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Precarious Meritocracy: Contractual Status, Performance Anxiety, and the Paradox of Efficient Leadership in Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

The systemic failure of the education process to improve student outcomes has been historically described as a result of patronage, seniority-driven promotions and the lack of professional responsibility in the recruitment of school head teachers (Valero et al., 2018). The Government of Sindh in turn responded by instituting a neoliberal reform based on the recruitment on merit provided by third party testing services namely Sukkur IBA University Testing Services (STS). Although these "IBA head teachers" have been able to perform miraculously to enhance the infrastructure of their schools, teacher punctuality as well as community participation, the achievements are inseparably connected with their precarious contractual position. This qualitative multiple case study of schools in District Khairpur argues, based upon the notion that its high performance is not a simple product of individual merit but is essentially constituted by its job insecurity, a phenomenon that is theorized here as the so-called precarious drive. The study examines the ways in which the state captures change capital through the performance anxiety of such leaders through the prism of performative governmentality and neoliberal subjectivity. Although Taluka Education officers (TEOs) are reported to be very satisfied with these visible improvements in schools, the lack of regularization in the head teachers leads them to deep feelings of stress in the future. This report finds that the existing reform model presents a performance-precarity paradox: the reform model effectively evades patronage in the short term, but it is an unsustainable and unethical model of incentives that swaps individual burnout with short-lived systemic temporary benefits. This paper provides analytical reflections on global education policy, outlining the harm of precarity as one of the principal instruments of governmental transformation.

Keywords: Contractual Head Teachers, Performance-Precarity Paradox, Precarious Drive, Neoliberal Education Reform, Performative Governmentality, Neoliberal Subjectivity, New Public Management (NPM), Audit culture, Merit-based recruitment

Introduction

Pakistan and more specifically the province of Sindh has had a history of conflict over the educational landscape between conservative bureaucratic traditions and modernizing reforms. In the past decades the public school system has been afflicted by what researchers describe as a deplorable state of teaching-learning processes which is symptomatic of a leadership crisis in which the head teachers were not recruited on a meritocratic basis. Recruitment practices in the past were very dependent on promotions based on seniority or political favors which resulted in a group of in structural leadership with an image of a passive administrator and not an agent of change in instructional practice. The indicators that resulted in these numbers were shocking: Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2018) pointed to the fact that, in rural Pakistan alone, 44% of class 5 children were unable to read a narrative of class 2 level, and Standardized Achievement Tests (SAT-VI 2017) in the Sukkur region recorded a 18.58% score in science ([ASER, 2018](#)).

Here, the fact that merit-selected head teachers are being introduced, and they are recruited with the help of the Sukkur IBA University (IBA) testing services, is more than an administrative change; it is a radical move towards a neoliberal auditing culture. Outsourcing the recruitment process to a third-party testing agency (STS) was an attempt by the state to help keep the hiring process out of reach of the pressures of local unions and political elites. These IBA head teachers came into the system with a task to remodel their schools, but with a certain employment condition they were brought in on a contractual basis, and no direct route to the permanent, pensionable status of their predecessors in terms of seniority.

This paper examines the conflict between this meritocratic choice and the precarious contractual position of such leaders. It suggests that the efficiency that has been observed in these schools is not an accidental byproduct of merit but is instead manufactured deliberately by precarious drive. This is a neoliberal objectivity in which the worker internalizes the performance the state is demanding of him as a survival tool. Instead, State reclaims the energy and resources that are required to restructure these institutions that have broken down without providing these individuals with an institutional stability in its turn. The paper is theorizing the performance-precarity paradox, asking whether any reform model founded on the worry of its leaders can ever be sustained in the long term or gain ethical legitimacy ([Brunila and Valero, 2018](#), [Valero et al., 2018](#)).

Literature Review

New Public Management in Education Reform

The Sindh recruitment policies are framed within the global trend of New Public Management (NPM) that proposes the reorganization of the public services along the axis of the effectiveness of the private sector, its competition, and its quantifiable results ([Shah and Rind, 2021](#)). Within education, it is NPM in the form of "managerialism" in which head teachers are restructured as CEOs of their school/college, responsible to the production as the student learning ([Aman et al., 2019](#)). Some examples of this have been observed in weak-state settings such as Pakistan, where NPM is sometimes employed as a device to circumvent established

patronage systems by making standardized testing and other putative measures of achievement ([Shah et al., 2024](#)).

Nevertheless, NPM implementation in the Global South can tend to be directed towards what can be termed as instrumental rationality, which is more of a logic, which is concerned with easily auditable indicators of progress rather than the complex, invisible nature of pedagogical development ([Homan, 2020](#)). This is reflected in the preoccupation of Taluka Education Officers in Sindh with the school aesthetics; in the creation of small parks; the fact that staff are on time; these act as high-visibility proxies to the leadership being efficient.

The Precarity of Public-Sector Labor

Precarity is not a state of unemployment but has become a hallmark of contemporary professional activities in neoliberalism ([Valero et al., 2018](#)). In the case of the IBA head teachers, precarity is a technology of the self. Their jobs are temporary and their regularization is postponed, which subjects them to a permanent probation. This lack of confidence is not a weakness of the policy but it is an element of its governing strategy. Precarity, as theorized in labor studies, results in a governing through affect, as the anxiety that the individual faces with regard to his or her future becomes the driver of his or her productivity ([Morris, 2025](#)). Studies on academic/professional precarity indicate the, in the face of a potential future stability, the career is being hashed out as a temporality of high-risk venture where the individual must bear the exploitation, in the name of their future ([Morris, 2025](#)). This is seen in Sindh through the readiness of the head teachers to teach additional classes, to use their own money to buy stationery and to work extra hours, as a way of constructing a performance showcase, in order to warrant their regularization.

Weak-State Educational Leadership

In underdeveloped nations, the job of the head teacher is usually curtailed by few resources and bureaucratic assistance ([Harber and Davies, 2005](#)). Conventional leadership paradigms in Pakistan were usually top-down in nature and these centered on financial and administrative conformity at the expense of pedagogical enhancement ([Shah et al., 2024](#)). The "IBA model" tries to move this to a transformational or a distributed leadership style, in which the head teacher organizes the community and the teachers around a common vision ([Canterino et al., 2020](#)).

Nonetheless, these leaders are not always able to implement change due to their deficit in institutional capital. The contractual heads are forced to depend on the so-called performative legitimacy as compared to the seniority based heads that have decades of relationship with the education department ([Graham, 2016](#)). They do not gain their authority by their rank in the hierarchy, but through visible outcomes. This puts them in a loop of high initiative-taking to demonstrate their value to the state and the local community ([Rojek, 2013](#)).

Theorizing Neoliberal Subjectivity and Performative Governmentality

The essence of the argument presented in this paper is based on the notion of neoliberal subjectivity ([Brunila and Valero, 2018](#), [Bonnie, 2010](#)). This means how people internalize market rationalities and perceive themselves as entrepreneurs of the self, who can discuss their

success and failure as to themselves. This implies that the identity of the head teachers in Sindh is intertwined with their capacity to demonstrate their efficiency to the state ([Rosenzvaig-Hernández, 2025](#)).

Performative governmentality refers to a form of rule in which the state does not rule by order but by establishing performance benchmarks and developing an auditing gaze ([Graham, 2016](#)). The contractual head teacher, residing in the shadow of the future, is reduced to a self-governing subject, who is conscious of the way he or she behaves so as to be able to conform to the wishes of the state in regards to their view of efficiency and modernization ([Bauman, 2001](#)).

Conceptual Framework

In this paper, the performance-precarity nexus has been theorized as a theory of understanding contemporary public sector reform. This nexus is a three-component interlocking nexus:

Component	Mechanism	Manifestation in Sindh
Precarious Drive	The internalization of job insecurity as a motivator for exceptional effort.	Head teachers taking initiatives like solar installation and "little parks" to prove their value.
Performance Showcase	The prioritization of visible, auditable improvements to secure institutional legitimacy.	Focus on physical infrastructure, punctuality, and community donations as evidence of success.
Change Capital Extraction	The state utilizing the temporary energy of contractual workers to reform institutions without long-term investment.	High performance and TEO satisfaction while regularization is delayed.

This framework implies that the success of the IBA head teachers is not an indicator of a healthy system and is an extraction of value out of precarious subjects. The state uses the so-called meritocratic narrative, the notion that hard work is rewarded, to motivate head teachers to work more than they are scheduled to, all the while keeping the so-called cruel optimism of regularization in the future ([Steele, 2025](#)).

Research Design

The present research relies on a qualitative multiple case study which has been conducted in District Khairpur, Sindh, and involved three schools headed by head teachers who were recruited via Sukkur IBA (STS). It enables to examine the in-depth understanding across the context, allowing the researcher to identify the patterns and evidence-based results (Takona, 2024; Weyant, 2022). Taluka Education Officers (TEOs) were used to select the schools purposely to represent the range of performance: high, medium, and low.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis on twenty-nine research participants that included head teachers, teachers, students, parents, School Management Committee (SMC) chairman, and TEOs. Such cross-case analysis of precarity experience and perception in various school settings was made possible by this triangulation of perspectives. According to Adams (2015) semi-structured interview give in-depth

underrating about the phenomenon and give worth to study in terms of insights and information gained from the participants. The claims of the "performance showcase" were checked by document analysis such as attendance registers, cash books, visitors book and the records of the SMC meetings.

The scholar used constructivist philosophical approach, recognizing the fact that the meaning of reality in the Sindh education system is co-created in the course of interaction and beliefs of different stakeholders. This strategy was crucial in capturing the affective aspect of the work of the head teachers; the hopes, fears, and the anxiety that informs the daily leadership practices by the head teachers.

Findings of the study

The Insecurity Motive

The three case studies conducted in Khairpur show a very impressive high initiative-taking pattern. School One was a high school branch located in a rural area and the head teacher (HT1) went beyond the conventional administrative duties to enhance the physical environment. He used SMC funds which are either avoided or abused in other schools to make washrooms usable, install solar panels and create a picture gallery of school events. These actions constitute a kind of a performance demonstration aimed at informing the state and the society that a new type of a leader has come. It was verified by community members in School One that HT1 was able to mobilize local graduates to teach honorarily on a temporary basis to solve teacher shortages, successfully applying the notion of social capital to overcome state failures.

School Two, in village Thar Deep, had a head teacher (HT2) who was concentrated on disciplinary initiatives. He proposed an hour of readings of Quran and a rigid schedule, and physically altered the school ground, filling in the trenches with canal sand. These programs were not prescribed by any particular provincial directive but were voluntary endeavors to establish a visible difference. HT2 even turned into a role model to be punctual and he would come to school early in the morning to embarrass other repetitive late-comers. This discipline, which is a characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity, is a way of managing others by way of managing oneself.

The motive of insecurity is most evident, however, in the sheer number of tasks these head teachers performed. At School Three, HT3, with a heavy opposition on the part of local private school owners and an inactive SMC chairman, used his own funds in buying water pumps and sports equipment. This over-performance is a tactical shift during the paradox of performance-precarity. According to one of the teachers, the head teacher perceives himself as a teacher rather than an officer, and all the time appears to be busy taking classes. These leaders are trying to ensure that they become irreplaceable by the state by carrying out the duties of the so-called worker (teacher) and the so-called manager (head teacher).

Case School	Infrastructure Initiatives	Pedagogical/Academic Initiatives
School One	Solar system, functional washrooms, little park	Weekly/Monthly tests, co-curricular calendar
School Two	Rostrums for classes, ground filling, plantation	Quran reading period, lecture system over dictation
School Three	Water pump, science lab furnishing, sports goods	Biometric attendance for students, science exhibitions

The Shadow of the Future

When the outward appearance of these schools was marked by efficiency and progress, the inward experience, that of the head teachers, was marketed by depth anxiety. The study observes a distinct hope and fear relationship: "On the one hand, the job insecurity drives these head teachers to maintain high performance, on the other hand it makes them anxious about their future. This insecurity is not one of the marginal issues; it is the shadow which leaves every success of color.

The explicit fear that HT1 stated about the regularization of his contractual position could resonate with the stakeholders who cared about his predicament and urged the government to secure his job. The fear of competition to the private schools was another factor that increased this anxiety in School Three, which the head teacher believed was attempting to sabotage his reforms. The head teachers have no personal interest in their schools; they are concerned with their livelihoods. This precarious consciousness does not allow them to plan a long-term since they are always concerned with the instantaneous performance that is necessary to renew their contracts.

The cross-case analysis indicates that insecurity is a universal stressor. Whether a school was a high performing school or a low performing school, the head teachers had a common vulnerability feeling. The latter is the paradox of efficient leadership: the state produces an efficient leader by rendering him/her in a constant state of threat. The personal histories of the head teachers were full of accounts of them being still not regularized, which produced a perverse incentive system, in which they had to work at a rate that was not sustainable to substantiate their existence to a remote bureaucracy.

Legitimacy perceptions among the stakeholders

Another important conclusion of this study is the comparison between the satisfaction of the Taluka Education Officers (TEOs) and the personal anxiety of the head teachers. TEOs, who were immediate bosses, were very satisfied with the performance of the IBA head teachers. The reform itself is a success to the TEOs since it has attained the visible indicators of NPM: punctuality, regularity and physical upgrades such as little parks. One TEO secondary said that students in such schools have now got confidence which they interpret as an indicator of institutional health.

This satisfaction, however, is of an instrumental kind. The TEOs glorify the consequences of the precarious drive without considering the cost it has on the people. The gaze of the state is

directed to the performance showcase, but not on the mental health of the leader and sustainability of the effort. The TEO secondary came bi-monthly in School Two to pass questions to students in what is known as a performance audit that exacerbates the pressures on the head teacher to make everything in School Two look perfect to the visiting supervisor. There was a change in the perception of legitimacy by the community. Traditionally, the community did not trust government schools due to low performance. By showing their intentions, the IBA head teachers were able to gain the respect and eliminate the lack of trust through employment of hard work. In School Three, this saw the parents sending their children to the government school rather than the local private school, which was an outright victory to the public good. However, the legitimacy is associated with the individual of the head teacher, but not with the state. In the event the contractual leader of the school gets ousted or burnt, then the trust of the community will probably fall along with them.

Discussion

Leadership, a Performative Project

The efforts by the IBA head teachers, including the creation of the little parks and implementation of biometric attendance of the students can be theorized as the performative projects. The leader has to generate a surplus of performance in a neoliberal system in which funding and job security is conditional. They are not just managers; they are show-cases. This performance is to two parties, the community, who will provide them with resources, and the state, who will provide them with regularization.

This transforms the leadership practice less about substantive rationality (what is best in the education of the students) to instrumental rationality (what appears best to the auditors). Although the head teachers in this research were quite concerned with learning, their selection of initiatives were greatly motivated by what can be observed and reported. Invention of picture galleries, invitation of officials to science exhibitions are also vivid illustrations of performance showcase of leadership.

The Process of extracting the Change Capital

According to this research, the state is in the process of extracting change capital out of its precarious work force. Change capital is the name that is given to the energy, innovation, and the extra-contractual work needed to make unsuccessful public institutions change. This is because by employing merit-selected people under temporary contracts, the state has tapped on a high-intensity burst of reform energy. These head teachers, with the ideology of regularization as the motive of the cruel optimism they possess, have no hesitation about staying longer at school, spending their own money and teaching eight periods.

This extraction is however non-reciprocal. The state gains the amenity of the working washrooms and the enhanced self-esteem among the students, but it has not provided the institutional security of tenure. And this model is in effect parasitic; it needs to feed off the anxiety, the sense of precarious drive of the individual to maintain an illusion of institutional reform. The shadow of the future holds true to the fact that the leader will keep working in this unsustainable rate until his or her contract is terminated or regularized.

Ethical Implications and Systemic Sustainability

The precarity as a producing technology is highly questionable in terms of ethics. Should the fear of unemployment in a person be the driving force of social reform by the state? The fact that the head teachers in Sindh had an experience of the affective subjectivation, which is their internalization of anxiety as a professional responsibility, is indicative of a kind of neoliberal governing that is highly alienating.

Moreover, the model is systemically unsustainable. The short-term phenomenon is the precarious drive. Studies on labor have indicated that incessant anxiety results in burnout, disengagement, and disaffiliation, which might occur eventually. Unless the Government of Sindh regularizes these head teachers, it will be losing an incredible amount of memory of the institution and slipping to the patronage-ridden stagnation of the past. To the extent that it does regularize them, it will be forced to seek a new method of motivating them which will not be based on fear. This is the "paradox" in that the state has not developed an effective system; merely found a way to exploit people effectively.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The IBA head teacher reform in Sindh is a microcosm of the world-wide neoliberal shift of the recruitment process in the state sector. On the one hand, it has managed to avoid the ills of patronage and lethargy through seniority but, on the other, it has brought about the ills of contractual precarity. This is the "efficiency" that is observed in Khairpur, a symptom of the performance-precarity paradox: high initiative and high anxiety.

Major Comparative Policy lessons

Merit is Necessary but Insufficient: Although third-party testing measures the competent leaders well, in itself, competency cannot cause systemic change in case it is compromised by employment insecurity.

Reform Peril of "Showcase": Neoliberal reforms tend to encourage visible (such as parks and painting) rather than invisible quality (such as teacher-student engagement). Policy makers should be cautious enough not to confuse a performance showcase with transformation in the structure.

- **Sustainability Needs Stability:** This is a short-term tactic of extraction of the precarious workers into the "change capital. Long-term reform entails institutional commitment to the worker that corresponds to the commitment of the worker to the institution.
- **Audit Culture vs. Support Culture:** TEOs and supervisors should leave the idea of being auditors and start to act like mentors. The satisfaction of the supervisor cannot be secured over the psychological well-being of the subordinate.

To sum up, the precarious meritocracy in Sindh provides an international education reform cautionary tale. As much as competition and merit are necessary to end patronage, applying precarity as the means of so-called efficiency is an ethical failure that jeopardizes the very institutions that it attempts to protect. It is in the establishment of a stable meritocracy, in

which the fear of their future does not motivate leaders, but the certainty of their professional mission.

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