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HEAD TEACHER'S ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

After completion of my studies at Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), I reported back to my parent organization Aga Khan Education Service for Pakistan in the first week of July 2002. I was posted in Aga Khan Girls High School Ovirk, Garamchashma as a headmaster on August 5, 2002. This school is situated in a very backward area of district Chitral.

After joining the school I held meetings with teachers and members of the school management committee to introduce myself and also to get their views about the future of the school. I realized after the meetings that the school management committee members (SMC), who represent the community in school, were worried about the poor performance of the high school students in external examinations.

Statistics showed very poor performance of the students in the last six years' Board examinations. I decided to work on this single issue on priority bases. I met students individually to help them improve their results in the external examinations scheduled for April 2003. I also held a series of meetings with teachers and parents in order to improve the students' results. Board's examinations were held in April this year and the results were announced in June. These results amazed all the rank and file of the area. The results were hundred percent passes with twelve percent A and forty-four percent B grades. This was a new record in the seven years history of the school.

I introduced School Improvement Plan in April this year. Under this plan teachers were asked to use Urdu or English in their daily conversation. The school library was re-activated after being in a non-functional state for the last one and a half years. Physical punishment, a cherished activity of the teachers, was banned. In addition to that many other administrative measures were announced to put the school administration on the right track. I made intervention after a long needs assessment of the school.

Things have started changing in the school. For example, the teachers have started using

Urdu and English in their classes and among themselves. Previously, the local language used to be the language of teaching. I have been helping teachers in their classroom teaching and other forums. The impact of all these things may come up in the ongoing mid-term exam results.

Introduction

I have been working as a headmaster in one of the Aga Khan Girls High Schools in District Chitral, a small and remote district of the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan. It is a mountainous area spread out over 14,850 square kilometres. According to the government census report of 1998, the population of Chitral is 316,000 with a 35% literacy rate. Before independence, Chitral used to be among one of the five hundred and sixty princely states ruled by local rulers.

Chitral became part of Pakistan in 1969 when General Yahya Khan, then military ruler of Pakistan announced annexation of all the princely states in Pakistan. Thus, Chitral became a district of North West Frontier Province. During the period of the State's government the autocratic rulers resisted all efforts at establishing schools in the area and only selected people of the royal family had access to education. For example, His Highness Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, had offered financial support to the rulers of Chitral for the establishment of schools, but unfortunately the ruler of Chitral refused.

History of the school

In the early nineteen eighties, Aga Khan Education Service for Pakistan (AKESP), an important component of Aga Khan Development Network started its educational activities in district Chitral in order to supplement governments' efforts towards increasing literacy rate, especially in female sector, which was at that time alarmingly low. The AKESP initiated its activities with three major objectives: access, quality and sustainability. For the last twenty years the AKESP, with the help of the local communities, has been struggling hard to achieve these objectives. So far, the AKESP has established fifty-one regular and twenty community-based schools for females.

In spite of the fact that Chitral is one of the remotest districts of the North West Frontier Province and is situated about 400 kilometres away from the provincial capital, it stands

in the third row in the district-wise provincial literacy rate table of the Frontier Province. The credit goes to AKESP because it has not only opened a chain of schools but has also played a key role in community mobilization.

Like all other District of the province, Chitral has also been divided into seven 'tehsils' for administrative purposes. Each tehsil has its headquarter and Garamchashma, where my school exists, is the tehsil headquarter of Tehsil Lotkoh. According to the census report of the government of Pakistan the population of Tehsil Lotkoh is 37,383 (18,532 males and 18,851 females) with a 34% literacy rate.

The school where I work was started in a prayer-house in 1980 with an initial intake of 77 students, and the self-help building was inaugurated in 1985. By that time the school had ten classrooms, a well-equipped science laboratory, library, headmasters' office and a staff room. At present 396 students are enrolled in the school.

It is said that well begun is half done, but in my case, unfortunately, I had to start with a terrible experience. I joined the school on August 5, 2002 and was taken to a local police station for giving financial benefit to my students.

According to the provincial law pertaining to central examinations all the candidates appearing in the central examinations were supposed to attach four photographs with their registration forms. Just after two days of my arrival in the school, deputy head told me that a Peshawar based mobile photographer was in the village and was offering very cheap rate -- 10 passport size photos for Rs. 60 only. He further told me that a local photographer charges Rs. 115 for only four photographs. Since 95% of our students come from poor families, it was my moral responsibility to first think for students' benefit. About an hour after this discussion the mobile photographer came to our school. At first sight I recognized him because I had met him six years ago when I was the Principal of a private school and he was there pursuing the same business. Since I had trust in him and his rates were very cheap, I agreed with deputy head's suggestion of doing business with this man. He took the photos of the students in school and left after two or three hours. He left the school with the promise that he will come back with the photos and collect the charges on his return.

On Saturday, August 10, 2002, when I was walking in the main road looking for public transport to my home, all of sudden a man appeared from a shop and caught hold of my arm and dragged me inside the shop. He was not a stranger but an old friend of mine. At this point he had suffered financial loss and he was in rage. Inside the shop he abused

me and showed me a report he wanted to give to the police against me. I tried to convince him but he was not ready to listen to me and when he crossed all moral limits I left the shop telling him to do whatever he could. I then had to stand at the van stand waiting for a public transport to leave. When I was still at the van stand, a police constable came there and took me to police station for inquiry. I had to spend about an hour in the police station, answering different questions of the police officials, the reporter, and his friends. Although I won the battle but this kind of situation really disturbed me. After this day, a lobby is continuously working against me and still sending various kinds of reports to different agencies.

At the time of my posting as headmaster, a local young man was the acting head of the school and he was not happy handing over charge to me. With him were working a few very senior teachers who had spent half of their employment tenure in this school and they had their own way of teaching and learning and of running all the affairs of the school. After a week time I found out that the school was being run through self-made rules and regulation. For example, according to the service rule for the teachers, all teachers have to reach school before the general assembly time and leave the school when the last bell is rung. In this school, teachers had developed a bad habit of late arrival. I observed some senior teachers coming to school when half time of their first lesson was over and leave the school at their own will. According to the school service rule, teachers have ten casual leaves in a calendar year and our teachers used them all up in the first quarter of the year. In order to save on casual leaves, our teachers had developed cooperative leave system. What this meant was that teachers would avail leave but their colleagues would mark them as being present in the teacher attendance register or leave the space blank till next day when the absent teachers would sign it personally.

I also observed teachers sitting in the staff room while their students waiting for them in their own classrooms. Another problem with the teachers was that they were not ready to spend even eighty percent of their time in their classes. They would come out after ten or fifteen minutes and join each other in the veranda to discuss family problems.

Under the rules Urdu and English languages should be the medium of instruction but I never saw teachers or students using Urdu language, leave aside English. Again, students were being treated like animals and their interest were never being taken into consideration.

The school library had a big lock in its door and was being used as a store for waste materials like broken furniture. The students remember last using the library about one and half years earlier when another PDT, Jannat Mubarak, was the head of the school

but it had been declared as a prohibited area for the students after her transfer from the school. When I asked my predecessor about the causes of the non-functional status of the library he told me that during ex-head's [PDT] tenure when the library was functional, many books were stolen and damaged by the students and thus, it had been closed to avoid any further loss.

Like the library, co-curricular or extra-curricular activities like quizzes, debates, parents' days or National day's celebrations had also been banned on the pretext that such activities waste teachers and students' time. There was a Master/Slave relationship among teachers and students of the school. The whole environment of the school was threatening the self-respect of the students.

The community living around the school has its own norms. Though they have full authority to interfere in the affairs of the school, they respect teachers at the cost of their children's future. They are happy because they have a high school at their doorsteps but what the school really does is not their business.

For example, since 1997, the students of this particular school have been appearing in Secondary School Certificate Exams conducted under the control of Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education Peshawar but when you look at the official result gazette you won't see even three students passing their exams with an A-grade. Teachers would blame parents for poor results and parents would put the responsibility on the teachers but they never took their concerns to the management because majority of the teachers belong to the same area where the school exists and the community member don't want to make them angry by complaining against them. Since I had just graduated from AKU-IED and had brighter ideas about teaching and learning, this situation was really embarrassing for me.

After taking charge from the ex-head I held meetings with the teachers and Members of the School Management Committee in order to share my ideas about the future of the school and learn their views. The teachers were really satisfied with their teaching and students learning. They would easily put the responsibility of poor quality on variety of factors like large classes of diverse learning groups, lack of resources and parents' carelessness. They were not ready to talk about teachers' responsibilities in helping students to improve their ability. In such an adverse situation it was useless to intervene in the established norms of the teachers. So, I decided not to make any kind of intervention in their affairs.

After consultation with teachers I started teaching English to the students of class 6th, 8th and 9th. I was not happy with the prevailing situation of the school but was silent in order to familiarize with the teachers and students before doing any kind of intervention in their affairs. I used to see students and teachers coming to school with long sticks for the purpose of punishing the students. I asked the teachers to stop beating students. Majority of the teachers resisted this small decision and told me that once we stop physical punishment, none of the students will open their books at home. Anyhow, I put ban on the use of sticks in classrooms. To implement the ban properly I snatched many sticks from the hands of students and teachers. In this part of the world teachers still use a stick as a resource and they feel very bad if they go to classes without anything to hit the students. I knew the teachers would not leave their practices easily so I told them that I shall not use stick in any of my three classes and we shall compare the results at the end of the year.

Looking at the annual result sheet I learnt a lesson that abrupt change had spoiled my students. For example, in Class 6, twenty-nine out of forty-one students and in Class 8, twelve out of thirty-one had failed their English paper. Luckily all the forty-one students of Class 9 had passed their English paper. It shows that in lower classes the students respond to punishment and when they go to high classes they understand that they have to work anyways. I was happy with the results because I had taught my students with love and honour.

In order to release the prevailing tension in the school, I suggested celebrating Quaid-e-Azam's anniversary. Again, my idea didn't sound good to some senior teachers but some assured me of extending their help. Since major repair work was going on in the school, we organized the program in the garden of one of the community members. Parents of students and other members of the community participated in the program. Students presented a colourful program and were appreciated by the participants. The Deputy District Nazim of District Chitral was the chief guest and he gifted Rupees ten thousand to the school. The school management committee used this money for maintenance purposes. My key opponent, who had reported against me in the police station, was among the audience. At the end of the program he came up on the stage and appreciated the students' performance but burst out at me in front of the large gathering. I remained calm and patient and didn't react at all. After the program, the chief guest and the members of the school management committee appreciated my cool behaviour.

It is said that misfortune never comes alone. A team of senior bureaucrats from the provincial capital paid a surprise visit to the school while all the students and teachers

were in busy in the program. Some community members and labourers working in the school told them about the program but they left in a rage. After two weeks they sent a threatening letter saying,

In spite of prior information you closed the school and when the inspection team arrived at your institution, they found the school was closed. The Board has taken a serious notice of it. You have neither insulted the Board Inspection team, but have also not obeyed the rules/regulations. Therefore, according to Board's Calendar the Board has the right to reconsider the provisional Recognition granted to your institution.

It was a critical situation because the future of seventy-four students was at stake. Although they didn't cancel the registration, they changed our examination centre. My opponents spread a rumour in the community that the centre was changed because I failed to entertain the Boards' officials. I had to cope with these and all similar situations with a smiling face -- an important lesson I had learnt from AKU-IED.

Poor performance of the students in the central examination was one of the reasons of my posting in this particular school. The institution had expectations that I might be helpful in improving the results. This was an important and difficult issue but I accepted it as a challenge. I held a series of meetings with teachers, students and parents to find out the reasons of poor results and to find a workable solution to the problems. After these meetings I identified the following reasons for the poor performance of the students.

- A: They go to the examination hall without having knowledge of the pattern of the Board's paper
- B: They don't know how to solve papers
- C: Teachers teaching does not match with exam requirements
- D: Students don't get themselves prepared at home

To address these issues we decided to give exam to the students who were appearing in central examinations in April 2003. Question papers were written on the Boards' pattern. Ninety four percent of the students passed this exam. After the exam I went through all the papers to identify some common but major mistakes. I met all the students individually to guide them about paper writing and avoiding very common mistakes that result in low marks. In these meetings I gave targets to the students according to their capacity. For example, I asked five students to work towards an A-grade and ten students to work towards a B-grade. We also held meetings with parents as part of our efforts to improve

the students' results. Local teachers sacrificed their winter vacation and continued the classes.

Annual exam were held in March and April this year in a very tense situation. Since the Board officials were not happy with me for not entertaining them the previous year, they deputed a Board official as an inspector to keep watch on our students.

The results were announced in the second week of June and surprised all the people living in the area. All our students passed, with three students obtaining an A-grade and eleven obtaining a B-grade. It was the best result in the seven-year history of the school and was a day of great happiness for all the students, teachers and community members. I received congratulation letter from the General Manager of AKESP Chitral for the outstanding results.

In five months time I had come to the conclusion that the school affairs were not on the right track and it needed to be put on the right track by introducing new reforms. For this purpose I wrote a School Improvement Plan to share with the teachers. Finally, an important meeting of the staff was convened on April 11, 2003, to discuss the new plan. One senior official from the central office also participated in the meeting as an observer. The plan had two major parts and has been reproduced below.

School Improvement Plan for The Aga Khan School Ovirk, Garamchashma, Chitral.

This Plan contains three parts:

- 1: Academic
- 2: Administrative
- 3: Community Participation

Academic Measures to improve the quality of teaching and learning

Urdu and English would be the academic languages of the school. All the teachers will use Urdu and English simultaneously. They are requested to talk in English among themselves and with students as frequently as possible but usage of Urdu is compulsory.

Follow schedule while giving homework and the most important thing is the proper checking of the students' work and giving proper feedback.

Detention process will be started for the students who do not do their homework or show laziness in the learning process. Under this system one teacher will stay behind after school and spend two hours more with the students so they complete their work and prepare their lessons.

Involve the students in hands on minds on activities in Science lessons and also teach social studies with the help of charts and posters. In teaching of mathematics involve students in each process and make sure that all the students understand the concepts.

Teachers of English and Urdu should teach both the subject as language. It means we should give equal attention to all the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). In the traditional system we focus on only on reading and listening and forget the other two skills.

Decorate the classrooms with students' work and keep on replacing them after two weeks with new charts and posters. This will encourage the students.

Awards and achievement certificates will be given to students who stand first, second and third in primary and middle sections and also in each class. This will create a healthy competition among the students.

Physical punishment must be avoided because it is a criminal act and destroys human dignity.

Class wise Naat and speech competitions should be organized once in a month and inter-school competition will be held quarterly.

I appreciate if teachers could identify weak students in their classes so we may be able to take up the issue with their parents and adopt measures for their improvement.

Teacher should not leave the students unattended even if they are outside.

Use polite language with the students.

Teacher development is another area need to be addressed. For this purpose series of workshops would be organized and participation of teachers will be compulsory.

Headmaster would visit the classes to help teachers in teaching. It should not be taken as a threatening act.

Every teacher should identify difficult concepts and share them with the head teacher. It will be the responsibility of the head teacher to identify facilitators for the workshops.

I would request health staff of the Aga Khan Health Centre for delivering lectures on health topic twice a month.

Writing of reflective journal is really important for self-development of teachers. Write reflective journals about your teaching and share with the head.

Library will start proper functioning from April 15 and teacher should borrow books from the library for reading and also encourage your students towards the same purpose. I would appreciate if teachers make sure that the students who borrow books from the library share something from the books with the rest of the class.

Teachers are also requested to donate books for the school library.

Frequent absentees must be brought into the notice of the head teacher so the matter could be discussed with the parents of the students.

An academic committee comprising of the head teacher and SMC members would be formed to check the work of the teachers and students. They would be authorized to visit the classes and check students' work.

Extra curricular activities must be the regular part of the school.

Teachers should be creative in developing low cost no cost materials.

Administrative Measures

All the staff would follow the following Administrative Rules and Regulations.

Teachers will arrive in school ten minutes before the general assembly time and leave the school when the last bell is rung.

Three times 15 minutes late arrival in school will be counted as full day casual leave. Half an hour leave means half-day leave.

Leaving class unattended will also be counted as half-day leave.

Visiting each other classes unnecessarily is strictly prohibited. If you have any thing to ask from the teacher please knock at the door and wait for the teacher to come out.

Meeting with guests in class time will not be tolerated and therefore, request the guests either to wait till u are free or at least wait till you come out of the class.

Teachers must go back to their classes within two minutes of leaving the first class.

I would appreciate if teachers use library and read books for their development.

Schedule your programs such as congratulations, condolence and other visits after school. Please don't leave school once u sign in the attendance register. Only those female teachers who have babies of less than half a year age and they have no classes can leave after teaching their classes.

All the teachers must attend the general assembly.

Head teacher and members of the academic committee is allowed to visit the classes and observe the teacher. They are authorized to see students work.

Teachers' personal files will be maintained and all their visible mistakes will be noted there. Please keep checking your files on monthly basis.

Submit proper leave application. Teachers can avail two days sick leave without doctor's advice but leaves more than two days must be supported by physician's advice. While applying for exam leave please submit exam date sheet with the application at least three days before the actual date of the commencement of the exams.

Application for maternity leave must be addressed to FEO head but it should go through the headmaster.

No teacher is allowed to send any student on leave without bringing it to the notice of the head teacher.

Teachers must sign the attendance register in the head teacher's office as soon as they arrive in school and also at the time of leaving the school.

Community Participation

Reorganization of the School Management Committee.

Increasing the number of the female members.

Community motivation for access of students to school.

Parents Teachers Associations need to be strengthened.

Water supply for the school.

Appointment of a female deputy convener is important.

The school had its own peculiar culture and changing this culture was not an easy job. After two months of the implementation of the plan I see things changing slowly and gradually. For example, in the initial stage, the teachers felt shy while speaking in Urdu or English but now they use Urdu and English for their conversations. The school culture has changed in terms of using language. Following their teachers, the students also feel confident in speaking Urdu with their teachers and their colleagues. Not only do teachers speak Urdu among themselves but they have also made it part of their classroom teaching. I think it is also a big achievement for all the staff.

The school library, which was out of use for the last two years, has been reactivated since May this year. Students' enthusiasm for borrowing books is worth seeing and students' reflection and the book borrowing register are evidence of that.

Teachers still use physical punishment as a means for effective teaching but in far lesser degree as compared to last year (Students' reflection).

Compared to last year, teachers have now become more disciplined. For example, they take their classes at the proper time and remain in their classes till the end of the lesson. Students' work is properly displayed in the classrooms.

I hope that the impact of all these measures would come out in the form of students' achievement in the ongoing mid-term exams.

In spite of many successes stories, I have not been able to address some of the issues mentioned in the school improvement plan. For instance, due to one reason or the other, no formal steps have been taken for teachers' development. In the early stage of the implementation of this plan one workshop on lesson planning was conducted in May, but the process could not be continued. I wanted to introduce detention process as a source of punishment for the lazy students who do not work at home, but this was not allowed by senior management due to cultural bonds.

I also intended to provide on the spot, regular support to teachers in their classrooms but the extra burden of fee collection didn't allow me to fulfil my promise. In the previous years this responsibility was given to any teacher in the school, but this year the head teachers have been given the responsibility for fee collection and it eats up most of the time of the head teacher. I have also not been able to work with teachers on developing low cost/no cost materials because of the shortage of time and burden of work.

I have been facing lots of challenges during this one year. As mentioned earlier, I was taken to a local police station for doing nothing. Government bureaucrats threatened me with cancellation of the school's registration. In spite of some good work in school, senior management punished me by awarding less annual increment because I had not been able to collect fees from the students. They wanted me to use force for collection of fee which was against my principles. Last month someone wrote a report against me to my senior management. In that report I was blamed for being involved in immoral activities. After investigation the report was found to be false. And this is how I am climbing the ladder of professional development.