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A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Teachers' Experiences of Interpreting and Implementing the National Curriculum of Pakistan 2022-23 in Public Middle Schools of Quetta

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ABSTRACT

Various Pakistani curriculum reforms have been carried out over the past decades: the National Curriculum 2006, the Single National Curriculum 2020, and now the latest National Curriculum of Pakistan (NCP) 2022-23. These reforms have been primarily assessed through surveys of stakeholder perceptions, leaving the experience of interpreting and implementing these reforms comparatively little studied, especially in Balochistan. This study aims to investigate the experience of middle-school teachers in Quetta, Balochistan, in terms of interpreting and implementing the NCP 2022-23 in comparison with previous curricular regimes. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021) was conducted on twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nineteen classroom teachers of nine subjects and one head teacher/curriculum coordinator in Quetta, Balochistan, purposively sampled for variation in subject, gender, career stage and urban-periphery location. A focused-coding stage from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was applied between initial coding and thematic analysis to test the initial codes. Three themes have been constructed. "Alignment as Professional Relief" captures the overwhelmingly career-long narrative of how the NCP 2022-23 finally eliminates the curriculum-textbook gap of all the previous curricula, releasing professional freedom for teaching. "A Well-Designed Curriculum, an Under-Equipped System to Implement It" describes the same teachers' perception of the lack of ongoing training and resources to implement that well-designed curriculum. "Uneven Terrain" demonstrates how this relief and this stress are not universal experiences but vary by teachers' posting, subject status, and national-content localization. The main bottleneck of the NCP 2022-23 implementation has thus shifted from curriculum design to training, resourcing, and equity. Curriculum policy, teachers' professional development and future research implications are discussed.

Introduction

Recent curriculum reform in Pakistan has been measured primarily not by its ambitious standards but by the gap between these standards and the reality of what actually happens in classrooms. The National Curriculum 2006, the rushed 2020 implementation of the Single National Curriculum (SNC), and the current National Curriculum of Pakistan (NCP) 2022-23 each mark new steps to narrow this gap. Each step has been accompanied by a wave of policy and stakeholder-perception studies (Mahmood, 2023; Mehmood et al., 2023; Qamar & Khalil, 2024; Zaman et al., 2021). What is rarely covered in this literature is teachers' perceptions of the differences between these curricula regimes in terms of what has actually changed in daily teaching—not at the level of policymakers' intentions, but at the level of interpretation and implementation (Priestley et al., 2012; Spillane, 1999).

This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how nineteen classroom teachers and one head teacher in the public middle schools of Quetta, Balochistan, experience the interpretation and implementation of the NCP 2022-23. As opposed to the majority of studies, which tend to focus on Punjab, Quetta, and, more broadly, Balochistan occupies a unique position in Pakistan's education system: it is subject to the same nationally-standardised curriculum, textbooks and assessment frameworks as any other province but is structurally more constrained in terms of training, infrastructure and peer-support networks than well-resourced provinces to implement that curriculum (Panjwani & Chaudhary, 2022). A study of curriculum implementation in this unique context therefore adds what the Punjab-centric SNC literature lacks so far: an account of how a well-designed national curriculum is implemented from a comparatively under-resourced periphery.

The purpose of this study is to explore, through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), how teachers in the public middle schools of Quetta interpret and implement the NCP 2022-23 in their practice and how this experience compares with their memory of teaching under the 2006 National Curriculum and the 2020 SNC. This study was guided by one central research question: How do teachers in the public middle schools of Quetta, Balochistan, experience interpreting and implementing the National Curriculum of Pakistan 2022-23? Three subsidiary questions further guided data collection and analysis: (a) How do teachers describe the relationship between the current curriculum and the textbooks they use, relative to earlier curricular regimes? (b) What pedagogical and material capacities do teachers identify as necessary to implement the curriculum as designed? Furthermore, (c) In what ways, if any, does this experience vary by a teacher's subject, career stage, or geographic posting?

This study makes three contributions to the literature: it provides one of the first reflexive-thematic-analysis accounts of teacher experience specifically with the NCP 2022-23, as distinct from the earlier SNC; it foregrounds Balochistan, a province little-covered in the literature on curriculum implementation in Pakistan compared with Punjab and Sindh; and it applies the reflexive approach to thematic analysis of a policy topic as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021), which treats themes as researcher-constructed patterns of meaning, to a domain which tends to be studied with more descriptive and content-analytic methods.

Literature Review

Curriculum Reform and the Curriculum-Textbook Relationship in Pakistan

In recent decades, Pakistan has been carrying out successive attempts at standardizing its fragmented education system, which includes public, private, and Islamic/seminary schooling. The Single National Curriculum, introduced in 2020 under Article 25-A's constitutional guarantee of free and compulsory education, aimed to bring all these streams under one umbrella (Chughtai, 2021; Panjwani & Chaudhary, 2022). Evaluations of the early rollout of the SNC based on quantitative surveys of stakeholder perception arrived at the consistent finding that teachers rate the SNC's aims positively but experience a significant lack of implementation support—in particular, training—relative to the speed of this reform (Mahmood, 2023; Mehmood et al., 2023; Qamar & Khalil, 2024; Zaman et al., 2021). The NCP 2022-23, which was developed under the National Curriculum Council with a special emphasis on standards, textbooks, teacher training and assessment as the four verticals of the reform (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2023), is the next iteration of this project but has been comparatively little studied so far, with most published evaluations still focusing on the 2020 SNC materials rather than the revision of 2022-23 currently in use.

One recurring construct throughout this literature, albeit not theoretically elaborated, is the relationship between a curriculum and a textbook—i.e., the extent to which the textbook, required for teaching, reflects the aims stated in the curriculum document. When the alignment is weak, teachers need to reconcile it themselves through invisible interpretive work (Mehmood et al., 2023); when it is strong, such reconciliation work becomes part of the textbook design itself. This construct lies at the heart of

the first theme of the present study and is considered here as a determinant of how much professional judgment and cognitive work a curriculum leaves for the teacher to exercise.

Teacher Agency and Curriculum Implementation

A second body of literature, albeit outside of Pakistan but still directly relevant to how the data are interpreted in the present study, explores the gap between what a curriculum says on paper and what happens in practice. Spillane (1999) defines teachers' "zones of implementation" as the space for interpreting externally mandated reforms in light of teachers' beliefs and practices. Priestley, Biesta and their colleagues expand on this in an ecological model of teacher agency, which sees the teacher's ability to implement the reform not as a stable personal characteristic but as an emerging phenomenon depending on the interaction between the teacher's professional history (iterational dimension), present resources (practical-evaluative dimension), and future orientation (projective dimension) (Priestley et al., 2012, 2015). This framework is valuable for the present study because it predicts exactly the pattern observed in the data: a teacher can have a very positive and agency-oriented attitude towards the design of a curriculum and describe at the same time the underdeveloped practical-evaluative environment (training, material resources, isolation) and the way it is experienced by teachers depending on their structural position.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis as a Methodological Choice

While thematic analysis and its subsequent reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021) was selected over content analysis, framework analysis and grounded theory for this study, due to its aims being identification of meaningful patterns rather than theory-building or category-counting, the researcher chose a technique from outside this approach to enhance the analysis: a focused-coding stage from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was inserted between initial coding and theme search to test the initial codes for analytic potential. This hybrid but still methodically coherent approach is documented in the Method section below.

Method

Research Design

This study employed the qualitative, single-site exploratory design with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021) conducted in six recursive phases – familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report – with an additional focused-coding stage, adapted from Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, inserted between initial coding and theme search to link the initial codebook of 34 codes and the eventually developed thematic structure. Consistent with the reflexive tradition, themes were seen not as predetermined categories but as constructions generated through researchers' engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Setting

The study was conducted in public middle schools (Grade 6-8) across Quetta District, Balochistan, including urban schools in central Quetta neighborhoods (e.g., Sariab Road, Jinnah Town, Satellite Town) and peri-urban/rural-periphery schools (e.g., Kuchlak and Panjpai) on the edges of the district. This range of locations enabled the inclusion of experiences of urban and geographical periphery teachers in the sample.

Participants

Twenty participants—nineteen classroom teachers and one head teacher/curriculum coordinator (who is also a former Social Studies teacher)—were recruited through purposive sampling aiming to maximize variation in subject area, gender, career stage (8 to 23 years), and school location. Teachers taught nine subjects: Mathematics, General Science (including Physics-, Biology- and Chemistry-focused sections), English, Urdu, Social Studies, Islamiyat, Computer Science/ICT, Health and Physical Education, Life Skills-Based Education, and Arts and Crafts. The resulting sample of 20 participants was considered sufficient, in accordance with the reflexive thematic analysis approach, to provide information power for a limited but subject- and context-diverse account of one district's teaching force (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participant names given in the report are pseudonyms, while location descriptors have replaced the identifying details of schools. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics.

Table 1*Participant Profile (N = 20)*

Participant ID	Gender	Subject / Role	Location (Quetta District)	Years of Experience
T-01	Female	Mathematics	Sariab Road (Urban)	14
T-02	Male	Science (General/Biology)	Jinnah Town (Urban)	12
T-03	Female	English	Airport Road (Urban)	16
T-04	Male	Social Studies	Satellite Town (Urban)	10
T-05	Female	Urdu	Sabzal Road (Urban)	18
T-06	Female	Islamiyat	Hazara Town, Girls' School (Urban)	15
T-07	Male	Computer Science / ICT	Brewery Road (Urban)	9
T-08	Female	Science (Physics-focused)	Zarghoon Road (Urban)	13
T-09	Male	Mathematics	Kuchlak (Rural periphery)	12
T-10	Female	Social Studies	Pashtunabad (Urban)	11
T-11	Female	Health & Physical Education	Sabzal Road, Girls' School (Urban)	10
T-12	Male	Science (Chemistry-focused)	Nawa Kili (Urban periphery)	11
T-13	Female	Life Skills-Based Education	Jinnah Town (Urban)	8
T-14	Male	Arts & Crafts	Satellite Town (Urban)	14
T-15	Female	Mathematics	Panjpai, Girls' School (Peri-urban/rural)	9
T-16	Male	English	Hazar Ganji, Boys' School (Urban periphery)	10
T-17	Female	Urdu	Killi Shaikh Hussain, Girls' School (Peri-urban)	12
T-18	Male	Head Teacher / Curriculum Coordinator (formerly Social Studies)	Toghi Road (Urban)	20
T-19	Female	Science (General)	Chiltan Area, Girls' School (Urban)	10

T-20	Female	Mathematics	Quetta City Center (Urban)	23
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Note. All names appearing in the transcripts are pseudonyms. T-18 is a head teacher and former Social Studies teacher and is retained in analysis as a distinct structural (administrative) vantage point rather than merged with classroom-teacher participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected via twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant in 2026. An interview protocol, which asked participants to trace their curricular journey across the 2006, SNC (2020) and NCP (2022-23) regimes, was used to elicit accounts of curriculum interpretation, textbook alignment, pedagogical change, resourcing and – for a selected group of participants – rural posting, co-curricular subject status and localization of national content. Main questions were kept constant for all interviews to ensure comparability. At the same time, follow-up probes were adjusted according to the participant's subject area and role (for instance, Science and Computer Science teachers received probes on lab and computer access, the Life Skills-Based Education teacher on facilitating discussions of sensitive topics). Interviews were transcribed in full prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the six-phase recursive process of Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019), with an intermediate focused-coding stage.

Phases 1-2: Familiarisation and initial coding. All twenty transcripts were read in full, then each substantive answer was treated as a meaning unit and coded inductively and semantically, as close as possible to participants' language, with a few latent codes used to capture underlying assumptions (e.g., professional isolation, subject legitimacy). Coding was recursive, generating an initial codebook of 34 codes used consistently across the data set.

Intermediate stage: Focused coding. Following the technique from Charmaz (2006)'s constructivist grounded theory, the 34 initial codes were tested for analytic strength and synthesized into seven focused codes (FC-1-FC-7), along with their definitions, coverage counts, and reflexive memos.

Phase 3: Searching for and developing themes. The seven focused codes were mapped to each other and grouped according to their central organizing concepts into three candidate themes, each containing two or three sub-themes mapping one-to-one onto the seven focused codes.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes. Each candidate theme was examined at three levels: extract-level check, data-set-level check against transcripts which did not generate any codes for that theme, and boundary check to see if some of the extracts fit under a different theme.

Phases 5-6: Defining, naming and reporting. Each candidate theme was refined into a thematic statement and a boundary distinguishing it from the other two themes, then integrated, with supporting extracts, into the analytic narrative presented in the Findings section below.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established according to Lincoln & Guba (1985)'s four criteria. Credibility was ensured by prolonged engagement with the entire set of transcripts through multiple recursive coding rounds and by the internal-homogeneity/external-heterogeneity check (Patton, 2015, as adopted by Braun & Clarke, 2019), which was applied to every theme to see if data within a theme cohere and boundaries between themes remain clear. Dependability and confirmability were achieved by maintaining a transparent documented audit trail from raw transcript, through 34 initial codes and seven focused codes, to three final themes, which allows each thematic claim to be traced to its extracts. Transferability was achieved through thick description of the setting, sample and extracts, allowing readers to judge the applicability of findings to similar under-resourced, devolved education contexts rather than making claims about statistical generalisability.

Researcher Reflexivity

Following the tradition of reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher's disciplinary background in education and curriculum studies, and his familiarity with Balochistan's public school system, are acknowledged as factors influencing the design of the interview protocol and the analytical perspective on the data set, most notably in the decision to keep Theme 3 as a separate theme despite comparatively low participant coverage due to its analytic significance, rather than frequency (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This positioning is seen as an analytic resource, rather than bias, to be disclosed.

Ethical Considerations

All participants took part voluntarily, were informed of the study's purpose prior to interview, and were assured of the anonymity of their responses, with reporting under pseudonyms without identifying school-level detail. No participant was identified by real name, and location details were provided only at the neighborhood/periphery level, in accordance with standard safeguards for participants in institutional qualitative research.

Findings

Three themes were constructed from the seven focused codes: (1) Alignment as Professional Relief, (2) A Well-Designed Curriculum, an Under-Equipped System to Enact It, and (3) Uneven Terrain. Taken together, the themes tell a single, coherent story: the reform's original design problem – a reliable connection between curriculum and textbook – is, in the near-unanimous experience of this sample, genuinely solved, but that design success has outpaced the system's current capacity to enact it, and neither the resulting relief nor the residual strain is evenly distributed across the profession. Table 2 presents an overview of the thematic structure, and Figure 1 displays the full thematic map from initial codes to the central research question. Pseudonymous participant identifiers are used throughout, with subject area noted at first mention within each sub-theme.

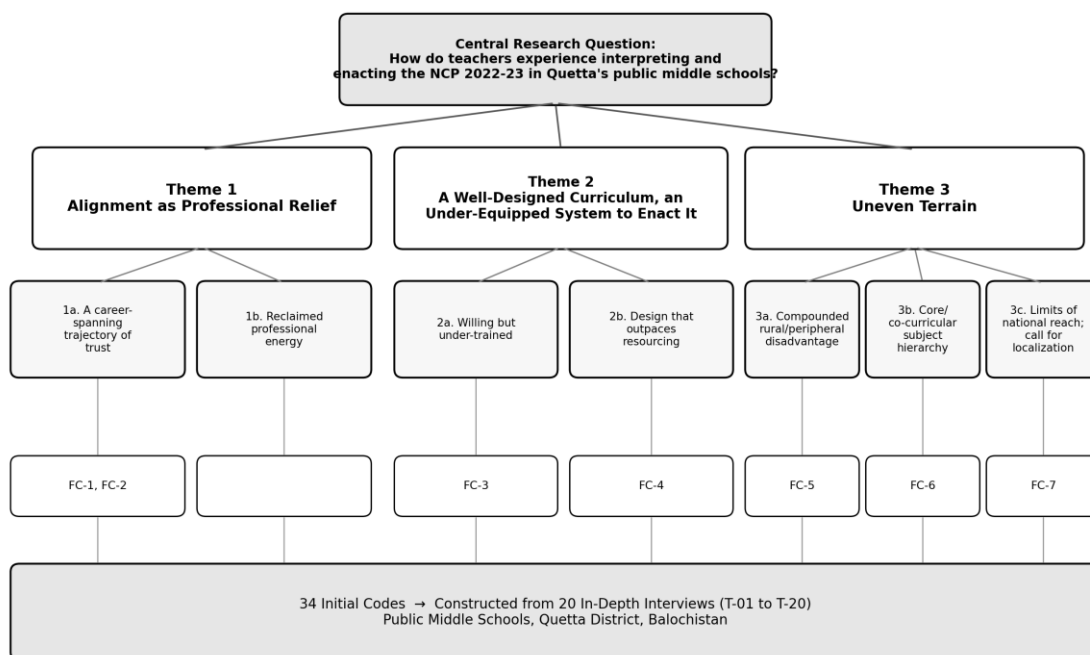


Figure 1
Thematic Map: From Initial Codes to the Central Research Question

Theme 1: Alignment as Professional Relief

For teachers in every subject, location, and career stage in this sample, the key experience of the NCP 2022–23 is not a new pedagogical innovation but a restored sense of trust between the curriculum document and the textbook they teach from. That trust pays concrete dividends: planning time and professional attention once required to verify or reconstruct that trust can now be dedicated to teaching. This theme deals with the relation between curriculum and textbook and what it releases teachers to do; it excludes judgments about whether teachers can fully enact the freed capacity (Theme 2) and how evenly that experience is distributed (Theme 3) – in Theme 1, the experience is remarkably uniform, covering all 20 participants for the alignment trajectory and 19 of 20 for its freed planning-time consequence.

A career-spanning trajectory of trust. Across every participant who taught under the 2006 curriculum, the same arc emerges: the feeling of a disconnect between curriculum and textbook that required private, often solitary interpretive labor; a narrowing of that disconnect under the rushed 2020 SNC rollout; and, presently, the curriculum-textbook alignment rated as the strongest in their career. This holds even for the single participant whose current subject lacks prior experience to compare against, and who finds the very absence of a comparator convincing evidence of how far the subject has come.

Looking back, what I remember most is the persistent gap between the curriculum document itself... and the textbook I was actually required to teach from... the current curriculum-textbook alignment is really the strongest I have experienced in my fourteen years of teaching. (T-01, Mathematics)

The new textbooks initially arrive later... but a well-aligned, self-sufficient set of curriculum and textbook materials is of enormous importance. (T-09, Mathematics, rural periphery)

The 2006 system was one of constant interpretation... and the current 2022-23 materials represent... the most reliably aligned curriculum and textbook combination I have ever used. (T-20, Mathematics, 23 years' experience)

Reclaimed professional energy. Since the textbook can be relied upon to carry the curriculum's intent, teachers describe planning as substantively different: less time reconciling or supplementing, more time deciding how to teach a concept, connect it to a specific class, and assess it meaningfully. In several cases, teachers explicitly frame this change as a redirected rather than reduced effort – energy invested in the part of the job that genuinely matters most.

I spend less time each week reconciling the textbook and the broader curriculum... and more time thinking about how to teach the concept effectively. (T-02, Science)

Less time wondering if the textbook content itself adequately addresses the curriculum goals, and more time thinking specifically about how to engage my particular students in that content. (T-10, Social Studies)

The internal homogeneity within Theme 1 is very high – no participant contradicts the direction of the pattern, and the same three-era comparative structure recurs in identical language across different subjects, including Mathematics, Islamiyat, and Computer Science. The external heterogeneity from Themes 2 and 3 is also apparent – Theme 1 is about the curriculum design and the trust in it, while Themes 2 and 3 are about the system's capacity to enact that design. Teachers can agree with the pattern described in Theme 1 and still describe aspects covered by Themes 2 and 3 – the themes are not mutually exclusive but focus on analytically distinct concerns.

Theme 2: A Well-Designed Curriculum, an Under-Equipped System to Enact It

In the very same breath as describing the curriculum's design quality as the best they have experienced, the teachers speak of two forms of capacity the system has failed to catch up to yet: their own capacity for the new teaching style this curriculum demands, and their school's capacity for it. This theme names the mismatch between a curriculum that is well-designed on paper and a system that has not yet become equipped to enact it in full in practice. It concerns system capacity to implement rather than design quality (Theme 1) and, on its own, does not answer the question of whose capacity is worse off than whose (Theme 3). Training and resourcing are kept as two distinct sub-themes since the former is a gap in teacher human capacity that the teacher needs to address personally. At the same time, the latter is a physical/budgetary gap largely beyond the teacher's control – yet both share the same principle of design-enactment gap, covering 17 of 20 participants for the former and all 20 for the latter.

Willing but under-trained. The teachers do not oppose the pedagogical shift this curriculum requires – toward activity-based, discussion-based, student-centered teaching – but they admit it is a challenge to shift a teaching style they have maintained for years, and what they received so far – usually just a single orientation session – falls short of what is required: sustained practical mentoring. Two more senior teachers deepen this statement, suggesting that the training available is implicitly targeted at newer teachers and fails to help experienced teachers break established habits.

Managing an open classroom discussion effectively... is a skill that requires real mentoring, not just a few lines in writing. (T-04, Social Studies)

I would appreciate much more structured training on facilitating difficult discussions... and making sure that the classroom remains safe. (T-13, Life Skills-Based Education)

Training specific to teachers with my level of experience... most of the training I had seems aimed at newer teachers. (T-20, Mathematics, 23 years' experience)

Design that outpaces resourcing. Irrespective of the subject, teachers list specific activities recommended by the curriculum and not supported by resources (working computers, internet, laboratory equipment, outdoor space, art materials) available in the budget of government schools. This is confirmed system-wide by the head teacher, who points out that budget constraints limit the availability of those resources regardless of how well the curriculum itself is designed.

My school has a limited number of working computers relative to class size... that the textbook materials do not account for. (T-07, Computer Science/ICT)

Some recommended activities assume that I have arts supplies... which are not always affordable on my budget. (T-14, Arts & Crafts)

Some recommended activities assume resources... that I cannot afford to have on my budget. (T-18, Head Teacher / Curriculum Coordinator)

Both sub-themes recur in nearly every subject and location, and teachers consistently frame training and resourcing constraints as separate from, and secondary to, their positive assessment of the curriculum design – a proportionality that is itself a part of the pattern. This theme can be distinguished from Theme 1 in that it focuses on system capacity to act on a trusted design rather than trust in the design itself, and from Theme 3 in that the constraint described is seen as roughly common to the profession, rather than affecting some teachers more than others.

Theme 3: Uneven Terrain

Beneath the broadly shared experience of improvement (Theme 1) and broadly shared experience of capacity strain (Theme 2) lies a third, more unsettled pattern: the reform is not landing evenly for everyone. Location of a teacher's posting, the subject they teach, and the nature of the community they are teaching in each shape the degree of reform's promise that actually reaches the teacher – geographically, in terms of subject status, and in terms of whose context the national content was written for. This theme explicitly concerns differential experiences determined by structural position, not the average experiences described in Themes 1 and 2; its three sub-themes are connected by a single question – for whom does this reform work best, and for whom does it work least? – rather than by a surface topic.

Compounded rural/peripheral disadvantage. The two teachers posted outside the urban core describe the same three obstacles reinforcing each other: training sessions held only in the city, materials delivered later than in urban schools, and lack of opportunities for consultation with nearby colleagues. Both come to the same conclusion: a clear, self-sufficient curriculum matters more, not less, to them than to an urban teacher, precisely because they cannot rely on consultation with nearby colleagues.

The well-aligned, self-sufficient set of materials matters a lot more to me when I am somewhat isolated professionally. (T-09, Mathematics, Kuchlak (rural))

The more self-sufficient, well-aligned materials reduce my dependence on consultations with remote colleagues. (T-15, Mathematics, Panjpai (peri-urban/rural))

The persistent core/co-curricular subject hierarchy. The teachers of Computer Science, Health and Physical Education, Arts and Crafts, and the newly introduced Life Skills-Based Education independently describe their subject as having been peripheral or informal prior to this reform, and interpret the structure of the current curriculum as a sign that the subject is finally taken seriously. This is not just a teacher perception – the head teacher, looking at the matter from the vantage point of school coordination rather than the classroom, independently confirms that core subjects had a more mature rollout than co-curricular ones – a rare example in this data set of a pattern being triangulated across two different structural positions.

...a sign that this part of student development is getting the attention it deserves. (T-11, Health & Physical Education)

Co-curricular subjects like mine are receiving somewhat less structured attention than core subjects... even within the improved current curriculum. (T-14, Arts & Crafts)

Core subjects like Mathematics and English had a more mature rollout... while co-curricular subjects... are still catching up. (T-18, Head Teacher / Curriculum Coordinator)

The limits of a national curriculum's local reach. A smaller set of teachers, who teach a civic subject or a classroom highly diverse in cultural or linguistic background, describe an additional, uncompensated labor – adapting nationally written content to their specific students, and wishing for more Balochistan-specific material in the curriculum they use already. This is a request for relevance and representation, distinct from the resourcing complaints in Theme 2.

Some historical content could... be presented with slightly more regional, Balochistan-specific examples alongside the national content. (T-04, Social Studies)

...that I adapted and contextualized by myself... more of Balochistan-relevant content woven into the existing improved curriculum. (T-10, Social Studies, diverse classroom)

Each sub-theme is internally consistent – teachers raising it describe the same mechanism in identical language, despite having no communication with each other – a meaningful form of validation even when participant counts are small. The three sub-themes are connected by a single logic of differential access by structural position, but describe three distinct axes of difference (geography, subject status, and cultural/linguistic context), and are reported separately, since the mechanism and the affected population are different for each.

Synthesis: Answering the Research Question

Taken together, the three themes tell a single, coherent story rather than three disconnected observations. Theme 1 demonstrates that the design problem that the reform was meant to solve – a reliable connection between what the curriculum says and what the textbook teaches – is, in the near-unanimous experience of this sample, truly solved, and this has freed professional energy. Theme 2 shows that the design success has outpaced the system's capacity to implement it, in two specific and separable ways: the teachers are expected to teach differently before receiving sustained training to do so confidently, and schools are expected to implement activities they cannot afford. Theme 3 demonstrates that neither the benefit from Theme 1 nor the strain from Theme 2 is evenly distributed – it lands differently depending on the geographic location of a school, status of its subject within the schooling system, and cultural/linguistic context of the national curriculum's content.

In this reading, the central finding of the study is not only that teachers perceive the NCP 2022–23 positively – although they do – but that the design success of the reform has created a bottleneck for the next phase of implementation at the training and resourcing and equity of reach level, and that the Quetta's public middle-school teachers can already observe this shift very clearly and specifically, in their own words, well before any official evaluation.

Discussion

These findings extend the largely quantitative and survey-based literature on Pakistan's recent curriculum reforms (Mahmood, 2023; Mehmood et al., 2023; Qamar & Khalil, 2024; Zaman et al., 2021) by demonstrating, in teachers' own words, why the alignment of curriculum and textbook functions as the consistently cited issue across that literature: it is not a minor feature of a reform but the primary determinant of how much interpretive labour a teacher is required to perform before turning their attention to pedagogy. Near-unanimity of Theme 1's career-spanning trajectory of trust suggests that the NCP 2022–23, for this sample, has addressed the problem identified as unresolved in previous survey research on the 2020 SNC rollout (Mehmood et al., 2023) – a meaningful finding considering how much of the existing literature views curriculum–textbook alignment as an open implementation risk rather than a solved design problem.

Theme 2 is well explained by Priestley et al.'s (2012, 2015) ecological model of teacher agency. Teachers' practical-evaluative environment – the material and cultural resources available to them in the present – has not kept pace with curriculum design that assumes a better-resourced classroom than many government schools in Quetta currently provide. This is consistent with Spillane's (1999) earlier observation that externally mandated reforms are implemented within teachers' zones of enactment – teachers are not resisting the curriculum's pedagogical vision, but implementing it within the bounds of a single orientation session and a budget unable to provide all the activities that the curriculum recommends. The gap in training identified by two senior teachers – that the available training is targeted at newer teachers – suggests that Pakistan's cascade training model (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2023) requires differentiation by career stage, a nuance not yet seen in the existing SNC/NCP training literature.

Theme 3 contributes a distributional lens that is largely missing from the existing SNC/NCP literature, which tends to report either aggregate teacher sentiment or, where disaggregated, a binary urban-rural comparison (as in Mehmood et al., 2023, whose quantitative rural-urban success gap in Punjab is consistent with, and provides additional external validity for, this study's rural/peripheral sub-theme). This study extends that one axis into three: geography, subject status, and cultural/linguistic fit. The subject-status finding – that co-curricular subjects such as Arts and Crafts, Health and Physical Education, and the newly introduced Life Skills-Based Education are interpreted by their own teachers, and confirmed by a head teacher, as receiving less mature rollout than core academic subjects – echoes a longstanding pattern in the curriculum-hierarchy literature in which subjects outside the system core receive less implementation attention (Panjwani & Chaudhary, 2022), and suggests that pattern persists even within a reform explicitly designed to standardize quality across subjects.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Three implications follow. First, because Theme 1 suggests the problem of curriculum-textbook alignment is substantially addressed, the authorities concerned with the curriculum and teacher training can shift emphasis – and budget – from further revision of materials to the training and resourcing gaps identified in Theme 2, rather than continue to treat alignment as the primary implementation risk. Second, the finding that the available training is perceived as targeted at newer teachers suggests professional development providers may consider differentiated pathways for teacher experience tier. Third, Theme 3 suggests that equity-focussed implementation monitoring – tracing training access, materials delivery timing, and resourcing not only by district but by within-district geography, by subject, and by the presence of Balochistan-specific contextualization in national materials – will uncover disparities obscured by district- or province-level aggregate reporting.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations apply to this study. The sample, while purposively varied, was drawn from a single district, and not intended to generalize statistically to Balochistan or Pakistan as a whole; transferability is judged by the reader against the thick description provided. Several sub-themes within Theme 3, notably the rural/peripheral disadvantage pattern, rest on a small number of participants (two, in that instance), and should be understood as analytically significant, not as prevalence claims; a larger, rural-weighted sample would establish the scope of this pattern. As with any single-coder reflexive thematic analysis, the themes reported here are a product of one researcher's interpretive engagement with the data, and should be assessed for validity through the transparent audit trail and theme-review procedure outlined in the Method section. Future research could extend this study through a second, independently conducted Phase 4 review; comparative work across additional districts of Balochistan to test the geographical and subject status patterns described here; and longitudinal follow-up of the NCP 2022–23 rollout as its training and resourcing provisions mature, to test whether Theme 2's design-enactment gap narrows as Theme 1's alignment gap appears to have done across three curricular eras.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand how public middle-school teachers in Quetta, Balochistan, experienced the interpretation and enactment of the National Curriculum of Pakistan 2022–23. Applying reflexive thematic analysis, it has found that teachers from a range of subjects, locations, and career stages perceive the current curriculum-textbook alignment as the strongest of their careers, releasing professional energy previously spent on private interpretive labor. At the same time, that same design success has outpaced the system's capacity to support it through sustained training and adequate material resourcing, and neither the resulting relief nor the strain is evenly shared: teachers posted at the geographic periphery, teaching co-curricular subjects, or teaching linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms describe a version of the reform that has not yet reached them. For a district-level curriculum reform literature that has spoken so far mainly in aggregates, this study suggests that the next most useful question is not whether the NCP 2022–23 is working, but for whom, and along which of these three axes, its promise has furthest to go.

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