

WHOSE VOICE MATTERS?



Youth Agency in Determining and Learning the Skills that Matter in Pakistan's Public Secondary Schools

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WHOSE VOICE MATTERS?

Youth Agency in Determining and Learning the Skills that Matter in Pakistan's Public Secondary Schools



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Authors: Urwa Naeem and Kaneez Zehra
Suggested citation: Naeem, U., & Zehra, K. (2026). Whose voice matters? Youth agency in determining and learning the skills that matter in Pakistan's public secondary schools. Society for Access to Quality Education (SAQE).

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Disclosure: This research made use of AI-based tools (Claude, Anthropic) in supporting analysis and copy-editing. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and conclusions are the work of, and remain the responsibility of the authors. AI-generated content was reviewed, verified and edited by the research team before inclusion.

Acknowledgements

This study was made possible by the contributions of many people and institutions.

We are especially grateful to the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) for its partnership throughout this research, and for securing all approvals, providing institutional oversight and leading the data collection process. We thank Dr Shahid Soroya, former Director General of PIE, for his leadership and support, and Mr Bilal Kakli, In-charge of MIS at PIE, for leading data collection. We also thank the government education authorities in each province and region who granted access to public schools.

We are indebted to the members of our Youth Advisory Group, who shaped the research instruments, reviewed the analysis and validated the findings, and whose insight widened the study's reach: Dr Sadiya Salar, Riffat Fatima, Dr. Yusra Gilani, Hamza Dilshad, Momal Nawab and Asif Nawaz.

We thank the reviewers who read and strengthened this report: Ms. Areebah Shahid, Executive Director of Pakistan Youth Change Advocates (PYCA), Ms. Raffiela Lae Santiago, Advocacy and Youth Engagement Officer, Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) and the Prime Minister's Youth Programme (PMYP) team.

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We are grateful to SAQE's internal research team, who led this study with passion and rigour. We are also grateful to Mr. Waleed Akram and Ms. Taskeen Fatima for their support in data analysis.

Above all, we thank the students, the teachers, parents, head teachers and policymakers who gave their time and their candour. This study concerns young people's right to help shape their own learning; it could not have been written without their willingness to tell us, plainly, how far that right is and is not being met.



About SAQE

The Society for Access to Quality Education (SAQE) is an education advocacy non-profit working to make free and compulsory education a reality for every child in Pakistan, as guaranteed under Article 25-A of the Constitution.

SAQE works through its flagship network, the Pakistan Coalition for Education (PCE). Established in 2005, PCE is a platform that amplifies the collective voice of civil society to transform Pakistan's education system, working across the country through a network of grassroots organisations, strategic partners and citizen groups united by a common belief: that the constitutional right to free, compulsory education for all children must be realised in full.

Through evidence generation, multi-level policy dialogue, social accountability mechanisms, community mobilisation and awareness-building, PCE creates the sustained pressure necessary for education reform. Our strength lies in coalition power, diverse organisations and individuals achieving together what no single actor can accomplish alone. PCE operates through a multi-tiered strategy that engages communities, districts, provinces, the national government and international platforms simultaneously, ensuring that grassroots voices reach policymakers while policy commitments translate into community-level action.



Acronyms

Abbreviation	Full Form
AJK	Azad Jammu and Kashmir
CUE	Center for Universal Education
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESP	Education Sector Plan
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GB	Gilgit-Baltistan
ICT	Islamabad Capital Territory
KII	Key Informant Interview
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MoFEPT	Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training
NAVTTC	National Vocational and Technical Training Commission
NEP	National Education Policy
NEST	Network for Education Systems Transformation
NFE	Non-Formal Education
PCE	Pakistan Coalition for Education
PIE	Pakistan Institute of Education
PTC	Parent-Teacher Council
PTM	Parent-Teacher Meeting
R&T	Regions and Territories (ICT, AJK and GB)
SAQE	Society for Access to Quality Education
SMC	School Management Committee
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
YAG	Youth Advisory Group
YAI	Youth Agency Index
YA-PAF	Youth Agency Policy Assessment Framework



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The findings from this study suggest that many Grade 10 students in Pakistan's public secondary schools perceive limited opportunities to influence decisions regarding what and how they learn. It shows up on its own in three separate places: the policy texts, the students' own survey answers, and the accounts of the teachers, parents and head teachers who work with them every day.

The question this study set out to answer

The study asks a single primary question: ***to what extent does Pakistan's education system create opportunities for young people to exercise agency in determining and learning the skills that matter?*** It approaches that question through three sub-questions concerning how skills are determined and who decides; how young people's perspectives align or diverge from those of other actors; and which structural, cultural and institutional factors enable or constrain youth agency. The evidence base comprises a review of ten education, skills and youth policies; a survey of 767 Grade 10 students (weighted to an estimated 1.31 million enrolled students) across all four provinces and the federal regions; and a qualitative corpus of 1,325 coded excerpts drawn from interviews and FGDs.

Core finding

Across every stream, the same structure appears. Young people are recognised as the justification of the reform - its "demographic dividend," its future workforce - but not as co-constructors of it. They are spoken about, planned for and measured; they are very rarely consulted, and almost never given decision-making power. The study terms this the **youth-agency paradox**: a system that is comprehensively for young people and almost never with them. The paradox is not a matter of attitude. Parents, teachers and school leaders overwhelmingly endorse the principle that students should have a say, and students themselves report high levels of trust in the adults around them. The paradox is structural. The channels, mandates, budgets and indicators that would convert goodwill into influence do not exist. Agency fails, repeatedly, at the last mile.

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Five key findings that explain the gap

1. **The policy architecture is silent on youth voice by design.** Of the ten policy instruments reviewed, the eight that actually govern teaching, training and budgets - the national education framework, the two skills strategies, the federal education quality roadmap and the four provincial education plans - each score 1 out of 5 on youth agency. Only the two stand-alone youth policies (Punjab, KP), which were genuinely co-designed with young people, reach 3 out of 5.

2. **Students feel heard but are rarely heeded**. Three-quarters of students agree that adults listen to their ideas (75.0%), and four in five understand how their school decides what is taught (81.4%). Yet only 49.7% report that feedback has ever led to a change in a class or rule, and 84.3% agree that decisions about skills are mostly controlled by adults, not students. The distance between being heard and having influence is the quantitative signature of the paradox.

3. **Voice without choice is another aspect.** Most students can express a preference. 57.3% say they get chances to tell teachers what they want to learn but 57.4% say they can never choose the topics or problems they actually work on, and 87.3% report that it is difficult to change course or pathway. Voice is permitted; control over learning is not.

4. **High self-efficacy, low system support.** Students are strikingly self-reliant: 90.9% believe they can learn a difficult skill, and 85–89% set goals, make plans and persist. The weakest link in this otherwise uniform confidence is the ability to ask for help or resources (68.8%) suggesting that young people are leaning on personal drive precisely because the system around them offers so little structured support.

5. **Alignment falls with institutional distance, and the system teaches what it tests.** Students' sense of who shares their view of important skills declines steadily with distance from the home: parents (83.1%), teachers (63.9%), school leaders (38.4%), peers (25.9%). Meanwhile a consistent message from teachers and policymakers is that the examination system, not student need, determines what is taught.

What the evidence points toward

The encouraging implication is that the structures youth agency requires already exist on paper in some policy. What is missing is the decision to connect them to young people and to hold the system accountable for doing so. **Expressed on the study's illustrative Youth Agency Index, young people's readiness (approx. 89/100) far outruns the agency the system affords them (approx. 58/100), an agency gap of roughly 31 points.**

The report's recommendations are therefore framed not as new structures bolted on, but as the activation, resourcing and youth-anchoring of mechanisms that are already present. In rough order of leverage, they are: embed a youth-voice expectation in the national framework that shapes all downstream policy; create a single, guaranteed, school-level mechanism for student input on learning; make student voice an assessed and monitored outcome rather than an optional virtue; and operationalise, budget and youth-lead the participation bodies that current youth policies only propose.

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

A young population and a system under strain

Pakistan is among the youngest countries in the world: around two-thirds of its population (67%) is under the age of 30 (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2025). Youth research and policy have tended to situate youth in two ways: as a population "at risk" or source of instability; and as "dividends" and "makers" of the future. However, whether this substantial demographic turns into a risk or dividend is contingent upon a single, demanding condition - that young people leave school with the skills a changing society actually requires, and with the confidence and capacity to keep learning and shape their own lives (Bloom, Canning & Sevilla, 2003; UNDP, 2017).

That condition is not currently being met at scale. The national policy literature itself describes a "learning crisis" in which large numbers of children complete years of schooling without securing foundational competencies, and in which what is taught is often poorly matched to what work and life demand[1]. Successive governments, federal and provincial, have responded with ambitious reform - new curricula, expanded technical and vocational streams, large literacy drives and substantial donor-supported investment. Pakistan's educational challenge, in other words, is not an absence of policy energy. One critical challenge concerns the design of reforms and the extent to which young people participate in shaping them.

The constitutional and legal backdrop matters here. Article 25-A establishes education as a fundamental right, and the 18th Amendment devolved primary responsibility for education to the provinces, producing the decentralised, multi-jurisdiction system within which this study operates. Devolution makes the provincial and regional variation documented in this report a structural feature of how skills are determined in Pakistan.

What this study means by "youth agency"

The concept of youth agency is commonly defined as the ability of young people to make decisions and take action about their own lives and well-being (DeJaeghere, McCleary, and Josić 2016). It is understood to be determined by individual attitudes, abilities, and skills as well as surrounding ecosystems which include relationships with teachers and peers, a school ethos that view students as "drivers" of their own learning, and access to resources.

"Agency" in this report refers to the capacity of young people to act as participants in, rather than only recipients of, decisions about their own learning - specifically, to help determine which skills matter and to exercise meaningful choice in

"Agency" in this report refers to the capacity of young people to act as participants in, rather than only recipients of, decisions about their own learning - specifically, to help determine which skills matter and to exercise meaningful choice in learning them

1. This characterisation is drawn from the National Education Policy Development Framework 2024 and corroborated across the provincial education sector plans reviewed

learning them. The conception draws on Sen's (1999) account of agency as a substantive freedom, and on Lundy's (2007) argument that voice becomes consequential only when it is granted space, audience and influence. Agency in this sense is distinct from three things it is often confused with. It is not the same as aspiration (wanting a future), nor self-efficacy (believing one can learn), nor satisfaction (feeling heard). A student may possess all three and still have no agency, if the system provides no channel through which preference can shape provision. As this report will show, that is precisely the situation in which most Grade 10 students in Pakistan find themselves.

To make the concept analysable, the study draws on a long tradition of scholarship on young people's participation, most usefully Roger Hart's "Ladder of Participation" (Hart, 1992) which arranges adult–youth arrangements on a continuum. The lowest rungs describe arrangements in which young people are present but powerless, used as decoration, or consulted without consequence. The higher rungs describe genuine participation, in which young people are informed, consulted with effect, and ultimately share or initiate decisions. The ladder gives this study a vocabulary for distinguishing the appearance of voice from its substance - a distinction that turns out to be the crux of the findings. Hart (2008) later cautioned that the ladder is best read as a heuristic rather than a developmental hierarchy, a caution this report keeps in view.

Building on this foundation, the study treats agency as a multi-dimensional construct with five observable components, which structure both the analysis and the two frameworks introduced later: **recognition** (are young people named as actors at all?), **voice** (can they express a view?), **choice** (can they exercise control over their own learning?), **influence** (does their voice change outcomes?), and **structural anchoring** (are the mechanisms that enable the above durable, resourced and accountable?).



Figure 1: Roger Hart's ladder of youth participation (1992)*

*Adapted from Hart, R. (1992) Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

Importance of this study

Three features make this study distinctive. First, it places the student perspective at the centre through a dedicated, weighted survey. Second, it triangulates that perspective against both the formal policy architecture and the lived accounts of the actors who implement it, allowing the study to locate exactly where intention and reality diverge. Third, to the research team's knowledge it is among the first national efforts in Pakistan to assess the education and skills system explicitly through the lens of youth agency.

Research questions

Primary question: To what extent does Pakistan's education system create opportunities for young people to exercise agency in determining and learning the skills that matter?

Sub-research questions

SRQ1: How do actors in the education system determine the skills that matter, and what role do young people play in this process?

SRQ2: How do young people's perspectives on skills align or diverge from those of other actors, and what tensions or opportunities arise?

SRQ3: What structural, cultural and institutional elements of the education system enable or constrain youth agency in determining and learning what matters?



METHODOLOGY

The study uses a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative and qualitative evidence are collected in parallel and integrated at the analysis stage. The logic is triangulation: each stream compensates for the others' blind spots, and findings that survive all three carry the greatest weight.

Research design

Three components were combined. A **policy review and analysis** situated the study within the existing legal and strategic architecture. A **student survey** generated a structured, weighted account of young people's own views on skills and agency. **Key informant interviews** (KIIs) and **Focus Group Discussions** (FGDs) captured the perspectives and reasoning of the adult actors who design, implement and support students' learning. The design deliberately positions the survey as the primary instrument of youth perspective and the qualitative components as the primary instruments of system-actor perspective, so that the alignment between the two can itself become an object of analysis.

Locale, population and sampling

The study covers all four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan) and the three administrative regions (Islamabad Capital Territory, Azad Jammu & Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan).

The focus is **Grade 10 in public-sector schools** — students typically aged approximately 14 to 16 (with some 17-year-olds in the achieved sample), at the point of transition into more self-directed academic and career decisions. The primary population is Grade 10 students in public boys' and girls' schools; secondary populations are teachers, parents, head teachers and policymakers engaged in decision-making, implementation or support.

To reflect Pakistan's decentralised system, **a stratified sampling design** was adopted, structured around the four provinces and the federal/administrative regions (ICT, AJK and GB). The target was approximately 200 Grade 10 respondents in each of the four main provinces, for a national sample of about 1,000 students, with the allocation balanced across the two dimensions along which the Grade 10 population varies: school locale (urban and rural) and school gender (boys'

The primary population is Grade 10 students in public boys' and girls' schools; secondary populations are teachers, parents, head teachers and policymakers engaged in decision-making, implementation or support.

and girls' schools, reflecting that public secondary schools in Pakistan are typically single-sex). In each of the four main provinces, eight schools were selected - four urban and four rural, and four boys' and four girls' - with a smaller allocation across Islamabad, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir, for a total of 40 sampled schools, supported by a reserve list of alternate schools used for replacement where a selected school could not be accessed.

School and participant selection

Schools were drawn from the official Education Management Information System (EMIS) lists for each region by data collection partner PIE. Selection was purposive: within each locale-and-gender cell, schools with sufficiently high Grade 10 enrolment were prioritised, so that the intended number of respondents could be obtained at each site. At each selected school, 35-40 parental consent forms were distributed; the students who ultimately took part were those who returned signed parental consent and then gave their own informed assent, for a target of approximately 25 respondents per school. Because schools were purposively selected and participation was conditioned on consent, the sample is best understood as a structured, stratified sample designed to mirror the Grade 10 public-school population across region, locale and sex, rather than as a simple random or probability sample of schools; this is reflected in the Limitations and addressed through weighting.

Table 1: Planned data-collection

Component	Participants	Planned scale	Purpose
Policy review	National & provincial youth / education policies, guidelines, reports	10 instruments	To situate findings within existing policy frameworks
Student survey	Ages 14–17 (focus Grade 10)	200 per stratum (1,000 target)	Quantitative assessment of youth perspectives on skills and agency
Focus group discussions	Teachers and parents	5 + 5 (10 total) 4 provincial + 1 federal	To capture the perspectives of teachers and parents
Key informant interviews	Policymakers	5 total (4 provincial + 1 federal)	To understand policy priorities, implementation challenges and school-level realities
	Head Teachers	7 (4 provinces + ICT + AJK +GB)	

The student survey: instrument, base and weighting

The survey instrument covered four domains: the perceived importance of a defined set of skills; alignment and voice (whether and how students can influence what they learn); enablers and constraints on agency; and student self-efficacy. Items were a mix of multi-select questions (for example, selecting up to three "most important" skills), single-response Likert items, and structured barrier inventories. The instrument was developed collaboratively within the three-country NEST study, coordinated by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution together with the in-country research partners in Pakistan, Jordan and Malawi, so that a shared core of items could be applied comparably across the three contexts. Before fieldwork, it was reviewed by the Youth Advisory Group in each country and by the in-country partners, and revised in light of their feedback.

Analysis is based on 767 achieved Grade 10 respondents, weighted to a population estimate of 1,306,876 enrolled Grade 10 students. Sampling weights were constructed at the province-by-sex level, using Grade 10 enrolment by province and sex from the Pakistan Education Statistics report as the benchmark population. For each province × sex stratum, the weight is the ratio of the population count to the achieved-sample count in that stratum

$$w_{gs} = \frac{N_{gs}}{n_{gs}}$$

where $N_{(gs)}$ is the number of Grade 10 students in the population for that stratum and $n_{(gs)}$ is the number sampled in the same stratum so that each sampled student represents the corresponding number of Grade 10 students in the population for their province and sex.

Understanding the weighting and coverage

The survey reached roughly 200 students in each main province, so the raw sample gives every province almost equal weight. Because Punjab and Sindh hold most of the country's Grade 10 enrolment, all percentages in this report are weighted to Grade 10 enrolment by province and sex, so they describe the average Grade 10 student nationally rather than the average student in the sample. Weighting shifts some headline figures by roughly ten to fifteen points against the unweighted sample (and somewhat more for a few sex-disaggregated figures), and the weighted figures are the ones used throughout. Gender-disaggregated results apply the same weights within the female and male subgroups, so that the provincial composition of each subgroup matches the population, and province-level results are likewise estimated using these weights. The survey also covered Grade 9 students (n = 230) alongside Grade 10 (n = 767): Grade 9 respondents were added during fieldwork to preserve coverage where school closures, examination schedules or access constraints made Grade 10 students unavailable in some districts. This report analyses Grade 10 only, to stay consistent with the study's focus and with the international report; re-running the headline indicators on the combined Grade 9–10 sample moves them by only one to six points and changes none of the findings.

Table 2: Achieved survey sample, by region and sex (unweighted respondents)

Stratum/ region	Female	Male	Total
Punjab	79	101	180
Sindh	116	81	197
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	58	45	103
Balochistan	100	100	200
Regions & Territories (ICT+AJK+GB)	60	27	87
Total	**413**	**354**	**767** **Weighted N approx. 1,306,876**

The qualitative corpus

The qualitative dataset comprises 1,325 coded excerpts drawn from 22 sources across the provinces and regions, coded against a structured codebook organised by the three sub-research questions. Coding was carried out jointly by the study's researcher and data analyst, working together against the shared codebook, with any disagreements resolved through discussion.

Analytical approach

Quantitative analysis was conducted in IBM SPSS, using weighted descriptive statistics and disaggregation by sex, community type and region. Qualitative data were coded and analysed in Dedoose, following the thematic coding structure, with the frequency of codes treated as an indicator of salience rather than of magnitude. Estimates are design-based descriptive statistics; given the stratified design and the small size of some strata (notably AJK and GB, reported jointly as Regions & Territories), differences between regions are reported descriptively and are not tested for statistical significance. Regional figures should therefore be read as indications of where patterns appear to differ, not as measured differences; the report draws on them to argue that provision needs to be locally responsive, which does not depend on any single comparison holding. Integration occurred at two levels: convergent, where survey patterns and qualitative themes were compared for agreement, and generative, where the combined evidence was used to construct the study's two analytic instruments (the YA-PAF and the YAI), which are presented transparently, with their constituent elements shown, so that they can be scrutinised, contested and reused.

Ethical considerations

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for the multi-country research, and the Pakistan component was covered under that same approval. Because the research involved minors, it was treated as a particularly sensitive category and held to correspondingly heightened safeguards throughout design, fieldwork and reporting. Before any data collection began, formal approvals were secured from the relevant government authorities to access public schools, and data collection was carried out in partnership with the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) to ensure proper institutional channels and oversight. Consent followed a staged process suited to each group: for the student survey, enumerators first obtained signed parental consent for every prospective respondent, and informed assent was then obtained from each student directly before the survey began; for the KIIs and FGDs, informed consent was obtained from all participants in advance of each session. Interviews and discussions were audio-recorded only with participants' permission. All data were anonymised, stored securely and treated as confidential, and findings are reported in aggregate or with identifying details removed, so that no individual participant can be identified.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that bound the interpretation of its findings.

- **Population and grade coverage:** The survey was administered to students aged approximately 14 to 16, with Grade 10 as the primary focus. Because of school closures, examination schedules and the inaccessibility of Grade 10 students in some districts during fieldwork, Grade 9 students (n = 230) were also surveyed to preserve coverage; these responses were removed at the analysis stage, so that the results reported here describe Grade 10 students only.

- **Sampling and representativeness:** The Grade 10 analysis is based on 767 respondents across a purposively selected set of 40 public schools, chosen to reflect provincial, urban–rural and gender strata. Results are weighted to Grade 10 enrolment by province and sex and are broadly indicative of the national Grade 10 public-school population, but they should not be read as precise population estimates. Estimates for the two smallest strata (Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan) rest on very few respondents, are reported jointly as "Regions & Territories," and should be read as indicative only. Achieved numbers also fell short of the target in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (103 against a target of 200), so KP estimates rest on a smaller base than those for Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan and should likewise be read with more caution. Because provinces contribute very different numbers of respondents and carry correspondingly different weights, province-level figures are reported as descriptive indications of pattern rather than as precise estimates, and small differences between provinces should not be interpreted as meaningful.
- **Design:** The study is cross-sectional and describes youth agency at a single point in time; it cannot establish causal or temporal claims. The Youth Agency Index is offered as a baseline for future re-measurement, not as evidence of change over time.
- Self-report: All survey measures are self-reported and subject to social-desirability and recall bias; students may, for instance, over-report feeling "listened to." The convergence of survey, qualitative and policy evidence mitigates but does not remove this. Because data collection was led by a federal education institution and conducted in schools, responses on whether adults listen to students may be inflated by social desirability.
- **Under-represented groups:** Several groups are under-represented and their results should be read with caution. Young people with disabilities are almost absent from the survey (five respondents), so the study cannot speak quantitatively to their experience. Transgender and gender-diverse young people are likewise not captured, as responses were recorded only as female or male. Because the sample is drawn entirely from public-sector schools, its findings should not be generalised to private schools, madrasas, or out-of-school adolescents; the poorest and most marginalised young people are therefore likely under-represented relative to the full youth population. The advisory group's testimony is used to signal, not to measure, these gaps.
- **Weighting:** Post-stratification corrects the achieved sample's province × sex composition but not other forms of selection or non-response, and cannot adjust for schools or students who were not reached.
- **Qualitative corpus:** The 1,325 coded excerpts come from a purposive, non-representative set of 22 interviews and focus groups; code frequencies indicate the salience of a theme within this corpus, not its prevalence in the population.
- **Advisory group:** The Youth Advisory Group (six members) was composed for diversity of lived experience rather than statistical representativeness; its contribution is interpretive.
- **Analytic instruments:** The YA-PAF and the YAI are original heuristics developed for this study, not validated psychometric or measurement scales; their domains are face-valid groupings of existing items rather than latent constructs, and their scores should be read as structured summaries of the underlying data.
- **Policy review:** The policy analysis assesses instruments as written (de jure) and does not measure how they are implemented in practice (de facto), which may differ.

Validation with the Youth Advisory Group

A Youth Advisory Group was created for this study. Its members reviewed and advised on the research instrumentation, tools and methodology as these were developed, commented on

the survey and the interview and discussion guides, and gave input at successive stages of the work before contributing to the validation of the findings. The group was small and deliberately composed: six young people, chosen for the range of their lived experience rather than as a statistically representative sample, with selection seeking representation across the regions and drawing on youth from diverse backgrounds and identities. The aim was simple: that this research should not just be done on youth but with them, as a principle of participation. Once the analysis was complete, the group reviewed the findings in a structured data-validation workshop, working through plain-language briefers of the qualitative and quantitative results and answering, theme by theme, a common set of prompts: does this match your experience, what is missing, and what surprised you most. The step did two jobs. As respondent validation (member-checking), it tested whether the study's reading of the evidence held up against the lived experience of young people inside the system; as a source in its own right, it added interpretation and surfaced dimensions the survey and interviews had missed. YAG members reviews are tagged in this report anonymously for safeguarding reasons.



THE POLICY LANDSCAPE

Before asking whether young people exercise agency in classrooms, it is necessary to ask whether the documents that govern those classrooms make any room for them to do so. They largely do not by design. This section establishes that finding and, in doing so, introduces the first of the report's two analytic instruments.

What was reviewed

Ten instruments were reviewed. Four national or federal instruments: the National Education Policy Development Framework 2024, the TVET Policy 2018, the National "Skills for All" Strategy 2018, and the ICT Quality Education & Innovation Roadmap 2026. Four provincial education or literacy plans: the Balochistan Education Sector Plan 2020–25, the Sindh Education Sector Plan 2019–24, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Plan 2020–25, and the Punjab Literacy & Non-Formal Basic Education Strategic Plan 2025–30; and two provincial youth policies: the Punjab Youth Policy 2012 and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Youth Policy 2016.
Each was assessed against a template covering how skills are framed, who decides, structural enablers and constraints, implementation, monitoring and feedback, financing, and an overall agency score per document.

The Youth-Agency Policy Assessment Framework (YA-PAF)

To move beyond an impressionistic reading, the study formalises its lens into a scoring instrument - the Youth-Agency Policy Assessment Framework. The framework does two things. First, it specifies the dimensions along which an instrument's treatment of youth agency can be observed. Second, it arranges those dimensions into a maturity model. A six-level model, anchored to Hart's rungs so that any education, skills or youth instrument can be placed on a common scale and, crucially, can be shown what its next step up would look like.

A six-level model, anchored to Hart's rungs so that any education, skills or youth instrument can be placed on a common scale and, crucially, can be shown what its next step up would look like.

The five dimensions are

1. **Recognition:** Are young people named as actors with a stake, or only as a target population, an "asset" or a risk?
2. **Voice:** does the instrument create any channel for young people to express their views?
3. **Choice:** does it give young people control over aspects of their own learning or pathways?
4. **Influence:** are youth views consequential, feeding into decisions, design or governance?
5. **Structural anchoring:** are the mechanisms for the above operational, budgeted, mandated and accountable, or merely aspirational?

Table 3: The Youth-Agency Policy Maturity Model

Level	Label	What the instrument looks like at this level	Hart rung
0	Absent	Young people are not mentioned as actors at all; the instrument concerns systems, inputs and adults.	not applicable
1	Beneficiary	Youth appear only as a target population, an economic "asset"/ "dividend," or a risk to be managed. No voice, choice or youth-informed monitoring.	1–2
2	Consulted (proposed)	The instrument proposes but does not yet resource or build a channel for youth feedback	3
3	Co-designed	Young people were genuinely involved in shaping the instrument, and it proposes standing participatory bodies (councils, commissions) though these remain largely advisory and government-chartered.	4
4	Shared decision rights	Participatory bodies exist, are budgeted, and seat young people with real decision rights in governance and monitoring; youth-informed indicators are tracked.	5–6
5	Youth-led/ co-governed	Young people initiate and co-govern; agendas, budgets and accountability are shared, and youth leadership is institutionalised rather than invited.	7–8

The headline finding: a sharply bimodal distribution

Scored against this framework, the ten instruments fall into two distinct groups. The eight education and skills-focused instruments (including every document that actually governs curriculum, teaching, training and budgets) each score 1 out of 5. The two stand-alone youth policies each score 3 out of 5.

The pattern is bare enough to state as a principle: in Pakistan's policy architecture, youth agency is concentrated in the documents written about youth and is almost entirely absent from the documents that run the education system.

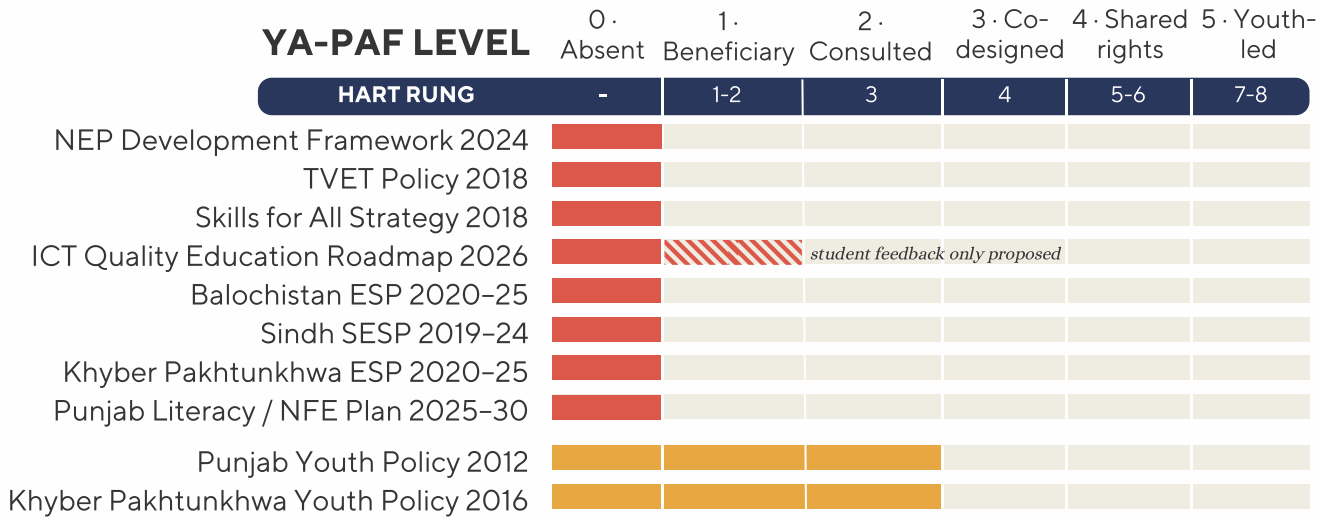
How the scores were assigned

Each instrument was assessed against a common template applied document by document. The template worked through sections on how "skills" are framed; actors and decision-making; structural and institutional enablers and constraints; implementation modalities; monitoring and feedback; and financing and for each it paired a set of guiding questions with observable indicators (for example, "Is youth participation mentioned, and in what capacity: consultative, co-design or decision-making?"; "What mechanisms exist for youth input? councils, forums, school-based structures?"). Every answer was recorded with its supporting evidence. A direct quotation and page or section reference from the source document wherever possible and tagged for confidence (high = direct quotation with corroboration; medium = paraphrase or single source; low = inference), so that each score is traceable to the text that produced it.

Each instrument then received a single overall youth-agency score on a six-point scale (0–5), assigned by taking the best-supported fit across the template evidence, mapped onto the maturity model in Framework 1.

Applied this way, the eight education and skills instruments each score 1: young people appear only as intended beneficiaries, most often an economic "asset" or "dividend" with no mechanism through which their views shape what is taught. The ICT Quality Education Roadmap illustrates the boundary: strongest of the eight on skills content, it still scores 1 because its student-feedback mechanism is only proposed, not established. The two youth policies score 3 because both were genuinely co-designed with young people (Punjab through consultation with 1,500+ youth, KP through a diverse province-wide process) and propose standing bodies such as councils and commissions.

Figure 2: Youth-agency scores across the ten reviewed instruments



How "skills" are framed

Across the education and skills documents, skills are framed overwhelmingly in economic terms: employability, productivity, remittances and the capture of the "youth bulge." The TVET Policy and the Skills for All Strategy are the clearest cases; the latter goes so far as to frame unskilled youth as a security risk who may "succeed to anti-social overtures with disastrous eventualities" (NAVTTC, 2018). This securitised reading sits at odds with the "demographic dividend" literature, which treats an educated, engaged youth cohort as a time-bound economic opportunity rather than a threat (Bloom, Canning, & Sevilla, 2003). The provincial plans add foundational literacy and "life skills," and Sindh and the ICT roadmap reach toward a 21st-century vocabulary.

The ICT Quality Education Roadmap 2026 is the outlier and the richest on skills content: it explicitly names 21st-century skills (the "four Cs" critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication), social-emotional learning, civic values, digital literacy and climate change, and positions life-skills education "as a cornerstone."

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Who shapes policy and who is missing

The same actor groups recur across the corpus: government departments; international donors and technical partners; and, in the skills documents, the private sector. Teachers and parents appear as subjects of reform; community governance runs through parent-teacher and school-management committees. Young people are absent from this list in every education and skills instrument.

The decisive contrast is the design process of the two youth policies, in which youth organisations were the implementing partners and province-wide consultations were run. The Punjab policy reports directly involving more than 1,500 individual young people with documented gender balance; the KP policy describes an "intricate consultative and iterative process" with "young women and men, boys and girls who participated in the formation." This single difference is the strongest predictor of an instrument's score, and it is the mechanism behind the bimodal distribution.

The "last mile": monitoring, financing and the failure of agency where it matters most

Several instruments are genuinely strong on monitoring and money, however, across all ten, monitoring concerns learning outcomes and enrolment - never youth-informed indicators and not one education or skills instrument carries a budget line for youth participation. Only Punjab's youth policy attaches dedicated youth financing; KP defers its budget to a commission.

FINDINGS

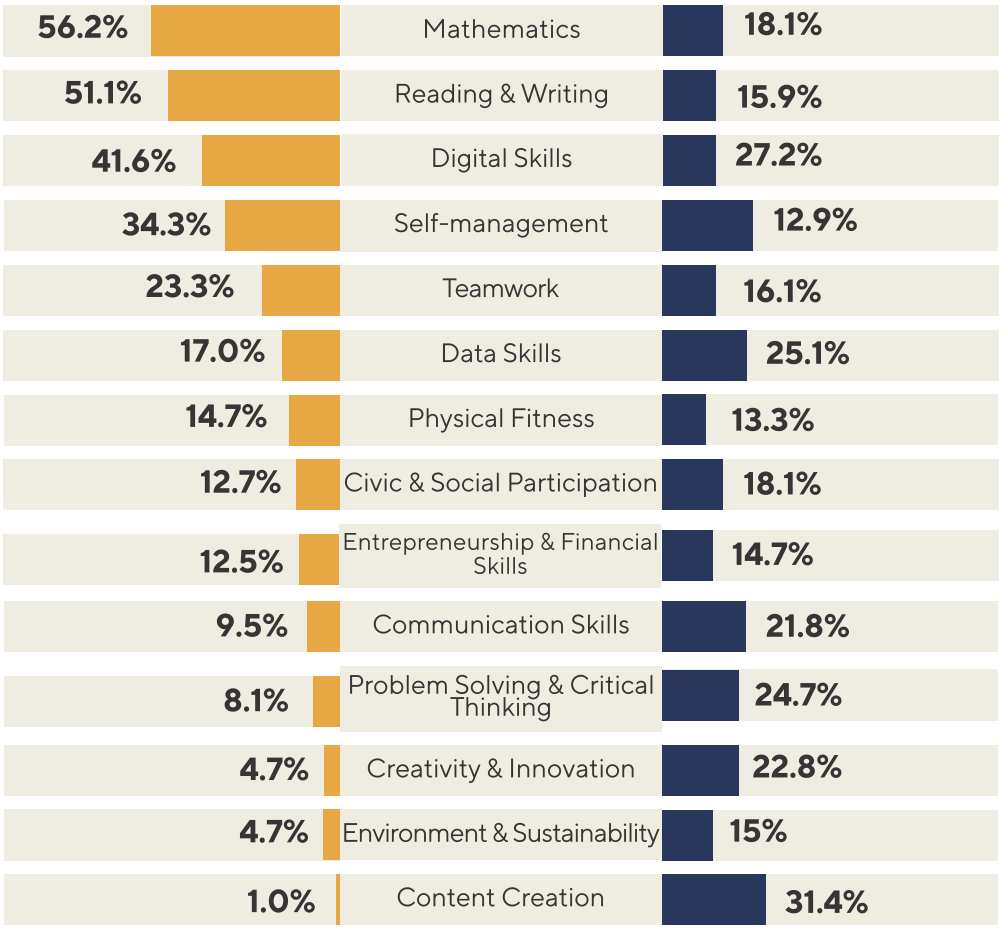
Finding 1: How Skills Are Determined, and the Role of Young People

This section traces a single question through the evidence: when a Pakistani public school decides which skills a young person will learn, who actually decides, and where does the young person stand in that chain? The answer is consistent across the survey, the interviews and the focus groups. It emerges in four steps, what students themselves say they need, who holds the authority to decide it, how far students are heard within that structure, and how little of their own learning they are finally able to choose. And it is to the first of these "the skills students value" that the discussion now turns.

1.1 What skills matter and to whom

Asked to identify the three skills most important for their future, Grade 10 students prioritise a pragmatic core. Mathematics (56.2%), reading and writing (51.1%) and digital skills (41.6%) lead clearly, followed by self-management (34.3%) and teamwork (23.3%). At the other end, content creation (31.4%), digital skills (27.2%) and data skills (25.1%) are most often named least important.

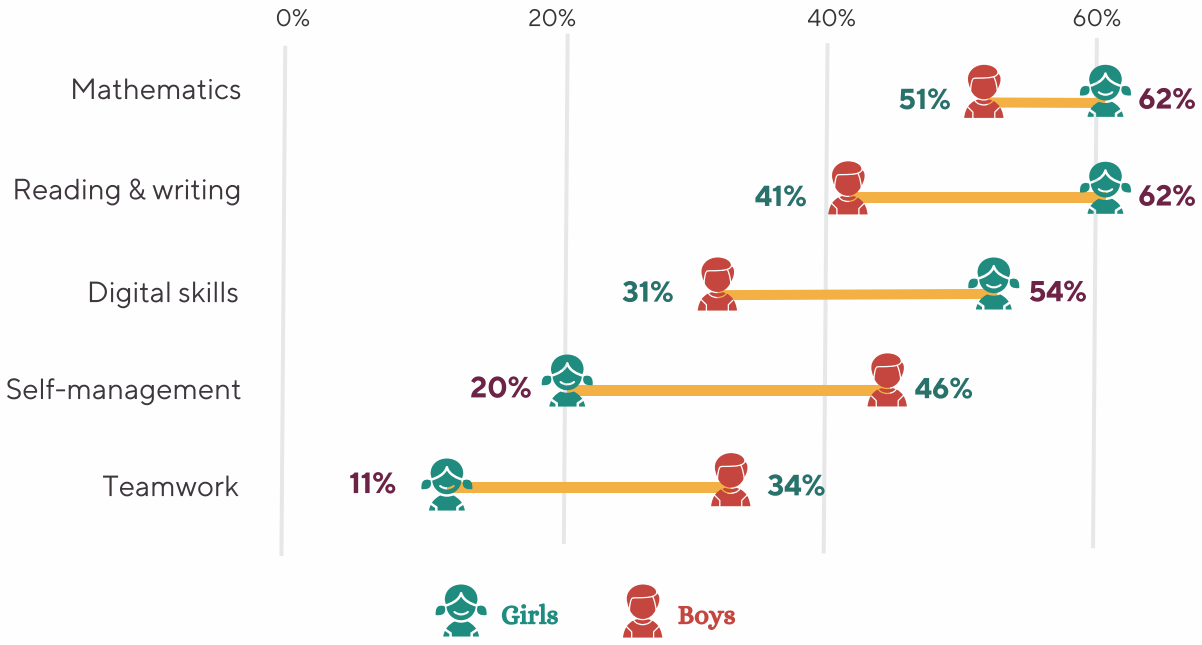
Figure 3: Most- and least-important skills for the future (% of students selecting; up to three)



Read as a whole, the ranking says two things. The first: a foundational core dominates what students believe they need. The second: averages conceal a population that is divided; the very skills a large group ranks first, another group ranks last. A national figure of 41.6% for digital skills is not the view of a typical student so much as the midpoint between two camps. That internal division is the thread the disaggregations below pull on, and it is the first sign that "the skills that matter" may not be a question with a single answer. Grouped by type, these span foundational skills (literacy, numeracy), technical and vocational skills (digital, job-specific), and transferable life skills (self-management, teamwork, communication, civic competence), and students rate foundational and life-skills competencies as highly as technical ones.

Two disaggregations matter for the agency question. By sex, girls prioritise all three leading skills more than boys, and the gap on digital skills is among the widest of all: 54.4% of girls name it a top-three skill, against 30.6% of boys.

Figure 4 : Skills named most important for the future by sex (%)



Bar length = size of the disagreement

The division, in other words, is substantially a division by sex, and it runs deeper than a gap of degree. Girls and boys do not simply weight the same list differently; they invert it. Girls put the academic and the digital first, boys the practical and the interpersonal - self-management, teamwork, civic participation. Whatever its origins, the pattern means that "what students want" is already two answers before a single policy is written, and that any uniform provision will fit one sex better than the other.

By region the divergence is larger still and here the ranking reorders itself. Digital skills are named most important by 81.7% of students in Sindh and 66.2% in

> Girls put the academic and the digital skills first, boys the practical and the interpersonal (self-management, teamwork).

Balochistan, but only 30.5% in Punjab; reading and writing are named by over three-quarters of students in Sindh yet only a small minority in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Figure 5: Skills named most important for the future by region (%)

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Digital Skills	30.5%	81.7%	23.8%	66%	75.8%
Mathematics	71%	71%	15%	14%	11.5%
Reading & Writing	63%	77%	6.9%	10%	11.8%
Self Management	46%	2.5%	31.5%	13%	30%
Teamwork	25%	4.3%	40%	6%	16%

What the regional table shows is that there is no national ranking to speak of. Taken together, the disaggregations converge on a single conclusion, and it is the pivot of the whole finding: "the skills that matter" is a genuinely contested question whose answer varies by who and where a young person is - which is precisely why a system that determines skills centrally, with no youth input, will systematically misfit a large share of its students.
The qualitative record confirms that appetite is shifting toward the practical and the digital faster than provision can follow. A Punjab policymaker described:

> *Students increasingly want practical, creative, and technology-oriented skills ... driven by their exposure to technology, social media, and a changing economic landscape.*
>
> Policymaker (KII) -Punjab

While a teacher from Punjab stated the on-ground reality:

> *They want to learn about technology, but we don't even have the proper labs for it. They hear about AI and robots, but in school, they might not even get to use a computer properly.*
>
> Teacher FGD -Punjab

Heard across regions, the same appetite takes on local colour. A parent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reasons from the ground of his own trade;

> *I work as an electrician and that is how I came to understand the value of practical skill. My advice to my children is to pursue the computer field because that is the era we are in, but I will never force them.*
>
> Parent FGD -Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

A parent in Sindh regarded digital skill as a threshold for modern life:

> *Digital skills are the foundation without which a child cannot participate meaningfully in the modern world ... If our children do not have this foundation, they will fall behind no matter how many other things they know.*
>
> Parent FGD Sindh

A policymaker in Balochistan points to new provision being built to meet the demand:

> *We are promoting IT and use of AI. We have developed 380 digital labs and working on large scale modern trainings to ensure better learning.*
>
> Policymaker (KII) Balochistan

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

"Students' choice and focus on foundational literacy and numeracy may be influenced by their evaluations and assessment, but also the student might not even be aware of the other skills. While conducting the survey, when I was asking students about the skills, they weren't even aware and couldn't understand the other ones even when I would explain them — so I think a reason is also that students don't even imagine or think beyond what the skills that education could deliver might be."

"While some young people today are able to explore opportunities, skills and career options through the internet and digital platforms, many others are left behind by the same divide."

1.2 The architecture of top-down control

If students are clear about what they want, the next question is who decides whether they get it. When asked who actually determines which skills are taught, every category of adult respondent describes a single, centralised hierarchy in which authority flows downward and classrooms implement. "Centralised policy control" is among the most heavily coded themes in the corpus (79 tags across all seven regions), and the language is strikingly consistent from province to province. A teacher from Sindh described this structure:

> *The decision-making is entirely top-down, coming from the Ministry and the Provincial Department of Education. They design the curriculum and the scheme of studies without consulting the local teachers or students. We are just the implementers of a system that is decided in an office far away from our classroom reality.*
>
> Teacher FGD Sindh

Teachers place themselves near the bottom of this hierarchy, bound by syllabus and schedule and stripped of discretion even when they can see a student's talent:

> *Unfortunately, teachers and school structures are often the last to decide, as we are bound by the syllabus. We might see a child's talent, but we don't have the authority to change their course of study.*
>
> Teacher FGD Punjab

A Sindh teacher placed the student explicitly last:

> *The student is the last person in the chain of decision-making*
>
> Teacher FGD Sindh

Parents also shared the same sentiments:

> *The school does not seek our advice on whether our child should be learning communication skills or computer skills. That decision is made somewhere else and then given to us as a finished product.*
>
> Parent FGD KP

Two further forces narrow the channel. The examination system concentrates everything that counts into marks, so that any skill not tested tends to fall away; and where families do exert influence, it more often reinforces the same academic priorities than widens them.

> *The examination system is a structural barrier. Our children are evaluated on marks. The admissions system runs on marks. Every certificate and achievement outside the academic record becomes irrelevant when marks are the only currency.*
>
> Parent FGD Islamabad Capital Territory

> *We prioritize subjects like Physics and Chemistry for the science students because that is what parents demand.*
>
> Teacher FGD Sindh

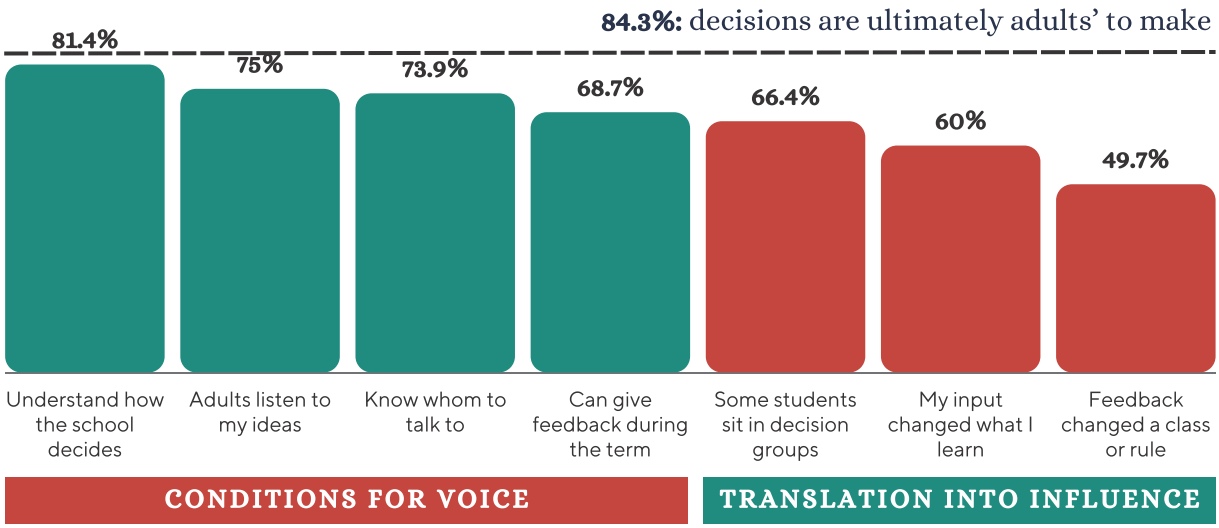
A recurring explanation for why even sympathetic school leaders decline to open up decisions is what teachers repeatedly called the "fear of transfer": a perceived risk of political retaliation for any local initiative, which drives leadership into a defensive "survival mode." The significance for this study is direct. A leader who cannot, as one teacher put it, move "a fruit stall without fear" will certainly not risk handing students a say in what is taught. Centralisation, on this account, is not merely an administrative arrangement but a discipline, and it reaches all the way down to the classroom door.

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1.3 Students are heard, but not heeded

If the structure leaves no formal opening for students, the question becomes whether they nonetheless feel heard within it and on this the survey speaks most precisely. Students report, in large majorities, that the conditions for voice are present: 81.4% understand how their school decides what is taught, 75.0% feel that teachers and adults listen to their ideas, and 73.9% know whom to approach to give feedback. Yet as the questions move from being heard to having effect, the figures fall away. 60.0% say their input has ever led to a change in what they learn, and only 49.7% that feedback has ever changed a class or school rule. Above it all, 84.3% agree that decisions about which skills are taught are mostly controlled by adults, not students.

Figure 6: The voice–influence gradient by sex (% agreeing)

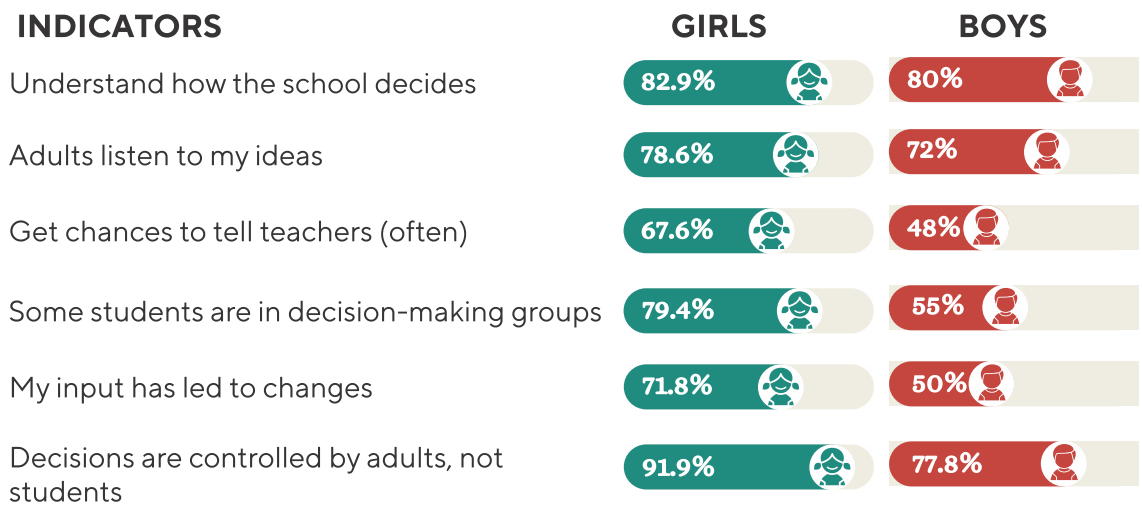


The table is best read as a descent in three stages. At the top, the conditions for voice are in place. In the middle, that voice begins to lose its grip as it is asked to translate into influence. And at the base sits the ceiling: an 84.3% super-majority who report that, whatever consultation occurs, the decisions are ultimately adults' to make.

This pattern mirrors international evidence. UNESCO's 2026 Global Education Monitoring Report, the first global measure of youth engagement in education decision-making, finds that even where consultation mechanisms exist they rarely translate into influence: among youth and student organisations surveyed, only about one in five felt their contributions were valued or that they were genuine collaborators, and school-student organisations reported the lowest satisfaction of all (UNESCO, 2026). Pakistan's Grade 10 students describe the same distance between consultation and consequence from the inside.

Disaggregated by sex, the gradient looks different for girls and boys, and the difference is instructive.

Figure 7: The voice–influence gradient by sex (% agreeing)



Girls report the conditions for voice more strongly than boys at nearly every step: more feel listened to (78.6% against 72.0%), far more sit in groups that help make decisions (79.4% against 55.3%), and more say their input has produced a change (71.8% against 50.4%). And yet girls are also markedly more likely to say that decisions are, in the end, controlled by adults (91.9% against 77.8%). The two facts describe the same experience from the inside. Girls are more engaged with the machinery of consultation, and it is precisely that closer engagement that makes them more acutely aware of where it stops. Boys, more detached from the process to begin with, report both less involvement and a lower sense of its limits. For a reform intent on making voice consequential, this is a double-edged signal. The students the system consults are also the ones who have learned that being consulted and being heeded are not the same thing.
The gradient is uneven across regions as well and it sharpens the point.

Figure 8: Feeling heard by region (% agreeing)

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Adults listen to my ideas	86.4%	71.6%	56.5%	40.6%	47.8%
Get chances to tell teachers (often)	77.9%	43.3%	18.3%	9%	39%
My input has led to changes	67.8%	48%	48.3%	51.6%	43.8%

Where Punjab's students report the warmest experience of being heard, the share reporting the same is descriptively lower moving west and north. In Balochistan just 40.6% feel listened to and a striking 9.0% get frequent chances to speak; in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the figures are barely higher. The "voice" half of the finding, in other words, is itself regionally concentrated. For a large share of students outside Punjab, the gap is not between being heard and being heeded but between silence and being heard at all. Any reform that assumed a national baseline of consultation to build on would be assuming something that holds in some provinces and not others.
Head teachers name the distinction between presence and influence themselves, with notable candour about its emptiness:

> *Involving students in a committee and genuinely listening to them are two different things. If we call students into a meeting just to have them present, without actually acting on what they say ... then the committee has no value.*
>
> Head teacher (KII) - Punjab

What fills the space where influence should be is guidance and observation. Adults deciding on the student's behalf, attentively, but deciding nonetheless.

> *There is no formal system for taking student opinion. What does happen is counselling. Students are counselled about what kinds of skills and professional choices can help them build a good life going forward*
>
> Head teacher (KII) -Gilgit-Baltistan

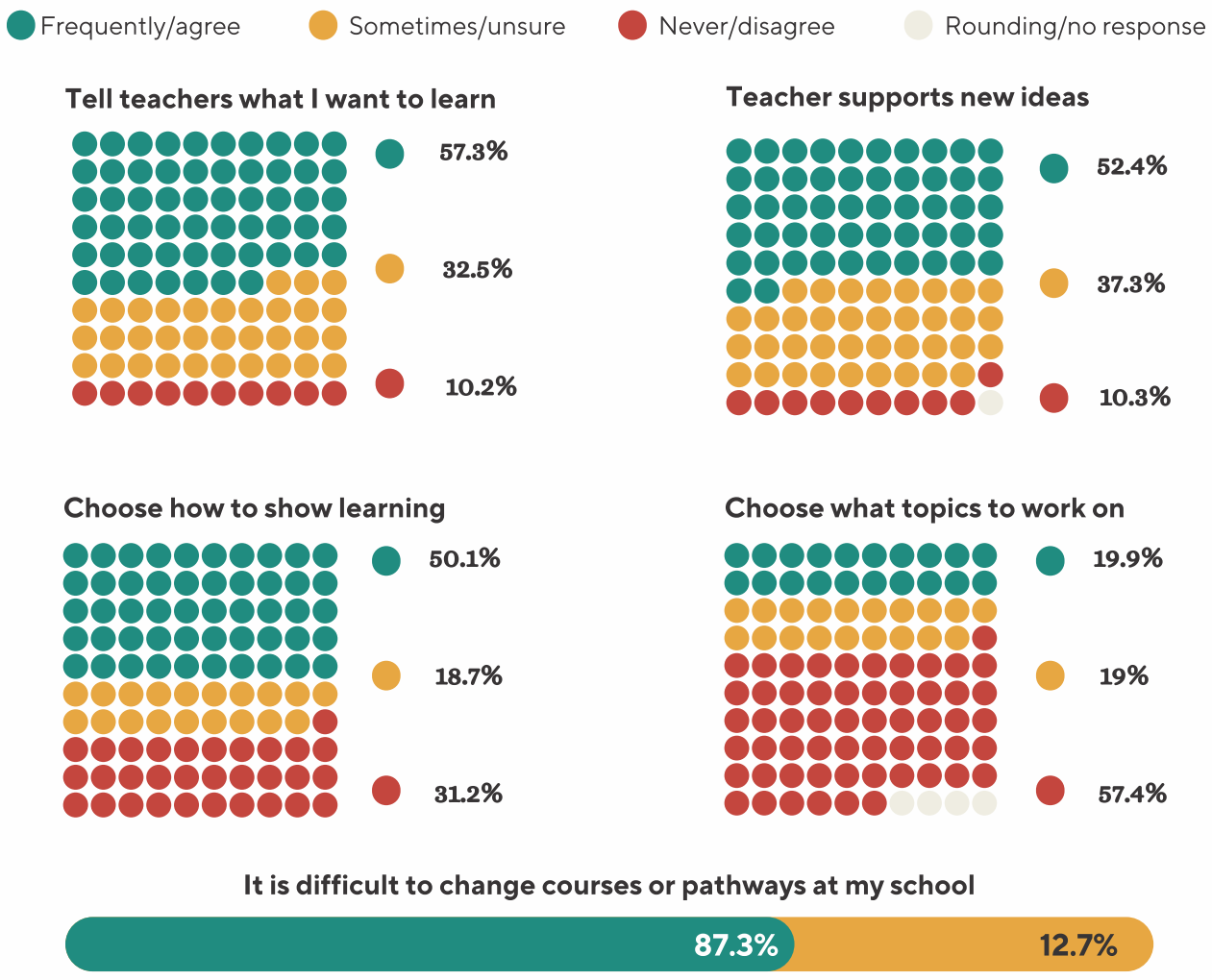
> *For students already enrolled with us, we have the experience of having monitored their interests over time, so we already have knowledge of what they gravitate toward.*
>
> Head teacher (KII) - Azad Jammu & Kashmir

Placed on Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, the system sits between tokenism and consultation: young people are sometimes present and sometimes asked, but rarely with consequence. The gap between the 75% who feel listened to and the roughly half who can point to any resulting change is, the distance between the ladder's third and fourth rungs and it is where the Pakistani system currently rests.

1.4 Voice without choice

If influence over collective decisions is constrained, control over one's own learning is more constrained still. The survey draws a sharp contrast between expressing a preference and acting on one. A majority of students (57.3%) say they frequently get chances to tell teachers what skills they want to learn; but asked how often they can actually choose the topics or problems they work on, 57.4% say never, and only 19.9% say frequently. Pathway rigidity compounds the constraint: 87.3% agree that it is difficult to change courses or pathways at their school.

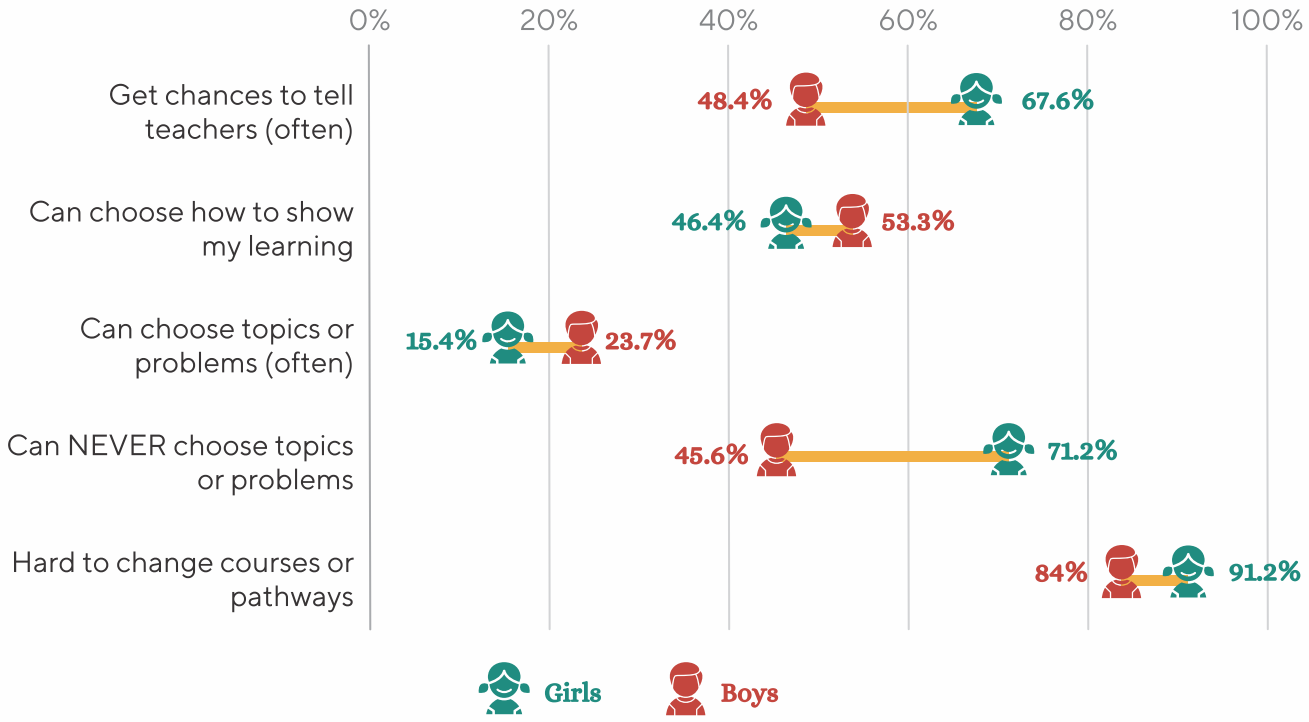
Figure 9: Voice versus choice (valid %, single response)



The table sets two things. First, expression is common. Over half regularly tell teachers what they would like to learn, and just as many feel supported when they raise a new idea. Second, choice is rare: the moment the question turns from voicing a preference to selecting what one actually studies, the numbers collapse. The lone place students retain some latitude is in how they demonstrate learning (50.1%), not in what they learn; and even that narrow room is walled in by the 87.3% who find it hard to change course at all. Expression has been made easy and consequential choice held back.

Disaggregated by sex, the choice deficit falls hardest on girls, and it does so along the very line the gradient drew.

Figure 10: Voice versus choice by sex (% as noted)



Bar length = size of the disagreement

Boys are somewhat more likely to report choosing their topics at least sometimes (23.7% often, against 15.4% of girls), but the sharper figure sits at the other end of the scale: 71.2% of girls say they can never choose what they work on, against 45.6% of boys, and girls are likelier to find pathway change difficult (91.2% against 84.0%). Set beside the gradient in 1.3, the pattern completes a coherent and uncomfortable picture. Girls are more often heard and more often consulted, yet less often permitted to choose. Voice is extended to them and choice withheld from them. Along a single gendered seam the same young women who engage most with the machinery of consultation are the ones least free to act on their own preferences.

Figure 11: Feeling heard by region (% agreeing)

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Can NEVER choose topics or problems	68.9%	15.3%	72.1%	39.2%	31.6%
Can choose electives that interest me	76.8%	72.2%	47.7%	29.1%	81.7%

The constraint is tightest in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where roughly seven in ten students say they can never choose their topics, and loosest by far in Sindh, where only 15% say the same. Parents grasp the difference between voice and choice, and its motivational stakes, more acutely than any statistic can convey; one put the whole matter in a sentence.

> *When a child is given agency - even partial ownership over a decision - their attitude shifts entirely from passive recipient to active participant.*
>
> Parent FGD Punjab

Teachers name the same limit without prompting and locate it in a curriculum built to be completed:

> *Are they according to the students' wishes or needs? No ... it's 50/50 ... it's just for the sake of syllabus to be completed ... the children can't implement it practically ... the rest of the content is irrelevant.*
>
> Teacher FGD Balochistan

A parent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa asks for precisely enough room for a child to signal what they actually want to learn.

> *The curriculum needs changes that give children the opportunity to express which skills they actually want to pursue rather than just receiving a fixed package of content.*
>
> Parent FGD Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The structural reading is that agency has been permitted to exist as sentiment and denied the means to become practice.

1.5 The role young people actually play

Pressed on whether students influence the system at all, policymakers gave the most precise account of the residual role left to young people. One explained that students ***"shape curriculum and pedagogy through their measured performance rather than through voice or direct representation,"*** **and that** ***"there is currently no formal institutional mechanism through which students directly decide the skills they want to learn."*** The student, in this configuration, is a data point in an assessment system, not a participant in a deliberation.

Teachers traced the same outcome to its root in the system's incentives. What the system measures, it manages; what it does not measure, it allows to disappear. And youth voice is measured nowhere.

> *There is no departmental KPI for 'listening to students' or 'fostering agency,' so these activities are ignored.*
>
> Teacher FGD

The absence of a student role is not, on this evidence, a considered judgement that young people have nothing to offer. Several actors say the opposite. It is the predictable result of an incentive structure in which no one is accountable for the thing, so no one does it. A parent described the missing structure almost exactly.

> *If principals had more autonomy to respond to their specific communities, if teachers were trusted to adapt their approach, and if parents were involved in genuine dialogue about what is being taught, the gap between what children want and what the school offers would narrow significantly.*
>
> Parent FGD Punjab

SYNTHESIS

Skills in Pakistan's public schools are determined by curriculum and assessment authorities at the top of a centralised, devolution-era hierarchy and transmitted to schools with little room for local adaptation and none for formal student influence. Young people play no structured role in determining the skills that matter; their only systematic channel of influence is indirect, exercised through measured performance. They are nonetheless far from indifferent. They hold clear, pragmatic and strikingly varied views about the skills they need, and they report, in most of the country, being listened to. The decisive finding is the gap between voice and effect. Students can speak and be heard, but cannot choose what they learn or point to changes their views have produced and it widens, tellingly, for girls and across the regions where being heard is rarest. The findings suggest that opportunities for participation do not consistently translate into decision-making influence and this is not from ill will. Adults overwhelmingly endorse the principle of student voice but because no instrument, mandate, budget line or indicator requires that voice to be consequential. That structural diagnosis carries directly into the question of alignment: if the will exists but the mechanism does not, then how far do the people around a young person actually share that young person's sense of what matters? It is to that question that the next finding turns.

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

"Student agency in Pakistan is not only limited by the education system itself, but also heavily influenced by socioeconomic inequality."

"Discovering it is a national pattern changes the diagnosis entirely. The absence of student voice is not an administrative oversight or regional underdevelopment. It is a deliberate structural feature of how the education system reproduces adult authority."

Finding 2: Alignment, Tensions and Opportunities

Where the first finding asked who decides, this one asks a more relational question: how far do the people around a young person - parents, teachers, school leaders, classmates - share that young person's own sense of which skills matter, and what follows, for good or ill, when they do not? The survey lets the degree of alignment be measured actor by actor; the interviews and focus groups explain what sits behind the figures, where the friction concentrates, and where the system's best opportunity may lie.

2.1 The alignment cascade

Asked whose views on important skills are closest to their own, students describe a clear gradient, and the gradient tracks proximity to the home. Parents sit at the top, named by 83.1% of students, followed by teachers (63.9%), then school leaders (38.4%) and, last, peers (25.9%). Alignment falls, in other words, as institutional distance from the student grows.

The high parent figure identifies the most natural ally for any youth-agency agenda, a point the qualitative record reinforces repeatedly. The low school-leader figure identifies the most awkward fact in the finding: the actor with the most formal authority over what a school teaches is the one students feel least understood by. That is not an incidental irony but a direct consequence of the structure Finding I described. In a system where decisions cascade downward, school leaders answer upward (to the department, the scheme of studies, the examination) rather than outward to the students in front of them, so their sense of which skills matter is calibrated to the system's priorities rather than the child's. Read this way, alignment is not goodwill that leaders happen to lack; several are warmly regarded by the same students who feel distant from their priorities. It is a structural distance built into the role, and it will not be closed by exhortation alone.

Figure 12: Whose view of important skills is closest to the student's own (multi-select)

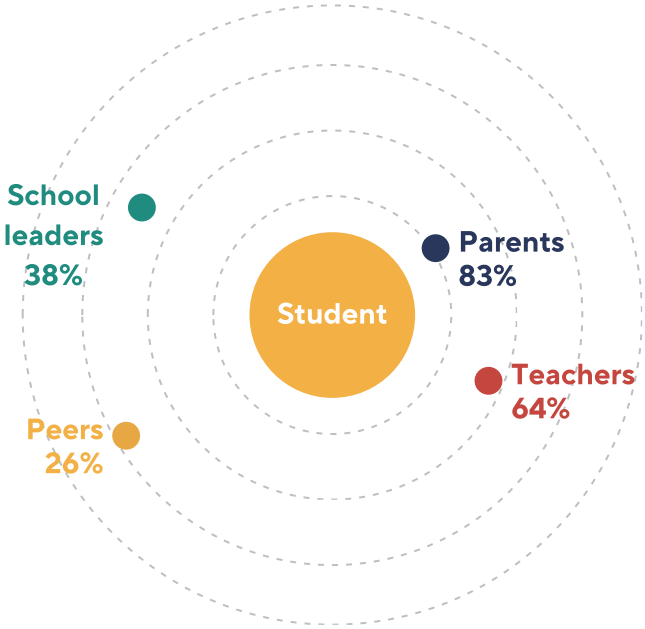
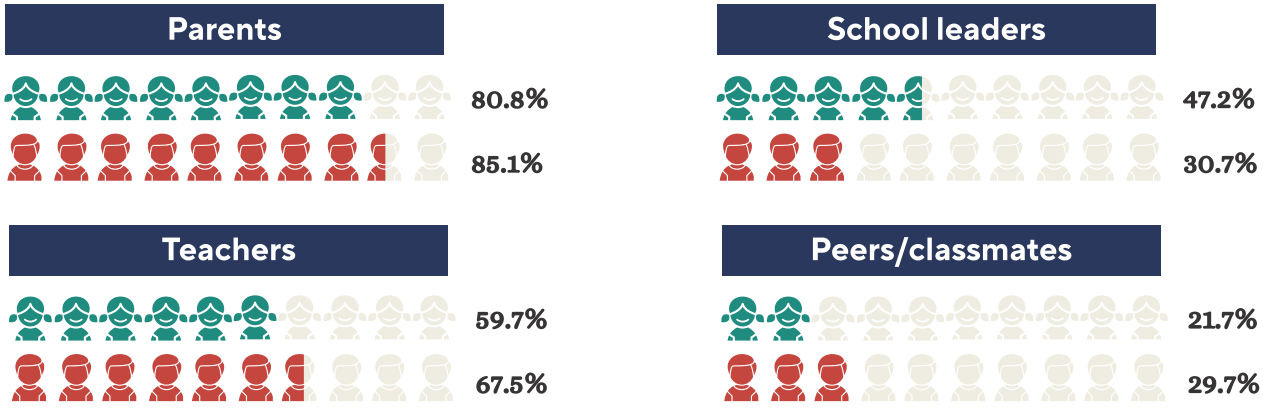


Figure 13: Alignment with the student's own view by sex (%)



Disaggregated by sex, one figure interrupts the smooth cascade. Girls feel considerably more aligned with school leaders than boys do even as boys report slightly closer alignment with parents, teachers and peers.

The qualitative record fills in why the family sits where it does. Parents describe, in their own words, the shift that even partial ownership produces in a child.

> *Absolutely yes. Children should be given the authority to think about and decide what skills they want to develop. When a child is given that kind of ownership, they engage with the learning much more seriously.*
>
> Parent FGD - Sindh

2.2 Where actors converge

Alignment measured actor by actor conceals a disagreement about substance, and it is to that the finding now turns. On the cross-cutting competencies like problem-solving, teamwork, communication, students, parents and teachers broadly converge. The divergence concentrates, sharply and consistently, in the skills that students increasingly name as most important (Table 1.1), set against the academic, examination-oriented content the system is built to deliver.

Two features make this divergence more than a routine gap between aspiration and provision. First, it compounds with class. Where the public system does not supply the practical and digital skills students want, families who can afford it turn to private tuition, so that the mismatch is met privately by the few and left unmet publicly for the many. Second, it carries a cost the system already pays: teachers closest to the friction tie the irrelevance of much of what they must deliver directly to disengagement, describing content students "can't implement practically" and a syllabus taught "for the sake of" completion. A divergence of this kind is not a neutral difference of opinion; it is a steady drain on the relevance of schooling.

> *There is a total mismatch between what we teach and what the students actually need to survive in the market. They want to learn skills that lead to immediate employment, but we are still teaching them 20-year-old theories.*
>
> Teacher FGD Sindh

> *The three work best when they work together, but in our situation they are largely disconnected. The school does what it can with the curriculum. The family does what it can at home. The community provides nothing.*
>
> Parent FGD Sindh

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

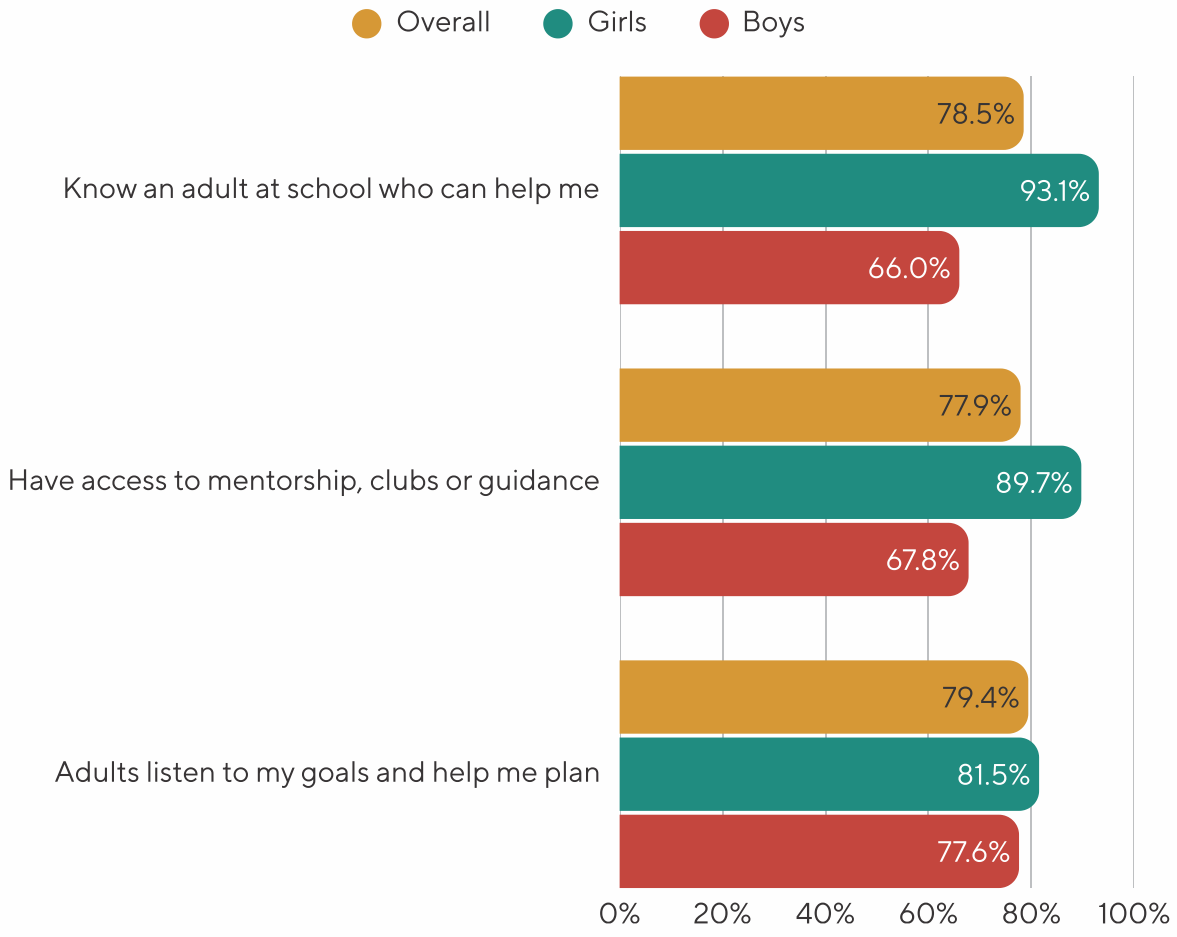
"Because I had strong academic scores, both my parents and teachers ... directed me toward becoming a doctor. There was very little space to explore alternatives."

"The true conflict is between the official curriculum and the shadow curriculum that families pay for due to systemic failures. Wealthier families invest more in education, while poorer families face new inequalities."

2.3 The opportunity

The same body of evidence that documents this tension also turns up something the tension obscures. Alongside the limits on voice and choice, students report a deep reserve of trust in the adults around them. Most say they have access to mentorship or guidance (77.9%), most know an adult at school they can turn to (78.5%), and most say adults help them think through their goals (79.4%). This is the raw material any agency reform would draw on and, unlike a budget or a statute, it already exists.

Figure 14: Relational trust and support by sex (% agreeing)



The gendered shape of this trust is the section's most striking result, because it sits directly on top of the constraint documented earlier. Girls report the highest trust and the widest access to a supportive adult. 93.1% name someone at school who can help, against 66.0% of boys.

The same students in whom the system has most fully earned confidence are the ones it least allows to choose. That is the opportunity and the warning in a single figure: the goodwill is there to be built on, but goodwill of this kind is depletable. When a young person is consistently heard and never heeded, the rational response is to stop offering a view. A mechanism parents described precisely:

> *A child who feels their opinions are dismissed by their parents stops sharing them, and then the parent loses insight into what the child actually thinks and wants. That is a loss for both.*
>
> Parent FGD Sindh

Figure 15: Relational trust and support by region (% agreeing)

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Know an adult at school who can help	79.3%	90.6%	65%	47.4%	94%
Access to mentorship / guidance	78.2%	86.2%	70.3%	53.9%	87.6%
Adults help me plan my goals	92.4%	86%	47.8%	42.6%	47.2%

The regional picture adds a caution to the opportunity. Relational trust is not evenly spread: it is strongest in Sindh and the federal regions and thinnest in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa - the same regions where students were least likely to feel heard in the first place (Table 1.3b). The resource an agency reform would lean on is scarcest exactly where the agency deficit is deepest, which argues against a single national template and for support weighted toward the regions that begin with the least. The advisory group's central recommendation follows directly from all of this: the task is not to manufacture goodwill the system already has, but to build the channel that would let it count.

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

"Young people must be meaningfully included in decisions about their education and future, and should help shape what and how they learn."

SYNTHESIS

Young people's sense of which skills matter aligns most closely with their families and least with the school leaders who hold the most formal authority. This gradient is a structural product of the top-down system described in Finding I. The decisive finding here is the trust. Students - girls most of all - hold a deep reserve of confidence in the adults around them. The obstacle to alignment, like the obstacle to voice, is therefore structural rather than attitudinal: the goodwill is in place and the structure quite not. That is a more hopeful diagnosis than it first appears, because goodwill is the harder thing to create and the system already has it; what it lacks are the enabling conditions that would let that goodwill become genuine influence.

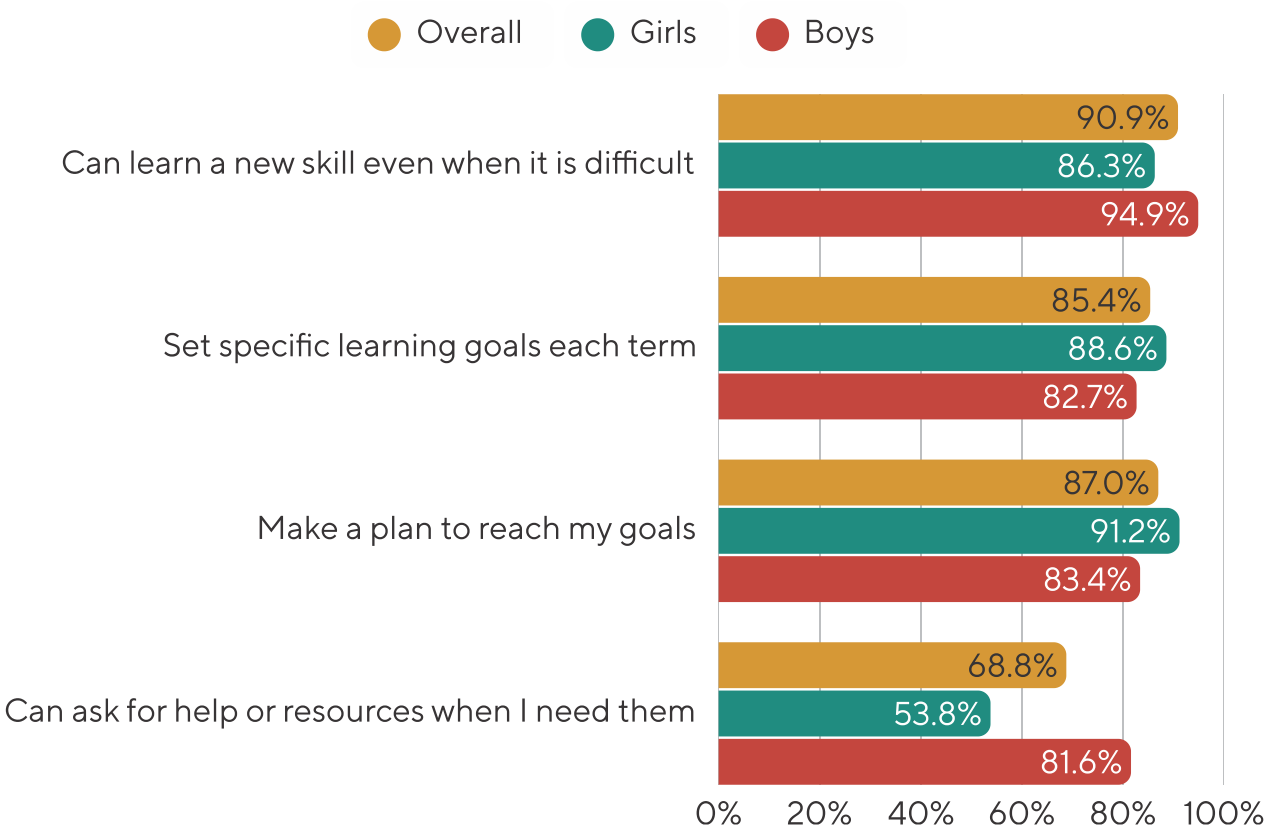
Finding 3: Structural, Cultural and Institutional Enablers and Constraints

The first two findings established a system that is broadly willing but structurally unable: adults endorse student voice, no mechanism carries it into a decision, and the goodwill to build one already exists. This final finding asks what, concretely, stands in the way and what, just as concretely, could be built on.

3.1 The enabler within

Whatever the system withholds, it has not dimmed students' belief in their own capacity. Nine in ten (90.9%) say they can learn a difficult new skill; strong majorities set learning goals each term (85.4%), make plans to reach them (87.0%), persist when work is hard (85.4%), and can usually think their way to a solution (87.5%). Against that near-uniform confidence, a single figure stands out as the exception and it is also the survey's most sharply gendered: the ability to ask for help.

Figure 16: Self-efficacy overall and by sex (% agreeing)



This table reveals that the study's single strongest enabler is endogenous. It costs the system nothing and belongs entirely to its own young people which is exactly why it should not be mistaken for good news about the system itself. The one exception is diagnostic. That the ability to ask for help is both the weakest link in students' self-efficacy and the most sharply gendered measure in the whole survey is hard to reconcile with Finding II, where it was girls who reported the highest trust in the adults around them. Girls trust adults more, yet ask them for help far less. The contradiction dissolves only if the constraint is read not as a shortage of people to turn to but as a limit on the permission to turn to them.

Figure 17: Self-efficacy by region (% agreeing)

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Can learn a difficult new skill	96.8%	96.6%	67.1%	91.2%	88.6%
Set learning goals each term	96.6%	95.6%	49.2%	54.5%	71.8%
Make a plan to reach my goals	93%	96.9%	64.1%	53.3%	87.1%
Can ask for help or resources	66.5%	93%	59.9%	39.1%	62.9%

The regional cut sharpens the point. Belief in the "I can learn a difficult skill" holds up almost everywhere. But confidence in the concrete machinery through which agency is actually exercised, setting goals, making plans, asking for help, falls away steeply in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the very regions where relational support was thinnest in Finding II. A student there believes in their own ability and doubts their ability to act on it through the system. This is where reading high self-efficacy as an unqualified success would mislead: the system leans on students' resilience most heavily exactly where it supports them least, so that what presents as confidence is partly the hard-won self-reliance of those who have learned not to expect help. There is also a form of agency the survey does not count at all, and the advisory group insisted on it.

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

"The digital aspiration economy, where young people learn independently through platforms like YouTube ... this self-directed learning reflects youth agency that is not recognized."

"The recent shift towards digital literacy is a good case study of agentic learning in school-going children ... it is also leading to students getting some degree of financial freedom."

3.2 The institutional constraints

If the enabler is the young people themselves, the first constraint is the one that surrounds them most immediately. The institutions. And the institutional obstacle is not a shortage of willing people; Finding II established that the goodwill is real and widespread. It is a shortage of accountability. The system measures and rewards what it can readily count i.e. "enrolment and examination marks" and youth voice, participation and inclusion are counted nowhere in it. Fostering agency is therefore nobody's defined responsibility, and for a cautious school leader it carries only the downside risk that Finding I named as the "fear of transfer." What is not measured is not managed, and youth agency is measured at no point in the system.

Two further institutional weaknesses sit below the survey's reach, and the advisory group named both. Where formal channels for student participation exist at all, they can be captured. A student council is only as representative as the forces that control it. And the teachers on whom any agency reform would ultimately depend are themselves depleted, by pay and conditions that

several YAG reviewers singled out as a missing layer of the whole analysis. The implication is structural: a system cannot delegate the building of agency to actors it neither trains, resources, nor rewards for the task. Parents name the same void.

> *The basic mechanism for parents to give input is the PTM. Beyond that there are phone calls and WhatsApp groups. But what is missing is a formal channel through which parents can say what skills they want the school to offer.*
>
> Parent FGD - ICT

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

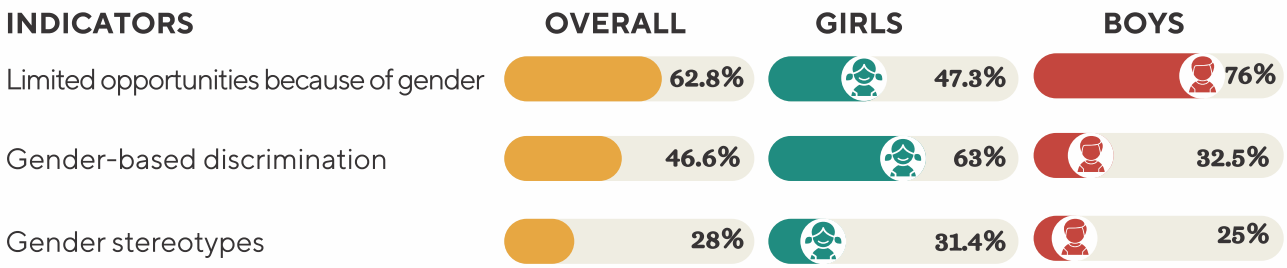
"Student councils are largely absent in most institutions. Where they do exist, they are often influenced or dominated by ideological student groups ... which can exclude students who do not fit within dominant religious or binary gender norms."

"Teacher working conditions are also an important missing layer, particularly low salaries and lack of institutional support."

3.3 The socio-cultural constraint

Beyond the school walls lies a second constraint, culture. It shapes agency in ways that fall unevenly, and gender is its sharpest axis. Girls report gender-based discrimination at nearly twice the rate of boys (63.1% against 32.5%), and describe a field of choice that begins to narrow well before schooling can act on it.

Figure 18: Gender-related barriers to learning, overall and by sex (% selecting)



Two readings of this table matter that pull in different directions. The first is that girls report the lived experience of discrimination at roughly twice the rate of boys, as one would expect of the group on whom the norm actually falls. The second is counter-intuitive: more boys than girls select "limited opportunities because of gender" (76.1% against 47.3%). The deeper finding is that for many girls these norms do not merely add friction to the agency question; they foreclose it, settling in advance that "what do you want to learn" is not a question they will be asked. Agency here is constrained upstream of the school - in the family and the community - which is also where the narrow prestige of medicine and engineering does the channelling work described in Finding II.

It's our societal belief that women should not be vocal, so the girls do not speak in classes … parents also don't participate or take interest … they just want them to pass.

Teacher FGD Balochistan

In our family, particularly for daughters, the opportunity to continue studying beyond a certain point is not always available. This is a reality that affects many families in our community.

Parent FGD Sindh

Figure 19: Gender-related barriers by region (% selecting)

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Gender-based discrimination	38.2%	45.7%	71.1%	28.6%	68.3%
Limited opportunities by gender	68%	17%	85.7%	65%	74.3%
Gender stereotypes	14.7%	49.4%	40.7%	11.2%	69.2%

Regionally, the reported experience of gender discrimination is highest in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (71.1%) and the federal regions (68.3%) and, strikingly, lowest in Balochistan (28.6%), where other constraints are severe. The pattern resists a simple story in which discrimination tracks conservatism or distance from the cities; it is better read as a sign that gender operates differently from place to place, so that a single national gender-equity measure would land on very different ground in each province. And gender is not the only line of exclusion the advisory group asked the study to keep in view.

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

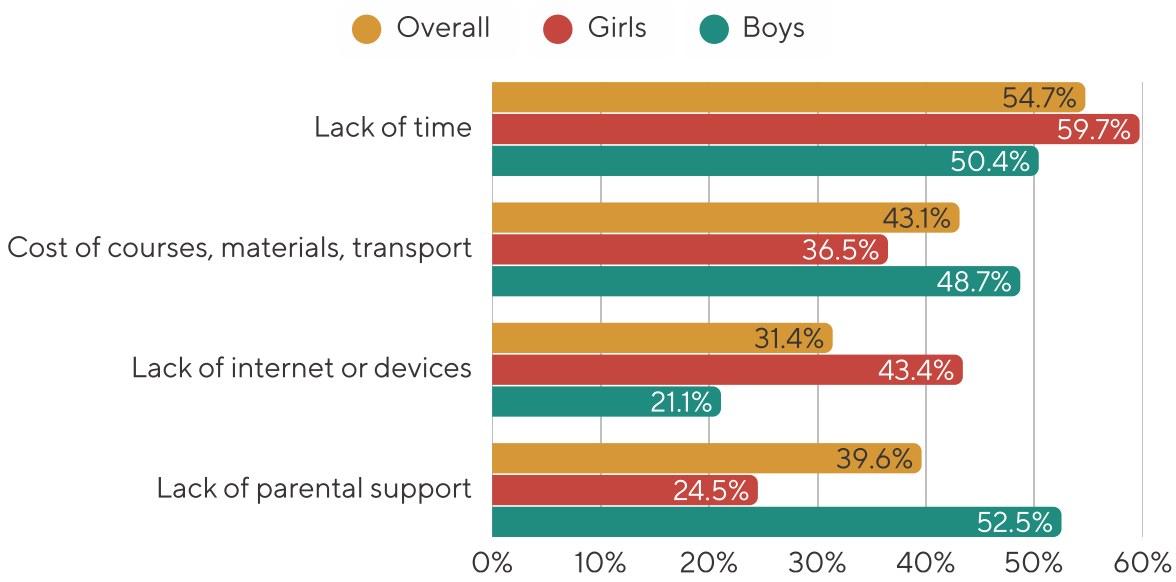
"When we talk about young women with disabilities, these issues become even more concerning. Decisions about education, careers and opportunities are often made for them rather than with them, and their own interests and aspirations are frequently overlooked."

"What feels missing is the impact of exclusion rooted in religion, gender identity, and disability."

3.4 The material constraint

The third constraint is the most concrete of all. Agency presupposes resources, and for a large share of students the resources are simply absent. A lack of time leads the list nationally (54.7%), followed by cost (43.1%) and a lack of internet or devices (31.4%). But the national averages are the least useful numbers here; the defining feature of the material constraint is how unevenly it falls by sex, and above all by region.

Figure 20: Barriers to learning or practising skills overall and by sex (% selecting)



By sex the barriers pull in opposite directions. Girls are far more likely to report a lack of devices (43.4% against 21.1%) and of time - consistent with domestic responsibilities and with a weaker claim on a shared household device - while boys more often cite cost and, notably, a lack of parental support (52.5% against 24.5%). The device gap deserves particular emphasis: it is the same girls who hold the highest aspirations for digital skills (Finding I) who are least likely to own the hardware to pursue them, so the constraint bites hardest exactly where the ambition is strongest.

Figure 21: Material barriers by region (% selecting)

	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Lack of Internet or devices	24.3%	30.6%	45.8%	64.4%	42.3%
Cost of courses, materials, transport	25%	72.8%	71.4%	21.4%	61.3%
Lack of time	67.5%	18%	55.4%	10.2%	58.4%
Lack of parental support	50.6%	5.5%	41.9%	58%	11.5%

The regional picture is the single strongest argument in this report against a one-size-fits-all response. The binding material constraint is different in almost every region: device shortage in Balochistan (64%), cost in Sindh (73%) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (71%), and time in Punjab (68%).

> *Digital skills are very important but the problem is that in many areas of AJK we still do not have computer teachers, so there are real challenges on that front.*
>
> Head teacher, KII, AJK

The advisory group pressed the point further, insisting that "infrastructure" itself means different things in different places and that in the hardest-to-reach areas the first material barrier is not equipment at all, but the journey to the classroom.

YAG REVIEWS/REFLECTIONS

"The material barrier in Gilgit-Baltistan is not about the absence of laboratories or poor internet; it revolves around the daily struggle of getting to school - students walk for hours across suspension bridges and cliff-edge paths. The school doesn't officially close; it simply empties, yet the examination board continues to send the same papers in March."

"Agency requires not just the absence of obstacles but also the presence of imaginable alternatives — the aspirational ceiling created by the lack of visible role models in non-conventional careers."

SYNTHESIS

The strongest force enabling youth agency in Pakistan's public schools comes from the young people themselves. A self-belief so widely held that the system is able to lean on it where its own support is thinnest. Everything that constrains that agency is arranged around them in layers. The institutional layer holds the system accountable for enrolment and marks but for nothing resembling participation or inclusion, so that even willing actors have neither the mandate nor the means to act. The socio-cultural layer, with gender its sharpest edge, narrows the field of choice before the school touches it, and does so most severely for girls. The material layer withdraws the basic resources agency requires, and withdraws them unevenly, so that the binding constraint differs from one province to the next. These layers are not independent; they compound, and they settle heaviest on the students who are already least served.



CROSS-CUTTING SYNTHESIS

This section draws the three evidence streams into a single answer to the study's primary question, and then introduces the report's second analytic instrument, an illustrative "Youth Agency Index" that expresses the paradox as a measurable gap and provides a baseline against which future progress can be tracked.

Convergence

The most important property of this study's findings is that they were produced three times over, by independent methods, and agree. The policy review found that the instruments governing education make no structural room for youth voice, while only the youth-specific policies co-designed with young people do. The survey found that students experience exactly this: they understand and are heard within the system (around 75–81%) but cannot choose what they learn (57.4% never) or point to changes their views have produced (49.7%), and they overwhelmingly perceive decisions as adult-controlled (84.3%).

The qualitative corpus found that every category of adult actor describes the same centralised, examination-driven, mechanism-less reality and endorses change and proposes it in convergent terms. Documentary structure, statistical pattern and lived testimony point to one conclusion. That triple convergence is what licenses the study to state its central finding with confidence. The answer is that Pakistan's education system is built comprehensively for youth and only marginally with them.

The answer is that Pakistan's education system is built comprehensively for youth and only marginally with them.

Four mechanisms of the paradox

Synthesising across sections, the paradox operates through four linked mechanisms, each evidenced in all three streams:

1. **Silence by design:** The governing instruments do not create channels for youth voice (policy review), so none exist to be used (survey: "no formal process" a top barrier at 33.2%).
2. **Heard but not heeded:** Where voice is invited, it is not made consequential. A gradient from 75% feeling listened-to down to 49.7% seeing any change, against an 84.3% ceiling of adult control.
3. **Voice without choice:** Expression is permitted (57.3%) but control over one's own learning is withheld (57.4% never choose topics; 87.3% find pathways hard to change).
4. **Readiness without support:** Young people supply abundant self-efficacy (90.9%) but the system supplies little structured support (help-seeking the weakest link at 68.8%; guidance "almost entirely absent").

The four mechanisms share a single root cause, identified independently in every stream which is the accountability deficit. The system measures and rewards examination outcomes and enrolment; it measures nothing about participation; and "what is not measured is not managed."

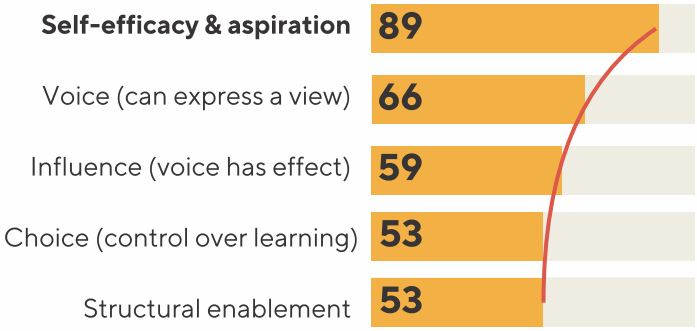
The Youth Agency Index: an illustrative baseline

To make the paradox measurable and to give the system a way to track whether it is closing, the study assembles the survey's agency-relevant items into a simple Youth Agency Index (YAI). The index organises items into five domains: four system-side domains describing the agency the system actually affords (Voice, Choice, Influence, Structural enablement) and one individual-side domain describing the young person's readiness to use it (Self-efficacy & aspiration). Each domain score is the unweighted mean of its constituent items, with every item expressed as the percentage of students responding affirmatively (and constraint items inverted, so that higher always means more agency).

Important caveat!
The YAI is a heuristic diagnostic constructed for this report, not a validated psychometric scale. Its domains are face-valid groupings of existing items, not latent constructs established by factor analysis; its means are unweighted; and several constituent items rest on the sample caveats noted. It should be read as a structured way of seeing the pattern the data already show and as a baseline to be refined and re-measured not as a precise score.

The above index reveals that the system performs best on the dimension it does not have to provide - the young person's own self-efficacy and aspiration (89). It performs adequately on voice (66), the low-cost gesture of inviting an opinion. It then falls away on the two dimensions that require the system to cede something real: influence (59), where voice would have to change outcomes, and especially choice (53) and structural enablement (53), where the system would have to transfer control and build durable, accountable mechanisms. Structural enablement scores as it does because strong interpersonal support is offset by two measures of system rigidity: the near-impossibility of changing pathways, and the dominance of adult control. The failure, once again, is one of structure rather than of people. Constituent items for each domain are set out in Appendix A1.

Figure 22: The Youth Agency Index



Full constituent items in appendix A1

Figure 23: The Agency Gap



Two summary figures capture the distance the system must travel. Taking the four system-side domains together yields an overall system-side Youth Agency Index of approximately 58 out of 100, against a youth readiness score of approximately 89. The difference between young people's readiness for agency and the agency the system

actually affords them - the agency gap - is on the order of 31 points. That single number is the quantitative expression of a system whose young people are ready before it is.

What young people added

The sense-making and validation workshop with YAG members widened the research team's understanding and analysis of the findings. YAG named several things the survey and interviews had largely missed, and most of what they added does not contradict the central finding so much as show further ways the same exclusion works, and further groups it falls hardest on. Four additions stand out.

The first is disability. The study barely sees young people with disabilities; only five survey respondents reported one. Yet a reviewer who works on disability inclusion described a familiar pattern in sharper form: decisions about education and careers "are often made for them rather than with them." Inaccessible buildings, materials and guidance deepen the agency deficit for this group, and the survey's near-silence is itself a finding about who the system overlooks.

The second is class. Reviewers kept separating the elite private schools, which increasingly offer choice and student-centred teaching, from the low-cost private and government schools most students attend, where there is little of either. Treating "public schools" as one category, they warned, hides how closely agency tracks family income.

The third is place, argued most forcefully from Gilgit-Baltistan: the region's unresolved constitutional status leaves it without a mechanism to legislate for its own schools, and the "material barriers" there are less about laboratories than about children walking hours along cliff paths to a school that quietly empties when the road washes out, even as the examination board sends the same papers in March.

The fourth is the agency the system does not count: a shadow economy of paid tuition that families fall back on, and a self-taught digital track - YouTube, freelancing, online courses - through which young people already show exactly the initiative the formal system says they lack.

Reviewers raised further constraints that belong in the next phase of work: student councils captured by ideological groups; exclusion on grounds of religious-minority status and of gender identity (one reviewer described concealing her own identity at school to stay safe); teachers' pay and conditions; the mental-health cost of chasing borrowed ambitions; the absence of visible role models in any but a few prestigious careers; and the particular weight carried by first-generation learners. One reviewer recast the report's "broken triangle" of state, teachers and parents as something wider - a web that also takes in grandparents, extended family and neighbours, whose expectations press on a young person as hard as any institution.

Together they marked out the young people for whom the gap between readiness and provision is widest and areas where systems fall short. That a group of young people could read the findings and at once locate what was missing is, in a study about youth agency, the most fitting evidence of the argument it makes.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The seven recommendations below are ordered by leverage, from the change that would shift the most downstream behaviour to the enabling conditions that sustain it. Each is tied to the evidence that motivates it, anchored in a mechanism that already exists.

WHY	ACTION	BUILDS ON
Recommendation 1: Embed a youth-voice expectation in the national framework (highest leverage)		
The policy review showed that the instruments holding budgets and indicators score lowest on youth agency, and that what governs downstream behaviour is set at the top of a centralised hierarchy. The single highest-leverage change is therefore to write a youth-voice expectation into the apex instruments - the National Education Policy Development Framework and the provincial education sector plans - so that it cascades.	Establish, as a stated principle in the national framework and provincial plans, that processes for curriculum review, skills selection and sector planning must demonstrate structured consultation with young people. Require that periodic curriculum and skills revisions be accompanied by documented evidence of student input (at minimum, consultation through teachers, per the model several head teachers proposed). This is a low-cost amendment to instruments that are revised on a cycle in any case.	Existing curriculum-review and sector-planning processes; the ICT roadmap's proposed feedback portal, which can be generalised.
Recommendation 2: Broaden the definition of "skills" the system recognises and rewards		
The policy review found that the education and skills instruments frame skills overwhelmingly in economic and technical-vocational terms -employability, productivity, the "youth bulge" - while the survey shows students value foundational skills (literacy, numeracy) and transferable life skills (self-management, teamwork, communication, civic competence) as highly as technical ones. A system that recognises only the economic slice of what students value cannot claim to be teaching the skills that matter to them.	In curriculum and skills frameworks, explicitly distinguish and give weight to a breadth of skills rather than treating "skills" in narrowly economic terms. Ensure skills-selection and curriculum-review processes account for all contextually essential skills students need to thrive.	The ICT Quality Education Roadmap's 21st-century-skills and SEL framing (the strongest of the reviewed instruments on skills content); the life-skills language already present in the Sindh and KP sector plans.

WHY	ACTION	BUILDS ON
Recommendation 3: Guarantee one school-level mechanism for student input on learning		
The most-cited barrier students identified was the simple absence of a formal process (33.2%), and adults across every region independently proposed the same solution: a dedicated, protected space for structured conversation about what students want to learn and where they are struggling. The survey's "voice without choice" finding shows expression is permitted but unstructured and inconsequential; a guaranteed mechanism converts ad-hoc goodwill into a system.	Mandate one lightweight, universal, school-level mechanism for example a protected periodic "Career & Skill Diagnostic" or counselling period, in which a designated teacher hears, over the course of a term, from every student about their interests, aspirations and difficulties. Critically, the resulting information should flow upward in simple aggregate form, so that a currently "completely absent" data source begins to inform decisions.	Head teachers' own proposals (the "protected weekly period" and "formally designated counselor role"), the lapsed "activity period" several teachers asked to have restored, KP's existing co-curricular month, existing class-teacher structures.
Recommendation 4: Make student voice an assessed and monitored outcome		
This is the keystone. The report's single most repeated root cause is the accountability deficit. "there is no departmental KPI for listening to students, so these activities are ignored." Recommendations 1 and 2 will not survive contact with a system that measures only examinations and enrolment unless participation is itself measured.	Add a small number of youth-informed indicators to existing monitoring and school-performance frameworks for instance, whether the school-level input mechanism is functioning, and student-reported measures of voice and influence drawn from this study's items. Extend accountability from whether funds were spent to whether students benefited. The Youth Agency Index and the policy maturity model are offered as ready-made monitoring instruments for the demand and supply sides respectively.	Existing M&E units, school-performance dashboards (e.g., the ICT roadmap's KPI architecture) and inspection regimes, adding indicators, not systems.
Recommendation 5: Operationalise, budget and youth-lead the bodies that youth policies already propose		
Pakistan does not lack youth-participation structures on paper; the Punjab (2012) and KP (2016) youth policies propose youth councils, commissions and "change agent" networks, scoring 3/5 precisely because they were co-designed with young people. But these bodies remain largely advisory, under-resourced or unrealised, and they sit outside education governance.	Activate, fund and connect these bodies to education decision-making, and establish student councils with real decision rights at school and district level. Where a youth commission or endowment exists on paper (as in Punjab) or is deferred to a future body (as in KP), give it a budget, a mandate and a defined relationship to curriculum and skills decisions.	The Punjab Youth Endowment Fund and Youth Commission; KP's proposed commission and youth centres; existing student-council traditions.

WHY	ACTION	BUILDS ON
Recommendation 6: Close the voice-to-influence loop, and protect the leaders who open it		
The voice–influence gradient (75% heard vs 49.7% any change) shows that being asked without effect breeds disengagement "when students see their leaders being helpless, they lose the motivation to engage." And the recurrent "fear of transfer" shows that even willing leaders are deterred from local initiative by a perceived risk of political retaliation.	Require that student input be visibly acted upon and reported back. A simple feedback loop at school level closes the gap between consultation and influence at near-zero cost. Invest in teacher and leader capacity for student-centred facilitation. And protect and reward school leaders who involve students and adapt locally, rather than penalising deviation directly countering the "survival mode" the evidence describes. Nor do these channels need to be built from scratch. Pakistan already has relevant youth-participation infrastructure: notable is the Prime Minister's National Youth Council, a consultative platform operating for years now, and the Digital Youth Hub, launched in 2025 as a single platform aggregating opportunities for youth, among several other platforms. The recommendation here is specific: that existing infrastructure be oriented, in part, toward in-school students and the education system so that the consultative and digital channels already reaching young people also carry students' voice into decisions about what and how they learn, the gap this study identifies.	Existing PTCs/SMCs and feedback channels; in-service teacher-training programmes (including donor-funded ones already operating).
Recommendation 7: Differentiate by province and design for equity		
Regional variation is a structural feature, not noise. A uniform prescription would misfit much of the country.	Pursue a common national expectation through provincially tailored means: prioritise foundational infrastructure and connectivity where material gaps are widest; make accountability-for-utilisation the lever where funds exist but do not reach students; and design participation mechanisms to be gender-responsive addressing safety and mobility, and deliberately using the digital channel that families themselves identified as a route to girls' economic participation.	Provincial ESPs and their existing equity and financing provisions; provincial M&E. Framework effect: ensures gains in agency are not captured only by already-advantaged students and regions.

Directions for Future Research

This study opens several lines for future work. First, the groups under-represented here including, young people with disabilities, transgender and gender-diverse youth, out-of-school adolescents, and students in private and madrasa settings warrant dedicated, appropriately designed studies, since their barriers to agency are likely greater than a public-school survey can capture. Second, the cross-sectional design should be complemented by longitudinal or repeat measurement, using the Youth Agency Index as a baseline, to test whether agency shifts as reforms are introduced. Third, closer study of the existing entry points for student participation - where they exist, how they function, and whether student input reaches school, provincial or national decisions - would show what it takes to move from consultation to genuine influence.

Conclusion

This study set out to ask how far Pakistan's education system creates opportunities for young people to exercise agency in determining and learning the skills that matter. Across a review of ten policy instruments, a survey of Grade 10 students and coded excerpts of testimony from teachers, parents, head teachers and policymakers, the answer is consistent and clear. The system has been built for its young people but only marginally with them. It teaches them, plans for them, measures them and listens to them; it almost never lets them help decide what they learn, or exercise real choice in learning it.

The study's central contribution is to show that this gap is structural rather than attitudinal, and to quantify it. Young people arrive with abundant self-efficacy and aspiration; the system affords them markedly less actual agency, a gap of roughly a third of the available scale. That gap is not produced by adults who wish young people silent but by the absence of channels, mandates, budgets and, above all, the indicators that would make voice consequential. "What is not measured is not managed," and youth voice is measured nowhere.

The same finding is the source of the study's optimism. A deficit of structure is more tractable than a deficit of will, and Pakistan already possesses most of the structures required: consultation and curriculum-review processes, monitoring frameworks, parent-teacher and school-management committees, co-curricular calendars, and - in two provinces - youth councils and commissions that were themselves co-designed with young people. The pathway forward set out in this report is therefore modest in what it asks and ambitious in what it could achieve: embed a youth-voice expectation in the instruments that govern the system; guarantee one place in every school where students are heard with effect; make that voice an assessed and monitored outcome; and activate the participation bodies that already exist on paper. None of this requires a new system. It requires finishing the one already begun, and holding it accountable for doing so.

Two instruments are offered to support that work beyond the life of this report: a policy maturity model against which any instrument can be scored and shown its next step, and an agency index against which the student experience can be tracked over time. Used together, they would allow Pakistan to know whether the gap between its young people's readiness and its system's provision is closing.

The cohort now in Grade 10 will shape Pakistan's economy and society for the next half-century. They have told this study, in numbers and in their teachers' and parents' words, that they are ready to help determine what they learn. The question the evidence leaves for policymakers is no longer whether young people are capable of agency, but whether the system will choose to grant it and, now, whether it will measure itself against that promise.

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APPENDIX

A1. Table YAI domains and constituent items (weighted %)

Domain/item	Value	Note
A · VOICE: domain mean approx. 65.5		
Get chances to tell teachers what skills I want to learn	57.3	frequently
My teacher supports me when I have new ideas	52.4	agree
Teachers/adults listen to my ideas about what I want to learn	75	agree
I know whom to talk to to give feedback	73.9	agree
Students can give feedback about classes during the term	68.7	agree
B · CHOICE: domain mean approx. 53.0		
I can choose what topics to learn / problems to work on	19.9	frequently
I can choose how to show what I am learning	50.1	agree
I can choose elective subjects that interest me	69.7	agree
I can work at my own speed / choose when to finish	80.8	agree
I can take part in extra-curricular activities	44.4	agree
C · INFLUENCE: domain mean approx. 58.7		
My input has led to changes in the skills I learn	60	valid % where applicable
Feedback led to a change in a class or rule (last year)	49.7	agree
Some students are in groups that help make decisions	66.4	agree
D · STRUCTURAL ENABLEMENT: domain mean approx. 52.8		
Access to mentorship / clubs / guidance	77.9	agree
I know an adult at school who can help me	78.5	agree
Adults at school listen to my goals and help me plan	79.4	agree
Ease of changing courses / pathways	*12.7*	inverted (87.3% find it hard)
Student rather than adult control of decisions	*15.7*	inverted (84.3% adult-controlled)
E · SELF-EFFICACY & ASPIRATION: domain mean approx. 88.9		
I can learn a new skill even when it is difficult	90.9	agree

Domain/item	Value	Note
When I face a problem I can think of a solution	87.5	agree
I make a plan to reach my goals	87	agree
I set specific learning goals each term	85.4	agree
I don't give up when work is challenging	85.4	agree
I like thinking and planning about my future	89	agree
I can choose my own career	88.6	agree
Working hard can make my life better	97.3	agree
System-side YAI (mean of A–D) approx. 57.5 **Readiness (E) approx. 88.9** **Agency gap approx. 31**		

A2. Policy instruments reviewed and Youth-Agency Policy Assessment Framework (YA-PAF) scores

Instrument	Type	YA-PAF level (0–5)	Corresponding Hart rung
National Education Policy Development Framework 2024	National / federal	1 — Beneficiary	1–2
TVET Policy 2018	National / federal	1 — Beneficiary	1–2
National "Skills for All" Strategy 2018	National / federal	1 — Beneficiary	1–2
ICT Quality Education & Innovation Roadmap 2026	National / federal	1 — Beneficiary *	1–2
Balochistan Education Sector Plan 2020–25	Provincial plan	1 — Beneficiary	1–2
Sindh Education Sector Plan 2019–24	Provincial plan	1 — Beneficiary	1–2
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Plan 2020–25	Provincial plan	1 — Beneficiary	1–2
Punjab Literacy & Non-Formal Basic Education Strategic Plan 2025–30	Provincial plan	1 — Beneficiary	1–2
Punjab Youth Policy 2012	Provincial youth policy	3 — Co-designed	4
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Youth Policy 2016	Provincial youth policy	3 — Co-designed	4

A3. Most- and least-important skills for the future (% of students selecting; up to three)

Skill	Named most important (%)	Named least important (%)
Mathematics	56.2	18.1
Reading & writing	51.1	15.9
Digital skills	41.6	27.2
Self-management	34.3	12.9
Teamwork	23.3	16.1
Data skills	17	25.1
Physical fitness	14.7	13.3
Civic & social participation	12.7	18.1
Entrepreneurship & financial skills	12.5	14.7
Communication skills	9.5	21.8
Problem-solving & critical thinking	8.1	24.7
Creativity & innovation	4.7	22.8
Environment & sustainability	4.7	15
Content creation	1	31.4

A4. Skills named most important for the future, by sex (%)

Skill	Girls	Boys	Gap (pp)
Mathematics	62.3	50.9	11.4
Reading & writing	62.3	41.4	20.9
Digital skills	54.4	30.6	23.8
Self-management	20.4	46.3	−25.9
Teamwork	11.1	33.8	−22.7
Civic & social participation	4.4	19.9	−15.5

A5. Skills named most important for the future, by region (%)

Indicator	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Digital skills	30.5	81.7	23.8	66.2	75.8
Mathematics	71.1	71.4	15	14	11.5
Reading & writing	63.1	77.2	6.9	10.4	11.8
Self-management	46.2	2.5	31.5	13.4	30.3
Teamwork	25.3	4.3	40.4	6.4	16.2

A6. The voice–influence gradient (valid %, single response)

Indicator	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
Conditions for voice			
I understand how my school decides which skills are taught	81.4	11.5	7.1
Teachers/adults listen to my ideas about what I want to learn	75	17.8	7.1
I know whom to talk to to give feedback / suggest a subject	73.9	18.5	7.6
Students can give feedback about classes during the term	68.7	21.5	9.7
Translation into influence			
Some students are in groups that help make decisions	66.4	20.6	13
My input has led to changes in the skills I learn †	60	28.6	11.5
Feedback led to a change in a class or rule (last year)	49.7	33.7	16.6
Ultimate decision-making			
Decisions about skills are mostly controlled by adults, not students	84.3	15.7	–

A7. The voice–influence gradient, by sex (% agreeing)

Indicator	Girls	Boys
Understand how the school decides	82.9	80.1
Adults listen to my ideas	78.6	72
Get chances to tell teachers (often)	67.6	48.4
Some students are in decision-making groups	79.4	55.3
My input has led to changes	71.8	50.4
Decisions are controlled by adults, not students	91.9	77.8

A8. Feeling heard, by region (% agreeing)

Indicator	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Adults listen to my ideas	86.4	71.6	56.5	40.6	47.8
Get chances to tell teachers (often)	77.9	43.3	18.3	9	39
My input has led to changes	67.8	48	48.3	51.6	43.8

A9. Voice versus choice (valid %, single response)

Indicator	Frequently / agree	Sometimes / unsure	Never / disagree
I get chances to tell teachers what skills I want to learn	57.3	32.5	10.2
My teacher supports me when I have new ideas	52.4	37.3	10.3
I can choose how to show what I am learning	50.1	18.7	31.2
I can choose what topics to learn / problems to work on	19.9	19	57.4
It is difficult to change courses or pathways at my school	87.3	12.7	–

A10. Voice versus choice, by sex (% as noted)

Indicator	Girls	Boys
Get chances to tell teachers (often)	67.6	48.4
Can choose how to show my learning	46.4	53.3
Can choose topics or problems (often)	15.4	23.7
Can NEVER choose topics or problems	71.2	45.6
Hard to change courses or pathways	91.2	84

A11. Choosing what and how to learn, by region (% as noted)

Indicator	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Can NEVER choose topics or problems	68.9	15.3	72.1	39.2	31.6
Can choose electives that interest me	76.8	72.2	47.7	29.1	81.7

A12. Whose view of important skills is closest to the student's own (multi-select, %)

Actor	% of students
Parents	83.1
Teachers	63.9
School leaders (e.g., principal)	38.4
Peers / classmates	25.9

A13. Alignment with the student's own view, by sex (%)

Actor	Girls	Boys
Parents	80.8	85.1
Teachers	59.7	67.5
School leaders	47.2	30.7
Peers / classmates	21.7	29.6

A14. Relational trust and support, by sex (% agreeing)

Indicator	Overall	Girls	Boys
Know an adult at school who can help me	78.5	93.1	66
Have access to mentorship, clubs or guidance	77.9	89.7	67.8
Adults listen to my goals and help me plan	79.4	81.5	77.6

A15. Relational trust and support, by region (% agreeing)

Indicator	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Know an adult at school who can help	79.3	90.6	65	47.4	94
Access to mentorship / guidance	78.2	86.2	70.3	53.9	87.6
Adults help me plan my goals	92.4	86	47.8	42.6	47.2

A16. Self-efficacy, overall and by sex (% agreeing)

Indicator	Overall	Girls	Boys
Can learn a new skill even when it is difficult	90.9	86.3	94.9
Set specific learning goals each term	85.4	88.6	82.7
Make a plan to reach my goals	87	91.2	83.4
Can ask for help or resources when I need them	68.8	53.8	81.6

A17. Self-efficacy, by region (% agreeing)

Indicator	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Can learn a difficult new skill	96.8	96.6	67.1	91.2	88.6
Set learning goals each term	96.6	95.6	49.2	54.5	71.8
Make a plan to reach my goals	93	96.9	64.1	53.3	87.1
Can ask for help or resources	66.5	93	59.9	39.1	62.9

A18. Gender-related barriers to learning, overall and by sex (% selecting)

Indicator	Overall	Girls	Boys
Limited opportunities because of gender	62.8	47.3	76.1
Gender-based discrimination	46.6	63.1	32.5
Gender stereotypes	28	31.4	25.1

A19. Gender-related barriers, by region (% selecting)

Indicator	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Gender-based discrimination	38.2	45.7	71.1	28.6	68.3
Limited opportunities by gender	68	17	85.7	65.1	74.3
Gender stereotypes	14.7	49.4	40.7	11.2	69.2

A20. Barriers to learning or practising skills, overall and by sex (% selecting)

Indicator	Overall	Girls	Boys
Lack of time	54.7	59.7	50.4
Cost of courses, materials, transport	43.1	36.5	48.7
Lack of parental support	39.6	24.5	52.5
Lack of internet or devices	31.4	43.4	21.1

A21. Material barriers, by region (% selecting)

Indicator	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	R&T
Lack of internet or devices	24.3	30.6	45.8	64.4	42.3
Cost of courses, materials, transport	25	72.8	71.4	21.4	61.3
Lack of time	67.5	18	55.4	10.2	58.4
Lack of parental support	50.6	5.5	41.9	58	11.5

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