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An Integrated Approach to School Development in Northern Areas of Pakistan

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Abstract

I started my career as a primary school teacher working for the Aga Khan Education Service in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. I was one of AKU-IED's first-cohort Professional Development Teachers (PDTs), and was the only course participant from the Northern Areas of Pakistan in the first MEd course. Having completed the MEd degree from AKU-IED, I went back to my parent institution and was assigned the management of 30 schools.

My post-MEd work, which reflects an integrated approach to school development, ranges from conducting professional development programmes for teachers and head teachers, increasing students' voice in school improvement-related decisions, revitalising school management committees, establishing resource centres, to increasing parents' (especially of mothers') involvement in school life. The saga of my work as a PDT portrays both successes and frustrations, and has interesting implications for those who may work under similar social, political and geographic conditions in the Northern Areas, or elsewhere in the country.

My work as a change facilitator for Aga Khan Education Service, the government and the English-medium schools in the Northern Areas was researched and a documentary called 'A New Beginning' was produced by an AKU-IED research assistant (Saeeda Nathu). This documentary presents interesting insights on multigrade teaching issues, community involvement in schools, orientation programmes to the school management committees, and the students' representative councils in schools.

I believe that sharing the significant episodes of this documentary, of 25 minutes, highlighting the achievements and challenges, and showing the school improvement work done in the rural, mountainous Northern Areas might be interesting and professionally helpful for other PDTs facilitating changes in schools.

Thus, I intend to present a paper (with the video) describing both my successes and challenges as a PDT in enacting school improvement in the Northern Areas of Pakistan.

Introduction

Having an emphasis on female education at the core of its mission, the Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKESP), during the last several decades, has been playing a complementary and supplementary role in government's efforts both to provide access and to improve quality of education in the mountainous, rural Northern Areas of Pakistan (Shafa, 2003). Several factors such as the gradual move towards meritocracy, increasing competition for students' admissions in educational institutions and, consequently, parents' interest and involvement in schools resulted in a variety of school improvement intervention by the AKESP. Though there has been more emphasis on enhancing the individual capacity of teachers than improving the collective "change capacity of schools" (Hopkins et al., 2000), AKESP has been, nonetheless, making strategic interventions to address the community's concerns about the quality of teaching and learning in schools. The famous Field-Based Teachers Development Programme (FBTDP), originally designed for and implemented in the Northern Areas since 1983, the Language Enhancement and Achievement Programme (LEAP), the subject-specific and general refresher courses for teachers, and the Learning Supervisors system for on-the-job mentoring of teachers are some of the examples of AKESP's strategic initiatives taken during the last two decades.

The following paper portrays AKESP's intervention for establishing the first Field Education Office (FEO) in Gahkuch in 1996, one of the several AKESP initiatives to decentralize its operations to achieve its goals more efficiently. The aim of FEO Gahkuch was to improve and strengthen management as well as academic support to teachers and, therefore, to work closely with various stakeholders to improve the teaching-learning conditions in schools. Since I was the founding head of the FEO Gahkuch, the paper also presents a Professional Development Teacher's (PDT's) approach, his initiatives and challenges in introducing school improvement activities in the schools falling under the FEO Gahkuch jurisdiction.

The reasons for establishing the FEO at Gahkuch were two-fold: First, the AKES senior management believed that the first experimental FEO needed to be nearer to the central office so that its work could be closely monitored and ongoing support provided, secondly, Gahkuch is the central and easily approachable location for Ishkoman and Punial (two

tehsils of Ghizer district), both of which make one of the four administrative units of the AKES schools. FEO Gahkuch was, therefore, responsible to monitor and provide professional support to 175 teaching staff for almost 5,000 students in 27 schools. Since the roads were not cemented, access to schools consumed a lot of time. For instance, it would take three hours drive from the FEO to reach the remotest school in the Ishkoman valley and, at certain times, schools in various parts of Ishkoman would remain inaccessible because of road blockades.

I, with the help of the field team, which included two education officers, an office assistant and a driver, initiated several school improvement activities in Ishkoman and Punial AKES schools. The brief space here may not permit detail descriptions on each strategy and initiative, therefore, I intend to confine the discussion to what was captured in a documentary called ‘A New Beginning’, made by an AKU-IED research assistant, Saeeda Nathu, while she shadowed me in May 1998 to document the impact of AKU-IED’s MEd programme on school improvement.

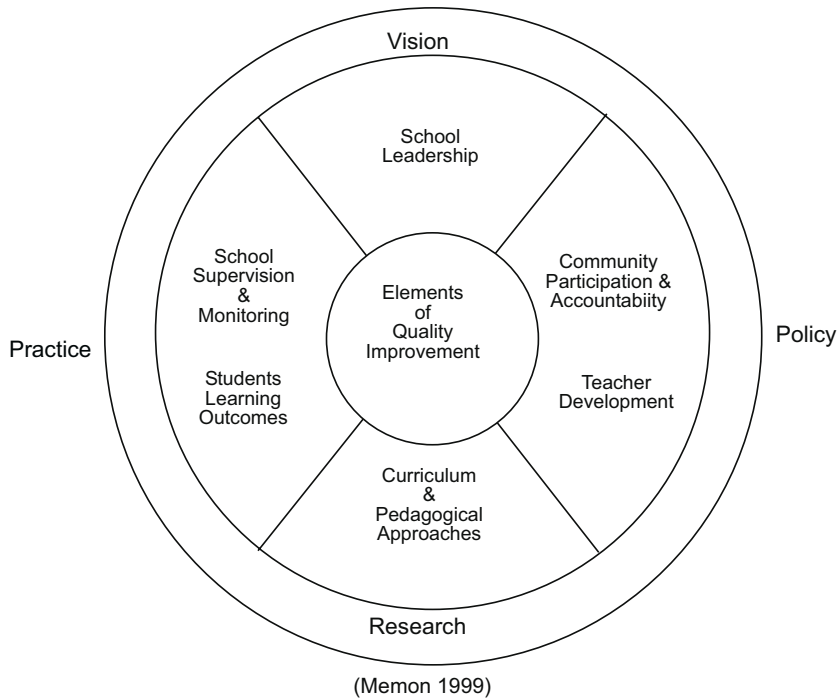
School improvement initiatives of FEO Gahkuch

Schools, as an integral part of the wider society, uninterruptedly influence and are influenced by the external world of schools. In order to address the teaching-learning issues, which make the core of the school improvement process, it is inevitable to simultaneously address the forces emanating from the inside and outside world of schools.. And this is what adds multi-layered complexity to the school improvement process.

Keeping in mind the magnitude of the challenge of making a positive difference in schools, the Field Team (FT) first conducted a needs analysis and gained useful insights from the schools’ staff and the local communities on school improvement matters. The challenges identified were categorized as the “inside-school” and the “outside-school” issues. For instance, lack of morale and motivation of staff, their lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills, problems of physical school plan, and lack of management and leadership skills of headteachers emerged as the major “inside-school” challenges. Whereas lack of parents’ interest in schools, micropolitics among the communities as well as between the communities and AKESP, central office-related issues, and community’s lethargic attitude towards AKESP were some of the examples of the “outside-school” challenges to school improvement.

Based on our experiences of working in the organization and on our ongoing interactions with the various stakeholders, we decided to take an integrated approach to school

development. Our integrated approach to school development closely reflected the following “vibrant model for quality improvement” (Memon, 1999).



Specifically, we extended our efforts to provide teachers and headteachers with ongoing professional support, develop headteachers’ leadership and management skills, take initiatives to improve students’ attendance and their achievement in school, motivate the community representatives on the village education committees (VECs) to work as change agents, and work with parents and other community members (especially with mothers) to increase their awareness and role in schools. Using Memon’s (1999) framework for quality improvement, I now describe some of the major FEO school improvement initiatives.

Curriculum and pedagogical approaches

By introducing teachers to various instructional approaches, we also helped them to develop a broader understanding of the curriculum and enrich the textbooks, where needed. There were various issues related to the curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

For instance, attaining the curriculum objectives was hampered due to lack of teaching and learning resources. Also, schools generally had fewer teachers than the number of classes, thus, curriculum implementation and increasing students' learning time emerged as serious school improvement issues. Consequently, curriculum implementation rather than curriculum enrichment became the priority to be addressed. We took the following initiatives to address these curriculum and teaching-related challenges:

Conducting multigrade teaching courses

In majority of primary and middle schools in the Northern Areas, there are more classes than the number of teachers available to teach those classes. This situation confronts both students and teachers with serious teaching and learning challenges. The multigrade teaching condition, a common phenomenon in numerous developing countries (Shafa, 1995), poses serious problems when teachers lack knowledge and skills to effectively deal with "more classes than the number of teachers available."

Upon my return from AKU-IED, I conducted multigrade teaching workshops for the primary and middle school teachers in various parts of the Northern Areas. Noting the effectiveness of these courses, the AKESP management decided to modify its Field-Based Teachers' Development Programme (FBTDP) and made the multigrade teaching course an integral part of the FBTDP. It was when AKESP was providing teachers multigrade courses through FBTDP, one of the World Bank missions, making a needs analysis to launch the 'Northern Areas Education Project' (NAEP), bought into the multigrade course idea and recommended to the government education department to follow the AKESP's multigrade course model for the NAEP school improvement initiatives. Since then numerous primary and middle school teachers representing the three education systems (government, AKESP, and the private English-medium schools) have benefited from the multigrade courses.

Introducing cooperative learning in schools

Although pedagogical concepts such as "group work" or "activity-based teaching" were not really new in the Northern Areas, introduction of cooperative learning structures immediately attracted teachers' attention and became a popular and oft-used teaching strategy. Cooperative learning components such as "positive interdependence", "individual accountability" and "social skills" (Kagan, 1992) sparked an enthusiasm in teachers because these components helped them improve students' interest, motivation and their involvement in learning activities.

Introduction of cooperative learning structures in schools proved to be an appropriately grafted strategy as it also coincided with and reinforced the rural development strategies (for instance, using the collective wisdom for conflict resolution, decision-making and problem-solving) by other Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) institutions such as the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) (AKRSP, 1984). It seemed that the AKDN social change agencies took an integrated approach to improve the living conditions of the people of the mountainous, rural Northern Areas. Introduction of cooperative learning was thus a right initiative at the right time in the context of the Northern Areas.

Improving students' learning outcomes

Students' learning is at the core of all school improvement initiatives and, therefore, it closely reflects the quality and professionalism of teachers and the overall performance of schools. Because the teaching approaches in the FEO Gahkuch schools characterized the "transmission-mode", students developed the rote learning skills rather than reflecting on raising questions and understanding the concepts. Also, there were no opportunities for students involvement in school life, like talent shows, to improve the teaching-learning conditions in schools.

We took several initiatives to improve students' interest and their motivation in schools to enhance their learning outcomes. Two of the major initiatives are described below:

Establishing teacher resource centres

In order to address the lack of teaching resource issue, the FT encouraged schools to develop and preserve teaching aids in schools. Teachers were facilitated in developing teaching aids from the low-cost and no-cost material, and schools were also helped with financial resources to buy the most-needed teaching aids. In some schools, the local community assisted in establishing resource centres by donating various furniture items such as tables, chairs and cupboards, whereas in other cases they came forward for doing manual work like repairing and whitewashing classrooms.

Resource centres preserved various kinds of resources, including subjects-related teaching and learning resources, models, charts, maps and artefacts, received from some of the community members. Some resource centres had specific Learning Corners, where teachers kept subject-specific teaching aids. In multigrade situations, teachers sent students of a particular class to these Learning Corners whenever they remained busy

teaching other grades.

Students' representative councils (SRCs)

The primary goal of the SRCs was to increase students' voice in school improvement-related decisions, and provide them an opportunity to “make thoughtful choices and adjustments” (Grace, 1992). Establishing an SRC in a school also provided students an opportunity to democratically elect their representatives. One student with the majority of votes from each class was elected as a member to the SRC. Number of SRC members varied from six, nine, to eleven for the primary, middle, and secondary schools respectively. The SRCs contributed to schools' improvement by:

- Assisting in teaching, especially when there would be no teachers to attend classes;
- Establishing a welfare fund to assist the needy students;
- Keeping an eye on and ensuring the physical cleanliness of school premises;
- Acting as monitors and maintaining discipline in classes;
- Playing their role to improve students' attendance;
- Assisting in arranging various events and celebrations at schools.

The SRCs were also given opportunities to receive and brief visitors on the working of schools. In cases where students remained absent for longer than three days, SRC members went to the absent students' homes and motivated them to attend the schools. In other cases, the SRC members washed the hands and faces and combed the hair of younger students who came to school untidy. In certain schools the SRCs had a box which contained some basic necessities such as towels, soaps, combs, hair oil, pencils, pens and erasers etc. Both teachers and SRCs briefed students to take stationery items from the SRC box whenever they forgot to bring or lost theirs, and return them at the end of the school day.

Besides establishing resource centres and students representative councils, the FT made wide-ranging efforts to improve students learning. For example, during our class visits we found that an overwhelming number of students had managed to pass their examinations without necessarily having the knowledge and understanding of the key concepts, which they should have learnt in the previous grades. This posed serious challenges to teachers in helping students understand and learn various concepts, thus, this situation required remedial teaching arrangements. As a result of our dialogues with teachers and headteachers, several teachers in schools volunteered to run remedial teaching classes after school hours. In some other schools, additional free coaching was made available to students

during the summer and winter vacations. Teachers' additional, volunteer efforts to provide coaching not only improved school results, but they also brought a positive change in the parents' and community's perception of the AKES schools.

Moreover, we held frequent conversations with students to inform them about the opportunities and challenges that they might encounter in their future educational endeavors. By doing so we helped them raise their motivation and give more time to their studies even after school hours. There were clear indications (e.g. parents' and teachers' feedback) of students' increased motivation in their studies. For instance, because of our ongoing dialogues with students, they utilized their time from and to schools to have educational conversations with their friends, or to learn concepts from their books. While students taking their cattle for grazing in their gardens or doing their household work (taking care of their siblings) showed interest in their books.

Community participation and accountability

In order to ensure holistic development of students, schools need to work in close collaboration with parents and the school community. "School-community relations involve working with community councils, community development associations, parent-teacher associations, and other local organizations that have an interest in the schools" (Chapman, 2003:12). Community participation in school life is getting an increasing recognition worldwide and the school improvement research is replete with evidence of community's positive impact on school improvement (Bray, 2000). The AKESP, too, has long realized the significance of the community's role in the promotion of education. Community, therefore, has a say at the various levels of the AKESP management to formulate policies that are in line with the organizational goals and the community's expectations.

However, developing a sustainable system for community participation is much easier said than done, because it requires parents and the community members to see themselves as partners with the AKESP and also accept equal responsibility for the access, quality, and sustainability of educational initiatives. Our frequent interactions with teachers and parents reflected the fact that communities generally looked to schools for their children's education, and would not play an active role in promoting and improving education. We took several initiatives to enhance community participation in schools, and specifically focused on the following strategies:

Involving mothers in their children's schooling

The need for the multi-dimensional development of students requires that teachers should involve key people having an influence on children's life and, thereby, on their schooling. Therefore, "partnership between parents and teachers has become enshrined in educational policies" (Reay, 2000), both here at home and abroad. Since fathers, in the context of the Northern Areas, usually remain outside home for various reasons (attending offices and working in farms), mothers, generally housewives, have a significant role to play in their children's education. Realizing their critical role in improving schooling, the FT took initiatives to improve mothers' understanding of their children's education and, thereby, increased their involvement in school activities.

For the first time in the Northern Areas we initiated the idea of celebrating Mothers' Day in schools, where we conducted sessions on how both educated and uneducated mothers could contribute to their children's education. In several instances, mothers contributed in kind and cash for school improvement. In other cases, they volunteered for manual work in repair and maintenance of schools. In sum, mothers' involvement in schools considerably improved their image of the AKESP schools, and helped narrow down the previously existing gap between schools and parents.

Revitalizing the Village Education Committees (VECs)

Two groups of people jointly manage the AKESP operations: First, the honorary managers (right from the Chairman, AKESP, to the VEC members at the school level) are selected for three years and they provide voluntary support to facilitate and decide on the strategic direction for the AKESP; secondly, the professional managers (right from the Chief Executive Officer to the teachers), who give their full-time, professional knowledge and skills to help the institution achieve its goals. The VEC, formerly known as the School Management Committee (SMC), consists of a certain number of parents and the head teacher, and is expected to provide honorary and community-related support to schools. The size of VEC varies according to the size and status of the school. Since the school headteacher works as the secretary, and in case of high schools two to three more teachers are selected as members on the committee, the VEC brings both the professionals and the honorary workers closer together to address the school-related issues.

The needs analysis reflected that the honorary set-up in general and the VECs in particular had ambiguity about their role. Many volunteers saw their role as an authority rather than a responsibility. For instance, instead of working as community educators and

leaders to help parents understand their role in their children's education, many honorary workers tried to step into the work of professionals: they tried to influence the appointments, transfers and promotions of staff. In other cases, some of them tried to do academic monitoring rather than providing community-related support to schools. At the FEO Gahkuch, we made efforts to revitalize the VECs: First, by creating a sense of the need for collaborative efforts and, secondly, by conducting numerous orientation programmes for the honorary workers to help them understand their role as community leaders. As a result, there was notable improvement in how they enacted their role as community educators.

School leadership

School improvement process is inextricably linked with school leadership. Sammons et al. (1995), for instance, see leadership as one of the most important characteristics of schools and argue that there is little evidence of effective schools with weak leadership. Traditionally, discussion on school leadership had a focus on headteachers alone, but with the newly emerging trends in school improvement anyone (be it a student, a teacher, or a management staff) who influences others to use their creative skills for school improvement can be a school leader (Barth, 1990). At the FEO Gahkuch we conducted sessions for headteachers on leadership development, and particularly emphasized the idea of shared leadership in schools. In addition, these leadership development sessions focused on improving headteachers' coaching and mentoring role in school improvement.

The impact of headteachers' leadership skills was visible from their various school improvement initiatives. For instance, many of the headteachers encouraged a culture of shared leadership by increasing teachers, students, and parents participation in school improvement-related decisions. The SRCs, various committees of teachers, and the VECs involvement in school were the signs of headteachers' shared leadership. However, though they showed interest and vigour, not all headteachers equally understood the need and philosophy of shared leadership. There were some headteachers who were politically motivated, expecting immediate rewards (good grades in their performance appraisal, promotions or increase in their salary) for their school improvement efforts. It was an enormous challenge to help such heads to understand the need to take school improvement initiatives, without linking them to personal and material gains.

School supervision and monitoring

Though the supervision and monitoring of schools needs to be improvement-oriented,

teachers in the Northern Areas seem to have developed negative connotations about the supervision and monitoring. They generally saw supervisors as “policemen” visiting schools to find weaknesses and, as a result, to penalize teachers and headteachers for their shortcomings. On the other hand, supervisory staff, too, believed in their “seniority” and “authority” to take actions against their subordinates. Replacing this top-down, command-driven system of monitoring with supervision for professional growth and improvement emerged as a huge challenge. The shift in the supervision style meant bridging the gap and creating trust between the FEO team and the school staff. It also required the supervisory staff to play their role as caring professional guides rather than harassing teachers for their shortcomings.

In switching over to a more professional and more improvement-oriented style of supervision, we took various trust-building measures. For instance, we repeatedly communicated to teachers that we were there to help them in their professional (and personal) challenges. Also, we avoided surprise visits to schools and to classes, rather we made negotiated, pre-planned visits. We also introduced and encouraged the style of having pre- and post-observation conferences with teachers (and headteachers) both to determine a focus for the visits and to share and reflect on the observations. By focusing more on their successes, achievements, and potential for improvement, we were able to create a situation where teachers took the lead to invite us to their classes to show us their achievements. Teachers also phoned us or sent us letters, requesting us to visit them and address their content-specific challenges.

Generally, our school-visit model included the following activities: For the planned visits, we went to schools before the morning assembly. Observed teachers’ lessons during the entire school day (8-9 lessons) and shared feedback to individual teachers after the school hours. We then conducted a professional development session on a common topic of interest for all teachers and in the late afternoon met the VEC to address school- and community-related issues, if any. The issues that required meetings with the VECs would be about students’ tuition fee, school repair and maintenance, celebrating various events at schools, absenteeism, and visitors to schools.

Conclusion

Is the foregoing narrative a success story of a PDT’s school improvement initiatives? The answer is NO. I worked as the head of the FEO, in a fairly autonomous environment for decision-making and for initiative taking for more than two years, before I was transferred to the central office. Undoubtedly, our work style (that of playing a mentor’s

and a community developer's role) had made a significant difference: it improved teachers, students and community's image of the AKESP schools, motivated teachers to put in more time and efforts in their professional obligation, decreased teachers and students absenteeism, enhanced students' sense of ownership of schools and, above all, it helped narrow down the gap between schools and communities. Though I don't have any handy, hard evidence, but based on my interaction with various people, I have an impression that most of the school improvement initiatives taken during our two years have died down. It would require a systematic investigation to find out why the school improvement initiatives, which once sparked an interest and motivation within the school community, withered away.

Although some of the working conditions remained unaltered, several of them changed. One of the members on the core FT (of three people) still works in the same FEO. The VECs and other community leaders were changed after completing their three years and new people came on board. More importantly, the central office leadership, which encouraged us to take creative steps for school improvement, changed which, I believe, further compounded the challenges for the new FEO team to keep the momentum of school improvement.

However, the lessons learnt from this rise and fall of the school improvement enthusiasm and dedication of the people involved have significant implications both for educational managers and for the educational change facilitators. For instance:

- School improvement initiatives require considerable time, constant tending and ongoing reflection by all concerned people in order for the changes to take roots;
- Change of key personnel adversely affects the process of school improvement;
- Even when people seem enthused and take interest in school improvement, they may not yet deeply believe in the change process, and, thus, may take a U-turn when the forces for change dissipate;
- Each stakeholder in the schooling of the children (whether literate or illiterate, poor or rich, male or female, young or old) has a very significant role in school improvement;
- Resources help and accelerate but cannot block the process of school improvement. Right attitudes and strategic interventions are more important than material resources;
- Without a change-loving and improvement-oriented mind at the top of the hierarchy, there is the least likeliness of improvement at the lower level ;
- Sustainability of school improvement also demands improving the immediate wider world of which the school is a part.

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