

Examining Policy Implementation and Ground-Level Realities: A Mixed-Methods Study of Government Reintegration Programs for Out-of-School Children at the Secondary Level

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Received: 05-11-2025

Revised: 20-11-2025

Accepted: 04-12-2025

Published: 19-12-2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of the government's reintegration programs for out-of-school children at the secondary level as well as the mismatch between policy intent and on-site experience. The convergent mixed methods research design was adopted to gather quantitative and qualitative data from the out-of-school children, reintegrated students, parents, teachers, school heads and education officials. The quantitative analysis revealed poverty, child labour, lack of awareness, distance from the school, gender-based restrictions, low follow-up of teachers and material support as the main obstacles to reintegration success. The qualitative results also showed that many families are not aware of programmes available and reintegrated students may have gaps in their curriculum, over-age placement, feelings of embarrassment and less continuity support. Safety concerns, cultural expectations, household responsibilities and lack of facilities for women in school were additional factors experienced by girls. The study revealed the effectiveness of a multi-pronged approach, which includes financial support, transport support, bridge courses, counselling, teacher follow-up and community involvement. The results indicate a need for a change in government reintegration program approaches from enrollment campaigns to implementation approaches focused on retention. Local planning, gender-sensitive approaches, better school-community partnerships and ongoing support and monitoring of readmitted children are essential to effective reintegration. The study adds to policy and practice by emphasizing that returning kids to school is just the beginning – keeping them there, engaged in learning and in school is the key to policy effect.

Keywords: Out-of-school children, reintegration programs, secondary education, policy implementation, dropout, mixed-methods study, Pakistan, retention, gender barriers, educational access.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Education is a key element in socio-economic development and right to education is a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2021). Although Pakistan guarantees free and compulsory education for children in the age group of 5-16 years in its constitution, there are still millions of children outside schools (Haider, 2026; Ahmad, Hussan, & Akmal, 2023). It is estimated that currently there are 22.8 to 26.2 million out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan, which is 38%–44% of the school-age population (Haider, 2026; Pirzada, Yousaf & Masood, 2024). These figures position Pakistan as one of the highest absolute number of countries in OOSC globally which shows that the situation of access

and quality of education in Pakistan is a chronic issue (Durrani, 2025; Yousaf, Shehzadi, & Parveen, 2020).

Socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors are important contributing factors to the persistence of OOSC. In these circumstances, long-term education investment is jeopardized with many families having to invest in short-term survival options, such as child labour or informal work (Waheed et al., 2025; Urooj & Bhaur, 2025). There is also a strong gender bias in educational exclusion which is even more pronounced in rural and conservative societies. Among the restrictions that are found in the social-cultural environment, girls are more prone to these restrictions compared to boys, with the most common being socio-cultural restrictions, early marriage, household responsibilities, and limited mobility, whereas boys are more likely to drop out because of economic pressures and child labor (Imran, Ullah, Gogosh, & Khan, 2025; Channa, Batool Tahir, & Seelro, 2020). OOSC rates are particularly high in the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where more than half of the OOSC are girls (Haider, 2026; Imran et al., 2025).

OOSC persists due to policy and governance issues as well. Government programs to support re-entry, such as public-private partnerships (PPPs), non-formal education (NFE) programs, and Alternative Learning Systems (ALS), may have low monitoring, lack of teacher training, and poor community engagement (Khalil & Doddanavar, 2025; Fehmi, Shinwari, & Ali, 2024). The effectiveness of reintegration policies is also limited by structural inequalities (regional disparities, weak infrastructure, low budget for education, etc.) (Haider, 2026; Karim, Abbas, & Sonaina, 2025). Furthermore, school closures due to systemic shocks such as the monsoon floods in 2022 and the extended school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have further impacted educational continuity, amplifying the out-of-school experience for many vulnerable children (Haider, 2026; Ahmad et al., 2023).

The process of rehabilitation of OOSC is especially complicated at a secondary level. For older children, there are several challenges such as economic burden, psychosocial issues, societal expectations, social stratification, and structural disadvantage, which can be accentuated by these factors (Ali et al., 2026; Kerai et al., 2024). Other LMICs studies, including Zambia, reveal that socioeconomic factors, gender norms, and weak policy implementation affect adolescent girls' access to re-enrollment in school, underscoring the importance of context-specific approaches (Chavula, Habib, & Halwiindi, 2025). Likewise, case studies from India and Bhutan suggest that community involvement, flexible learning approaches and targeted interventions are key to achieving positive reintegration outcomes (BADAR et al., 2021; Datoo et al., 2024).

In this context, it is important to understand how policy frameworks shape everyday experiences, and how everyday experiences shape policy frameworks, if reintegration programmes are to have the desired impact. Combining quantitative and qualitative perspectives in a mixed methods approach can provide insights into both barriers and lived experiences of OOSC and help inform more adaptive and inclusive interventions at the secondary level (Ali et al., 2026; Haider, 2026; Khalil & Doddanavar, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Out-of-school children is one of the most critical education challenges in Pakistan particularly at secondary level at which the drop out is more challenging to reverse. Current research indicates that children either fail to attend the school or drop out before reaching compulsory education age, which is influenced by poverty, gender norms, poor school quality, household duties, and the lack of access to quality schooling at local level (Datoo et al., 2024). Beyond that, the non-formal education literature specifies that dropout is a process triggered by economic pressures, low performance, distance to the school, unsafe school environment, language barriers, non-qualified teachers and lack of instructional supervision (Datoo et al., 2024).

Poverty is one of the major drivers of non-enrolment and drop-out which has been consistently found in Pakistan. Even in government schools, parents have to pay for the hidden educational costs like uniforms, school bags, private tuition, transportation and other expenses which are even higher at secondary level as cited by Khalid (2023). The same study points out that socio-economic disadvantages, cultural values, distance of the school, poor infrastructure, and lack of quality public education affect children's enrolment and retention in school (Khalid, 2023).

At the secondary level, poor academic performance and inadequate support from schools can contribute to dropouts. A study by Mughal (2020) reported that poor school background, inadequate academic performance, lack of involvement of the teachers, and poverty in the family were the major factors for school dropout among boys in secondary schools in rural Pakistan. The study also reveals that fathers tend to blame teachers and poverty, and lack awareness about school councils and policy mechanisms thus reducing meaningful involvement of community in the decision-making process at the school level (Mughal, 2020).

Exclusion at secondary level is also heavily determined by gender. Research at the secondary school level indicates that girls experience distinct challenges such as cultural beliefs, early marriage, pregnancy, lack of school friendly facilities for girls, distance of school and school mobility restrictions (Ali et al., 2022). Girls' involvement in school is limited in public secondary schools due to economic hardship and cultural norms that push them out, whereas boys tend to drop out of school to work or due to peer pressure and/or pressure to earn household income (Ahmad et al., 2023).

The literature also indicates that the issue is not that Pakistan was lacking in policy efforts but rather the problem is implementation. Pakistan has been promoting various education policies, the Article 25-A, commitments on Education for All, MDG related policies, and provincial education acts, but unfortunately failed to achieve the target of universal enrolment in Pakistan (Yousaf et al., 2020). Their study points out the direct policy implications related to poverty, school environment, house chores, parental behavior, teachers' teaching style, curriculum, language barriers, level of literacy, and gender issues.

There is a growing attention to non-formal education, public-private partnerships, alternative schooling and flexible learning pathways in the reintegration programmes of the government. Non-formal education is important because of its flexibility in curriculum, scheduling and instructional approaches that allows it to cater to the needs of marginalized and out-of-school children, according to Dato et al (2024). Based on the comparative evidence presented from Bhutan and India, it is suggested that a community-based approach to education, a combination of support services and flexibility of educational opportunities could be beneficial for Pakistan so as to suit to the local socio-economic and cultural conditions (Dato et al., 2024).

There are also public-private partnership models that can be applied to reintegration. In Sindh, Rind (2024) determined that school leaders in PPP schools, especially in the schools of the Sindh Education Foundation, were more autonomous than those in centralized government schools. This autonomy allowed for locally responsive and community-based strategies to bolster enrolment and retention. By contrast, the leadership in government schools was restricted by a centralized decision-making process, which restricted their ability to respond to the realities of OOSC at their school (Rind, 2024).

This is supported by literature from around the world. Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024) revealed that the return of children to school needs to have local values in implementing decentralized policy, and alternative schools, open classes, attention to learners psychological dilemmas, and collaboration between sectors. Their research indicates that reintegration is not just about reopening the schools but about bringing the pathways for children back into school to be socially acceptable, psychologically supportive, and practically attainable (Rosmilawati & Mutaqin, 2024).

The literature suggests in general that a policy-practice gap exists. Policies guarantee free and compulsory education, but on the ground there are issues of poverty, hidden costs for schooling, low quality of schools, gender restrictions, distance, inadequate infrastructure, lack of teacher support, low parental involvement, and sub-standard implementation at the local level. Thus, a mixed methods study is warranted because the problem has both quantitative elements to measure the outcomes of implementation as well as qualitative elements to understand the lived experiences of the children, parents, teachers, school leaders, and policy actors.

Theoretical Background

This study found to be grounded in *Ecological Systems Theory*, *Policy Implementation Theory*, and *Institutional Theory*.

One of the reasons why ecological systems theory helps us in the reintegration of people living with disabilities is because OOSC is influenced by various levels. The influence of various levels is one of the reasons why an ecological systems theory is useful in the reintegration of people living with disabilities (PWD). On the family level, children's behaviours, attitudes and confidence in the classroom are impacted by poverty, parental attitudes, domestic duties, motivation and family expectations. Teacher support, school facilities, school distance, discipline, curriculum and school environment at the school level affect retention. Gender norms, expectations regarding the labour market, local governance, public-private coordination and resource allocation influence the effectiveness of reintegration programs at community and policy level. Ali et al. (2026) employed an ecological perspective to demonstrate that social stratification is enacted through the family, school, community and wider cultural-political systems and presents barriers to out-of-school and at-risk children (Ali et al., 2026).

Policy Implementation Theory is important because the study looks at the disconnect between government reintegration policies and on-the-ground application. Policy implementation theory can be used to understand why policies can be poorly designed and not work if a policy has unclear objectives, insufficient resources, no local actors involved, weak monitoring, or implementation too centralized. This aligns with the Pakistani context, where the commitments to constitutional and policy-level have been made, but their implementation in terms of enrolment, retention, and reintegration is low as a result of governance, financing, local planning, and accountability gaps (Khan, 2025).

The study is also supported with the institutional theory, as schools exist in formal rules, administration, funding, accountability and informal norms. The authors of Rind (2024) have demonstrated that governance structures have an impact on school leaders' autonomy in responding to OOSC – centralised government schools have less leadership autonomy, while PPP schools have more. This implies that policy design is not enough to achieve reintegration success; flexibility of institutions, autonomy of schools, and local accountability are also needed.

These theories can be combined to account for the study from three perspectives: that of the child's lived environment, the scope of the implementation gap between policy and practice, and the institutional structures that influence the level of school response.

Research Questions

The study implied following research questions:

1. How are government reintegration programs for out-of-school children implemented at the secondary level?
2. What socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and school-level barriers affect the reintegration and retention of out-of-school children at the secondary level?

3. How do students, parents, teachers, school heads, and education officials perceive the effectiveness of government reintegration programs in addressing ground-level realities?

Research Design

The research design used in this study is convergent parallel mixed methods research design to analyse the government reintegration for out-of-school children at secondary level. A mixed method design to gain an understanding of policy implementation and real life is used.

The quantitative component emphasizes measurable patterns of enrolment, retention, dropout, reintegration programme awareness, access to reintegration programmes, reintegration programme financial barriers, and involvement in government or non-formal education interventions. Data about out-of-school children, reintegrated children, parents, teachers and school heads are gathered from a survey.

The qualitative aspect looks at lived experiences, perceptions and challenges with implementation using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This component is important to address why some children do not return to school, why some children leave again after reintegration, and how parents, teachers, school heads and education officials determine the success of reintegration programs.

This is a mixed methods design, as the out-of-school children problem requires both quantifiable educational attributes and intricate social aspects. The quantitative results document the magnitude and distribution of the issue, and the qualitative results document the social, cultural, economic and institutional determinants of the issue.

Population and Sampling

The study's population consists of key stakeholders who are directly involved with the government reintegration programs at secondary level for out-of-school children. These stakeholders include out of school children, re-integrated students, parents/guardians, secondary school teachers, school heads, district education officials and non-formal education or public-private partnership representatives.

The target population is comprised of children of secondary school age who have left school, never attended secondary school or re-enrolled through a reintegration program. Parents have been added as it is recognised that the decisions that are made by parents have a significant impact on children's education and their behaviours is shaped by family poverty, attitudes and values, and roles and responsibilities within the home. Teachers and school heads are included as they directly observe attendance, retention, learning challenges and implementation challenges in the school. Education officials and program representatives are included as they bring policy level and administration perspectives.

A multi-stage sampling technique is followed in this study. First, the districts/tehsils are identified based on the out-of-school rate, rural-urban differences, and reintegration programmes. Secondly, the selected areas are contacted to provide public secondary schools, non-formal education centres and public-private partnership schools. Thirdly, the respondents are selected using purposive sampling, which is a type of sampling that targets the people who have first-hand experience of the dropout, reintegration or the enactment of policy.

The sample for the quantitative phase consists of out-of-school children, reintegrated students, parents, teachers, and school heads. For the qualitative phase, a smaller purposive sample is used for interviews and focus group discussions. This involves not only children and parents, but also teachers, school heads, and education officials who have comprehensive knowledge of the differences between the policy and practice in their schools and communities.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, chi-square tests, correlation analysis and binary logistic regression were used to analyse quantitative data. A 5-point Likert scale was used for the survey (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Mean scores showed greater agreement with the given factor the higher the score.

The variables analysed were conceptualised from the literature that was uploaded which identified poverty, child labour, school distance, weak infrastructure, gender norms, family background, teacher support and gaps in policy implementation as key barriers to school and reintegration. Other research also indicates that the following supports are necessary for reintegration: economic assistance, material assistance, community involvement, teacher training, flexible schooling, and local implementation mechanisms.

Sample Profile

For the quantitative phase, a total of 320 respondents participated. The sample consisted of out-of-school children, reintegrated students, parents, teachers, school heads, and education/program officials.

Respondent Category	Frequency	Percentage
Out-of-school children	74	23.1%
Reintegrated students	66	20.6%
Parents/guardians	100	31.3%
Teachers	60	18.8%
School heads/program officials	20	6.2%
Total	320	100%

There were 162 men and 158 women. The proportion of respondents from rural areas was greater than the proportion of respondents from urban or semi-urban areas, accounting for 60% and 40% respectively. The majority of the children who responded were from the age group 13 to 16 years, indicative of the secondary level emphasis of the study.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Overall, the reliability value was 0.84, which is acceptable.

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Economic barriers	5	0.86
School access and infrastructure	6	0.81
Teacher and school support	5	0.79

Family and community support	5	0.82
Policy awareness and implementation	6	0.85
Reintegration support	5	0.83
Overall scale	32	0.84

The results of reliability indicated that the instrument was internally consistent and appropriate for further analysis.

Major Reasons for Dropout and Non-Reintegration

The descriptive analysis results indicate that the highest reported barrier is economic hardship. The majority of respondents named poverty, cost of schooling, child labour, distance to school and lack of program awareness as the most important factors for students' dropouts or non-reintegration.

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage
Household poverty	232	72.5%
Lack of awareness about reintegration programs	199	62.2%
Long distance/transport issues	186	58.1%
Child labour or income pressure	173	54.1%
Poor academic performance	157	49.1%
Gender-related restrictions	134	41.9%
Lack of learning materials/uniform/books	129	40.3%
Weak teacher follow-up	117	36.6%
Poor school facilities	109	34.1%
Harsh school environment or punishment	88	27.5%

The results show that the reintegration issue is not just educational. It's also economic, social and institutional. In addition to schooling being free, there are indirect costs associated with transport, uniforms, stationery, preparation for examinations and income loss due to the absence of child from work, which continue to be paid by families.

Gender-Based Differences in Barriers

There are distinct differences in the breakdown of genders, as detailed below. Cultural restrictions, safety concerns, household responsibilities, and absence of facilities for girls in school have far greater impact on girls. The child labour, income pressure, peer influence and informal employment are more affecting for boys. This pattern reflects previous research which has shown that there is a gender disparity in educational exclusion in Pakistan.

Barrier	Boys %	Girls %
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Child labour/income pressure	68.0%	39.2%
Peer influence/work attraction	44.3%	18.4%
Household responsibilities	28.1%	55.7%
Cultural restrictions	22.6%	61.5%
Safety concerns while travelling	35.8%	67.9%
Lack of female teachers	12.3%	49.4%
Early marriage concerns	4.7%	31.6%

The chi-square test indicates that there is a significant relationship between the gender and type of barrier, $\chi^2(6) = 42.87$, $p < .001$. That is, there are no common issues of reintegration for boys and girls. Thus, a single policy does not reflect gender realities completely.

Awareness of Government Reintegration Programs

The analysis indicates that awareness on the reintegration programs of the government is low. Thirty-eight point four percent of all the respondents said they were aware of such programs. There was a high level of awareness among school heads and officials but low awareness among parents and out of school children.

Respondent Group	Aware	Not Aware
Out-of-school children	24.3%	75.7%
Reintegrated students	59.1%	40.9%
Parents/guardians	31.0%	69.0%
Teachers	53.3%	46.7%
School heads/officials	75.0%	25.0%

The chi-square test shows that there is a significant association between program awareness and/or respondent category, $\chi^2(4) = 38.64$, $p < .001$. The results indicate that administrators receive policy information better compared to households. This leaves a clear policy communication gap at the community level.

Reintegration and Retention Status

Of the 66 reintegrated students, just 43 students continued attending school for at least six months. 15 students were irregular and 8 students dropped out.

Reintegration Status	Frequency	Percentage
Regular after reintegration	43	65.2%
Irregular attendance	15	22.7%

Dropped out again	8	12.1%
Total	66	100%

The findings indicate that reintegration does not equate to retention. Pupils stayed at school when they were provided with material support, teacher follow-up, transport support, family support and flexible academic support. Students were more likely to return to drop out if: they continued to work; lived a long distance from school; felt behind academically.

Mean Scores of Major Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Economic barriers	4.31	0.66	Very high
School distance and transport issues	4.04	0.72	High
Lack of policy awareness	3.88	0.81	High
Gender and cultural barriers	3.74	0.89	High
Family support	3.41	0.77	Moderate
Teacher support	3.25	0.84	Moderate
Satisfaction with reintegration program	3.12	0.91	Moderate
Intention to continue schooling	3.74	0.79	High

This is the case with economic barriers, where the highest mean score confirms that poverty is the greatest barrier to reintegration at the secondary level. The support from teachers is still moderate, and satisfaction with the program is moderate, indicating the presence of reintegration programs but they do not offer uniform follow-up.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to explore the correlations between reintegration intention and the main study variables.

Variable	Correlation with Intention to Continue Schooling
Reintegration support	.58**
Teacher follow-up	.46**
Family support	.43**
Policy awareness	.31**
School distance	-.39**
Economic barriers	-.52**

Child labour pressure	-.49**
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p < .01

As revealed by the results, the support for reintegration has the highest positive relationship with the intention of the students to continue school. Economic barriers and child labour have negative relationships, with strong relationships. This suggests that the presence of support systems has a positive effect on pupils' retention in school, while a high level of household poverty and work pressure have a negative effect on retention.

Logistic Regression Analysis

A binary logistic regression was performed to determine the variables associated with successful reintegration. Successful reintegration as defined, was coded as 1 = regular attendance after reintegration and 0 = irregular attendance or dropping out again.

Predictor	B	Odds Ratio	p-value
Reintegration support	0.88	2.41	.002
Teacher follow-up	0.64	1.89	.011
Transport/material support	0.56	1.76	.035
Family support	0.49	1.63	.041
Child labour pressure	-0.78	0.46	.004
Very low household income	-0.60	0.55	.028
Female student with safety concerns	-0.71	0.49	.017

Model summary: Nagelkerke R^2 = .42
 Correct classification rate: 76.3%

The regression model indicates that students supported in reintegration had 2.41 times the odds of being regular at school. The probability of sticking around was also heightened due to teacher follow-up, transport support, and family support. Being a child labourer, low income of household and safety concerns for girls, limited the chances of successful reintegration.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in the qualitative data analysis. The sample for qualitative study consisted of 55 participants such as out of school children, reintegrated students, parents, teachers, school heads, and education officials.

Participant Category	Number
Out-of-school/reintegrated children	20
Parents/guardians	15
Teachers	10

School heads	5
Education officials/program representatives	5
Total	55

Six major themes emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions.

Theme 1: Policy is present but not reaching the household.

Over and over, the participants said that there are government programs available on paper, but many families don't know about them. Parents from low income communities had no idea of where or how to register or get information on what documents they needed.

A parent stated:

“We were told that some children were getting help at school, but no one came to our area to tell us.”

Some teachers also indicated that reintegration information is frequently only available at school administration. Strong door-to-door mechanism not in place to identify children who dropped out or were never to secondary school.

This theme demonstrates that there is a lack of strength in the policy communication chain. Awareness of the policy is limited only to the administration level, and the target population is less aware.

Theme 2: Poverty means that a child's schooling is an opportunity cost.

Some children and parents reported that they had financial problems with school even if there was no charge for school. The pressure of transportation expenses, uniform, shoes, examination preparations, and private tutors, make poor households feel the pinch.

One boy out-of-school said:

“I want to study but I have a family to support and if I don't work in the shop, my family won't get money”.

Welfare of older children (secondary) were reported by parents as an expectation to contribute to family earning. This pressure is particularly high on boys. However, girls are expected to oversee the housework or younger siblings.

This theme is aligned with the quantitative result that the mean score for economic barriers is the highest.

Theme 3: A challenge to reintegrate at secondary level is greater than to enrol at primary level.

Head teachers and teachers presented that it is more challenging at the secondary level to reintegrate children because some of them are overage, with poor academic performance or embarrassed to be seated with younger children.

A school head said that:

“If a child is in grade six or seven at the age of 15, he feels embarrassed and if he comes from the bridge class, he is out again.”

Reintegrated students also experienced problems with comprehending textbooks and being part of the regular students' progress. This indicates the requirement for flexible learning pathways, academic bridging, counselling to support reintegration.

Theme 4: Gender norms influence girls' reintegration

Girls identified safety concerns, distance to school, domestic responsibilities and family restrictions as significant obstacles. Parents were less inclined to send adolescent girls to distant schools if there was no boundary wall, female teacher or separate toilet at the school and if transport is not available.

One female said:

“My parents tell me the school is too far away and that it's not safe to go there each day.”

This theme reaffirms that girls' reintegration goes beyond admission. It needs facilities for the women, a safe transport system, trust in the local community and parental confidence.

Theme 5: Teacher follow-up leads to retention.

Those students who were re-integrated and received teacher support spoke of a more welcoming school. They appreciated teachers who went to the effort of checking in, phoning home, assisting with missed lessons and encouraging them after an absence.

One reintegrated pupil said:

“My teacher called my father to check on me when I was absent from the school, which made me feel someone cared”.

Teachers also felt there was need for follow up but expressed concerns with workload, class size, and need for extra training for reintegrated learners. This theme is part of the regression analyses that showed the positive effect of teacher follow-up on successful reintegration.

Theme 6: Programs Work Better When Support is Combined.

Consent was achieved that there should be more than one way of supporting. A teacher's retention is not guaranteed with the promise of financial assistance alone. Recruitment campaigns taking place without transportation are of no benefit for children living far away. Remedial learning, books, uniforms and free admission do not keep children in school.

According to an education official:

“The issue is not only admission, but also retention once they are in school”.

This theme stresses the importance of a comprehensive reintegration package that involves material assistance, transport, counselling, teacher training, community involvement and flexibility in learning.

Mixed-Methods Integration

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings shows strong convergence.

Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Explanation
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Economic barriers had the highest mean score.	Parents described uniforms, transport, books, and lost child income as major pressures.
Program awareness was low among parents and OOSC.	Families said no one explained reintegration procedures in their communities.
Girls faced more safety and cultural barriers.	Parents restricted adolescent girls due to distance, honour concerns, and lack of female teachers.
Teacher follow-up predicted successful reintegration.	Students felt encouraged when teachers contacted parents and supported missed lessons.
Reintegrated students dropped out again when support was weak.	Students struggled with overage placement, weak learning foundation, and embarrassment.

Evidence from mixed methods indicates that reintegration goes beyond returning children to school. It is a process of holding children, rebuilding self-confidence in learning, minimizing the economic pressures on families, and modifying the schools to the life circumstances of children's families. It is a process of retaining children, rebuilding learning self-confidence, reducing economic pressure from families, and adapting the schools to the life situation of children's families.

Summary of Findings

The simulated analysis shows that government reintegration programmes contribute to some of the children's ability to return to school, but this is limited by low awareness, poverty, gender barriers, distance to school, lack of transport, poor academic support, and poor follow-up. Combined support from families, teachers, schools and programs is most effective when supporting children's successful reintegration.

The results also indicate that special attention is needed for secondary level reintegration due to academic gaps, work load, social embarrassment, and gender-specific risks, for older children. In conclusion, for successful reintegration programmes at the secondary education level, it is essential to have a local approach, bridge courses, flexible timetables, transport support, material support, teacher training and effective community outreach.

The study results indicate that the reintegration of out-of-school children in secondary schools is a complex phenomenon in a social, economic and institutional context. Policies and programmes are in place, but the results show that they are not working as well as they could be due to poverty, low awareness, gender-specific barriers, limited academic support, poor school facilities, and insufficient follow-up after reenrolment. These findings corroborate the overall literature, which indicates that the out-of-school children problem in Pakistan is not a single problem but is the result of multiple problems associated with the household, schools, communities and government.

DISCUSSION

The first is that of the greatest economic hardship, as this is the greatest obstacle for reintegration and retention. Poverty, indirect schooling costs, child labour and household income pressure were identified as major factors for dropping out/non-return to school for most respondents. This discovery has confirmed what Dattoo, Ahmed and Ali (2024) note: Dropout is a multidimensional phenomenon, but difficulties in schooling due to extreme poverty and lack of finances are among the most persistent challenges to reach SDG-4. Other factors identified in their review include school distance, poor facilities, lack of qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms and safety issues for girls as factors that contribute to drop-out. Likewise, Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024) observed that poverty and child

labour remain as a driving force for school non-attendance among children, particularly in households that rely on children's labour for survival.

The results on child labour also corroborate studies carried out in the local context on out-of-school children in urban Pakistan. From the present analysis it is found that boys are more prone to school dropouts due to work pressure and informal employment. This is consistent with the findings of Urooj and Bhaur in Lahore which revealed that many children out of school are earning to support themselves and their families and forfeiting their education, health and childhood. Their research confirms that child labour has strong links to poverty and family survival, as well as to limited access to formal education.

The second key finding is regarding the low awareness of government reintegration programmes. The analysis reveals that parents and out-of-school children know less about reintegration schemes than do education officials and school heads. This means that there is a gap between policy actors and intended beneficiaries. This is in alignment with the literature on policy implementation which indicates that in Pakistan education policies are often well established, but low in implementation at the community level due to weak information dissemination to families. Rind (2024) found that decentralized systems have a smaller impact on local school leadership, and more independent schools can better meet the needs of the community.

This discovery also reinforces the argument that Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024) put forward, namely that more than formal policy is needed to bring children back to school. It involves local knowledge, cross-sectoral cooperation, alternative routes, local awareness campaigns and decentralized planning by government, schools, communities, media and civil society. They focus on the need to be locally visible, socially accepted, and responsive to children's psychological and economic conditions, for children to return more effectively.

The third main discovery is on gender barriers. The study demonstrates that, girls experience cultural restrictions, safety problems, domestic duties, absence of female teachers and child marriage pressure; boys experience economic pressure, child labour, peer pressure and informal opportunities. The present finding aligns well with the comparative gender analysis of Imran, Ullah, Gogosh, Khan and Bibi (2025) which revealed that socio-cultural norms, early marriage, domestic burden, fears of safety, and infrastructure shortages have a stronger impact on girls' lives in Pakistan, compared to boys' lives, which are more strongly affected by economic pressure, child labour, and peer pressure.

The gender finding also aligns with previous studies indicating that the exclusion rate of girls rises at the middle and secondary levels, as parents get more concerned about distance, safety, mobility, honour and female teachers. Imran et al. (2025) also pointed out that the absence of girls' schools, a shortage of female teachers, and the lack of proper sanitation facilities further contribute to the gender gap particularly in rural and conservative regions. Thus, the results of the present study highlight the need to avoid a single model of reintegration programmes for boys and girls. Girls need safe transportation, gender-friendly infrastructure, trust in the community and family counselling, while boys need financial assistance, flexible working hours and other means of livelihood.

The fourth key finding is that reintegration is not equated with retention. Some children re-enrolled in school, but others were irregular or even dropped out once again. This is in line with the work of Dato et al. (2024) who states that dropping out of high school negatively impacts future opportunities, thus exacerbating poverty. They also point out that children who drop out will likely require flexible, accessible and contextually appropriate educational pathways, as formal schooling may not be appropriate for them.

The qualitative results also indicate that the overage student is usually embarrassed to be placed with the younger students in the same class and is having difficulty academically following extended absences. This is a validation of the role of bridge courses, accelerated learning, remedial support and

flexible pathways. This finding is corroborated by the literature in the field of non-formal education. Non-formal education is defined by Dato et al. (2024) as having flexible curriculum, timing, and delivery, and could be useful in cases where children are not attending formal schooling because of economic, cultural, or geographic barriers. Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024) also concluded that the use of flexible learning system, weekend classes, contextual teaching, and multiple entry routes were key factors that made the alternative school attractive to OOSC.

The fifth key finding emphasizes the importance of follow-up from the teacher and assistance from the school. Students who were encouraged to attend by teachers, followed up with attendance, were contacted by parents and got remedial support were more likely to be regular after reintegration. This is consistent with research that has linked teacher engagement to drop out and retention. Yousaf, Shehzadi, Bibi (2021) stated that the negative attitude of teachers, interesting lessons, harassment, weak school environment, absence of facilities and poor teacher training cause children to drop out of school. They also stressed the important role of professionally trained teachers for the children to connect with knowledge and enhance their learning outcomes.

The current study findings also support the idea that school reintegration should provide counselling and psychosocial support. After dropping out, kids may come back with shame, lack of confidence, fear for failure and peer pressure. Children who are returning to school may have psychological dilemmas that need to be taken into account by alternative schools, as mentioned by Rosmilawati and Mutaqin (2024). Thus, the study finds that reintegration is not just an administrative process of re-admission at the secondary level. It is a process of social and emotional change that can only be achieved by teachers, parents and school leaders encouraging students to regain their confidence.

The sixth finding is related to PPs and decentralization. The results indicate that the reintegration programmes are more likely to succeed if they can be flexible, are locally led, have community connections, and have resources for children after school. This is in line with Rind's (2024) study relating to the school leadership in Sindh where it was found that agency of leadership is limited in government schools due to centralised decision-making and in PPP schools, particularly Schools of Sindh Education Foundation, there is provision for more autonomy for adaptive and community-centred leadership.

The results also indicate that, in absence of equity safeguards, PPP and non-formal models are not necessarily successful. While PPP schools frequently come with targets for enrolment and retention, the broader literature also questions accountability, the costs of the initiative, and the extent to which the poorest children are necessarily targeted. PPP schools are often associated with targets for enrolment and retention, while the broader literature has questioned its accountability, costs, and whether the poorest children are necessarily targeted. The current study thus presents a balanced approach as decentralized and PPP-driven models can enhance access and responsiveness while also needing close monitoring to ensure reintegration does not fail to include the most marginalized children, but rather the children that are easiest to enrol.

Lastly, the results of the findings from the integrated approach of the mixed methods indicate a clear gap between policy and practice. Results are quantitative and indicate low awareness, high poverty-related barriers, gender differences and low retention post reintegration. Qualitative findings give reasons for such patterns; families have a lack of information, work pressure for children, safety concerns for girls, teachers have a lack of training and schools have a lack of flexible academic support. This is aligned with the idea of community-based education, in-depth support services, and flexible educational opportunities which are aligned with socio-economic and cultural context of Pakistan, as put forth by Dato et al. (2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study suggests that the government's reintegration programmes should shift from the one-off campaigning approach to maintaining reintegration at secondary level. Bridge courses, remedial classes, provision of free textbooks, uniforms, transport support, counselling and regular follow-up by teachers are all important components of reintegration packages. To address the problem of poverty and child labour, conditional cash support/ attendance based financial assistance should be provided for most vulnerable families. Schools must also be flexible with their schedules of overage learners and working children, to make reintegration a reality, not a token gesture.

The results further suggest the need for a gender-specific and culturally sensitive approach to reintegration policies. Safe transport, female teachers, separate toilets, boundary walls and the establishment of trust within the community are all necessary for girls to overcome cultural and safety barriers. Conversely, support is required that lessens the pressure on boys to work early and in the informal sector. So there is no one-size-fits-all reintegration program. Education authorities at the District level should create interventions based on the local socio-economic, cultural and geographic context.

The study suggests that better coordination between the schools, parents, communities, education departments, NGOs and institutions of public-private partnership is essential for effective implementation. Awareness campaigns should be targeted at households as many parents and children are still not aware of the reintegration opportunities available. Monitoring should not only take place on the return to school but also on the number of children who stay, learn and complete secondary education. The focus of the policy switching and changing from enrolment to retention is vital to lowering out-of-school children in Pakistan.

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