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June 2014

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Recommended Citation

Bana, Z. (2014). Navigating with trust: A proposal for transforming public sector schools towards learning organizations in Pakistan. *Journal of Research and Reflections in Education*, 8(1), 17-25.

Available at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_ied_pdck/249

Navigating with Trust: A Proposal for Transforming Public Sector Schools towards Learning Organizations in Pakistan

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While working with teachers, teacher educators, educational leaders and principals of schools and teacher education colleges throughout the country, I am informed that the most significant factor for transforming public sector schools is winning the trust of teachers. Teachers, no matter how they are recruited and what their current competencies are, have become part of the work-force in public sector schools. It is observed that the school administrators have exhausted their trust and treat all kinds of teachers including good and committed teachers, with the same administrative approach which places them in odd situations, wherein they start losing their own trust to remain present in their classes which results in a sheer wastage of resources in education. The present proposal critically examines as to why navigation with trust is essential at this point of time and how, through appreciative processes, the public sector schools could be transformed towards learning organizations in Pakistan.

Keywords: *teachers' potentials, appreciative processes, public sector schools, strength-based leadership, learning organizations*

Introduction

In my roles as teacher, teacher educator, educational researcher, academic coordinator and educational consultant in both public and private sectors educational organizations, I am privileged to visit many schools across Pakistan as well as in other developing countries. My experience while working with teachers, teacher educators, educational leaders and principals of schools and teacher education colleges throughout the country, informs me that the most significant factor for transforming public sector schools, particularly teaching-learning processes in these institutions is winning the trust of teachers. Though it is not a new phenomenon and its roots are found in early human history, but current analysis of the public sector schools in Pakistan squeals to us, "There is a critical issue of lost trust in public sector schools in Pakistan!"

Parents have lost their trust to send their children in the public sector schools. Even the ultra-poor parents, who could understand the worth of formal education for eliminating their poverty, prefer to send their children to private school system for seeking quality education. Same is the case of

teachers who work in the public sector schools but who send their own children to private schools for quality education! There are many reasons and myths attached to this preference including the use of English Language as a medium of instructions in these private schools. Nevertheless, it is a fact that public sector schools in Pakistan are under pressure for major scrutiny from the public concerning teachers' attendance and quality of teaching-learning in these schools. The matter is grim and needs serious and thoughtful approaches to navigate this issue of lost trust!!

The central premise of this paper is, that if the school leadership acquires strength-based management approaches, they can increase teachers' physical presence, mental engagement, morale and motivation to enhance their teaching-learning processes in their classes. Teachers, no matter how they are recruited and what their current competencies are, have become part of the work-force in public sector schools, which, need to be accepted. It is observed that the key stakeholders viz. headteachers, educational administrators and parents have exhausted their trust and treat all kinds of

teachers, including good and committed teachers, with the same administrative approach.

In my experience, there are different categories of teachers working in public sector schools such as: i) good teachers, ii) poor teachers, iii) dangerous teachers and iv) non-teachers. According to my observations, good teachers are those who have strength of both the content knowledge and the pedagogical skills and they are well equipped and highly committed to work well in their classes. There are poor teachers who, content-wise are strong but lack pedagogical content application; they can be assisted and developed in pedagogical content knowledge to help them move ahead to the category of good teachers. Dangerous teachers are those who are strong at communicative skills but they lack the updated content knowledge which places them in the category of perilous teachers, because students

apparently get inspired from such teachers, but, at the end, they end-up with obscure-content knowledge which may not help them in their competitive assessments. Though, it is difficult to identify such teachers but once they are identified, they can be persuaded through genuine feedback and mentored on upgrading their content knowledge through co-planning and co-teaching strategies and can also be helped to move ahead in good teachers' category. However, there are few teachers who have neither content knowledge nor pedagogical skills but are there in schools as they are recruited not on any of the above-mentioned strengths but on other grounds. They can be categories as non-teachers.

Following figure may help to understand teachers' categories based on their strengths in content and pedagogy:

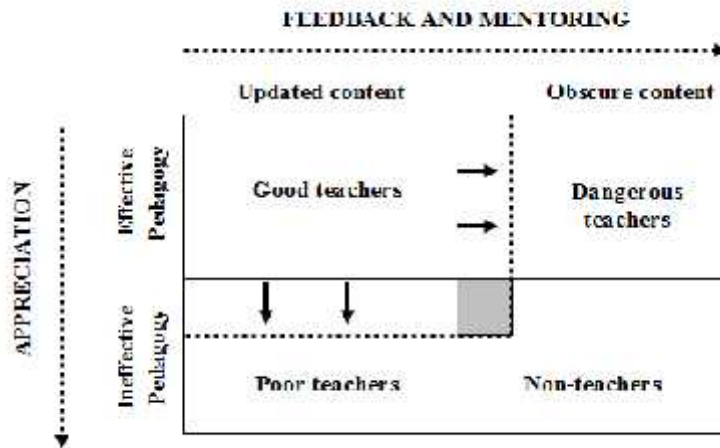


Figure 1: Teachers' categories based on their strengths in content and pedagogy

What happens when the school administration gets fed-up with the attitudes of non-teachers, which may be one-fourth or less in numbers, they start treating all the said four categories of teachers in same administrative scale, to lighten their frustration accumulated by non-teachers. As a result, the three-fourth of the teachers' gentry, which can be built into assets for school improvement, find themselves in odd situations wherein they start losing their own trust, motivation and commitment to remain present in their classes and engage themselves in teaching-learning

processes, which results in a sheer wastage of public resources in education. Dealing with non-teachers' issues saps time, energies and efforts of school leaders and restricts them from developing available positive core of teachers in their schools. As school-leadership cannot deal with non-teachers' issues directly because of their affiliation with one or the other party outside the schools, they mostly engage in dialogues focusing on fault-finding and correcting the errors of all the teachers rather than moving schools towards exploring and exploiting the strengths of each one of them, inclusive of the non-

teachers, through appreciation, feedback and mentoring to create these schools as 'learning' organizations where, according to Senge (1990), everyone continually enhance their capacity to learn and grow.

The present paper critically examines as to why navigation with trust is essential at this point of time and how, through appreciative processes, the public sector schools could be transformed towards learning organizations in Pakistan.

Current State of Public Sector Schools in Pakistan

Public sector school organizations in Pakistan are continuously advised, especially over the past decade, by local, international and donor agencies, of what is not working well with regard to their public schooling viz. "poor quality of education", which is considered as failure of the system itself (UNESCO-USAID, 2006, p.4). The education system at the moment, is catering to over 32 million children in public sector schools across the country; 7.3 million school-going age children, are still out of schools (Pakistan Education Statistics 2010-11) which is indeed a severe challenge to education reform in this country. Further, the physical conditions of most of the public sector schools, according to the recent report on Pakistan District Education Ranking (Alif Ailaan, 2013) are most unpleasant.

Nevertheless, if we, the educational advisors, consultants, educational leaders and faculty at teacher education colleges continue concentrating only on what is not working, thus devoting our valuable time identifying problems, we may lose focus on what is possible and how it can be improved to contribute positively to this education reform. Many times, we look for solutions to revive the education system by forming "guiding coalition", a concept introduced by Harvard business professor John Kotter (cited in Barber, 2013), outside the school organizations. What is needed is, to create "guiding coalition" within the school communities and concentrate on what strengths and possibilities exist at the school organizational level that could be leveraged to improve state of education in these schools.

The current literature in organizational learning and improvement suggests that advice, typically, is not perceived as having value at grass-root level and hence, it is not and it will not be taken seriously, in most cases (Zenger & Stinnett, 2010 p.12). It is observed that the matter of teaching and learning in school organizations is currently left to chance. Very few public schools provide good quality education across the country. The overall findings of the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) and the respective Provincial Education Assessment Centers (PEACs) to carry out nation-wide education performance assessment, in public sector schools at grades 4 and 8, indicate that students' performance in science, mathematics and languages is below average.

Other ongoing studies including Learning and Educational Achievements in Punjab Schools (LEAPS), Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), Baseline Study in Sindh and Balochistan for Strengthening Teacher Education in Pakistan (STEP) and UNESCO-USAID Situational Analysis of Teacher Education in Pakistan (2006), endorse continued deterioration of quality of teaching-learning in public sector schools, which reflects students' poor performance in literacy, numeracy and critical thinking skills (Memon, 2013). The striking figures of various provincial, national and international reports on school education in public sector, are threatening and alarming. This has also created a large number of students' drop-outs in government schools and further added to under-achievement of international commitments such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNUDHR) on Education, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for Education and Dakar Education for All (EFA). However, the current reforms such as launching of the new National Education Policy-2009 and the formation of National Education Task Force 2010 by the Ministry of Education (MoE) have some ray of hope and have made a move towards enhancing school education in public sector.

Article 25-A of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, reinforces that all citizens, between the ages of five to sixteen should have fundamental right to free and compulsory education. This constitutional obligation is supported by the 18th Amendment Act, 2010 by the Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and

now, the newly elected democratic government 2013 has endorsed it by entrusting responsibility to provincial governments to implement it. This constitutional amendment and responsibility provides space and opportunities to the provincial and local educational players, including school level leadership, to take active role in ensuring provision and quality of education to all children between the ages of 5 – 16 years in their respective jurisdictions and schools. This is a great challenge as well as an opportunity which can be harnessed by investing in what works at school level.

Why Strength-Based Leadership Approaches?

Schools are like children; they have mysterious qualities to talk and grow together (Bana, 2007). Education systems are like parents; they have tendency to support their children in all circumstances. Zenger and Stinnett (2010) illustrate these parent-child dynamics by providing a day-to-day example from house-hold. They say that when a child, who refuses to clean his / her room finds that if it waits long enough, its mother or father will do the work for it. Over the time, both parties tacitly agree (perhaps without even being conscious of this agreement) that the parents will nag, the child will ignore the warnings and the parents will ultimately do the work. When parents become frustrated because the child is not doing what the parents want, they rarely look at their own contribution to this situation. While this quick-fix approach may work in some situations, it does not help organizations like schools to learn, grow, develop and manage themselves.

School leadership plays a significant role in transforming schools towards learning organizations provided they are trusted and groomed in strength-based leadership approaches which, as defined by Rath and Conchie (2009), is an ability to know self and others' strengths and build on mutual strengths rather than work on correcting errors and weaknesses of subordinates in organizations. Current research in organizational learning ascertains that building on strengths is up to 3 times more effective way for moving institutions rather than improving on weaknesses. In a large-scale global survey (2010) of CEOs and senior executives conducted by Zenger group, 75 percent cited leadership development as important, yet, only 7 percent concluded that their organization was doing it effectively.

Research on school improvement in both developed and developing countries shows that school leaders are the primary factors behind teachers' commitment and effectiveness. School leaders need to explore and exploit their strengths for sustainable long-term performance in school organizations. This navigation must be grounded in the profound climate of trust, compassion, stability and hope which can help develop teams in schools to work together, to solve increasingly complex problems, to work as a community and function as a representative of the system (McCarthy, 2012).

Why is Navigation with Trust Essential?

In Pakistan, many times, school organizational problems are addressed through administrative advices and top-down approaches which remain "cosmetic" in nature and purposes (Memon, 2013). Despite sincere efforts, good intentions, increase in policy structures, management and fiscal contributions by donor agencies, a reflective analysis of current state of affairs, in most public sector schools and its corresponding impact on both the quantity and quality of education, presents a disequilibria, because, most of the time, the focus of educational reforms is on what is not working in these organizations! Literature on capacity building of organization argues that capacity building (Crisp, Swerissen, Duckett, 2000) in any social system including school organizations, is not stable, enduring and "out there". It occurs when people in the organization mutually construct meaning in their interaction, ideas and actions to make sustained commitments and ownership at the individual and entire system level. In our system, where political inefficiencies play a major role, mostly, the solutions and advices are sought from the external players who may not be able to understand the dynamics and level of strengths in each school to take them from "the state of poor to fair, to good, to great and to excellent" levels (McKinsey, 2007). One-size-fit-all approach (Memon, 2013) cannot serve all public sector schools in Pakistan!!

The journey of school improvement and transformation varies from child to child, teacher to teacher, school to school and district to district. There are 145 districts in Pakistan covering different areas ranging from far-flung rural mountainous valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhawa,

Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA including Tribal Agencies and Frontier Regions) , Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Balochistan to the plain areas of Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT)) and Provinces of Sindh and Punjab. The scope is enormous and the nature of reforms is diverse, schools need empowering leaders at all levels.

The identification of strengths and exploitation of these strengths as opportunities and possibilities for each child, each teacher and each school community, is the role of school districts and leadership in these contexts. They understand what the starting points for improvement in their schools are. They need to be trusted and groomed in strength- based leadership approaches to take responsibility to address their own problems and search for possibilities by trusting their own human-capital viz., the teachers, the students and the communities. Here the element of “trust” as first starting point for transforming schools towards learning organizations navigates. Appreciative processes cannot work adequately when top-down bureaucracies indulge in directing day to day work of school organizations, discouraging school leadership to play its effective role.

The assumptions behind Appreciative processes (Reed, 2007) are, that:

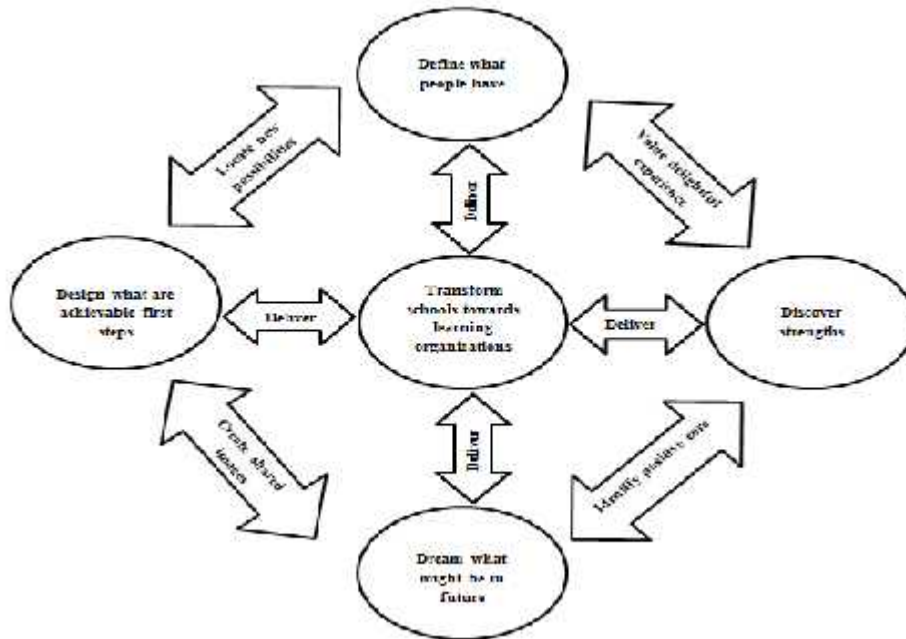
- In every school something works.
- What we focus on, becomes our reality.
- The language we use creates our reality.
- Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities and hence multiple moments.
- The act of asking questions is fateful and leverage an individual's or a group's performance in some way.
- People have more confidence and comfort for journey to the future (the unknown) when they are valued and trusted in the present.
- People carry parts of the past forward. These past memories should be built only on what is the best about the past.
- It is important to value different starting points in the organizations for learning and improvement.

Therefore, there is a need to develop intense internal and external groundbreaking reviews at school organizational and district levels by identifying positive core of strengths in each organization, focusing not on probing problems, but on searching possibilities to address school organizational problems. Asking relevant questions (Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom, & Brain, 2005) is core in the process of navigation. It is understandable that most schools in public sector, have modest performance due to many reasons including the role of key stakeholders in schools. However, this modest performance can be raised by investing time and energies in Appreciative processes which engage leaders in acquiring strength-based leadership approaches through applying the 5Ds viz. 1) Define, 2) Discover, 3) Dream, 4) Design and 5) Deliver, the Spiral Development Cycles of change and improvement (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011).

How Appreciative Processes Could be Applied?

Appreciative processes are considered as paradigm shift that help moving the organizations from deficit thinking towards strengths-based-assets-building approaches, through engagement of all key stakeholders in participative and appreciative processes of change and improvement. Although this navigation with trust is a gigantic task, nevertheless, it requires initiating the process to synergize the energies of everyone in education to help make a difference in current state of affairs in public sector school organizations in Pakistan. The basic process of Appreciative Inquiry grounded in the said 5Ds' process of changing social reality mentioned herein, is an attempt to generate a collective image of new and better future by exploring the best of: i) what is, ii) what might be, iii) what should be and iv) what can be (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, & Yaeger, 2000). In other words, the process engage organizations in defining and discovering the best of, dreaming and designing what creates the best of and augmenting the people and processes which best exemplify the best of. These are the core elements considered for sustainable change in organizations (Bushe, 1999).

Following Figure 2 may help us to understand the appreciative process further:



It is important to understand how the stakeholders view the current social realities in public sector schools. If we think that there are problems, there are. But if we think there are strengths, there are. It is up to us what we choose and focus on, in the process of reform. Learning organizational leaders, who are alert enough, know how to exploit creativity and possibility of key stakeholders including teachers, parents and students to take charge of change in their schools, because they have a collective wisdom which must be harnessed and exploited.

Example of an Appreciative Inquiry in a Pakistani school

In the current study conducted with teachers in a public sector school organization in the rural context of Gilgit-Baltistan, in Pakistan, Shah (2013) argues that Appreciative Inquiry has power to enhance teachers’ knowledge, skills and attitudes, which is core profile for teachers’ development. The participants of the study were found to be highly engaged in each developmental stage, where

momentum was created through life giving elements of positive questioning, positive language and supportive feedback. Consequently, teachers got fueled which energized them to work on their core purpose of teaching learning in their classes.

The process began with appreciative interviews and great conversations (Bana, 2010) in which teachers shared their most delightful experiences of teaching with new insights related to their work as teachers and leaders. The content analysis of their stories led to focus on what helped them to excel in their work in the school. This helped teachers in conceptualizing the purpose of their life and work. The process contributed to discovering their own strengths. Setting the stage for valuing best in them, helped the teachers to expand their energies towards what might help them further to enhance their abilities as good teachers. Searching for possibilities to improve further, they were found engaged in designing their action plans to be delivered in their classes which were followed by supportive and scaffolding feedback to them. This

inculcated a sense of caring, respecting, trusting, openness and cooperation, the core dispositions for an effective teacher leader (Shah, 2013).

Following three phases of appreciative processes are suggested to help school leaders to initiate the process of change and improvement in teaching learning processes in the public sector schools in Pakistan:

Phase I: (Define and Discover).

- i) Engage teachers in sharing their delightful experiences related to their work in schools as places of learning.
- ii) Help teachers to define their positive core i.e. what they want and help discover their strengths leading them to value the Best of what they have.

Phase II: (Dream and Design).

- iii) Build trust of teachers to expand their energies, direction and efforts to the life-giving core of their schools i.e. the teaching-learning processes for which the schools are meant.
- iv) Helping them to capitalize their strengths to develop their teaching plans.
- v) Assist them with mentoring and coaching.
- vi) Provide them constructive feedback for their development.
- vii) Envision with them what might be there for them in their schools in future.
- viii) Search for what could be the possibilities to improve and what should be the achievable first steps and strategies to make the vision of school a reality.
- ix) Invest in strength-based management approaches to strengthen the positive core of teachers in the school.
- x) Create sustainable school development plans.

Phase III: (Deliver and Destiny).

- xi) Deliver each day a small token of activity towards improvement.
- xii) Engage regularly in capacity building of teachers to ensure quality service delivery in their classes.

The above mentioned a dozen of pointers can initiate a positive change in the public sector schools. It is

important to understand that transforming schools into learning organizations is a continuous process and a mutual responsibility of all stakeholders including the education system. Appreciative and participative processes with constructive feedback will help to understand what schools have and asking relevant questions concerning the teaching learning processes will help to value how schools can be improved, which is the prime responsibility of school leaders.

The current on-going projects such as Strengthening Teacher Education in Pakistan (STEP), Educational Development and Improvement Programme (EDIP) in Gilgit-Baltistan and the first ever report titled positively as *The Good News from Pakistan* (Barber, 2013) share practicalities of rebuilding hope, trust and confidence of parents in public sector schools in Pakistan. What is common in these accounts is that there is more than one model for school improvement. The schools must engage the communities in quality improvement, systematic support to teachers must be provided at school level and the school leadership must be groomed in strength-based approaches to nurture key stake-holders including teachers and communities in transforming public sector schools towards learning organizations in Pakistan.

My Reminiscence

Here, I recall a story from the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him). When a very poor man approached the Holy Prophet, urging for food, the Prophet (Peace be upon him) asked him, "What precious things have you at the moment?" He replied, "O Prophet of Allah , I have nothing but only this bowl which I stretch out for begging, and a piece of cloth, half of which I spread out for sleeping and half for covering my body at the night time". The Prophet (Peace be upon him) asked his companions, the *Sahaba*, "Who from amongst you can buy these items?" One of them replied, "I can buy these items for one *Dirham*". Again, the Prophet (Peace be upon him) called, "Who can buy these items for more than one *Dirham*?" Another *Sahabi* replied, "O Prophet of Allah, I can buy these items for two *Dirhams*". The Prophet (Peace be upon him) took the amount of two *Dirhams* from the latter *Sahabi* and in return gave him both the items which became more valuable for the *Sahabi* due to the Prophet's touch upon these

items. The Prophet (Peace be upon him) gave the poor man the two *Dirhams* received and guided him to buy a rope and an axe and cut wood from the jungle, sell it in the market and report to him after two weeks.

The poor man left the site, went to the market as guided, and purchased a rope and an axe and some food for him for eating on that day. In the evening, after cutting the wood, he came to the market for selling the wood. On that day he earned three *Dirhams*. Next day he worked harder to get some more wood and went to the market a bit earlier to sell the wood. He earned more than three *Dirhams*. He continued this practice of earning bread and butter with hard work and continued saving some money every day.

After the fortnight, he went to see the Prophet and stated: "O Prophet of Allah, I have now seven *Dirhams*, a new bowl, a new piece of fabric and a place for passing my nights in sleep". At that time the Prophet (Peace be upon him) prayed for him for more *Barakats*-abundances.

What lessons do we learn from the above mentioned story from the Prophet's (Peace be upon him) life?

- i) Firstly, build on strengths of what people have.
- ii) Secondly, build on collective wisdom and mutual strengths of people around you.
- iii) Thirdly, guide people from their own abilities.
- iv) Fourthly, monitor their progress attentively.
- v) Fifthly, appreciate and provide constructive feedback on their achievements.
- vi) Lastly, look upwards for abundance.

The focus on positive core in this example changed the life of the poor man and transformed him from the state of beggary to the state of achieving dignified life. Schools are also like social beings. They can be moved from problems to possibilities by harnessing collective wisdom and mutual strengths of all in the school organizations. School leadership has the power to change schools if they are empowered and trusted by the system.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this Navigation with Trust will initiate the process of critical reflections and discussions among key-stakeholders encompassing local, provincial and federal governments and policy makers to focus on current realities of public sector schools and empower school leadership to take their decisions for utilizing their human and capital resources to transform their schools as learning organizations. This proposal will also enable headteachers and teachers to improve their relationship and commitment to align their strengths to discover and value the best in their organizations. Creating long term vision for their schools and designing and delivering achievable plans according to their current capacities, will be the founding steps towards the journey for transformation and improvement in quality of education in public sector schools. Research, utilizing Appreciative Inquiry as a method of data collection and as an approach to teachers' capacity building in public sector schools in Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan (Shah, 2013) in Gilgit-Baltistan region enlighten us that schools, which have focused on possibilities to improve from within, have become the schools of choice for parents in those areas. Degrading and nagging available human-capital in the form of teachers, do not help to move forward in transforming schools as learning organizations.

Similarly, the education researchers in Pakistan at this point of time, need to put their time and energies not in investigating the major reasons for academic failure of students in public sector schools in Pakistan but to help schools by conducting practice-oriented researches rooted in the philosophy of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in the field. The teacher education colleges also need to move from conventional models of research, which places much emphasis on problem identification and highlighting on what is wrong or broken in these schools, towards searching for possibilities to improve these schools. There are still plenty of teachers in public sector schools, who demonstrate best practices, skills and capabilities which can further be utilized by appreciative processes of inquiry which starts with valuing the positive core and discovering the best of the past in the school organizations, taking teachers and stakeholders in the said 5Ds Spiral Development cycles of defining, discovering, dreaming and envisioning their future schools,

designing the transformative actions and delivering these actions on day to day basis, no matter how small are the first steps towards this journey of Transformation of Public Sector Schools towards Learning Organizations.

It is believed that once the school leadership will acquire the skills of identifying strengths and believe in their own strengths to improve their organizations, the system will step forward to help them leverage their school performances. The success of the system is dependent upon the success of individual schools. The system needs to be cognizant with the level of improvement needed in each school organization for learning and improvement. Re-building trust and confidence of public sector schools is a mutual responsibility of both the system and the school leadership and cannot and should not be ignored, to help schools come out from their current depressing situations of education.

It is also important to understand that proposing practice-oriented researches does not mean undermining other research methodologies such as quantitative surveys, qualitative case-studies, phenomenological or anthropological studies in education. However, looking at the current scenarios of schools in general and the public sector schools in particular, in Pakistan, one can ask the question as to how these teacher education colleges can help to improve the practices of those who are the direct beneficiaries from their research and teaching – that is, the schools and teachers, through their scholarship of teaching, research and service? How could the principle of reciprocity in educational research be harnessed by exposing and encouraging graduate students to carry out their small-scale researches in methodologies which are rooted in both the understanding and improvement of the current scenarios of school education in Pakistan? The most critical initiative require from us, working in the field of educational development is, that, if not we, then who will initiate this process and if not now, when will we manage and own to lead education reform and transform public sector schools towards learning organizations which is the desperate need of the hour for schools in Pakistan!!

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