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CHANGING THE INDIVIDUAL AND WORLD AROUND HER: A CASE STUDY OF FEMALE TEACHER FROM RURAL SINDH

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Abstract

As part of a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), AKU-IED implemented a research study that aimed to understand the Impact of AKU-IED Capacity Building Initiatives for NGOs/CBOs in Education in Sindh. This paper will present some of our findings on the nature of impact of the program on individual course participant.

The paper will present the case study of Mariam¹, a female teacher working in a school managed by an NGO in rural Sindh. She participated in a Certificate in Education: Primary Education Program organized for NGOs. After completing the certificate course Mariam was also selected for the Advanced Diploma in Education Course. Mariam begun her professional career from a donor-supported community-managed girls' primary school as its teacher and, within a very short time, she was appointed as the Principal of the same school. Thus, she gradually moved ahead and attained a pivotal position in her organization.

In order to study impact of the teacher development program on an individual, Mariam was interviewed along with her colleagues and NGO representatives several times over the period of two years with intervals of six months.

The professional development course had a multifaceted impact on Mariam's personality and her professional practice. She brought changes in her behavior and attitude with her colleagues, students and community; therefore she became friendlier and tried to interact with and include others in school improvement plans. Mariam's professional practice,

¹ This case study is based upon the information collected through Mariam, her colleagues, supervisors, and her classroom observations over the period of time. Bits of information regarding advance diploma program have been received from Mariam in semi-informal settings or through her reflection papers. Names of the respondents have been changed and names of NGO and location have not been revealed to meet with the ethical requirements.

such as teaching, planning and decision-making, and managing and monitoring the school, also seem to be significantly enhanced and she seems to have emerged as a good teacher and manager. Over a period of time a change in her status has been observed as she has developed herself as a teacher educator along with teaching responsibilities.

We will also try to explore factors, particularly program-related factors, which contributed towards the change process and supported the CP in creating impact from her initiatives.

Introduction

This case study of a female teacher, Mariam, has been developed under USAID Project-4 “Documentation & dissemination of ‘Best Practices’ & ‘Lessons Learned’ in the Community Managed and Financed Education Initiatives for Programme and Policy Advocacy”. This project comprises of five different studies. Study-5 aimed at documenting the impact of AKU-IED’s initiatives on individual course participants and NGOs’ practices.

Interviews and classroom observations were conducted as part of the data collection. The interviews were conducted at the beginning of the program and immediately after completion of the program. Further, two more interviews with intervals of six months were also conducted of Mariam, her colleague teachers, and the NGO head. In addition, classroom observations were made on each follow-up visit, and assignments and other documents were also reviewed. We also got the chance to chat with Mariam informally and a few of the information notes from these informal sittings are also used to develop the case study.

Mariam's profile

Mariam is a young female Pakistani teacher who has been working in an NGO school in rural Sindh for the last five years. She joined this school recently as a teacher and now also performs the role of teacher educator. Earlier she worked as a teacher and then as the principal in a community-managed girls’ primary school supervised by the same NGO.

Mariam belongs to a middle class family. Her father retired a few years ago from a low-profile job in a government hospital. Her mother is a housewife. Mariam has five sisters and a younger brother.

Mariam's highest academic qualification is a Master's degree in Urdu. She was educated in government institutions in her native city and was considered an average student during her academic life. Within her family, education was always given the highest importance-her father received education up to the primary level and, although her mother has not received any formal education, she was taught the Quran and therefore was able to read and write Urdu fairly well. Mariam's three sisters were educated up to a Master's level and the other two are currently studying in higher secondary classes while her only brother is studying in grade VI. Her parents always supported their girls morally in their educational pursuits and even helped them in doing homework during their early schooling. According to Mariam, although her parents were not able to support the children to a great extent academically, they contributed a lot to their education. She narrated that:

As my mother was taught Quran, she could read and write Urdu easily. She used to help us in study till grade five. She was really concerned about our education. Similarly my father would help me in solving math sums. They were not very educated but always gave value to our education. (Teacher's interview Before the course)

Mariam began her career as a teacher in 1998 when the NGO called her for an interview and selected her as a teacher. Unfortunately, some other teacher was appointed in her place without any intimation to Mariam. When Mariam found out, she was annoyed and decided to fight for her right and, after a few days' deliberations, she was finally appointed as the teacher. Within a short span of time she proved herself to be a hardworking and active teacher and was quickly promoted to the position of Principal by the same management committee members who had initially opposed her appointment as a teacher.

It is usually observed that the teaching profession is given little importance in the Pakistani context but, for Mariam, joining this profession was not merely incidental but an informed decision. In a discussion about her joining the teaching profession, Mariam revealed her keenness to become a teacher since her early student life. Her enthusiasm had been so deep that, as a child, she always acted as a teacher whenever played with her friends. She recollects a memory of her childhood in which she reflects her enthusiasm for the teaching profession in these words:

When I was in grade three, my mother and I went to visit my uncle in another province. One day, early in the morning, we went out for a walk. Few steps ahead I saw a ground outside the school where the children were assembled, singing a poem. I stood a while, then asked from my

uncle ‘we don’t sing this poem in our school...!’ My uncle said “this is not a poem, this is ‘Dua’ (prayer) here we pray to the God before singing the national anthem”. I memorized that prayer and thought when I become a teacher I would recite this prayer in my school. Ever since my childhood I have been very keen to become a teacher. (Teacher's interview after a year of the course)

Moreover, Mariam thinks that teaching and learning is a very interesting process because through this, one can increase one’s knowledge base. Perhaps due to her anticipated decision, she was passionate about her profession and school. Her enthusiasm and passion always dominated her mind and she used to think about school development even in her spare time at home. However, Mariam's earlier notions regarding teaching and learning mainly originated through her own experience of learning in her student age, when she was taught through conventional methods in which the learner is not given much value and is asked to read the textbook and learn from whatever is written in it.

Before coming to AKU-IED, Mariam had attended various training sessions on different aspects of teaching conducted by the NGO. She acknowledges her learning from these trainings and, according to her, these trainings introduced her to teachers’ development. Although she considered herself to be a good teacher because of her pervious training she still aspired towards this training because she felt that it would improve and update her prior knowledge in educational issues such as curriculum, syllabus and educational issues. Another motivational factor was her attachment with the school and her wanting to bring about many changes and developments.

... I love my school and I always use to think about its development. I want to improve the quality of education, as our country needs good citizens. This is only possible through good teachers, a good teacher being one who possesses the knowledge and skills. This training might help me in gaining new knowledge and skills (Teacher's interview before the course).

Mariam’s was selected for the certificate in education course after an interview by a team from AKU-IED. She was interviewed in her hometown and reported that before the interview she was apprehensive of what might be asked of her, even though she had undergone an interview for her job before. She was worried about the impressions she would make on the interviewing team who arrived from Karachi.

When she had first found out about the course and wanted to take the interview, she had informed her parents in advance that if she would be selected for this course she would have to go to Karachi. Initially, when she was selected for the course, her mother opposed it and was reluctant to give permission and saying “it was not possible to go Karachi for two months and live in a hostel with strange people”. But her father supported her and gave her permission to attend the course.

My father supported me a lot, he said to my mother that ‘we have spent our time and now this is their age. Let them do what they want, if they go along with the modern age, it will be beneficial for them.’ (Teacher's interview before the course)

It was the first time that Mariam had attended a course of this length and that too outside her hometown and away from her family. Coming to Karachi and living in a hostel was indeed a tough experience for Mariam. AKU-IED gave Mariam her first exposure to an international environment. According to her, she was extremely afraid of being at AKU-IED and thousands of questions arose in her mind as how she would survive in a strange environment.

She took time to settle down and socialized with her colleagues and, slowly and gradually, built up her confidence and overcame her fear. She started participating in class activities. She mainly credited facilitators' efforts that made the environment friendly for every course participant. The facilitators did not impose their knowledge but asked students to share and reflect on their practice in their own classroom. Her prior knowledge also helped her to gain momentum in the class. For example, she actively participated in the discussion regarding the “role of community in school”, as she belonged to a community school and found it easy to take part in this discussion.

With her participation in the course she acknowledged the learning from the course. She says:

I learned more from this course than any teacher trainings I received earlier and I must recommend this course for all of my colleague teachers, it is especially useful for who don't know about the responsibilities of a teacher and the objectives of teaching and teach in a conventional way, merely spending the time in the class and coming back home.

I didn't know that we would be taught about lesson planning and multi

grade teaching, I just thought that there would be things about teaching and curriculum and the training would be limited up to teaching of textbooks only. However the amazing thing of this course I found was that we learnt, understood and then practiced which helped us in retaining every thing that we learnt. I felt as though I was learning mathematics, science and social studies first time. (Teacher's interview after the course)

After completion of the course, she returned to her school as a knowledgeable and confident teacher who was filled enthusiasm and curiosity. Immediately after rejoining her school Mariam was called by AKU-IED for an interview for the Advanced Diploma in Education (ADE) programme. At that time she was in two minds: on the one hand she had developed an interest in attending the ADE programme; but, on the other hand, she was more interested in first applying the earlier course's learning in her school. According to her:

I wanted to attend the diploma course only to improve the quality of education of my school so that my school can compete with other school of the vicinity. But if I had attended another course immediately after, I would not have been able to apply my earlier course learning. (Teacher after her selection in advance diploma)

Here enthusiasm triggered her into implementing the course learning and she started working on school development plans with the help of her colleagues and, over a period of almost one-and-a-half years, she got to work on the different plans. In October 2002, she was again selected for the same ADE programme and she again got the chance to come to AKU-IED. According to her, she had seen a great change in her teaching after attending the original course and therefore had dreamed of being selected for the ADE programme so that she would learn more about teaching. In her words:

It became my wish to attend the advanced diploma because when I implemented my earlier course learning in school I achieved better results. This pushed me to learn more ... if I hadn't have selected for this course, I'd have thought that I have missed out on a great opportunity ... I was so happy when I was selected ... (Teacher's interview after her selection in advance diploma).

Changes in Mariam's life after studying at AKU-IED

In this section of this paper we would like to discuss the multifaceted impact of AKU-IED professional development courses on Mariam's personality and her professional practice. After attending the course there was a major change in Mariam's attitude towards her colleagues and management committee. She developed patience and became more polite and friendly with them. She adopted a strategy of teamwork through which she involved her colleagues in planning for school development. For this she created an environment where all teachers could share and discuss their problems related to teaching and learning. Mariam treated her teachers on an equal basis and preferred to treat them as friends rather than taking on role of authority or a Principal. She says:

Now I have learned that if we want to work together compatibly, we have to develop equality, patience and endurance. If we behave appropriately with our colleagues, students and management, we will be able to gain their trust. When there is mutual trust, things can be managed smoothly (Teacher's interview after six months of the course).

Mariam has also considerably changed her attitude towards the students. She gives more importance to child centered learning in her teaching and tries to take into account students' problems and psychology. Her colleagues also reported this change in Mariam's attitude and also adopted the child centered point of view.

Changes in Mariam's attitude and behavior are mainly attributed to her learning at AKU-IED where she got several opportunities to re-conceptualize and rethink every aspect of her life. This helped her to reflect upon her actions before actually carrying them out. For instance, on one occasion, when Mariam became very emotional during the class, she was advised by the facilitators to reflect upon her attitude. This made her realize that she should control her emotions.

Mariam had also developed the habit of reflection and it was found that she mediated her enactments by her reflections. The changes in personal domain (i.e. domain of beliefs, knowledge and attitude) of Mariam led to her changes in the domain of practice. When she reflected on the areas of the school that needed improvement, she involved her colleagues in every move. After considering and discussing various areas of improvement with them she realized that she needed to focus upon lesson planning, which she considered pivotal to the rest of the other academic factors.

After the training, when I rejoined the school, I found that there are many areas that needed improvement. After reflecting and sharing ideas with my colleague teachers, we decided that lesson planning would help in improving other areas of school. Although we did plan our lessons before the training, the objectives of the lessons were not highlighted. Even the method of lesson planning was restricted to topic, subject and strategies. This planning did not include assessment of the children's learning and their difficulties. During the course at IED when we practiced the lesson planning we focused upon the learners and their learning, objectives and methods of teaching (Teacher's interview after the course).

In her interview, Mariam reported that, initially, when she wanted to start work on bringing changes in implementing the lesson planning her teachers could not understand as they had not considered the importance of lesson objectives and students' assessment so deeply before. However, they showed their eagerness to work together with her. As Mariam had learned the application of effective lesson planning during the course, she was quite confident that she would be able to explain the same to her colleagues. Thus she planned to conduct 15 sessions, of one hour each, on lesson planning on a daily basis after the school time.

... likewise I started to take one session of an hour daily after the school time. Three of the five teachers took more time to learn because they were unable to implement their prepared lesson plan in their teaching accordingly. While the other two that had managed to implement their required changes continued to guide the other colleagues and assisted them in implementing the change (Teacher after six months of the course).

After the initial implementation of these practices, teachers still had problems in achieving their lessons' objectives due to the shortage of time. They rectified the problem in their discussions and mutually decided to increase the length of time for each period from 35 minutes to 60 minutes. In order to adjust the subjects according to the new timetable, they decided to teach only four major subjects twice a week and other minor subjects were to be covered under these major subjects. For instance, language and social studies were to be incorporated into a broader topic of general knowledge.

Mariam and her colleagues reported this experiment as a success in many ways for school development. For example, teachers started to reflect on their teaching practice and they were able to identify their teaching weaknesses and the lesson objectives and students

assessment were more focused upon. Eventually a collegial and friendly environment in the school became apparent where everyone started sharing and learning. Moreover, teachers also reported better students outcomes, that is, the skills of reading and writing improved, they participated more in class activities, responded to questions quickly and even asked the teacher questions.

In response to interviews and during informal discussions Mariam referred to several different elements of her school environment that supported her in the process of professional development. These included: support from schoolteachers, an active management committee and the availability of resources. In addition some other reasons also accounted for Mariam's practice such as her being in a position of authority combined with her self-initiating nature. All these were invaluable in helping her implementing the new learning reforms.

Mariam in her class

After attending the professional development course, Mariam had become an innovative and reflective teacher. It was observed during interviews of Mariam, her colleagues and NGO supervisors that she had shifted from a conventional teaching approach that included the use of chalkboard, individual seatwork, and explanation to whole class. It has already been mentioned that Mariam used to share course learning with her colleagues before introducing any aspect of school or classroom development. Unlike the lesson planning, group and pair work were introduced for the first time in her school and she included these methods in her lessons plans. She found them to be very beneficial in terms of enhancing student learning. She reflects that:

If a child is weak in writing, I seat him/ her in the group and encourage him/ her to write ... 'your fellow students will guide you'. In this way the child improves his/her writing and develops a sense of competition and works hard. As a group dynamics, all three kinds of learners i.e. slow, average and intelligent develop themselves altogether. Likewise in pair work I mix up the slow and fast learners in pairs. By this, students feel very happy; they listen each other's lesson and correct each other. Thus both children benefit from their teamwork (Teacher's interview after 6 months of the course)

Similarly she also adopted other teaching strategies such as improving language skills of children by combining compulsory and minor subjects of language, story reading,

role play, presentations, use of low/no cost material, activity based teaching and introduction of the Dalton method (Under this method students are kept free to work in the class on different tasks and the teacher's role is to guide and supervise them). A description of one of Mariam's classroom observations shows that:

The teacher divided the whole class into six groups with four students in each group. She asked each group to go out of the class and bring some object. After a while each group came back with different objects in their hands like storybook, marker, toothpaste box, biscuit box and chalk. Teacher distributes plain paper among them and instructs each group to draw the object and write some sentences about benefits of the objects. The teacher keeps moving around in the class and guiding them [teacher is very polite and encouraging to all the groups]. She asks the groups one by one to come forward and present their findings... (Teacher's classroom observation on Feb 7, 2002).

The introduction of these changes was not limited only to Mariam's class but was also observed on a school level. Mariam's colleagues also found these methods very helpful in their teaching. During a group interview they shared that:

We appreciate the introduction of new teaching methods in our school because we feel that these methods are helpful for our teaching. The Impact of these methods is also seen on students' confidence; they work in an environment that is conducive to learning, where child-to-child learning also takes place (Teacher's interview after a year of the course).

In order to provide continuous support to teachers for their professional growth, Mariam found peer coaching to be a successful strategy along with such other strategies. For this she started with one teacher and gradually extended the practice to other teachers. According to Mariam, this strategy is more successful in the context where teachers do not get opportunities for their professional development. After her successful experiment Mariam shared that:

To develop the professional capacity of the teachers, I focused upon the peer coaching strategy, which was taught in teacher education course and diploma course (at AKU-IED). By this strategy I found a great improvement in my school. I started with one of my teachers Shahida and invited her to observe the class. Afterwards I observed her class teaching, and finally

we shared with each other and identified the gaps in a way that she would not feel herself devalued. Shahida taught a poem “Mehnat” (hardwork) in class IV. I observed that she defined the different professions in the poem by using models. In the end she straightaway read the poem. When I gave her feedback, I suggested that if I would teach this poem, I would have done it by singing. Teacher accepted my suggestion, however said that she did not learn this poem by singing as a student herself, so it is hard for her to sing the poem now. I said “let’s work on it”. I also involved another teacher Rahila for the other day's planning. On the next day I went to the class with Shahida, and found that the students couldn't learn the same poem by heart. Then with the teacher's permission I taught the same poem by singing in a rhythmic way. Amazingly students got involved and they remembered it. Thus the teachers realized that it's not necessary that we must teach to our student the way we have been taught (through conventional methods). After Shahida I did peer coaching with Shaher Bano and then Shaher Bano did the same with Roshan, and Shahida peer coached with Rahila, and now they all are peer coaching with the new comer. Thus there is a continuity in the process (Teacher, during the Diploma course).

It appears that Mariam, along with her colleagues, not only continues her teaching practices in the class but always tries to bring new ideas and innovations in her school. Her NGO supervisors confirmed this when they said:

Whenever we go to visit Mariam’s school, she used to say that she wants to introduce new things, new innovations in her schools... she always seems eager for the improvement (NGO supervisor interview after 6 months of the course).

The enhancement in Mariam’s content knowledge and pedagogical skills seems to be the result of her learning at AKU-IED, which has contributed a lot to Mariam’s professional development. However, her own commitment and enthusiasm for the teaching profession also enables her to explore and seek out the new methods of teaching such as the introduction of Dalton’s method in her school.

Mariam's management in the school

As mentioned earlier, Mariam worked as Principal in her school along with carrying out

teaching responsibilities. After returning from AKU-IED it seems that, along with her teaching skills, her management skills have also improved. There seems to be a change in record-keeping, monitoring, communication, and coordination with people. A major change in her managerial skills, as observed by Mariam's colleagues, NGO supervisors and members of management committee, was her decision-making power. She took many decisions, which later proved to be beneficial for the school development. Some of these were the introduction new teaching methods, proposing a new school building, introducing new formats of record keeping, and sparing time for sharing and debriefing after school time.

School records related to teachers' and students' attendance, finance and monitoring supervision are now prepared in time and are kept ready for any reference. For Mariam, maintaining the records was beneficial and the importance of organized records was evident when visitors or NGO representatives visited the school to get an update. The NGO supervisors also attest to Mariam's organizational changes in these words:

Mariam's school is one of the schools where you always find complete and well maintained records (NGO supervisor interview after 6 months of the course).

Mariam's strong monitoring skills helped her to identify weak areas in her school and target those for improvement. For example, if she found any weakness at the class level, she gave feedback to teachers whereas she involved teachers and members of management committee on necessary school organizational policy. Although she had not done this monitoring in a formal way (by developing some formats) she tried to keep a vigilant eye on school matters.

Mariam performed her managerial role very carefully. Her communication and interpersonal skills in dealing with different people in different situations have gradually improved. She treats her teachers as friends while her behavior as an administrator during official meetings is professional. She likes her teachers to maintain good relationships with management committee members so that they feel comfortable with each other; however, she safeguards her teachers from direct inquiries from the school management committee regarding their weaknesses related to teaching. She wants them (management committee members) to consult her in this connection because she likes to expose her role as a strong manager. She shares that:

I never share petty issues regarding my teachers and school with school

management committee and during the school visits, if they (management committee) identify any weakness, they are supposed to disclose it to me because I am responsible for everything happens in the school. If they started to interact with the teachers directly, some misunderstandings might emerge... moreover with the direct contact of school management with the teacher, role of a head would be obscured (Teacher, after attending the course).

One of the major qualities considered important for a manager is an effective problem-solving approach. Mariam has also developed herself in this area. She identifies the problem and tries to explore its reasons and possible solution through consultation with her colleagues. As she said:

Before the training I used to address the problem instead of avoiding it off. But as I didn't know the reason for the problem ... most of the times I failed to resolve it and in case I succeeded in resolving that particular problem the other unseen problems related to that one emerged later and thus it seemed like a unending chain of difficulties... but here [in the AKU-IED training] we've learned that first thing we have to find out the root cause of any problem. It is then easy to work towards resolving it. I adopt this approach and found it much more beneficial (Teacher, after attending the course).

As discussed earlier, Mariam has recently shifted from a community school to NGO School. However, she has not disconnected herself from her earlier school. She still cherishes the community school as her 'own school' and always shows great humility towards it. She visits the school and tries to help teachers in any matters related to school management. She remains concerned about the professional development of the teachers of this school and has also conducted a one-week teachers' development workshop. Mariam reports that she has developed her teachers to such an extent that after her departure from the school, they are now capable of managing the school without her. Initially, they faced some problems but her continuous support enabled them to overcome those difficulties.

As a teacher educator

According to Mariam, her informal role as a teacher educator started when she returned from the first certificate course and began peer coaching in her school. After some time,

she was called by the NGO to participate in the teachers' development activities arranged by her NGO colleagues who were diploma graduates. This was her informal role and she just took on the responsibilities related to logistic arrangements; however, by attending these workshops she developed an interest in being a teacher educator in the future. Thus, within a short period of time her participation in these sessions increased from looking after logistics to facilitating a few sessions.

Mariam's formal role as a teacher educator began when she attended the ADE programme at AKU-IED. Since then, she has started to participate in the NGO's teacher development programs with an extended role. According to her, she gradually enhanced her skills in teacher education, which she learned from the AKU-IED facilitators and her NGO colleagues (diploma graduates). Thus, Mariam has developed her skills to the extent that she is now capable of designing and conducting workshops independently such as a one-week workshop she conducted on pre-primary concepts of teaching for the teachers of community school.

Mariam's NGO also recognizes her strong role in teachers' professional development and has invited her to join the NGO's Learning Resource Center as a teacher educator and also to perform as a teacher in the NGO's school. The major reason for this change in her status is that the NGO views her as a bridge between its school and the learning resource center. Mariam reflects upon her current status in following words:

Certificate course's learning was confined up to individual or class, school level development, in which we learned how to introduce new methods in class teaching or how to involve community in school. But in the advanced diploma whatever we learn, we have to utilize it for the development of our teachers. Although we received content knowledge in certificate course and cleared our teaching concepts the advanced diploma we have moved a step ahead, and developed reflective thinking for teaching and now unlike the certificate course when we used to think 'as a teacher', we now think as a 'TEACHER EDUCATOR' (Teacher's final comments).