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Great conversation for school improvement in disadvantageous rural contexts: A participatory case study

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'Great Conversation' for school improvement in disadvantageous rural contexts: a participatory case study

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The core empirical basis of this paper is based upon my recent participatory action research case study, sponsored by my university, conducted in a rural school in one of the most disadvantageous districts of Sindh, Pakistan. The paper argues that the current climate in most of the schools across the country reflects 'apathy' and 'ignorance'. Although substantial initiatives have been taken by the education-sector reforms, all efforts tend to be diluted in improving quality and access to education, particularly in rural areas. One of the obvious reasons for not achieving maximum impact through these reforms is that, mostly, they are driven from external efforts, which themselves are subject to strong criticism. This paper explores how a teacher educator may empower a rural school by engaging key stakeholders in therapeutic enquiry, utilizing 'Great Conversation' as an alternative pedagogy for school improvement and reforms.

Keywords: 'Great Conversation'; school improvement; rural context; participatory case study; apathy and ignorance

Introduction

This paper is an outcome of my previous article entitled, 'Schools' Participation in Great Conversation: A Proposal for School Improvement', published in June 2007 in one of the journals on research and reflection in education in Pakistan, in which I proposed the value of building social relation through critical conversation in schools for schools' improvement. In this paper, I share my journey of exploration about how a teacher educator may initiate 'Great Conversation' by carrying out therapeutic enquiry, using a spiral development model of participatory action research (PAR) that focuses on both understanding and improvement in a rural school in a most disadvantageous area in a developing country context. The term 'Great' is purposely used to depict the idea of conversation held in 'great books' or by 'great philoso-phers' in the 'great debates', which particularly led the discourse towards the 'origin' or the 'foundation' and impacted a positive change in human thoughts and behaviors in human history. 'Great Conversation' is used here as an alternative, transformative andragogy (Brown 2006), an active dialogical, critical and self-critical stimulating method (Freire 1998), a pedagogical communicative relation (Burbules 1993) and a literate discourse (Delpit 1992) to explore great questions in the context of education and schooling. It is argued that in the current wave of educational reforms, schools

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are increasingly becoming 'factories' or 'machines' rather than social and intellectual beings. The human factor has not been given due consideration in the process of overall reforms.

Context of the study

This study is undertaken in one of the schools in one of the most disadvantageous rural districts in Sindh, Pakistan. School education in Pakistan is undergoing a significant change because of the nation's quest for becoming a 'knowledge-based society', as set out in the Pakistan Vision 2030 document (Government of Pakistan 2007), and the government's efforts to improve education through education-sector reforms to meet international challenges such as the Millennium Goals for Education and Dakar Education for All. The renewed education policy and plans, developed and supported by the Ministry of Education in recent years, have made a significant move in school enrolments, infrastructures and access. However, this commitment endures with the challenges of a current population of more than 159 million people with an annual growth rate of 2.2%, in which less than 50% of adults are functionally literate, with some six million children in the age group between five and nine years who are still out of schools, with 50% who join class one never completing the five years of the primary school cycle, with an unacceptably high dropout rate among girls in primary schools in rural areas and with the meager spending of 2.1% of gross domestic product (2008/09) on education. The current Education Development Index reflects that the country lies at the bottom along with Bangladesh and is considerably lower in the list in comparison with India, China, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and other countries in the region (UNESCO 2004).

Besides these striking figures, more deficiency accumulates when most of the schools depict pathetic conditions of 'rote memorization' of textbooks and students learn the lessons of 'plagiarism' since their childhood, in the sense that they are asked to copy the same content from their textbooks, into their notebooks, without understanding and comprehension. Perpetuation of such methods of teaching and learning has devastating effects on student outcome in terms of leaving the system with no capacity-building in critical thinking and problem-solving. The results of the report of the Academy of Educational Planning and Management (2002), the National Education Assessment Study carried out by the Ministry of Education (2006–2008) and the 2006 research report shared by the Sindh Education Foundation (Daily Times, Pakistan 2007) verify that 70% of children who attend schools have severe difficulty in comprehension of the text that they have memorized from their textbooks. The Sindh Education Foundation report confirms that the results of Grade Four and Grade Five students in literacy and numeracy are equivalent to those of Grade One and Grade Two students. The reports reveal that only 2% of students in the country are 'learning' almost the entire curriculum, which indicates a huge national wastage. One of the reasons is perhaps because the decisions about what students need to know, what they are to do and why they are to do it, are never asked and students are never really encouraged to ask questions about their learning. As a result, they fail to determine a clear sense of direction from their learning; hence, increasingly they become 'dependent', 'ignorant' and 'apathetic' towards their education and life. Thus, they remain trapped in poverty and child labor. Similarly, in most cases, teachers simply lack exposure to alternate teaching learning pedagogies whereby they could experience that knowledge and understanding is constructed by mutual interaction and critical conversation between teachers and students.

The rural schools suffer more from such attitudes for many reasons, besides poverty and child labor. Other factors include: lack of basic facilities such as drinking water, toilets, electricity, learning material (chalk, dusters, and textbooks); quality of teachers; inadequate academic supervision; improper learning environment; and lack of effective management of human and financial resources. However, lack of awareness of teachers about paradigm shifts in understanding the whole notion of education, curriculum, instruction, assessment and examination has aggravated the problems of school education in rural areas in Pakistan.

Despite the fact that sincere efforts have been initiated to decrease such gaps through education-sector reforms, it has proved to be too difficult for policy-makers at a national level to bridge these substantial knowledge gaps, in these schools. This is because the initiatives taken so far are externally driven without engaging the grass root stakeholders in the process of school improvement and reforms. Similarly, mostly, these reforms are project-oriented 'one-off' interventions, which are time bounded; thus these provide less time to 'integrate' theories of reforms with practices of whole school improvement.

Nevertheless, the Government of Pakistan is envisioning its citizens to be effective problem-solvers, critical thinkers and creative knowledge consumers and providers, within one generation to, 'develop industrialized, just and prosperous Pakistan through rapid and sustainable development in a resource constrained economy, by developing knowledge inputs' (Government of Pakistan 2007, 1). In the midst of such complexity, when the Vision 2030 of Pakistan is expected to be materialized within one generation of young Pakistanis, and the current state of affairs in teaching learning in schools leads to hindrances in students' achievements and learning and a decreased rate of students completing the minimum cycle of primary education, which ultimately results in deteriorated quality of life in these areas, one wonders how the knowledge inputs could be delivered without refining current teaching learning practices in our schools. Hence, there is felt a dire need to look for fresh orientations and new insights to improve the quality of teaching learning in schools in the country in general, and in disadvantageous rural areas in particular.

The fertility of rural context

My interest in working for rural schools was derived from the uniqueness of the rural context from where I come and the relatively limited research attention focused on rural schools, while understanding school improvement and reforms. Working in the area of school improvement for more than two decades, I have realized that despite socio-economic conditions in rural contexts, rural schools have greater chances to transform themselves, because of the very nature of the inherited ethos of the rural communities, which is deeply rooted in their socio-cultural fabric (Nazamani 2001). Having mingled with the rural communities in Sindh and Northern Areas of Pakistan, I have observed that there are many useful collective communal values reflected in their day-to-day lives, such as: crop harvesting and cutting time; collaborative contributions in birth, death and marriage ceremonies; and *Otaqs* (guest rooms for males) and *Kacheris* (informal meetings, in the context of rural Sindh, where these rural communities sit together and enter into participatory dialogues concerning their daily life and communal development). Nevertheless, the majority of them have neither realized nor capitalized their potentials to improve the quality of education for their children through such participatory dialogues in schools.

Serving rural communities in disadvantageous areas is also one of the missions of the university where I work. This study contributes to achieving the mission of the university, which is built on core values of Quality, Relevance, Impact and Access (QRIA). The acronym 'QRIA' for these fundamental values composes a word in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, known as *Q'ria* – which means 'village' (Firoz tul Lughat). The word 'village' signifies many positive concepts – such as relationships, and unity and sense of community – but it also portrays, with other socio-economic conditions, a lack of equal access to educational opportunities, and an unfavorable environment within and outside schools.

A community-based village school in rural Sindh was taken as a case under study. Sindh is Pakistan's second most populated province and also its second largest economy. With an estimated population of 34 million, in Sindh – as in the rest of the country – poverty has fallen, but remains high in absolute terms, especially in rural areas. Most of the people, according to the recent Survey Report in Sindh (Ministry of Education 2000), are living below the poverty line, which has hampered their basic social needs – namely, health and education. Diseases such as malaria, typhoid and hepatitis are quite common in children. Schooling is considered less important by many of the parents as it does not contribute to any change in their quality of life. However, those who understand the need to educate their children and to send them to schools, despite poverty and by foregoing opportunity cost from their child's labor, are frustrated to see the overall quality of education in these schools.

Currently, the Government of Sindh is developing a medium-term education-sector reform program, with the aim of improving the access and quality of schooling. This study may provide some insight for policy-makers, teacher educators and researchers to think about alternative strategies to improve the quality of teacher education in rural schools.

Research site

I selected a school in one of the most disadvantageous districts of Sindh where some initiatives have already been introduced for school improvement. To understand further how a rural school learns and improves through engaging itself in great conversation, I worked closely with the key stakeholders inside and outside the school, in a natural setting. I participated in great conversation by setting the 'clinical' scene for key stakeholders such as the head teacher, teachers, students, parents and community representatives to critically reflect upon existing practices of education and schooling, in order to help them plan and implement mutually identified areas for school improvement.

Almost 14–16 visits to the site over a period of an entire school calendar year were undertaken, in which I spent more than 100 contact hours participating and engaging in great conversations with the whole school community. The frequencies of the visits, in the initial stage of entry and at the stage of withdrawal from the site, were increased to facilitate the school to take over the responsibility and ownership of the process of school improvement. To keep the study on track, a tentative visit plan was developed and shared with the school. As the process of the study progressed, some cycles demanded considerably longer periods than what was envisaged in the work planner. Three cycles were undertaken to understand how rural schools learn and improve through critical conversations.

Why 'Great Conversation'

Great conversation is considered a transformative andragogy – an art and a science of helping others to learn (Brown 2006) and develop the language of critique with the language of possibility (Freire and Faundez 1989) to improve themselves and their institutions. It requires a particular kind of pedagogical communicative relation (Burbules 1993) and a kind of listening that not only open the eyes and ears of all concerned, but also help them open their hearts and minds (Delpit 1988) to mirror within themselves. Many educationists agree that, in fact, it is a way to access and understand the perspectives of stakeholders who are most directly affected by, but least often consulted about, the process of reforms (Cook-Sather 2002). Carolyn Shields (2004) terms such conversations as 'critical pedagogy', which foster participatory dialogues between stakeholders and schools and cultivate critical reflections to overcome pathology of silence in organizations. In such a process of conversational interaction, the discourse is directed intentionally towards teaching learning, as the learner is at the heart of school improvement. Burbules (1993) supports this idea by defining it further that such conversation is fundamentally not a form of chatting or question-answer communication; it requires engaging 'social relation' with 'emotional' as well as 'communicative' aspects. The emotional factors in conversation include concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope. The communicative virtues are tolerance, patience, openness to criticism, inclination to admit mistakes, a desire to render one's concern in a way comprehensible to others, willingness to re-examine presuppositions and to become less dogmatic, listening carefully, considering alternative view points, and expressing oneself straightforwardly and reasonably. Carl Rogers (1950), a leading psychologist, suggests three core conditions for such intervention: unconditional positive regard; congruence (genuineness, transparency); and empathetic understanding. The aim of initiating great conversation in schools is to create a non-directive relationship conducive to enhancing stakeholders' ownership and commitment to self-help in improving schools. Burbules (1993) suggests, therefore, that it must be undertaken in a spirit of mutual respect and concern, and not be presumed to be the role of the privileged or the expert one.

Literature on organizational learning (Argyris 1992, 1999) also recognizes that such processes help individuals and organizations to identify gaps in theory and practice, and to promote reflection on practice and mutual learning of stakeholders, whereby mutual binding and ownership can be developed for improvement. The very essence of such interaction is that everyone can have something to say and any one can speak at any time; thus providing opportunities and voices to the underprivileged to participate in matters that are directly related to their destinies (Delpit 1988). When stakeholders engage in this discourse, they hear their own voices too. Without critical conversation with self and others, change stagnates (Fletcher 2003). The focus of great conversation on teaching learning recognizes the value of reflection on practice. In such learning moments, great conversation becomes the mechanism for gathering evidence as well as the thought-provoking process required for deep change (Durant, Dunnill, and Clements 2004). This long-lasting, insight-based humanistic approach becomes the foundation for school improvement, particularly in a rural context where participatory dialogue is an in-built feature of their socio-cultural fabric (Bana 2007). A well-designed active dialogical, critical and self-critical discourse (Delpit 1992; Freire 1998) promotes reflection, introspection and scrutiny of individual and group assumptions and guides the participants to focus on discussion not about what is

wrong or how to fix it, but rather about what is possible and how to do it (Wilkerson 2003).

Why participatory case study

As the purpose of this study was to empower stakeholders in a rural school to improve their current practices, a PAR strategy was used to help the rural school to re-connect their various components of school to treat it as a whole, by interacting with each other. PAR as suggested by many authors (Kember 2000; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2002; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Retallick 2004; Kemmis 2006; Fox, Martine, and Green 2007) is a democratic process of inquiry that is concerned with developing solutions to pressing problems in the functioning of the real context. Hence, participation, collaboration and mutual consensus at all levels of research were the core requirements of this study, which provided the opportunity to all key stake-holders in school to initiate the process of improvement in their own context, by close examination of the effects of their own practices. The basic structure of PAR embed-ded in its spiral cycles – that is, identification of problems (Reconnaissance), Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect and Replan – helped all in the school to enter into the orbit of school improvement and witness the growth and development in themselves.

The given diagram is adapted from the IMSTRA model of teaching practice, based on three steps – *Immersion, Structuring and Applying* – and is converted to the five critical steps of *Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect and Replan* to simplify and understand the process of growth and development occurring by going through each spiral develop-ment cycle of the research (see Figure 1). These cycles not only depict the increasing upward growth but also illustrate the scope in terms of scope and openness in each tunnel, connected within each spiral development cycle deeply rooted in the reconnaissance and diagnosis of ground realities of the context.

This ever-increasing spiral process has its roots in Kurt Lewin's social psychology where he has referred to two crucial ideas to carry out such discourse; namely, the group decision, and commitment to improvement. This conceptual understanding with the human psychology and the theoretical underpinning of the role of 'Great Conver-sation' in promoting transformation in education, as referred to earlier, laid the foundation to initiate the process of the study smoothly and helped take the research participants along, to willingly accept the primary responsibility for deciding the course of actions for themselves. My role as a researcher initially emerged as a facilitator or a catalyst but gradually converted into a participant and a learner among the learning community of the school. The PAR approach facilitated me to do research 'with' people rather than research 'on' people – treating them as subjects. The follow-ing guiding principles adapted from *The Ugandan Project on Improved Education Quality 1999* (Uganda IEQ Core Team 1999) were observed throughout the fieldwork:

- learn from and with people,
- go at the pace of stakeholders,
- learn progressively,
- link learning to action,
- be flexible and use friendly approaches,
- use triangulation and multiple perspectives,
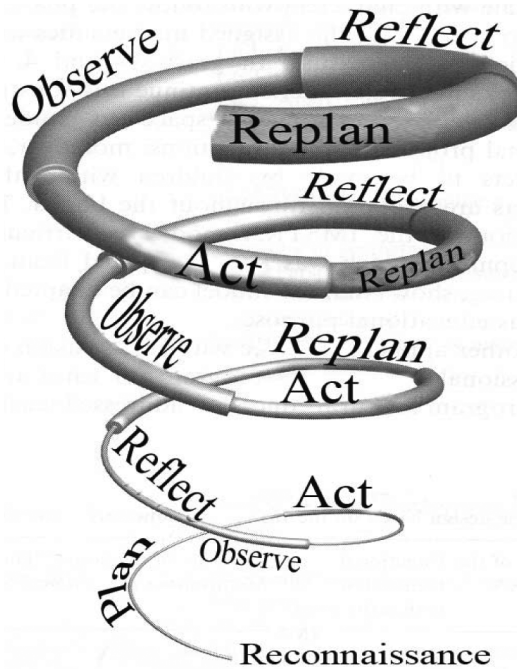- search for reasons 'why',

Figure 1.   Adapted IMSTRA model for teaching practice: spiral development.
Note: Adapted from Singer and Moscovici (2008).

- be inclusive among and within the groups, and
- promote voluntary participation.

Strategies for data collection

Keeping in view the complex nature of this study, multiple strategies of data collection were used, such as classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions, a simple questionnaire for teachers to understand their perceptions and beliefs about education and schooling, analysis of school annual results, teachers' and students' reflective diaries, field-visit notes and memos, audio-recordings of critical conversations of workshop proceedings, meetings with parents and community, and my own reflective conversation in the form of self-talk and talking to my critical friend, my research assistant; all were captured. The sources of field notes were also triangulated by sharing my own thick descriptions with my research assistant's reflections and entries of data in the field, and to some extent with the research participants' – particularly teachers' and students' – reflective diaries.

Data analysis procedures

The data analysis procedures were manual and ongoing. In the first place, the data from the reconnaissance were transcribed and translated from different sources (i.e. audio-tapes of interviews, teachers' questioners, field notes, etc.) where preservation of both verbal and non-verbal communications was taken care of to record the data appropriately. From there, I identified emerging themes through reading and re-reading of the

data, reviewing the relevant literature and questioning my own perception, beliefs and practices. To retain concentration during the analysis, notes and ideas were written on the margins of the transcriptions and translations. It enabled me to make sense from the huge data collected in reconnaissance.

In the second place, the data were analyzed at concurrent flows of activities, such as ongoing observations and reflections within each PAR cycle that shaped the next cycle of planning and action for improvement. Each cycle's data were displayed on spreadsheets, where the themes and patterns were highlighted to capture the 'richness' and 'wholeness' of the situation for further understanding and improvement. My frequent conversation with my critical friend as well as confirmation of some data with the direct research participants also helped me to refine the summary of the data in each cycle. Thirdly, the stage of conclusion/drawing verifications, where I once again minutely examined the data for sharing it in the research seminar organized at the university for getting further insights and reflections from my peers, also helped me to ensure the internal and external validity of the data. These multiple strategies of data analysis and timely feedback helped me to gain confidence and manage the participatory dialogues meaningfully, and thereby develop an understanding of how rural schools learn to improve. Acknowledging the fact that PAR is not a neutral process, it made the process trustworthy for all involved in the research. The process of internal and external validation, peer reflections and self-critique, facilitated me to improve the reliability of the data.

Reconnaissance – the journey towards exploration

I set off on my journey of exploration with the reconnaissance/diagnosis as mentioned, in order to understand what was happening in the school (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Retallick 2004) by talking to the people of any age in the school. I appreciated their thoughts, values, prejudices, views, feelings and perceptions (Wellington 2000) regarding their school. Nevertheless, more in-depth observations were made in actual teaching–learning situations so as to understand what was happening to the heart (children) and mind (teachers) of the school. Twelve complete classroom observations, covering teachers and students from early childhood (*Kachi* classes) to the secondary classes were conducted during the initial two visits to the site.

My normal day in the school usually started at 7.30 a.m. with my presence in the school assembly and usually ended at 1.30 p.m. upon the close of the school day. During this period, observation of the classes and feedback sessions with the teachers for that particular day, along with overall observation of a typical school day, were recorded in a reflective journal kept by me and my research assistant, who often used to visit the research site with me to record the huge data and later emerged as my critical friend in the study. During the course of the field visits, I got enough opportunities to interact with students, teachers, the head teacher and parents, and visited surrounding schools and communities to understand the overall milieu of education and schooling in the rural context.

The formal and informal interaction with the heads and the teachers, observations of the teaching learning processes, focus group interviews with the students, semi-structured interviews with the parents and the community representatives, formal interview with the representatives of the School Management Committee and interaction with parents in informal gathering revealed that the overall quality of education

is deteriorating day by day in rural schools. One of the major reasons behind this, as shared, was using unfair means to clear the examinations for good results. It was also noted that using unfair means in the examination was not seen as a concern but as an acceptable norm by many of the teachers and the parents. The general perception of teachers and the head regarding parental involvement in the school was not encouraging. Parents were seen as problem-makers – as mentioned: 'they do not understand what is best for their children'. It was thought that school should maintain a 'strict discipline' and keep parents at a distance, 'so that they do not create any problem for the school'.

A look into the classrooms

The data from classroom observations reflected that most of the time spent in the lessons was either by the teachers on their chalk and talk, or humiliating the students for not doing their homework, or on children copying the book content written by the teachers on the chalkboards. For example, in Class II, mathematics class, the simple addition was done by the teacher and students were asked to copy the process done by the teacher in their textbooks without engaging them in the process of addition. Similarly in Class VII, science class, the teacher was writing the answer of the question 'What is a mixture?' on the chalkboard from the science textbook and asked students to copy the same text from the chalkboard in pin-drop silence. In that class, the teacher also scolded one of the students who pointed out a missing word from the textbook the teacher left out of her answer. However, in Class IX, English class, the scenario of teaching learning was a bit different, where the teacher tried to involve students by providing them a question to respond to. The question was: 'How did you spend your last Eid?' She provided the format to respond on four dimensions: clothes that they wore on the Eid day; meal that they ate on that day; feast that they attended; and ritual that they participated in. Even in that so-called interactive class, students were just coming into the center of the class and providing the same answers, such as: 'I wore Shalwar Kamiz', 'I ate Biriani', 'I celebrated Eid with my uncle's family' and 'I went for Namaz'. These close-ended questions ultimately resulted in a monotonous class. Students' boredom was evident by their body language, such as yawning or dropping their heads on the desk or just playing with their stationery during the class. There was no pedagogical communicative relation found in the class where teacher and students could engage themselves in critical conversation on 'why' questions, such as the purpose and the philosophy of the Eid. Talking to some of the students about their learning after the class, they seemed satisfied, as they were getting good marks and grades in their paper–pencil tests/examination. Despite poverty, tuition culture prevailed among many students in the school.

Likewise, from the data gathered through a small questionnaire regarding understanding teachers' perception about school, schooling and education, it was noticed that most of the teachers considered school *as a place of learning and character building.* They believed that the main purpose of schooling is *holistic development of children to make them better citizens.* However, few of them thought that the basic purpose of having school in their context was *to support (empower) financially (good jobs) individuals (students) so that they become the 'sensible person' in each and every walk of life.* While responding to the main purpose of education, it was noticed that few considered *education as the third eye of a person* (symbolizing wisdom, using indigenous expression). *Without education, the person cannot see the world in its true*

color. Education is the best way to improve our character. Nevertheless, while reflecting on the mode of delivering education, it was thought that *a child can't understand anything, whatsoever, but with the help of education we (teachers) can change him/her into a good person.*

During interaction with the notable persons of the village community, it was mentioned that *the community had time and interest to work for their school, but they do not see open doors for them.*

Deciding where to exert an effect

I analyzed the reconnaissance data minutely in terms of noting patterns; clustering them to make sense of the data, to understand the gaps in the school. It was divulged that both the school and the community were aware of the unsatisfactory state of education in schools in general; nevertheless, they seemed satisfied with the results of the school, no matter how these were achieved. However, parents whose children may not have used unfair means adequately in their test and examination were labeled as problem creators, because then they challenged the school's performance as an underachiever. To 'fix' the 'tension', the school prohibited visitors, including parents and community members, from visiting the school. Teaching learning scenarios in the classes were reflecting transmission of information by the teachers. There seemed no relevance to what was happening in the classes and what was needed for students to survive with dignity and respect in this fast-changing real world of today. However, theoretically, teachers' notions about school as a 'place' in which learning and character building were done to children by teaching them good citizenship, and to become an economically productive and wise person, were there in their written responses, which were very close to Pakistan's vision document for 2030. Nonetheless, a gap was found in the teaching practices and students' learning outcomes.

Another major concern that emerged from the initial data analysis was the school–community relationship. The school perceived parents as *non-cooperative and problem-makers*. However, theoretically the school was aware of the role of parents in enhancing the academic performance of the students, as mentioned during the focused group conversations with teachers and school leadership. They mentioned that *teachers should have to consider the problems of the parents and students and try to solve them*. However, application of such statements was completely invisible in the school.

The reconnaissance data informed and led me to the direction of the study. The scenario in the school meant that teaching learning and parental involvement were the most crucial areas of concern and needed immediate attention for improvement, as both had direct impact on students' learning outcome. Although the ideas of the school–parent relationship or child-centered teaching learning did not appear to be new ideas for many of the teachers in the school, perhaps because many project interventions were launched in the current wave of education sector reforms in the district, nevertheless the gap between Espouse Theory and Theory in Action (Argyris 1992; Schon 1983) was evident at all levels within the school.

Planning and implementing actions

To bridge the above-mentioned gap between Espouse Theory and Theory in Action, there was felt a dire need to intervene directly into the existing situation. However, the

ethos and guiding principles of PAR research suggested to me to be inclusive among and within the school and not to initiate the critical conversation as an 'expert' or as a 'technical advisor', but to work with the school and the community as a 'facilitator' and a 'participant' by helping them analyze their own practices and understand situations on these issues. Therefore, for me the role of the head teacher emerged as a 'central role' in addressing these issues.

As the head teacher was also involved in the reconnaissance process as a participant observer, based on her accounts of diagnosis, it was identified by her that we needed to work with the teachers first. Respecting her views and empowered by appreciation of her core identified problems in the school, a plan for intervention was developed mutually. Looking at the norms of the rural communities, the critical questions for me were: how, as an outsider, can I initiate the 'great conversation' with the rural teachers focusing on their teaching learning practices in the school? What norms could be established for participating meaningfully in the critical conversation?

Cycle one: plan and act

Establishing norms for great conversation

A two-hour workshop at the weekend, when children usually have a day off from the school, was planned with the mutual agenda on discussing 'alternate strategies of teaching learning'. The time was set at the convenience of the teachers and the head teacher. The workshop conversations were designed carefully in a subtle way to generate the critical conversations with the teachers and the head teacher understanding that a well-designed conversation promotes reflection, introspection and scrutiny of individual and group assumptions and guides the participants to focus on discussion not about 'what is wrong' or 'how to fix it', but rather about 'what is possible' and 'how to do it' (Wilkerson 2003).

Therefore, after socialization, I initiated the conversation by talking about the journey into nature. Hence, the first question I asked was: 'What did you like most about the journey into nature?'

All shared their responses: most of the responses depicted images like children, greenery, sea, birds, and so on and so forth. Each one justified why they liked these artifacts of nature. The majority of the participants admired the goose (*Kun'j*) as their favorite bird – perhaps because people of this district are surrounded by the *Kenjeer* Lake and the Arabian Sea, where they watch this bird daily. As a participant observer, I picked out the bird as the majority's symbol and mentioned my liking of the bird – the dove. I shared why I liked the dove amongst birds because it symbolizes 'a bird of peace'.

I asked them if they could recall any historical incident where this dove played its vital role in the history of mankind and has been recognized as a 'bird of peace' since then.

The participants offered different answers that ranged from the UNO symbol of peace to the symbol of peace in different wars and also in the war of *Karbala* where the holy Prophet Mohammad's great grandson *Imam* Hussain sought martyrdom. Learning from and with them and going at their pace, I accepted the responses with respect, but challenged the participants to think through the history of mankind in its early period.

The participants reflected critically on the given note, and one of them mentioned that she knew the role of the dove in the time of Prophet Noah. She mentioned that

during the flood and the rainstorm, when the boat of Prophet Noah reached the mountain and stayed there for a couple of days, a dove was asked to fly down to see whether water had dried, so that people could come out of the boat and go down and spread themselves on the land. At that time, a dove came up with a twig of leaf in its little beak and set itself up on the beam of the boat. From this twig of leaf, it was deduced that the water had then receded. People there shouted 'Peace is restored now, Peace is restored now'. She mentioned that the dove was symbolized as a bird of peace since then.

Utilizing the indigenous story of the dove as an entry point

Taking this indigenous story as an entry point, to develop understanding about the whole purpose of education and schooling in today's time, I further asked them to think about five positive words for each alphabet letter of DOVE, which reflect the notion of education in their context. In this brain-storming, I made sure that each one of them should share at least one positive word. The participants gave a variety of positive words. The collection emerged as follows:

- D for   Devotion, Dedication, Development, Donation, Dazzling
- O for   Opinion, Opportunity, Occupation, Observation, Optimistic
- V for   Volunteerism, Variety, Variation, Value, Vulnerable (vulnerable not positive)
- E for   Ethics, Eagle, Education, Encouragement, Energetic

I then asked the participants to think about the purpose of education, keeping in view these 20 words, and to make a definition of education in a sentence according to their understanding, using one word from each alphabet of DOVE. A range of interesting definitions emerged from the words identified by them. However, here is one definition as an example, which tells a lot about the meaning of education in a rural context:

> *Education* is a process of *development* to provide *opportunities* to the *vulnerable*.

It was interesting for me to note at that time that the definition of education, which was developed by the participants reflecting their rural background, was also synchronized well with the acronym QRIA symbolizing both village community and the mission of the university (quality, relevance, impact and access), as mentioned earlier in this paper. The integration of the notion of teachers about education and the university's mission of QRIA gave me confidence to carry further the great conversation, which thus emerged in a natural flow.

Convergence of conversation into critical dialogues

It was noticed that soon the questions and answers in the workshop moved towards serious critical dialogues, wherein it was discussed that, today, one of the most important purposes of education is to restore peace in our society, in our schools, in our classes, at our homes, and in the larger global village – our global world. For that purpose, we need to establish the norms and the values of peace in our classes and in our schools. Sharing my learning from the literature (Stephenson 1994) about how one can use DOVE to establish the norms and values in their classrooms, I shared four

fundamental principles for managing critical conversation in our classes, using the analogy of DOVE. These were:

- D: Don't judge pupils or people by their appearance; understand their ideas.
- O: One idea at a time. Focus on it to internalize the idea in-depth.
- V: Variety in ideas. Think creatively and do not repeat what has already been said.
- E: Energy on task. Concentrate and do not divert your attention from the task in hand.

With consensus and thorough understanding of the analogy of DOVE, we agreed to follow the norms of DOVE for engaging ourselves into 'Great Conversation' about the current scenarios of education and schooling in our context. This particular kind of indigenous knowledge, developed together, ultimately became a smooth entry point for engaging participants into deep reflections.

Setting the scene for clinical intervention – dispensing of Jug and Mug Theory

To carry forward this great conversation further on alternate strategies of teaching learning in schools, I set the scene for 'clinical intervention' by dispensing the Jug and Mug Theory literally by setting a typical classroom in a food serving tray. I used different sizes, shapes, colors and structures of bottles and labeled them as teacher (the biggest bottle) and students (on other different sized, shaped and structured bottles). I poured a little water in each bottle, symbolizing students having some previous knowledge. I deliberately put a lid on one of the bottles. Another bottle was selected from a perfume bottle, another had a natural bottle-neck, another was a bottle with a natural brown color, and so on and so forth, to demonstrate the individual difference in the class. The biggest bottle symbolizing 'teacher-filled full of water', thus, was symbolizing a person full of knowledge. That particular bottle was selected for its having a golden ring around its neck symbolizing 'teaching degrees and diplomas'. I placed all the bottles in the tray and demonstrated the teaching learning process by pouring the water, from the biggest bottle labeled as 'the teacher', into the smaller bottles, labeled as 'the students', in one go.

By demonstrating this action, I asked the participants what was happening. They mentioned that, most of the time, water was falling into the tray. They exclaimed: 'It was wastage!'

I engaged them in critical discourse by asking further reflections:

What is happening to the student with his mouth covered?
He is not open to learn and absorb knowledge.
What is happening with the student having a natural bottle-neck?
He may have some learning difficulty.
What is happening with the student with natural brown shade?
He is receiving more knowledge but is not obviously seen at a glance.
What is happening with other students?
They are receiving little knowledge from the teacher because they are not involved in the process of their learning.
What happens when we do a one go act in our classes?
There was a dead silence observed among the participants.
After a while one of the participants exclaimed: *but this is the way that we have been taught for ages!*

I stopped at that internal exclamation and from the same setting I demonstrated an interactive teaching learning strategy, by putting red and green food colors in both the teacher's bottle and the students' bottles, respectively, symbolizing teacher's knowledge and students' knowledge. I took the teacher's red-colored bottle and mixed the water with care, with individual attention and with an interactive approach, into one of the students' green-colored bottles. The red color of the teacher and the green color of the students symbolizing some degree of knowledge in each of them, whilst interacting (two to three times in this case), created a new reality of orange color.

ZB: What did you observe now?
Participants: The new reality!
ZB: What is that new reality?
Participants: The teacher is also learning and constructing his/her knowledge from the students.

This was the real break-through for the teachers in the workshop: 'dismantling teacher's status as knowledge giver', particularly in a rural context, and watching him/her re-positioning as learner among students was a real breach for them. They started discussing the importance of the constructivist theory demonstrated through symbolic expression and its implication for teachers' and students' learning without going into big jargons and theories of different teaching learning strategies. The rural teachers found great meaning in the act of Jug and Mug Theory and construction of knowledge together. They admitted that it was the first time they understood what it meant when it was referred to them as teacher-centered and child-centered approaches. This information hardly made sense to them while only listening to those theories and practicing those theories at their micro teaching practice in their training programs. 'The scenario of Jug and Mug Theory has taken us out from ourselves to mirror our inner selves and our inner feelings'.

Participants' contribution – sharing experiences

Sharing of these ideas gave confidence to the participants to reflect critically on their existing teaching learning practices. During the discourse, one of the participants shared her own experiences of learning from one of her teachers. She mentioned that the teacher brought a half-filled bottle of water and marble balls into one of his science classrooms and asked the students.

What do you think, how many marbles will make the bottle full?

Each student predicted. The range of responses was between four and 15.

The teacher asked one of the students to do the practical. The student came forward and put the marble balls in one by one and counted. He got the count of 51 marbles to fill up the entire bottle.

The teacher said: 'You know, 99% of the predictions we make in our lives are wrong; still we live in a world of foolish assumptions. We need to do the actual practicum.' The participant teacher further added: 'You know the most dangerous phenomenon is, that these false assumptions we practice on our students. In the light of our assumptions, we label them as duffers, slow learners, lazy, or unwanted children in our classes.' This was another break-through for many, including me as a learner.

Involvement of school leader in the process of great conversation

Utilizing the climax of the emotional opening of teachers, the head teacher sitting in the workshop so far very quietly concluded the conversation by the following commitment:

> Students are not empty bottles to be filled. We have to create interactive learning environments and critical dialogues in our classes where students and teachers both get opportunity to share and learn. We are meaning-makers. We create the meaningful knowledge by mutual interaction and critical conversations; we have to provide our children space for learning together.

Such powerful reflection coming from the key stakeholders – the teachers and the school leader – was another breakthrough towards making a dent on indifferent attitudes of apathy and ignorance in schools.

Development of an action-based agenda

The commitment of the head teacher was further strengthened by development of an individual five-point agenda for change by the teachers in the workshop. The focus of the five-point agenda was to bring about change in the current teaching learning practices in the school, which was later self-monitored by each individual teacher. The synthesis of all of the five-point agendas reflected a huge range of improving class-room practices, such as:

- providing a conducive environment to students for learning,
- avoiding labeling or categorizing students,
- appreciating students' work,
- taking students in the field of creativity,
- implying active and good observation skills to keep an eye on every student,
- recognizing different learning styles of students,
- facilitating students according to their capacity, level and needs,
- avoiding over-burdening students with homework,
- using brainstorming as a teaching strategy to facilitate students as much as possible,
- applying learning by students as a focal point in teaching,
- providing individual attention to each and every student during the class,
- maximizing the involvement of students in learning,
- considering teachers as learners,
- listening to students actively,
- facilitating activity-based learning,
- utilizing indigenous and relevant knowledge to enhance students' thoughts and imagination,
- considering planning of lessons first and foremost,
- employing assessment for learning,
- introducing social skills of DOVE into teaching learning processes, and
- respecting students' self-esteem and ideas.

I was amazed to see the rural teachers' self-developed action agenda reflecting the theories of education and schooling that can be found in the literature on teacher educa-tion globally. To take their theories into action, each teacher placed his/her five-point

self-developed agenda in their respective teaching files, which was further supported by the systematic classroom observations and constructive feedback sessions with individual teachers on a case-by-case basis in consecutive field visits.

It was evident through classroom observations and my own reflections that there was a profound change in teachers' attitudes and actions during their teaching learning processes. To sustain the change in teachers' beliefs and practices, a systematic self-reflective journal writing tool was introduced to the teachers in the successive field visit.

Observe and reflect

It took me at least three months to make a dent on the teaching learning process of the school. My practical involvement inspired the whole school to learn more. Students, teachers, the head teacher and school staff developed trust and confidence in me as their critical friend, as they witnessed unconditional positive support and regard in their learning.

However, it was felt that the most important link in the orbit of school improvement – that is, parents and community – had been missing since the start of the 'Great Conversation'. To bring parents into the orbit of critical conversation at the beginning was a challenging task, as, during the field visits, at many times, it was observed that there was a tension between the school and the parents. Parents' expectations from the school about provision of quality service to improve students' performance were very high.

It seemed to be a complex situation to bring parents and the school into such encounters. Nevertheless, the need to take the parents into the orbit of great conversation cannot be ignored. I approached a reasonable-minded community representative to understand the dynamics of the school–community relationship. It seemed challenging for me to initiate critical dialogue with both the parents and the school. Nonetheless, it was also important to sensitize the issue that, without parental and community support, the school cannot contribute towards students' learning outcome.

I started deliberate conversations with the teachers and head teacher during informal settings such as tea and other breaks. To break the ice between the school and the parents, I visited personally the elders of the community outside the school in their *Otaqs.* During the conversation, feedback was sought on how rural schools learn to develop themselves. The community ventilated all their tension regarding their school. After getting the space to ventilate their frustration, which was but natural and inevitable, a more productive conversation emerged. The community identified the two most crucial areas where they thought immediate attention was needed: teachers' quality of teaching, and enhancing parental involvement in the school. I sought their help in inviting other parents to visit the school on a mutually agreed date.

Sharing the reflection of the community visit with the head teacher and the rigorous and critical observation and interaction with both the school and the community, it dawned upon me not to intervene in the situation as open-ended, but to organize 'Great Conversation' in a formal setting.

Cycle two: re-plan and act

Bringing parents into the orbit of great conversation

As rural parents were often not formally literate, the question was how to involve them in meaningful critical conversation in a workshop setting. My often-practiced

borrowed material from other contexts on the importance of the school–community relationship seemed not relevant in this context. Thus, searching for the relevant material became the topmost priority for me in this situation. The pictorial material on the issues related to teaching learning and parental involvement was identified to be used as a basis for critical conversation and reflections in the workshop.

The pictorial scenario of pouring knowledge into the minds of children, students with blinders on their eyes and mouth, and burdened with books on their backs, making them seem more like donkeys than human beings, children under the thumb of parents or teachers not allowed to speak and ask questions, and so forth, were placed on the charts and formed a gallery presentation. It generated a lot of critical conversation about what is meant by a successful teaching and learning process and how parents are equally important to support their children's learning.

Sharing of indigenous material and experiences helped teachers and parents to understand further the questions such as who can help their children to come out from the current state of poverty and child labor, and how can they be helped through education to live a life with dignity and respect? How to guarantee that the basic quality education goes to all children in our school? How can parents help their children at home to get some space for their learning and reflections? Some examples of small doable actions, such as making a greenboard or blackboard available by either painting the wall in the corner of their houses or hanging the board somewhere accessible to children at home, may provide some intellectual space for their children to learn from their own self-talk using these learning devices.

The anecdotes of two young children's conversations with each other by drawing small and big circles on their classroom board and relating them to their experience at home, by indicating a big circle as *Ma'an* (Mummy) and characterizing her as *Moti* (fat) and a small circle by saying *Piau* (Papa) and characterizing him as *Patila* (thin), were shared as natural learning opportunities that may further be explored by recognition of alphabet letters such as 'M' and 'P' in the English language or 'M' and 'P' in their national language Urdu or in their local language Sindhi. The concept of fat and thin could be discussed with its implication for health issues, and so forth, which are pertinent issues in rural contexts in developing countries. Children and even adults learn more with such multidisciplinary approaches by experimenting with and interpreting things in the world around them. The intellectual space in the form of a painted board can facilitate children at an early development stage to draw and learn about the entire universe around them. Due to socio-economic conditions, particularly in rural areas, parents cannot afford and thus do not allow their children to do such creativity on their school copies. As a result, we put blinders on their imagination and creative thinking. With these ideas and unconditional positive regard and empathetic understanding, parents opened up with their suggestions to provide low-cost/no-cost material to their children along with provision of a blackboard at their homes. At this juncture, the quote of the poet of the land, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, shared by one of the parents in Sindhi – 'human beings have unique ability to learn from their experiences which distinguish them from other species' – was highly appreciated.

The parents got a lot of confidence and admitted that, for such help, their lack of literacy does not matter. One of the parents stood up and said:

> This is the first time we are listening to such ideas from the school to help our children at home. The usual practice of the school was to call and depress us that we cannot do any thing for our children.

They opened up with lots of ideas and suggestions for the school, such as whether school could provide opportunities to their children to learn from other than classroom activities – for example, providing an indoor games facility for girls and outdoor games for boys in the school. Parents also shared their concern regarding the corporal punishment given to children, even in the *Kachi* (early childhood) classes.

The presence of teachers, the head teacher, parents and the community representatives in the workshop that was gradually converted into the local practice of a *kacheri* (informal meeting) added value and opportunities to the school to learn from the voices of those most vulnerable. This led the school to think critically on their current practices of providing an enabling environment for learning and to plan meaningful activities for the students, who must be at the 'heart' of school improvement.

Bringing the whole school into sharp focus of self-realization

The school–community interaction opened up a new avenue for many in the school to explore the journey of self-realization and to move away from apathy and ignorance, towards acceptance of their behavior and exploring possibilities to move out from the level of assumptions and biases to the level of conscious effort, to identify and improve the flaws in their practice. It was not an easy job. It created a lot of discomfort, depression and demeaning in the teachers at the initial stage. However, gradual acceptance of the existent reality in their practices helped them to identify their 'blind' spots and move on to the level of conscious improvement. This consciousness established a further breakthrough for the transformation of teaching learning in the school.

The following extract from a teacher's diary is shared to understand, as an example, how the journey to self-realization helped a teacher to improve her practice:

> In class IX, I was teaching chemistry and asked one of the students to go to the black board and solve the chemical equation problem. I was sure that the student would not be able to solve the problem since the student remained absent in my class the day before. He was always labeled (in the staff room) as a slow learner, dull and mentally absent child in the class. Thus, I was not giving him enough attention and thought in my classes. On that day, just to confirm my assumption that the student would not cope to the level of class IX and did not have the ability to do anything, I asked him to come to the board and solve the problem. However, when the student came, to the black board, I was surprised to see that he solved the problem given to him, correctly! To test him further, I asked him to solve second and third problems and he did solve all the problems assigned to him in the presence of the class. This incident shocked me and I was ashamed and thought that I was not sincere with my profession. Since then, I try my best to give equal attention to my students and I have found that my teaching has improved.

This particular reference of a teacher's self-realization had a deep positive impact on her teaching in her classes. It was evident through the teachers' talk that they were gradually moving into the paradigm of 'self-reflection'. The nature of their conversation brought them into sharp focus – the commitment to 'what can I do' thus provided them opportunities to understand 'themselves' with their enhanced allegiance for their classrooms, and hence facilitated them to listen to broader purposes, greater possibilities and fundamental issues related to education and schooling in their contexts.

Observe and reflect

It was interesting to note that gradually now the problems were not sensitized by me, but were identified and shared by the teachers in the school. For example, in one of

the reflective sessions, teachers shared that despite their lesson plans and activities ready for effective lesson delivery, they faced problems in overall classroom management. Hence, the support in this particular area was shared as a major area of concern for many of them.

While reflecting on the concern shared in the teachers' meeting and looking for the manner in which to deal with the issue, I approached the teachers for their suggestions in the meeting. The teachers shared two options to tackle this problem: to conduct a workshop on the classroom management with them, and to demonstrate classroom management in their actual class setting. Most of the teachers voted for the latter option as they mentioned, 'seeing is believing'.

Cycle three: re-plan and act

Need to demonstrate best practices in the field

The question arose as to how to help each other to enhance our skills in the area of classroom management. The topic was proposed from the social study subject; namely, 'Causes of high death rate in Pakistan'. The responsibility was given to me to plan the topic with clear objectives and activities and shared with the Pakistan Studies teacher in the school upon my next field visit. I prepared and shared the plan with the concerned teacher. The feedback provided by the subject teacher was that the topic was new and would be difficult for students to participate in fully. Therefore, it was suggested that the emphasis would be given to the process of 'classroom management' rather than the 'content knowledge' of the topic. In the light of the feedback received, the topic was modified as 'Understanding Pakistan: opportunities and challenges'. It was suggested that two classes would be combined to demonstrate how the problem of classroom management could be handled with large classes. There were 48 students sitting in the class. Seven teachers observed the delivery of the lesson and recorded their feedback for further discussion.

I started the class by welcoming students and asking them to introduce themselves. After introduction, the class was divided into six groups by assigning numbers from one to six to all students. Then the students were asked to seat themselves at their marked stations as Groups 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. After organizing the class into six groups with both boys and girls represented in each group, the class norms were set, applying the DOVE principles: Do not judge your fellow student but understand what he/she is saying; One student at a time; Variety in ideas; and Energy on task in hand.

I put the DOVE rules on the board in the class. After organizing the setting of the class in groups, the topic of the day was shared with the students. I invited them to participate in brainstorming on the topic. Each student was asked to share at least one idea in the brainstorming, observing DOVE skills. Their responses were written on the board and were analyzed in terms of broader themes and categories. Later, students were invited to further discuss the topic in their groups and synthesize it by utilizing the thinking and problem-solving tools, such as:

- 5W1H questions with 'so what' conclusions (what, why, when, where, who and how and so what),
- PMI (plus, minus and interesting things),
- SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats),
- mind-mapping,

- brainstorming, and
- CAF (consider all factors).

The tools were thoroughly explained to them by examples. Later, worksheets of the tools were given to them to record their discussion using one of the strategies assigned to them in their respective group.

It was incredible to see the energies and motivation in the students and how seriously they worked on their assigned task. Specific time was allocated to do the assignment. After thorough discussion, they were asked to synthesize the task material in paragraph form. It was observed that students were highly engaged in understanding and doing the activity. The outcome of the activity, which was their own writings, was displayed in the form of their presentation at their classboard, where students exchanged their ideas with each other. Some reflections of students on their day's work were taken and the class was concluded within an hour assigned to me. The immediate feedback from the students apprised me that this exercise was the first of its kind in their school life in which they were asked to think first, utilize the brainstorming and develop their own piece of writing without copying any sentence from the textbook. And they did it successfully, which was the most exciting part of their lesson of the day.

Teachers' feedback on the lesson

After the class, there was a reflection session with the teachers on what they had learnt by observing the class with relevance to classroom management. They felt the following:

- There were well-planned and well-thought-out lessons and activities.
- Students become personally engaged and interested in their learning.
- It was a purposeful learning activity and the purpose was clear in terms of how to generate original thinking on a topic.
- It was clear from the beginning of the class what they were going to do and why to do it in that way. So the clear direction was provided to the students at the initial stage.
- The intrinsic motivation of learning was observed – no fear of right or wrong was there in students.
- They (students) were curious as well as puzzled while applying the tools of generating original thoughts and ideas and helping each other to understand the task. This was the real beginning of actual learning.
- It was built on brainstorming of what they already knew. Thus it provided continuity and relevance to their thinking and learning.
- Group formation strategy was new to them, as one of the teachers mentioned: in my class I used to ask students to form their groups by their own choice. Hence all good, mediocre or struggling students used to sit in their own group formation. As a result, in spite of cooperative learning, it used to be either competitive or dull or with no learning in those groups. Thus class management issues were experienced in my class.

After getting the reflections of teachers, I focused the conversation onto the issue under discussion: What could be some possible causes of lack of classroom management? Few teachers reflected on negative factors of peer pressure and social context,

others reflected on personality and adjustment problems in students and teachers, but the majority of teachers talked about their own instructional strategies, a communication gap, use of abusive language, physical, mental and emotional punishment, a gap in the student–teacher relationship, and unintentional favoritism or excessive praise for a few chosen ones, and so forth. They reflected that classroom management needed human relation and instructional skills (pedagogical communicative relation) such as appreciating all, no favoritism, respect for all, every child being important in the class, use of non-sarcastic language along with thorough planning, organization, communication, instruction, motivation and focus on learning objectives.

Teacher sharing her life story

The following powerful story was shared by one of the teachers, which depicted her experience about why students demonstrate inappropriate behavior in their classes:

> It had always been my habit to praise the good deeds and goodness of students, so that they would solidify their habits and deeds and it would also encourage them, because I believed that appreciation is the biggest magic and works well in the class. But one day, I was astonished to see how other students perceived the praise: for one (student) broke the morale of other students in the class.
>
> Noori (pseudonym), one of my students in class VIII, shook me during her reflection of the week, which I have recently learnt through action research and introduced it in my class. One day, I was telling the class that Zara's (pseudo name) handwriting (one of the female students) was really admirable and the finest in the class. Noori (pseudo name) said, 'Teacher, your admirable words for Zara were very heart-broken for few students. Instead of those words, you might have said that: "Zara writes very neatly. Her copy is very neat and complete. She writes the words properly. You should all try to write like her so that you do not feel degraded"'.
>
> I learned a lot from this (student's feedback); we should use the words very properly (while praising the students), because the teacher's words directly impact on the students' behavior and they become de-motivated and destructive when not treated equally. When I started thinking, I realized that truly it was a bad habit on my part, to praise some and ignore others in the class. The lesson that I learned from a young girl, is a very important lesson of my professional life. By using the words in an appropriate manner and by changing their texture in a positive tone, we can save others (students) from destruction in our classes.

Such a powerful story shared in the teachers' reflection session helped others to understand why classroom management issues emerged in their classes, why students' critical reflections are essential for teachers to manage their classes effectively, and how attending to the voices of this most directly affected constituency (Cook-Sather 2002) helps us to improve our classes.

The learner – the core of school improvement

It was noticed by the teachers in the senior classes that gradual change was observed in students' reflections and learning. In their critical conversations, students shared how different creative-thinking strategies learnt were helping them to improve their performance in their tests and examination, and how they were developing their confidence to write their papers without cheating from others' copies.

One of the students reflected:

> 5W1H strategy has changed my way of writing and thinking. It has developed my skills. Firstly (initially) when I write any passage I just wanted to know, what is that? But I do not know what the main purpose of writing this paragraph is. Now I know how we go into the depth and write any good paragraph.

Another mentioned in his diary:

> In my class we were doing writing on a topic: Intoxicants and inherences are harmful? Why? I have expressed my feelings through 5W1H format by considering: 'What are harms? Why are they harmful? What is the impact? When do they cause death? Who is responsible for controlling them? And how are they controlled?' It is very easy format for generating our ideas on the topic in a systematic way.

Another shared:

> Before using the (PMI) formula in writing skill always (whenever) I sat to write I was confused about what to write and during confusion I used to waste my time; but after using the formula there were ideas automatically coming in my mind, Also, what do I have to write – and I don't waste my time and complete writing fast. For example, in my monthly test of Pakistan Studies, I was asked a question that how and what impact Muslim civilization put on the Sub Continent? I was little bit confused – what to do? But this format helped me to write a paragraph considering the positive aspects and its negative aspects with interesting observations. The teacher gave me full marks. This format is very simple and easy to write a paragraph with the help of plus minus and interesting strategy.

Reflecting on the above-mentioned incidents/experiences/stories shared by the students, I learnt that students learn best when they are personally engaged in their learning – when they know why are they doing a particular assigned task and, at the end, they want to feel that they have achieved something worthwhile. They are very intelligent to apply the new learning. What they need is an exposure to new ideas and strategies. The consecutive field visits confirmed that most of the teachers and students were applying the newly learned thinking tools, which provided them confidence to work more on their learning tasks. The local case studies shared in the school-wide *Kacheri* provided opportunities for all to understand and construct meaning from the relevant indigenous knowledge for overall educational development in their context.

A year-long journey of therapeutic enquiry in a disadvantageous rural school provided me tremendous opportunities to understand and learn how rural schools can be improved by applying the great conversation mechanism in participatory dialogues rooted in their indigenous practices, stories, symbolic language, esthetic expressions and meaningful allegories, which are effective learning approaches and, hence, are the very spirit of the community traditions in rural contexts. Rural schools are more social beings rather than academic organizations only, thus it is very important that social, emotional and psychological dynamics are respected to achieve intellectual growth and academic quality in rural schools. Thus, school improvement and reforms should be process-oriented and must consider the humanistic dimension of learning in the overall reforms. Our often-used quick answers to school improvement, such as more teacher trainings, more funds, more facilities, more resources, and so forth, may not touch the social and emotional dimensions of teachers and schools that are core for

school improvement. The attitudes of apathy and ignorance cannot be transformed in a dramatic way to reform, it needs mutual collaboration, reciprocal respect, co-learning and actions to achieve the national Vision 2030. Thus, the great conversations can be utilized as a transforming energy in schools and communities to empower them to build their capacities for absorbing reforms. Schools, particularly in disadvantageous rural areas, cannot and should not work in isolation without support from the higher education institutions and the universities.

Ethical dilemmas

As this study was the first of its kind, conducted in a humanistic approach, it threw up many ethical dilemmas for me, such as: to what extent the data of personal attitudes, opinions, habits of teachers, school leaders, parents, students and community are to be communicated to or withheld from public knowledge; how a fair right to privacy and confidentiality could be maintained in such PAR; how to uphold the quality and coherence of PAR using the method of 'Great Conversation'; how to communicate the notion and ethics of research to rural schools and communities; and was the individual informed consent sought from the research participants desirable in such a participatory case, or was the school and the system's consent fulfilling the overall protocol of ethical consideration in participatory educational research? These were the dilemmas I grappled with throughout the study.

Conclusion

It is important to understand that the school improvement process is a highly complex, multi-dimensional and multi-layered process. Thus, it needs complex responses with more humanistic approaches (Freire 1985, 1989; Delpit 1988; Argyris 1992, 1999; Burbules 1993; Cook-Sather 2002; Fletcher 2003; Wilkerson 2003; Brown 2006). The best way to create a knowledge-based society and to materialize the Vision 2030 of Pakistan is inevitably to initiate critical conversations and meaningful dialogues with all involved in the process of educating our youth, without delaying or providing excuses to ourselves for the current scenarios of the literacy rate in Pakistan. Communities, no matter how illiterate, are more action-oriented than many of us, who believe in theoretical approaches in educational reforms. It is understandable that the creation of PAR in schools and in the communities is time and energy driven, which is not an easy endeavor for practitioners to be engaged in; nevertheless, it is important to understand that the process of initiating critical dialogues is fundamental in addressing the basic questions about education and overall reform!

It is critical to understand that today, in these times of major change and reform, it is the learner who will inherit the earth, not the learned one. Thus, the major question to all of us occupying learned positions of teaching, research and policy-making is, 'how to learn from the actual field?' For this we need to put our professional identities aside and admit that we do know little in educational reforms in developing contexts. There is a need to tumble down the attitudes of apathy and ignorance on our part and explore first our potentials and our own knowledge gaps to understand the rural schools and communities, and reconstruct both our professional lives and our professional identities by engaging ourselves in 'Great Conversations' within selves and our surroundings – the disadvantageous rural schools and communities. This

sounds a frightening proposition at this point in time, but the task is not an impossible one in the near future, when rural communities are gaining momentum for recognizing their potentials. It is the right time for the universities of education to add one further aspect in their faculty portfolios and programs; namely, service to rural schools and communities for their internal and external growth. Hence, the teacher-educators' role should not be confined to teacher training and development only in classrooms at universities or during teaching practice lesson observations at schools, but should also be enhanced to 'own' rural schools and communities for their empowerment and development. This leads us to re-think our policies and practices to strengthen school–community–university collaboration, to promote the values of quality, relevance, impact and access in education.

This study endorses that such a developmental process is possible and schools and communities are serious in getting rigor, care, sustained attention, and commitment of academics, researchers and policy-makers to join hands to make viable and feasible policies and plans to transform school education to materialize the national Vision 2030. Many of our most painful problems today can be addressed if we, as educational reformists, understand the contextual realities in rural areas.

Acknowledgments

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