for everyone by employing appropriate, appealing and practical teaching methods. These ideas not only result in understanding but also assist learners to memorize the information, particularly in groups that learn poorly. This research fits with previous studies that found joyful and flexible teaching is vital for alternative education programs (Dattoo et al., 2024; Rind, 2024). In addition, the use of technology, regionally appropriate resources and instructors from the community is in line with policies pushing for open and inclusive learning atmospheres. It implies that the teaching methods used in NFE centers contribute to the development of the basic skills and preparation of the learners to the formal education (Sheikh et al., 2015; Shoukat et al., 2025).

Gender and Safety Challenges in Attending Non-Formal Education (NFE)

NFE centers in Sindh experience major difficulties due to gender-based barriers. A lot of female learners said that it was the traditional attitudes of society and their families that prevented them from getting an education. One student noted, *“Yes, being a girl made it difficult sometimes. People made comments when I went out daily... I felt shy at first”* (R1). Others explained that parents approved of girls attending school as long as the teachers were female. For instance, *“My parents were hesitant at first because there was no female teacher. They agreed once a female teacher joined the center”* (R2). Living close to the center also made a difference in parents’ choices: *“My father didn’t want me going far from home. The center was nearby and had a female teacher, which made it acceptable”* (R5). According to these, girls are usually denied an education due to societal expectations, gender roles and safety issues, despite NFE being available.

Cultural beliefs and how society views girls can make it harder for them to attend school. Participants explained that families and community members frequently doubted the purpose of educating young women. One respondent remarked, *“Yes, mostly from relatives who questioned why I needed education as a girl. But my mother supported me”* (R6). Family agreement is often needed for girls to go even short distances in societies with traditional norms. *“Some days required family permission due to traditional concerns about girls moving around alone”* (R7). Stakeholders recognized these problems, stating, *“Gender-related challenges are still significant... especially when schools are not nearby”* (R10). Talking with community members and increasing awareness of the issue were widely seen as useful methods, though they did not always work well.

Ultimately, difficulties related to safety, moving around and social respect still prevent many girls from joining NFE programs. Mitigating these barriers has been made simpler using female staff, staying near the communities and being actively involved. Yet, there are still important barriers related to structure and culture. Clearly, these outcomes suggest that localized and gender-inclusive policies are crucial for letting all children participate in education (Mangkhang, 2021; Rind & Knight Abowitz, 2024; Shoukat et al., 2025).

Community Perceptions of the Non-Formal Education (NFE) Program



Responses from communities about the NFE program were diverse, but numerous participants reported receiving more help as academic outcomes were visible. One learner noted, *“Most people supported the center. They saw it as a good chance for children who had missed out on school. Some even enrolled their children after seeing our progress”* (R2). For some teachers, this process involved students’ improving confidence and performance little by little: *“Community members gradually supported the program after seeing improvements in students’ confidence and knowledge”* (R6). It was noted that involving community leaders helped increase the level of acceptance, as a stakeholder said, *“Community engagement is positive, especially when local leaders are engaged early on”* (R7).

Despite the progress that has been made, traditional customs continue to dominate and oppose the education of girls. *“Support is not uniform and is to some extent aligned with the opposition of the elders to the education of girls”* (R11). The informal nature of NFE is sometimes viewed negatively. *“People said it wasn’t real schooling and criticized us for not having uniforms or not taking board exams”* (R1). This outlines the legitimacy and gender issues in rural education in Sindh (Gull & Sarwar, 2020; Kushtiwala & Iqbal, 2023).

Shortly, development shown by students, persistent outreach activities, and local involvement from the beginning, positively influences confidence in adult education centers. There are still many who remain skeptical, due to strong beliefs about gender, learning in new ways, and intergenerational differences. In the rural and semi-urban areas of Sindh, the formal education system continues to be regarded as a major system and in value terms, unconventional education systems are considered to be of lesser value in comparison, if the benefits are not evident (Rafiq & Malik, 2024; Shahid et al., 2022). Additionally, the absence of female teachers and the absence of a female security guard reinforces the traditional beliefs that girls should not go out. For acceptance to be sustained, it is critical to engage the religious and community leaders, create spaces that are accessible for both men and women, and integrate NFE strategies into the community development plans. For NFE projects to be successful, community support is crucial (Joyo & Memon, 2023; Lakhan et al., 2021; Sheikh et al., 2015).

Transition from NFE Center to Formal School

Supporting learners in transitioning to formal schooling became an additional duty for NFE teachers. Students mentioned teachers took initiative by liaising with school principals, providing reference letters, and accompanying students and their parents through the whole admission process. One student recounted, *“Our NFE teacher helped by contacting a nearby school principal. She arranged for us to apply and even took us to the school for the admission process”* (R1). Some groups mentioned how this support is even more involved: *“She wrote us a reference letter and filled the forms for us”* (R2), and *“She helped my mother with the application and even came with us the first day”* (R5). The study shows that teacher supervision and assistance significantly influence the students’ integration into the formal education system, more so in cases where parents lack knowledge of the schooling process.

Working with mainstream schools, however, can be challenging. *While some students benefitted from having peer buddies* (R7), others had problems such as NFE qualifications being disregarded, and large gaps in academic attainment. As one stakeholder stated, *“There are some cases where Transitions are planned with our team and nearby mainstream schools, but they are seldom easy. Administrative requirements and gaps in academic readiness cause holdups”* (R11). Most of the time, organizations relied on informal methods and personal connections: *“Primarily, it hinges on collaborations between educators and school leaders”* (R15), and *“To get involved, we had to depend on the support of the NGOs and recommendations of teachers”* (R20). Some changes seem to happen, but their success appears to be the outcome of individual efforts more than organizational frameworks.

Overall, making the move from NFE to formal schools mostly relies on teachers, good connections between children and adults and adaptable school leaders. However, the lack of consistency in structures, documentation and poor coordination are still significant issues. The availability of NFE credits and clear

referral systems are significant measures to enhance fair school reintegration (Rind, 2024; Safdar et al., 2020; Shahid et al., 2022).

Support or Guidance Provided to Navigate the Transition

In most cases, teachers at schools helped students from Non-Formal Education (NFE) centers, who were guided by staff at the NFE centers when they applied for admission. Many participants mentioned that educators prepared application papers, outlined their educational history to school personnel and attended admission appointments with their students. As one learner shared, *“The teacher assisted with filling out forms and told the school about our learning background”* (R1), while another noted, *“Our teacher walked us through the admission process and stayed in touch”* (R6). Still, NFE teachers received most of the assistance and there was not much active input from the schools they served: *“Only our teacher helped—no formal assistance from the school”* (R13).

Some students reported given orientation, having peer buddies, or preparatory counseling. Consistency in implementing these was not guaranteed. As one respondent commented, *“Orientation, buddy systems, and admin help work when available, but are rare”* (R20). Others mentioned *“preparatory sessions and counseling”* (R4), *“some schools provide buddy systems... but not consistently”* (R8). The regularity of guidance was evidently lacking and muddled the transition for students, who often found themselves in new and challenging schools.

Finally, NFE teachers play a vital role in accommodating students, yet the formal school system does not tend to have explicit ways of accommodating such students. In the absence of professional mentoring, orientation or support, the students are left to deal with the change in their own ways and opportunities. The research states that re-entry is supported by policies regarding peer interaction, counseling and academic support, which is necessary to work closely and support each other (Junejo et al., 2018; Kushtiwala & Iqbal, 2023; Shoukat et al., 2025).

Pedagogical Differences and Flexibility versus Rigid Structures

Most learners noted big differences in teaching style and how lessons were conducted once they moved from NFE centers to formal schools. Formal schools were said to be strict, focus on exams and not change easily. One participant noted, *“Formal schools have more rigid structures and higher academic expectations, which can overwhelm transitioning students”* (R2), while another emphasized, *“Formal schools are more rigid and test-focused. NFE is more flexible—sometimes too flexible”* (R4). It was especially hard for students who were used to NFE’s learning-driven ways to adjust.

Teachers used a wide range of differing teaching approaches. Educators in schools were widely seen as having less patience and failing to understand individuals’ needs. One learner explained, *“In the NFE center, the teacher was patient and allowed questions. In formal school, the teacher expected us to already know everything”* (R6). Many individuals pointed out that NFE encouraged group discussions and individual learning speed, unlike the regulated, subject-focused system seen in schools. *“Formal schools are exam-centric and less flexible, which can overwhelm NFE graduates”* (R10).

All in all, the traditional, assessment-focused model of schooling often goes against the flexible and individualized way NFE works. Some students struggle with the broad contrast between their former learning environment and what they experience now. Adjusting is more difficult when students are not given enough individual attention in school. The thesis points out that closing these pedagogical gaps is vital for students to successfully return to school. Using group learning and curriculum designed for the next level can address this transition problem (Kushtiwala & Iqbal, 2023; Shahid et al., 2022).

Documentation Barriers and Systemic Gaps in Admission Processes

Many NFE learners who were trying to enter formal schools found it difficult because of problems with documentation. Many participants did not have necessary documents such as birth certificates, B-forms and school leaving certificates. One learner stated: *“I didn't have a birth certificate. It was required by the school, so we needed assistance from an NGO. ... This postponed the admission”* (R1). One more learner stated, *“I was unable to present my B-form. Therefore, the school turned me away”* (R15). School officials

were often not convinced by the NFE qualifications and believed teachers were supposed to advocate for their students: *“The NFE teacher had to convince them to accept me based on her reference”* (R9). They recount how the rigid daily routines, coupled with the absence of formal documentation, prevent or postpone children from commencing school.

Numerous participants highlighted that the procedure for validating documents and certifying is not uniform. The late issuance of report cards, proofs of qualification, or formally stated documents from NFE centers resulted in uncertain outcomes. *“Document verification delays are common and result in missing admissions”* (R3), and *“The absence of official NFE documents, such as report cards or recognized transcripts, causes delays”* (R16). Parents and schools faced a lot of confusion concerning what could be regarded as proof of prior learning. *“We have been advocating for a comprehensive system that electronically tracks and validates students' progress”* (R11). There were also other issues because of a school-level approach that was not aligned with the policy and overly rigid rules.

Documentation barriers continue to affect NFE learners attempting to enter formal classrooms. Barriers caused by lack of IDs, stringent admissions, and ineffective verification systems perpetuate delays and, in some cases, exclusions to registration. The Sindh NFE community has highlighted the need for the digitization of student records and the need for more formal and streamlined education policies. Recent studies indicate that the absence of formal policies for decentralization negatively affects the inclusion of less represented groups. NFE is required to align with formal education to ensure equitable educational access (Ahmad et al., 2014; Dato et al., 2024; Hameed et al., 2024).

Weak Institutionalization of Transition Programs and Inconsistent Implementation

Participants shared that bridge programs exist, but they are rarely extensive, often vary from one region to another and are sometimes implemented haphazardly. One stakeholder explained, *“There are a few pilot bridge programs, but they lack scale and continuity”* (R1), while another stated, *“Some bridge programs are in place, but their reach and effectiveness vary across regions”* (R2). In spite of their strong foundations, these programs often have no well-planned strategy for a full-scale rollout. As one respondent noted, *“There are policies in place, but they're not always enforced or funded properly”* (R4), highlighting a disconnect between policy formulation and implementation. Many transitions happen in an informal way, with teachers or NGOs taking the main responsibility.

These bridge initiatives usually happen with pilot projects, support from donors or leaders from partner organizations instead of government institutions. *“Bridge programs exist, but aren't fully institutionalized”* (R6) and *“Few centers run bridge programs, but they're not widespread or institutionalized”* (R9). Moreover, systemic integration remains weak: *“Unless formal schools coordinate, impact is limited”* (R12). Despite successful trials of transition models, problems like financing, unclear standards and delays in administration hinder them from growing and continuing. As reported, *“Programs are donor-led and inconsistent”* (R19), and *“Most transitions depend on individual effort”* (R17).

In general, the fact that transition programs are not widely available indicates that the policy objectives are not always aligned with the real practice. Many attempts to enhance education are sponsored by individuals, which are not used consistently and do not have a real system. Unless NFE is given a decent rollout, or even adopted into the public school system, the majority of its transitions will occur informally. The results underline that the effective and sustainable change requires government intervention, collaboration, and application of standard procedures. There is a need to connect the policies and practical lives to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to get an education in Sindh (Hussain et al., 2022; Khan, 2024; Sain, 2023).

Cultural Barriers to Girls' Education and Societal Expectations Hindering Female Learning.

Many respondents mentioned that traditional values still keep girls from getting an education. Families often thought that it was best for girls to stay at home as they got older. One respondent noted, *“My father didn't want me to go back to school, thinking I should focus on learning housework instead”* (R1), while

another shared, *“Most families expect girls to become housewives. Schooling is considered secondary”* (R19). Often such attitudes are pushed by older relatives and followed by others, with girls normally being taken out of school as soon as they begin puberty or enter early adolescence. *“There’s pressure from elders to keep girls at home once they reach a certain age”* (R18).

For most people, education comes second to marriage and household chores after the end of primary school. Many participants mentioned that girls are removed from school to help them get ready for marriage. One participant said, *“They think girls should stay at home and prepare for marriage. My parents were also pressured by relatives”* (R4). At puberty, education is often stopped for girls in many families. As one student put it, *“Families still believe girls should stay at home after a certain age, especially once they hit puberty”* (R10). Having to comply with roles dedicated to women such as caring for the house, children or becoming a wife, greatly disrupts how much girls can learn.

In short, cultural views that are hard to challenge are still preventing many girls from getting a good education during their teenage years. Girls are more likely to drop out from school due to opposition from their families, pressure from society and strong gender roles. This study points out that both organizational changes and improvements in family situations, social views and cultural rules are required to help girls remain in school (Gull & Sarwar, 2020; Lakhan et al., 2021; Shoukat et al., 2025).

Impact of Infrastructure Factors on Girls’ Participation in Formal Schools

Having women as staff and separate washrooms became essential for girls to stay in school. A number of participants pointed out that the lack of these aspects is a reason why dropout rates are high. One stakeholder noted, *“These are non-negotiables. Their absence directly correlates with dropout rates and low female enrollment”* (R1), while another added, *“If a school lacks basic hygiene facilities or has no female teachers, parents hesitate to send their daughters”* (R3). It was common for participants to note that schools with separate toilets and female staff kept students learning longer, *“Having female teachers and proper facilities like separate toilets really encourages girls to stay in school”* (R5).

Other than buildings, schools also rely on female staff to foster trust with the families. People often related gender-responsive environments to parents wanting to send and let their daughters continue school. *“Female staff and gender-friendly infrastructure increase enrollment and reduce dropout rates significantly”* (R9), and *“If girls don’t feel safe or comfortable, their parents won’t allow them to attend”* (R11). Not having enough modern infrastructure was often named a main reason for students exiting school early in rural communities. *“No separate toilets or female teacher in the afternoon shift. That’s why many girls drop out after a few weeks”* (R12). The challenges expose the effects of everyday circumstances on girls’ ability to continue their education.

All in all, ensuring infrastructure is sensitive to gender makes it possible for girls to remain involved in school. When schools have separate toilets and female teachers, the number of students and the chance they stay increases. A key point made by this study is that resolving infrastructure problems helps ensure equal access for students. Inclusive school design policies should take these aspects into serious account (Khosro, 2024; Sheikh et al., 2015).

Observations and Experiences of Support Programs: Mentoring, Counseling, and Remedial Education

Many participants said their support programs such as mentoring, counseling or remedial education, were either not offered or very limited. Some of the respondents said they were aware of NGO-led initiatives, but most people viewed these as temporary or divided. One student remarked, *“No, there are no special programs for us. We’re treated like all other students, even though we have different learning backgrounds”* (R2). Others noted that where such programs do exist, *“they’re not integrated into the formal system. We need a more unified approach”* (R4). Such insights point out the importance of including psychosocial and academic support for NFE graduates in the system.

Some revealed that they took part in special classes meant to strengthen their abilities in Urdu and maths. *“I participated in remedial classes which helped improve my Urdu and math skills”* (R6). However, these

services were often dependent on external funding or limited to pilot programs: *“Mentoring and remedial classes exist but are limited, and scaling these up would benefit many students”* (R7). Community partners pointed out that there are no reliable government efforts to support these efforts. *“Programs are usually limited to pilot stages and need government buy-in for scaling”* (R11). Moreover, access to digital tools was mentioned, though uneven, especially outside urban areas. *“Some partners are using apps and videos... but digital access is a huge barrier outside big cities”* (R18).

In general, NFE graduate helping programs are poor, unfunded and generally out of touch with the rest of the school system. State support, policy coordination and equal availability for all regions are crucial for sustainable energy services. The role of introducing official mentoring, support, and additional help in schools is crucial in helping transitioning learners to guide them into the future (Batool et al., 2020; Hiq et al., 2021).

Role of Digital Tools and Mobile Learning Resources in Transition Support

It was widely accepted among participants that digital technology at NFE centers made it easier for students to continue their learning in flexible settings. Mobile videos, review apps and lesson stories were reported as tools that helped participants recall what they learned. One noted, *“Digital lessons from the NFE center were very useful for revision and helped me keep up when I missed school days”* (R4). However, the contrast with formal schools was stark, where such tools were largely absent: *“In the formal school, there’s no digital learning at all”* (R3). This difference tells us that, while NFE centers were using mobile technology, formal schools didn’t have the means or motivation to do the same.

In these regions, people depended on digital tools as crucial alternatives when traveling to schools was not easy. *“Digital tools are increasingly used to supplement learning, especially in remote areas”* (R6). Respondents noted improved outcomes where digital programs were implemented, though coverage remained inconsistent: *“Some partners are using apps and videos... but digital access is a huge barrier outside big cities”* (R8). People engaged in the process noted difficulties related to low internet speed, electricity shortages and a shortage of devices: *“Without electricity and devices, most rural schools are left out”* (R16). Though mobile learning pilots seemed successful, problems with scalability, affordability and fairness remained.

Ultimately, technology can support the move from traditional to modern education, mainly by addressing gaps in student learning. Still, their influence is limited due to the uneven infrastructure and the absence of greater integration in formal settings. Based on the findings, sustainable digital inclusion calls for policy initiatives, partnerships with private groups and attention to building rural education (Gull & Sarwar, 2020).

Policy Reforms for Equitable and Inclusive Education Access

Participants discussed how major policy reforms are needed to provide equal opportunities in education for marginalized students, especially those going from NFE to formal education. Many times, the recommendations focused on accepting NFE certificates during the admission process. As one respondent put it, *“NFE certificates should be accepted by formal schools... and there should be transport and meal support for poor students”* (R4). Scholarship schemes, ways to lower school costs and easier ways to complete documents were suggested by others: *“Easier document requirements, scholarships, and transport support would help”* (R2). Group members also requested flexible school timings for students working and better cooperation with community authorities on how lessons are delivered.

Inclusivity for all genders and participation in the community continued to be main themes. It was pointed out by several participants that effective policies would tackle both infrastructure and basic cultural values. *“Policies must go beyond infrastructure and address social beliefs through community-level engagement and family counseling”* (R5). Steps such as hiring more female staff, ensuring student safety and offering benefits to parents were considered especially important interventions. *“Policies around safe school environments, financial incentives, and female recruitment are essential”* (R15). Community members

pointed out that sharing their voice in education policy matters and that decisions should be made according to what works best for each community.

In all, inclusive education reform calls for a complete strategy that recognizes NFE credentials, looks at how community issues and resources influence learning and increases the use of flexible and technology-supported education systems. Policy structures need to fit the local situation, rely on data and adapt to real life conditions. If these shifts fail to happen, rural girls and learners whose families have not attended school will still face exclusion (Ahmed et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research focused on understanding how adolescents adapt as they move from Non-Formal Education (NFE) centers to formal schools in Sindh, Pakistan. It has been found that such centers successfully reach out to children who dropped out of school, mainly the adolescent girls, but formal education options for these students are still not fully developed and lack support. In NFE centers, teachers usually help students with paperwork and keep in contact with schools on their behalf. Because there are no official procedures or strong support from organizations, these projects have a wide range of success and often do not last. Learners who have never experienced structured teaching or tests often face the greatest challenges because of academic, social and psychological barriers. Additional challenges for girls include moving less freely, less infrastructure designed for them and being surrounded mostly by male teachers at school. This makes it harder for people to keep the information and hinders the role of NFE in helping people continue their education.

The study proposes setting up planned and orderly systems for how workers move between different levels. Starting with the idea of building bridges, government support for special courses can be given to NFE learners to help them manage academic expectations, especially in English, Science and Mathematics. In addition, people should receive support for their emotions, take part in orientation and undergo training for teaching inclusively and with awareness of trauma.

Admitting students should not wait for birth certificates or transcripts to be provided. Mobile registration places and temporary sign-up processes should be set up for families who live far from schools. Next, raising the standards of transport, providing separate gender restrooms and recruiting women teachers help more girls stay and succeed in school. To be successful, multi-stakeholder cooperation is required. SEF, local government, school management councils and community elders must adhere to a formalized procedure of recording and following up child protection concerns. This would imply that teams would be able to follow up students even after transition and help them to keep pace with their school work. Lastly, peer mentoring should be set up for NFE graduates when they start attending formal schools. The programs can reduce the anxiety of students, enable them to socialize and succeed in school.

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