From Disengagement to Co-Production: How Merit-Selected School Leaders Build Bridging Social Capital to Compensate for State Failure in Rural Sindh-Pakistan

Javed Ali Rajpar
Assistant Professor, GDC Karoondi, College Education Department Government of Sindh & PhD Scholar @ Sukkur IBA University, Sukkur Pakistan
javed.rajpar@gmail.com
Abul Ala Mukhtar
Head Master GBELS Junani, Warah
abulalamukhtar@gmail.com
Shahid Hussain Wassan
HST GBHS Haji Nawab Khan Wassan, Kotdiji, Khairpur Mirs´
shahidhussainwassan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
The present study focuses on the sociological change of the leadership in the district Khairpur Mirs' Sindh, in the wake of the implementation of the merit-based recruitment of head teachers by the Sukkur IBA University Testing Services (STS). The main focus of the research is that the innovation of these leaders selected on merit basis or commonly known as the IBA head teachers was not administrative efficiency but revolution in sociological engagement. When faced with the persistent state failure, which was the lack of official control, resource inaccessibility, and the degradation of infrastructure, these leaders acted strategically as social capital brokers. Beyond the internal bonding capital of pre-existing school personnel, they actively built bridging capital through vertical and horizontal networks with local media, non-governmental organizations and the community. The paper redefines leadership as network entrepreneurship to examine the ways in which these head teachers designed a parallel informal system of resource-mobilization to reestablish school functioning. A qualitative multiple-case study provides data which shows clear illustrations of such brokerage, such as land donations and media-based greening campaigns. The paper also deals with the looming dangers of this model, especially the possibility of further inequality between schools that have network-savvy heads and those that stay in the category of bureaucratic negligence. The results highlight the necessity of leadership training that includes the social network analysis and community brokerage skills.

Keywords: *Disengagement, Co-Production, School Leaders, Build Bridging, Social Capital, State Failure*

Introduction

The Sindh province has been characterized by a severe crisis that is widespread in its state-run education system and that has often been blamed by researchers on the failure of governance and administrative paralysis within the system(Askari, 2026). As the country has almost 23 million out of school children and more than 7.5 million in Sindh alone, the province experiences a complex crisis based on both textbook mafias and decades-long chronic underinvestment and the political considerations that have long dominated teacher and head teacher recruitment(Arijo, 2025).Historically, the appointment of head teachers was done on the basis of seniority and length of service instead of leadership aptitude or pedagogical

knowledge resulting in a culture of inactive and ineffective leadership where the officials would be away most of the time. Evidence of this disengagement can be traced in the school inward registers, which often indicate a complete absence of communication with the district education offices, indicating the functional withdrawal of the state in the provision of educational services in the rural areas.

The Government of Sindh responded to these worsening indicators by implementing a radical policy change, to recruit head teachers under a merit based, third party testing system organized by Sukkur IBA University (STS). These new IBA head teachers were expected to transform schools in conditions where the state had not been able to even provide basic facilities such as working washrooms or drinking safe water. This paper suggests that their contribution was most substantive in the application of new administrative rules but rather in the strategic implementation of a concept known as brokerage to accumulate social capital. These leaders were faced with the state incapability and mobilization of parents was not their only response; they established vast networks such as the local Press Clubs, philanthropists, and NGOs that practically formed an informal system of governance to replace the failure of the bureaucracy.

This analysis aims at understanding how far the effective leadership in resource-poor environments can be framed as network entrepreneurship, and thus how such leaders identified the structural hole in the social fabric of their communities and filled it to gain access to resources needed to make schools better(Lingo, 2020). What follows are the theoretical foundations of the social capital(Burt, 2017, Heemskerk, 2007), the diagnostic indicators of state neglect, and the colorful, strategic behaviors adopted by these merit-selected leaders to stimulate a culture of co-production among the rural Sindh.

Literature Review

Social Capital Theory

The theoretical foundation of this study is the theory of social capital that describes social relations as productive resources. Coleman (1988) defines social capital in terms of its role: it is a resource of action that arises out of social structures and makes it possible to achieve ends that would otherwise be unachievable without that resource. Coleman (1988) focused on the concept of network closure in an educational setting, i.e. the presence of strong relationships between parents and teachers and students in which the relationship fosters a system of mutual trust and social control that leads to student achievement(Heemskerk, 2007). But in rural areas, network closure at the school level was frequently used to defend incompetent employees or preserve the status quo of negligence(Bhagavatula and Elfring, 2010).

Putnam (2000) also made a further distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bridging capital, on the other hand, refers to links between diverse groups, which are necessary for "getting ahead" and accessing resources outside one's immediate circle. Bridging capital, in its turn, is associated with connections across different groups, which is required to get ahead and gain access to the resources that are not directly within a person's network(Claridge, 2018). This paper assumes that the innovative twist of IBA head teachers was their interest in bridging capital. Whereas the traditional head teachers were prone to use the narrow bonding capital to maneuver local politics, the merit-selected leaders were brokers to connect the school with the larger social economic networks.

The perspective of Bourdieu (1986) has offered a critical approach to the risks of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) approached social capital as a process by which inequality gets reproduced as the old boys' network makes sure that those in power remain in power. This has become a crucial question in sociology of education because network-savvy leadership is being shifted to,

and therefore it starts to unintentionally punish schools in the most marginalized communities where there is limited access to bridging opportunities(Molla and Gale, 2024, Bourke, 2023).

Community-Based School Management and the Limits of the State

A move towards Community-Based School Management (CBSM) in the Global South is frequently the reaction to state incapacity. Grindle (2018) states that the weak incentives and repressive capacities of state often hinder education reform in developing countries. Access-oriented reforms (school building, increasing instructional staff) are politically appealing but quality-oriented reforms (enhancement of instruction, high stakes assessment) are far more difficult to realize since they pose threats to bureaucracy and union entrenched interests(Hickey and Hossain, 2019).

In Sindh, state failure is not simply a question of lack of funds; but rather of the mismanagement of the budgets of education and a disengagement between the board examinations and standardized tests(Askari, 2026). When the formal state apparatus recorded in the school's inward registers as a silence fails to provide, the school must turn to the community. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that CBSM has the potential to result in elite capture, in which local powerful actors overtake school decisions to benefit themselves(Musgrave and Wong, 2016). The IBA head teachers helped negotiate this by redefining the relationship as not a patronage, but as co-production in which the community contributions were linked to the actual outcomes of education, which were directly proportional to merit(Ahmed, 2024).

Leadership as Brokerage and Network Entrepreneurship

The growing discipline of social network perspectives in educational leadership re-defines the head teacher as a broker overseeing the flow of knowledge between the loosely coupled stakeholders(Rechsteiner et al., 2024). The theory of brokerage and closure theory, proposed byBurt (2005), postulates that the people who traverse the structural holes (the distances between the disconnected groups) receive the vision advantage and are more effective at creating and introducing new ideas. The paper establishes effective leadership in resource-poor contexts as Network entrepreneurship: capacity to lead and mobilize a complex network of actors to co-produce and promote opportunities(Wang, 2018). In contrast to the bureaucratic functionary, the network entrepreneur views the school as an open innovation community, which is dependent on mobilization of peers but not superiors(Burt, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of the study presents the leadership practices of IBA-based head teachers divided into separate sociological categories. Through the separation of bonding ties (internal) and bridging ties (external), we are able to examine the role of brokerage as a compensatory system to state failure.

Table 1 Conceptual Dimensions of Social Capital Brokerage

Dimension	Bonding Capital (Internal/Close)	Bridging Capital (External/Distant)
Network Type	Closed, inward-looking, homogeneous.	Open, outward-looking, heterogeneous.
Core Function	"Getting by": Support among existing staff and parents.	"Getting ahead": Access to new resources and ideas.
Brokerage Move	Facilitating trust and regularity within the school.	Linking the school to media, NGOs, and diaspora.
Resource Flow	Emotional support, collective labor, basic fees.	Land, financial grants, material donations, political legitimacy.
Leadership Style	Traditional / Paternalistic.	Entrepreneurial / Transformative.

In rural Sindh, state failure is the breakdown of the process of linking capital, that is, the trust and the connection between the residents and the government organizations. In the event of linking failures, head teachers need to go through their own brokerage role to turn "bridging" relationships into working linking relationships. As an example, the head teacher compels a science exhibition organized with community funds by inviting a Taluka Education Officer (TEO) to the event to create a bridging event to impose a linking moment of accountability.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case study design to determine the performance of IBA head teachers in district Khairpur, Sindh. The research was based on three particular school locations, namely School X (Sojhro Khan), School Y (Thar Deep), and School Z (Shahpur) being chosen due to their different levels of performance as suggested by the Taluka Education Officers.

Data Collection and Sample

The collection of data was based on a heterogeneous sample of 29 stakeholders, which guaranteed a holistic and contextualized perception of the phenomenon:

- **Head Teachers:** Three IBA-recruited leaders.
- **Teachers:** Three teachers with at least five years of experience (serving under both old and new leadership).
- **Students:** Twelve students from class 10 (witnesses to the transition).
- **Parents:** Six active parents from the community.
- **SMC Chairmen:** Three chairpersons representing the community's voice.
- **Taluka Education Officers (TEOs):** Two officials managing sub-district systems.

Tools

A critical tool for this study was "document analysis," which allowed for the triangulation of interview data. The researcher analyzed:

- **Inward and Outward Registers:** To track communication (or lack thereof) between the school and officials.
- **Visitors' Books:** To record community and official visits.
- **Muster Rolls and Attendance Registers:** To quantify regularity.
- **Cash Books:** To analyze the utilization of School Management Committee (SMC) funds.

This methodical focus on the "inward register" provided the primary evidence of "state failure," as these books often showed a stark absence of official support or guidance prior to the IBA appointments.

Findings: From Disengagement to Co-Production

The results are categorized into three parts: diagnosis of state failure using school documents, strategic brokerage behavior of the head teachers and the concrete/intangible yield of these networks.

State Failure: Evidence of the Inward Register Diagnosis

The absence of funds in rural Sindh was not the main measure of state failure, but rather the complete absence of administrative control. The inward registers analysis of the three schools in the case study revealed a dismal situation of communication of officers. While the "visitors' book" occasionally showed signatures from local community members, the formal state apparatus represented by District and Taluka officers remained functionally silent. Stakeholders described a pre-merit era characterized by:

- **Chronic Absenteeism:** Both teachers and students were irregular, with no mechanism for accountability.

- **Infrastructure Decay:** At School 1 (Sojhro Khan), washrooms were non-functional, and there was no clean water or electricity until the new head teacher took initiatives.
- **Pedagogical Stagnation:** Teaching was limited to "rote dictation" and the use of "solved papers" rather than actual instruction.

At School 3 (Shahpur), the school head teacher said that they were beginning at zero because the school had been rendered useless by the old regimes.

The breakdown of the state was also manifested in the SAT-VI scores indicating the overall averages of 24.28% in the area which is a clear indication that the management of these schools was incompetent and it was due to laxity by the bureaucrats that the academic mission of these schools had been worn outas demonstrated by the research of Kalim and Bibi (2022).

Brokerage Strategies: Parents to Press Clubs

The institutional vacuum that followed this reaction was filled by IBA head teachers acting as network entrepreneurs, i.e. they made strategic social moves as a way of accumulating bridging capital.

The Strategic Direct Communication

The most efficient, though the easiest, of all the brokerage moves was the gathering of the phone numbers of parents. HT2 village Thar Deep got the phone contacts of all parents and the people in the village where they worked with the help of mobile connection to establish a direct accountability line. The head teacher called the parents directly in case the students were absent instead of sending official notices that were readily disregarded and this made the relationship between the teachers and parents to become more personal than bureaucratic. This plan gained the good will and trust of the people, and the parents were made dynamic co-workers in the betterment of the school.

Public Meetings as problem space

Instead of seeing School Management Committee (SMC) meetings as an obstacle, IBA head teachers took advantage of it as a platform of collective deliberation. HT1 had frequent mass meetings to present his vision and he would ask the people: What do you want your children to be? This strategy relocated the school improvement responsibility to the community instead of the state. By making the "plans and intentions" public, the head teachers found out who could provide labor and materials or even land by the means of the resource providers who were found to be in the village.

Vertical Bridging: NGOs and the Press

The most important brokerage action was, perhaps, the vertical network construction with supra-local actors(Huang et al., 2025). IBA head teachers made a strategic invitation of the local Press Club in the school events like plantation day. Using the media, they did not merely obtain publicity; they formed a reputation capital, which shielded them against local politics and raised money in the diaspora. In School 1, this brokerage caused the Press Club to give 100 plants to enable them to create a "little park" on school grounds.

The Yield: Tangible and Intangible Resource Flows

This brokerage production was material and symbolic, forming a parallel, informal resource-mobilization system which offset the budget deficit of the state.

Table 2 The Yield of Network Entrepreneurship (Cross-Case Comparison)

Resource Type	School X (Sojhro Khan)	School Y (Thar Deep)	School Z (Shahpur)
Land / Infrastructure	School ground enhanced; parking specified.	**SMC Chairman donated 1 acre of land.**	Scientific lab furnished via

			USAID/Community brokerage.
Material Yield	**Press Club donated 100 plants**; Solar system installed.	Villagers donated 50 benches; Electric transformer bought.	Rooter machine for water; Science kits purchased.
Financial Support	Retired teacher donated 100 uniforms; GSTA lobbied for teachers.	Community contributed to transformer purchase.	**Parent donated Rs. 5,000** for school improvement.
Human Capital	**Villagers donated trees** for furniture; Honorary teachers hired.	Local graduates hired to teach on self-help basis.	Biometric attendance for students; Manual staff hired.
Intangible Yield	High morale; Role model status for the village.	Trust restored; "Poultry farm" image erased.	Trust deficit removed; Enrolment shift from private to public.

The yield draws attention to the fact that the most effective IBA head teachers were those who managed to turn moral capital (their own hard work and regularity) into material capital. In School 2, the community was ready to give 50 benches and even an electric transformer to the school since the head teacher was perceived as honest and serious, thus, the issue of the problem of the breakdown of lights which the state had neglected over many years.

Discussion

Comparing IBA-HT and Typical Bureaucratic Headship

The IBA head teachers had been fundamentally sociological in terms of their innovation. Whereas most "seniority-promoted" headmasters (HMs) worked under a restricted, narrow-minded approach to leadership based on rote compliance and didactic knowledge, the IBA-HTs were moral agents with a prophetic model of leadership. Network closure in the negative sense defines the HM model, a clique of senior teachers who are resistant to change and hold on to older mental models.

On the contrary, IBA head teachers made use of distributed leadership and shared responsibility. They did not wait until the state spoke and had the school cleaned or the roof repaired, but organized the community to do it. This produces a socially fair, democratic school in which there is shared power between the school and families. Nonetheless, this change is only achievable because the IBA head teachers were seen as being legitimate since they got the job based on merit and thus were not affected by the kind of nepotism and political influence that bedevils the normal bureaucracy.

Sustainability and Inequality Risk

The major threat of this model is the Matthew Effect of social capital: to him who hath shall be given. Schools that are headed by one of the network-savvy entrepreneurs are more likely to succeed especially those who have higher initial education or urban ties whereas those in the truly isolated or marginalized areas are still in the cycle of neglect.

- **Polarizing Inequality:** When the quality of school becomes a brokering capability of a leader to mediate in donations, then the role of the state in offering quality education becomes further undermined. This can worsen the situation of socio-geographical inequality in Sindh.

- **The Fragility of the "Bridge":** The resources flows found in this research are the informal and the discretionary. They are reliant on personal relationship between a particular head teacher and a particular donor. When the head teacher is changed, the network collapses and the school is easily vulnerable.
- **Elite Capture vs. Co-Production:** Although the IBA-HTs were successful in maintaining the local elites on the board to drive positive change, there is always a threat that the donors (such as the land-giving chairman of the SMC) will one day come back needing to demand kickbacks or even control hiring, exactly the same governance failures that the merit-based turn was meant to address.

Practical Implications on Leadership Training

The paper conclusively determines that the present leadership training in Pakistan that emphasizes on administrative and financial activities is inadequate. In order to maintain the successes of the IBA-HTs, the competencies that should be institutionalized include:

- Social Network Analysis (SNA): Developing leaders who will learn to map and mobilize their social ecosystems to recognize potential bridging partners.
- Community Brokerage: Acquisition of negotiated partnership skills, shared vision building, and conflict management with the community stakeholders.
- Reputational Management: Educating leaders about the importance of interacting with the media and the civil society as a means of creating a so-called protective shield of public legitimacy surrounding the school.

Conclusion

The greatest invention of the IBA head teachers in Sindh was the ability to become brokers of social capital in a state of administrative paralysis. Through a clever construction of the bridging social capital, they transformed schools to become co-production hubs of the community even though they were formerly useless bureaucratic outposts. They showed that successful leadership in poor and rural areas is not only a matter of administrative presence; it is an issue of network entrepreneurship; the skill of recognizing and sealing the structural voids created by a collapsing state.

These bright instances of donations of trees by the villagers and of land by parents are not stories of generosity but the machinery of what we call informal governance, which offers in itself only a lapse bridge to span the gap of incapacity in the state. Nevertheless, the Government of Sindh needs to understand that this model is as strong as its leaders will be. The job-insecurity and the contractual anxiety that these head teachers are fearing jeopardize the networks that they have worked years to establish. In order to make sure that co-production does not result in co-production of greater inequality, the state should institutionalize these leaders and regularize the brokerage model, transforming the passive dependence on the heroism of individuals to an active, network-based model of public-community relationships. In the absence of such institutional provision, it can be expected that the bridging capital of the present day will be a weak compensatory system as opposed to a long-term solution to the issue of educational equity.

References:

AHMED, N. 2024. Overcoming Educational Inequality in Sindh: A Path Forward. Available: https://spinetimes.pk/overcoming-educational-inequality-in-sindh-a-path-forward/.

ARIJO, D. A. G. 2025. Deterioration of Education in Sindh: Causes and Consequences. Available: https://sindhcourier.com/deterioration-of-education-in-sindh/.

ASKARI, S. M. 2026. Sindh's education system hit by governance failures, textbook crisis and rising dropouts in 2025. *The News*.

BHAGAVATULA, S. & ELFRING, T. 2010. The Structure of content in multiplex ties: Exploring the advantages for entrepreneurs in rural India. *IIM Bangalore Research Paper*.

BOURDIEU, P. 1986. The forms of capital. *Cultural theory: An anthology,* 1**,** 949.

BOURKE, R. 2023. Responding to complexity in disadvantaged school contexts: the role of school networks in building social capital. *Irish Educational Studies,* 42**,** 1043-1064.

BURT, R. S. 2005. *Brokerage and closure: An introduction to social capital*, Oxford University Press, USA.

BURT, R. S. 2017. Structural holes versus network closure as social capital. *Social capital***,** 31-56.

CLARIDGE, T. 2018. Functions of social capital–bonding, bridging, linking. *Social capital research,* 20**,** 1-7.

COLEMAN, J. S. 1988. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American journal of sociology,* 94**,** S95-S120.

GRINDLE, M. S. 2018. Despite the odds: The contentious politics of education reform.

HEEMSKERK, E. 2007. Brokerage & Closure. An Introduction to Social Capital. *Comparative Sociology,* 6**,** 232-235.

HICKEY, S. & HOSSAIN, N. 2019. *Politics of education in developing countries: from schooling to learning*, Oxford University Press.

HUANG, S., CHEN, Y. & ZHOU, L. 2025. The Subject Position and Network Entrepreneurship of Parent Organizations in China. *The China Quarterly***,** 1-17.

KALIM, U. & BIBI, S. 2022. A review of public-private partnership for elevating the literacy rate in Pakistan. *Journal of Social Sciences Advancement,* 3**,** 92-97.

LINGO, E. L. 2020. Entrepreneurial leadership as creative brokering: The process and practice of co-creating and advancing opportunity. *Journal of Management Studies,* 57**,** 962-1001.

MOLLA, T. & GALE, T. 2024. Educational disadvantage and policy: expanding the spaces of assessment. *Journal of Education Policy,* 39**,** 105-126.

MUSGRAVE, M. K. & WONG, S. 2016. Towards a more nuanced theory of elite capture in development projects. The importance of context and theories of power. *Journal of Sustainable Development*.

PUTNAM, R. D. 2000. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, Simon and schuster.

RECHSTEINER, B., KYNDT, E., COMPAGNONI, M., WULLSCHLEGER, A. & MAAG MERKI, K. 2024. Bridging gaps: a systematic literature review of brokerage in educational change. *Journal of educational change,* 25**,** 305-339.

WANG, Y. 2018. It all starts with forging social ties: Developing school leadership from the social network perspectives. *NASSP Bulletin,* 102**,** 323-340.