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January 2006

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Recommended Citation

Kanji, G., & Ali, T. (2006). School improvement: a case from the Northern Areas in Pakistan. In I. Farah & B. Jaworski (Eds.), *Partnerships in Educational Development* (pp. 193-205). Oxford: Symposium Books.

CHAPTER 12

School Improvement: a case from the Northern Areas in Pakistan

GULZAR KANJI & TAKBIR ALI

General Background

The Northern Areas of Pakistan with their rugged, rocky and breathtaking mountain scenery, snaking rivers and mighty glaciers, have recently emerged from isolation after the Pakistan and Chinese governments completed the building of the Karakoram Highway in the early 1980s, linking Pakistan to China. Criss-crossed by the mountain ranges of the Karakoram, the Hindukush and flanked by the Himalayas on the eastern side, this rough terrain with some of the highest mountain peaks in the world, consists of numerous fertile valleys sustaining small communities, whose livelihood mainly depends on agriculture and livestock. Lack of good roads and transport facilities has resulted in communities generally remaining isolated for centuries. The exact figure for the population is not available for the Northern Areas; however, according to the Pakistan government's estimate in 1996 it was approximately 1.6 million. The majority of the population is Muslim and consists of Sunni, Shia, Ismaili and Nurbakhshi communities (King & Mayhew, 1998, pp. 36-37).

Educational and Professional Development Context

In the Northern Areas – as in the rest of Pakistan – teaching is a poorly paid profession, which is not highly regarded by the local communities. In order to improve the status of teachers and the quality of teaching and learning both the government and the Aga Khan Education Service in the Northern Areas began to train hundreds of teachers through their Field Based Teacher Development Programme (FBTDP) which was initiated by the Aga Khan Education Service in Pakistan in the early 1980s.

The Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES, P) is a non-governmental organization (NGO), which owns and manages 123 primary

and secondary schools, mainly in the Gilgit and Ghizer districts. Although they were set up primarily for the education of girls they have more recently become coeducational. Parents generally prefer to send their children to these schools because their medium is English, unlike the government schools where the medium of instruction is Urdu. Other NGOs such as the Naunehal and Hunza Education Resource Project (HERP) as well as many private and army institutions complement the government provision for schooling.

The Institute for Educational Development at the Aga Khan University (AKU-IED) has also played a significant role in the professional development of teachers from the Northern Areas by training several experienced teachers as Professional Development Teachers (PDTs) through their M.Ed. Programme, and through their eight-week long Visiting Teacher Programme (VTP) based in Karachi (see Chapters 3 and 5). At the same time, AKES, P has taken a major initiative in conducting additional programmes for teachers, such as the Learning Enhancement and Achievement Programme (LEAP) for the improvement of communication skills in English. In the government sector, the Northern Areas Education Programme (NAEP) has focused on teacher development, management training for heads and communities and production of new curriculum materials. This has been made possible through financial and technical aid from the World Bank, Department for International Development, UK (DFID) and the British Council (United Kingdom [UK]).

The Establishment of the Professional Development Centre in Gilgit

In order to improve further the professional development of teachers in the Northern Areas, the AKU-IED and the Aga Khan Education Service set up a partnership which culminated in the establishment of the Professional Development Centre, North (PDCN) in Gilgit in 1998. The purpose of PDCN was stated thus in the original proposal which was developed by AKU-IED and AKES, P:

The core function of the PDCN would be professional development of teachers who are already in service. Supporting functions would include management training of school heads and middle and senior level educational managers, curriculum development and research.

The PDCN set as its goal the development of strategies and initiatives which would build up a critical mass of well-trained and effective trainers, teachers and educational managers at primary and secondary levels, in the government, AKES, P and private schools, bearing in mind the needs and opportunities of female teachers. From the outset the PDCN began to develop strategies and approaches which were context related and innovative,

which would improve the quality and standards of student outcomes and which would enable the team to try out and test new ideas, evaluate these and also attempt to influence policy. Thus the PDCN established a range of activities such as monthly educational forums, management programmes, regular meetings on gender issues, and short courses on primary education and library skills; the field-based Whole School Improvement Programme (WSIP) became the central feature of the PDCN's activities. The academic team at the Centre comprised five Professional Development Teachers (PDTs) who were trained by AKU-IED, an experienced head teacher and former HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector) of schools from the UK, and a programme coordinator from Canada who already had the experience of leading the Language Enhancement Achievement Programme (LEAP) in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. As mentioned above, their remit was to achieve the programme goals with the help and guidance from various faculty members at AKU-IED, who visited the Northern Areas for short periods of two to three weeks to support and enhance the PDCN programmes.

What is ?ADD 'THE' Whole School Improvement Programme?

The whole School Improvement Programme (WSIP) is an approach to enhance the quality of teaching, learning and student outcomes, which enables the external motivator – a Professional Development Teacher (PDT) in this instance – to focus on a school as a learning organization and a community of practice. In order to improve classroom practice, it was recognized that many traditional structures and systems would need to change concurrently, and that the head, the staff and the community would need to work together to ensure that new ideas and practices were tried out, adapted and internalized by them. Various research studies carried out, for example, in the British context by Hopkins (1996) and Stoll and Fink (1996), have shown that the interrelationships between different areas of school improvement have a critical role in enhancing or constraining student learning and outcomes. The main areas addressed concurrently in schools by the PDCN are as follows:

- leadership and management;
- the quality of teaching and learning;
- curriculum and staff development;
- community involvement;
- students' behaviour and emotional development, and health education;
- accommodation and resources for supporting learning (see Appendix).

Centre-based and individually focused training in the Northern Areas over the past decade has not significantly changed the traditional practices in schools partly because the head teachers and the educational providers did not support the returnees in implementing new ideas and initiatives, and partly because the political and cultural undercurrents as well as professional

jealousies within schools hindered them from initiating changes and improving their schools. According to House (1981) it is important to consider the impact of cultural, political and technological aspects on institutional improvement because these undercurrents are instrumental in enabling innovations either to succeed or to fail. In an unsupportive school climate, the newly gained skills of teachers are quickly eroded and the status quo is re-established. In Hargreaves's view (1994, p. 436): 'First, there is little significant school development without teacher development. Second, there is little significant teacher development without school development'. He argues that these two propositions challenge the more simple view that improved schools result from improving individual teachers.

This is not to say that all centre-based and individually focused training is fruitless. Rather, it could be very productive if schools took on the role of learning communities and became more receptive to new ideas and practices. Therefore, the PDCN team attempted to influence positively the interplay between the cultural, the technological and the political aspects (House, 1981) of the project schools by being a part of the school life as it was lived, and by focusing on the whole school as a unit of training. The strategy of treating each project school as a unit of training was based on the PDCN head's experiences of school inspections in the UK and the ideas gleaned from other researchers such as Fullan (1992), Hargreaves (1994) and Stoll and Fink (1996), who argue that greater success is achieved in improving schools if the institutional development and individual teacher's professional development go hand in hand.

How does the Whole School Improvement Programme Work?

The WSIP has a school-based focus for a period of at least one school year requiring two Professional Development Teachers (PDTs) to work with class teachers for two-person days a week in the first year, followed by less intensive support in the second year. As mentioned earlier, the PDTs are highly experienced and skilled trainers with a sound knowledge of educational theories and practice gleaned from their experiences and from the M.Ed. Programme at AKU-IED. Keeping in mind the realities of classrooms and the knowledge base and beliefs of teachers, PDTs help teachers maximize the available human and material resources to improve the quality of teaching and learning. They attempt to develop good practice through collaborative work, team teaching and activity-orientated learning. Additionally, a workshop is held every week after school hours to enhance teachers' professional knowledge and skills. The schedule of workshop topics includes: principles of children's learning, classroom organization and methodology, behaviour and discipline, health education, curriculum development, enhancement of some content knowledge, and improvement in examinations and assessment practices. Through these workshops it is

intended to establish a culture of regular staff meetings, the purpose of which is to institutionalize regular professional/academic dialogue amongst teachers and heads. This is the most difficult challenge in terms of changing the deeply embedded egg-crate-like culture of schools (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992, p. 220), where teachers teach within their own boundaries. The programme is not only designed as a vehicle for implementing effective practices but also as a research tool for examining the project schools' effectiveness as organizations, and the quality of the support structures and procedures of the educational systems which manage these schools.

The Programme

In the first year of the programme, 14 primary schools were selected: four in Hunza, four in the Ghizer valley and six in Gilgit. The size ranged from approximately 90 pupils to 200. The staff generally consisted of a teacher-in-charge and four to eight assistant teachers. In the primary schools, hardly any support staff such as secretaries, cleaners or caretakers were employed, with the result that all administrative work and maintenance had to be done by the staff and the local volunteers. Furthermore, because the teacher-in-charge or the head had a full timetable of seven or eight periods a day, neither of them was able to do justice to either the teaching load or other responsibilities such as meeting parents or collecting fees or supporting other teachers in their classrooms. It was in this very challenging context that PDTs worked alongside teachers and attempted to improve their practice.

The Role of Head Teachers

During the pilot phase of WSIP the training team quickly recognized that improvements in the area of teaching and learning, curriculum and staff development, resourcing and student behaviour required commitment and support from head teachers, who were instrumental in setting the cultural climate of their institutions. Since WSIP did not provide sufficient management and leadership training for heads, it was decided to involve AKU-IED faculty in conducting an additional, field-based programme – Certificate in Educational Management (CEM) – concurrently with WSIP for head teachers (see Chapter 9). The two programmes together seemed to have a greater impact on school improvement than either programme on its own. CEM brought about an attitudinal change in the majority of head teachers, who became bold enough to question and criticize the prevalent management and teaching practices in their schools. As other research studies have already demonstrated, the quality of leadership emerged as the most powerful factor in bringing about improvements (Farah, 1996; Memon, 2000). It was also found that the female heads in the project schools were more willing and flexible in adopting new ideas than their male counterparts, regardless of the systems they belonged to. The three most successful schools

in the project had female head teachers. The most successful school, which had the least material resources, and most untrained teachers, had the advantage of a young enthusiastic head with a vision and an ability to motivate the staff, parents and the community in taking on new approaches.

Teaching and Learning in WSIP Schools

Not unlike a minority of head teachers, a small number of teachers in the project schools benefited only marginally from the various opportunities offered by WSIP. There was great variation in an individual teacher's willingness and endeavour to learn more about his/her profession and in turn to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. The team came across different types of teachers in the project schools. Many teachers and head teachers welcomed new ideas enthusiastically, and put them into practice – ideas such as making low-cost materials in the form of zigzag books for reading or making displays of children's work or collecting nuts and seeds for counting or cutting cardboard shapes to demonstrate say, the concept of fractions. The heads became bold enough to observe teachers and proffer advice. Unforeseen problems arose when teachers and heads tried to initiate group work or stop using physical punishment particularly because the children were unused to such ideas. But these problems helped many participants to seek solutions. This group of professionals tended to display a positive attitude towards new challenges for their own learning as well as students' learning. In one instance, a head took the students into his confidence by explaining to them why the school had stopped beating them and what was expected of the children. He also devised a system of cards, which were given to the children for good behaviour. Other heads changed their timetables to create longer periods for practical work or created resource and library areas to store and retrieve materials or added sports activities to their timetables.

The second group, on the other hand, showed a lukewarm attitude towards new ideas and efforts to change. They put into practice new methods or ideas in the presence of the PDTs; but as soon as the external support and follow-up discontinued for whatever reason (for example, a PDT missing one school visit or not giving time to that particular teacher), they reverted to their old routines of rote learning and chalk and talk. The third group of teachers, who balked at new ideas and practices, were generally cynical, disillusioned and full of complaints against individuals and educational systems. Variations in teacher attitudes had a significant impact on student learning. Where teachers showed enthusiasm and support for new ideas, the students also responded with enthusiasm and commitment. The training team had the most difficult task of influencing the negative attitudes of teachers in order to create a critical mass of like-minded staff, who would continue with improvements after the team's departure. One major difficulty was in shifting teachers from chalk-and-talk approaches to doing practical

work, for example, in the areas of numeracy or science. Because this kind of approach required planning and collection of materials, some teachers felt that it was too time-consuming for them. A story was recounted by a PDT about a teacher who continued to remain glued to her chalkboard despite several demonstrations by the PDT in the use of teacher-made games and practical activities created from waste materials. The PDT was beginning to despair when the teacher asked the PDT to bring her a cardboard box. The PDT beamed and thought, 'What a break through!' The following week, armed with boxes and other materials, the PDT approached the teacher's class and gave her the boxes. Upon seeing the boxes, the teacher picked out one and said, 'Thank you. This will be just right for making a parcel for my things.' The PDT was astounded at the response of the teacher, but continued to struggle on to bring about small improvements in her class.

Curriculum and Staff Development

In an educational climate where teaching is driven by textbooks and examinations, teachers perceive coverage and rote learning as the major ways in which to deliver the National Curriculum, although ironically, hardly any teacher has ever possessed, let alone seen the National Curriculum document. Thus the weekly workshops, which covered topics such as classroom management and organization, teaching of subjects such as mathematics, language and science, and developing assessment tools, encouraged the heads to work with their teachers. These workshops opened up opportunities for sharing information and generating an academic dialogue between heads and teachers. In one project school, for example, the head and the teachers continued to meet on the school premises during occasional holidays to plan together and make materials. Gradually teachers began to give time to planning and preparation in many project schools. With the aid of the PDTs, the teachers began to produce low-cost materials in order to promote more activity-based teaching and provide practical experiences for children. This particular innovation also led to the development of resource rooms and resource corners in the schools. In the lower primary classes, for example, PDTs helped with the collection of natural materials such as stones, sticks, nuts and seeds, flowers, leaves, bones, fur and feathers to strengthen conceptual development in the areas of numeracy and environmental education. Teachers also used cartons, boxes, newspapers, food packets, old fabric and plastic materials to make charts, pockets, books, drawings and flash cards. A purpose-made 'Teacher's Bag' was given to each member of staff filled with essential materials, such as scissors, glue, sticky tape, pins, crayons and pencils, marking pens, rulers, string and other useful materials to improve teaching and learning opportunities. One teacher commented, 'Without the bag and the materials we have got in our bags, in my view, a teacher is not complete.' A head

teacher was moved to say, 'I view this bag as a teacher's weapon, as important as a gun for a hunter.'

Making materials, however, was not as difficult as changing the length of some periods from 35 minutes to possibly an hour in order to allow students sufficient time to carry out practical activities. The routines seemed to have been cast in concrete in the minds of heads and teachers. Persuasion and demonstrations by the PDTs ultimately resulted in changes in the length of some periods in most schools.

Another major innovation was the introduction in all project schools of the mobile library system. This required PDTs to select 50 information and story books for each school from the PDCN library to develop a reading culture and to inculcate the habit of reading amongst teachers and students beyond the textbooks. Teachers were also encouraged to enrich the content of the textbooks by using information books and stories. Again transporting the books proved easier than getting the schools to create library periods or incorporate additional material in their lessons. The change was brought about after much patience and perseverance on the part of the trainers. This particular innovation has had a significant impact on the attitudes of teachers and pupils alike in opening up the secondary world of imagination and engendering interest in information materials beyond textbooks.

Community Involvement

One of the six areas of development, as mentioned earlier, was the involvement of parents and the local community in the life of the school. While the local community had often played a significant role in raising funds and constructing school buildings, they were not encouraged to be involved in their children's learning. The parents bought school uniforms and textbooks, paid monthly fees and expected schools to give daily homework to their children. This was where the schools and parents drew their boundaries. The mothers' responsibility was generally to remain at home to attend to household chores, raise children and do agricultural work. PDTs, therefore, sought to enhance parents' participation by creating Mothers' Committees in schools to address such issues as homework, health education and cleanliness, students' behaviour and social development. This was seen as the beginning of a long road to getting mothers involved in understanding what their children did at school and how they could help them at home. Within a short period of time, mothers' gatherings at most schools became a regular event. Commenting on the mothers' responses, one head teacher said,

Given the grim realities of the context, initially I thought that motivating the mothers and attracting them to school would be an impossible task since our females who work as housewives are illiterate, ruled by men, have no say in the use of household budget and are overloaded with household chores. But my judgement turned out to be wrong. If we plan well and work hard,

we can arouse parents' interest in their child's education and get from them whatever support we want.

Because the home environment and social attitudes do not promote gender equity, schools seemed to be the most appropriate places to foster an understanding of gender issues. PDTs consciously gave leading roles to girls in mixed-gender classrooms during activities, and placed girls in the front rows of classes. They also brought gender aspects to the fore in workshops by frequently giving lead roles to female teachers in discussions, lesson planning and teaching. They celebrated 'mothers' day' in schools, and established a pattern of home visits to build up women's confidence and to involve mothers in different activities in schools.

Pupil Behaviour, Health Education and Social Development

Health education, cleanliness and social development were addressed through the workshops and through PDTs' practice in the classrooms. Although cleanliness improved and pupils began to take responsibility for various tasks, the problem of physical punishment remained because it is deeply embedded in the culture of the communities. In an authoritarian culture, students often lacked confidence to interact with either the teachers or their peers. PDTs did manage to bring about small changes through the creation of an interactive teaching environment, the introduction of practical activities, opportunities for discussions and the use of appropriate questioning techniques during lessons.

Accommodation and Resources

Many project schools suffered from a severe shortage of classrooms. Furthermore, they did not use the available space effectively. Frequently, the training team had to face the problems of having the nursery and class 1 sitting outside the school building in extreme weather conditions, often on bare, dusty and rock-strewn ground with no furniture and no surfaces to write on. PDTs challenged this established practice that hardly anyone had tackled before and succeeded in enabling the schools to rethink their use of space and other resources, particularly in relation to the youngest pupils in the schools. PDTs also enabled teachers to make useful aids such as pegs out of broken furniture for hanging students' bags, or shelves to store materials and books.

Benefits to PDTs and Institutions

PDTs felt that they were able to apply their newly gained theoretical knowledge to real classroom situations thereby reviewing and refining it, and transforming it into procedural knowledge. For them it was a unique context in which they could demonstrate how different methods influenced teaching

and learning, how practices could be changed and how problems could be solved, particularly by attending to the interplay between the political and cultural attitudes of staff. PDTs helped the heads to address many policy-related issues such as the supply of teachers and educational resources, and to show the policy-makers that these issues impacted on the quality of teaching and learning. PDTs not only engaged in a whole range of self-initiated activities in schools but also dealt with unexpected events and emergencies (for example, what to do with a child suffering from cholera, typhoid or diarrhoea, or how to maintain cleanliness during such epidemics). They also mentored teachers, did demonstration lessons, co-planned and co-taught lessons, cleaned classrooms and washrooms jointly with teachers, helped with behavioural problems, found appropriate books and information for the teachers, and made and used low-cost materials for teaching purposes. WSIP had clearly demonstrated that the quality of teaching and learning improved significantly when several aspects of school life were addressed at the same time, and when the head and staff jointly acted to examine critically and improve policies and practice.

Outcomes

Fullan's observation (Fullan, 1985, p. 396) that 'change takes place over time' was borne out again and again during the programme. One year is but a short period of time for schools to show significant improvements, particularly in examination results. However, improvements recorded by the training team were as follows:

- 9 out of 14 schools made changes in their timetables to create library periods and also double periods for practical work.
- In 10 out of 14 schools the system of one-teacher-one-class was introduced in the nursery and class 1.
- Standards of cleanliness improved in all schools. In 5 schools, the heads gave up their own offices or shared the space to accommodate pupils without classrooms.
- Most heads began to visit classrooms during lessons, and teachers also planned in advance at least a couple of lessons a week.
- Students developed greater confidence in their interactions with others.
- Benefits of the mobile library were evident in student enthusiasm and usage of books both by teachers and students.
- The education providers were beginning to pay greater attention to the suggestions made by PDCN. For example, they had begun to ensure that washrooms were available in all schools. They also began to provide more educational resources to schools.
- PDTs learnt that each school was a complex organization with its unique culture and that school improvement demanded a range of skills from them such as forward planning, flexibility, listening to the voices of teachers and pupils, patience, good communication, resourcefulness,

problem solving, conflict resolution, sound knowledge of the curriculum and above all, a sense of humour. They not only talked about school improvement, but they also *lived* it.

- Combination of CEM and WSIP accelerated improvements in schools.

Challenges

A major issue for PDCN is how to combat the weak infrastructures of the educational systems, which impact negatively on the work of the schools. Issues related to poor accommodation and resources, lack of maintenance, frequent absences of staff, inadequate staffing and poor support and monitoring structures. If these issues are not addressed effectively, then no amount of training will bring about significant and lasting improvements in schools. Other major issues such as poor content knowledge of many teachers, lack of management skills of head teachers, and low level of community involvement also need to be addressed.

Although small successes were evident in the programme, many challenges seemed formidable and as daunting as the mountains in the Northern Areas. Despite the feelings of frustration and despondency at times, the training team continued to work with zest and a sense of humour. Rosetta Marantez Cohen's comments confirmed the team's view that the quality of innovations was critical for success, that the innovations were not easy to implement, and that they needed to be seen in their proper perspective. Reflecting on her involvement in a three-year project called Quest, she writes:

Taken together, then, there is nothing glamorous or even clear-cut about the modest reforms, which emerged over the course of the 3 years of Quest's existence. Though successes have occurred (e.g., teachers becoming renewed and revitalized, students becoming tolerant of one another), the day-to-day work of reform is still a complex, ambiguous morass of gains and losses, successes and defeats. Change, when it happens at all, happens slowly and incrementally. It follows no a priori plan, emerging instead as a patchwork of theory, personality, and compromise. (Cohen, 1995, p. 3)

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APPENDIX

Improving Opportunities for Children to Learn

Quality of Teaching and Learning

Teachers have high expectations of pupils' achievement. They have clear objectives, lesson plans and evaluation procedures. They use appropriate textbooks, displays and resources for teaching and learning. Children are active learners and do sustained work. They are highly motivated, eager to learn and show initiative.

They take risks and are not afraid to make mistakes.

Leadership, Management and Administration

Head Teacher has a clear vision for the school and high expectations. HT communicates effectively, demonstrates instructional leadership, supports teachers and visits them in class, shares responsibility, provides for staff development, manages finance, plans ahead and keeps good records, works collaboratively with parents and community.

Curriculum Development and Staff Development

National Curriculum is enriched by the use of relevant resources and information. The curriculum is broad, balanced, relevant and matched to children's needs and experiences. It is challenging. HT and teachers organize regular in-service training. They constantly endeavour to improve their knowledge and skills.

Community Participation

Parents and community are involved in the work of the school. They co-operate and collaborate with Headteacher and teaching staff. Parents are involved in their children's learning, and policymaking. Parents and community share their skills with teachers and children. School organizes regular meetings and classes for the community.

Building, Accommodation and Resources

School environment is well maintained, inviting and attractive. It is effectively used. Resources, including the library, are adequate and easily accessible. There are good displays of children's work and other materials. Children and teachers take pride in their environment and maintain high standards.

Social, Moral and Spiritual Development of Students and Health Education

Standards of students' behaviour and discipline are exemplary. Students are well behaved, cooperative and keen to take responsibility. Students and teachers collaborate, and show respect towards each other and all members of the school community.

