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TRANSFORMING PEDAGOGIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROJECT, BALOCHISTAN

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Introduction

Pakistan's education system is experiencing reforms in early childhood education (ECE) through policy and direction by the Government. With the introduction of the Pakistan National Curriculum in Early Childhood Education in 2002 (revised in 2007), there is evidence of a shift in emphasis from teacher-directed to child-centered practices that involve active learning, problem solving, critical thinking and play.

While there is great need and demand for quality and effective ECE provision in the context, there is a shortage on the supply side of expertise in ECE both in the public and private sectors, adequately trained teachers, ECE managers, availability of teaching learning material and physical facilities, and a critical mass of effective institutions that can promote ECE across the country (Juma, 2004; Pardhan, 2010). Nonetheless, education reforms to address the issue of capacity development in ECE are evident in a variety of ECE resource development initiatives emerging in the country through public sector, private sector and NGO agency initiatives. A key aim is for teachers to shift their current teaching which emphasizes knowledge acquisition, drill and practice to engage young learners in constructivist learning experiences that involve direct experience, exploration, discovery and social interaction (Pardhan, 2012).

This brief paper presents an example of transformative pedagogy through the in-service early childhood education teacher development programme undertaken by Aga Khan University – Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) as part of Early Childhood Development Project, Balochistan (ECDP-B)¹. Through the ECDP-B, trainings are being undertaken for the capacity development of early childhood teachers. In addition, short trainings are being carried out with other key stakeholders like government officials, implementing partners and head teachers who play an integral role in supporting teachers. A key aim of these trainings is to enhance these stakeholders' understanding of content knowledge and pedagogical skills, including supporting early literacy, required by early childhood teachers. The model used in the trainings with teachers and other stakeholders was to explore their existing beliefs and to provide interventions to facilitate teachers with shifting their beliefs and practices. McMillan (2004) asserts that teachers' beliefs play a central role in their decision-making about classroom practice. As part of the training programmes, the course participants' existing beliefs and their beliefs following the training were explored. This paper addresses aspects related to beliefs about children, literacy, numeracy, play and school management systems which were covered as part of the teacher education programmes. The paper concludes with

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implications of a way forward to support children's learning and development in diverse contexts like Pakistan.

Beliefs about Children

Through the use of metaphors, course participants in the programmes reflected upon their beliefs about a child. They represented a child through metaphors of a stone, blank paper, clay and water which can be molded by adults. Their metaphors seemed congruent with their deeply espoused perceptions of children as blank slates and their responsibility being to transmit knowledge to young children. The training objectives were to bring about change in their existing beliefs about teachers being knowledge givers (Bana, 2010), and to espouse an understanding about the prior knowledge which children bring and upon which teachers build to scaffold their learning. During the in-service programmes, aspects of early brain development, child development, curriculum in the early years and how teachers can transform their pedagogies to support young learners were addressed.

At the conclusion of the training programmes, teachers reflected that their existing beliefs had been challenged and that they had begun to view children differently. Their representations of a child were now through metaphors of a seed, plant or tree that requires a healthy and nurturing environment where children's ideas and experiences are valued. The transformation in the teachers' beliefs about children has been observed during field visits. Their observed practices reflect consideration of young children's learning needs through the active learning approach being implemented in their practice.

Early Literacy

Literacy development begins early in life and is on-going. Literacy development occurs in everyday contexts of the home, school and community through meaningful and functional experiences that require the use of literacy in natural settings, for example reading a newspaper or book, writing a letter, and making a greeting card (Morrow, 2012). At school, literacy skills can be supported by instruction which reflects real-life experiences, taking into account students' background and knowledge. Instruction should be sensitive to a child's stage of development socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively. Organized and systematic explicit teaching of skills is necessary for literacy development (Morrow, 2012).

Through the ECDP-B training programmes, course participants' existing beliefs and practices of literacy development were explored. Their beliefs and practices showed an understanding that children learn through rote memorization, by reading and copying alphabets and by singing nursery rhymes. Course participants were introduced to a number of strategies to support children's literacy development, including the process approach to writing. During the training programme, the process approach to writing was located within other strategies to make it a meaningful and functional experience. To introduce the writing task, the reading aloud strategy was used with a storybook. The participants were then guided through the process approach to make their own storybooks based on the story read during the read aloud. The participants began with the pre-writing where they brainstormed their ideas related to the story as a group. A course facilitator scribed their ideas. The participants were then guided through the drafting of their story where they collectively developed an outline and the draft with facilitator support to extend the organization of the ideas. After completing the draft, the

course facilitator supported the participants with editing through the help of a pictorial and text word wall. Thereafter, the course participants wrote the revised version with the course facilitator as the scribe. The participants then had an opportunity to individually to write their own storybooks following the steps in the process approach to writing modeled by the course facilitator. Field visits reflect the teachers' attempts to use the process approach to writing in their classroom practice. This is an important shift away from traditional practices that have focused on rote memorization rather children thinking about, organizing and expressing their ideas (Morrow, 2012).

Numeracy

Children learn different mathematical concepts before entering into formal schooling (Griffin, Case & Siegler, 1994). Charlesworth and Leali (2011) argue that it is important to focus on children's understanding of informal mathematics experiences rather than rote memorization of numbers. In this regard, Griffin et al. (2011) stress upon teachers' support to enable children to connect their existing knowledge and understanding of different mathematical concepts.

Through the ECDP-B trainings, course participants' existing beliefs and practices of numeracy development were explored. Their existing beliefs and practices reflected an understanding of children's early numeracy development taking place through rote counting, reading and writing numbers in sequence as well as counting pictures. Moreover, their views seldom reflected any connection between their practices and understanding of how young children use mathematics in their daily lives.

During in-service programmes, various active learning, child-centered pedagogies were used to transform the teachers' existing practices of teaching numeracy to young children. The training programmes focused upon teaching mathematical concepts like one-to-one correspondence, number recognition and counting, seriation, graphing, addition and subtraction of one digit number, shapes and patterns through concrete materials, stories and rhymes. Field experiences show that these activities are being replicated in classrooms with the help of locally available resources to facilitate children's conceptual understanding of mathematics.

Play

Play is a pleasurable and enjoyable activity for children and it is an important part of children's development from birth onwards (Berkhout, Bakkers, Hoekman, Sieneke, & Brouwer, 2012). According to literature, well-organized and well-resourced sand and water play enhances different science and mathematics concepts like shape, space and size, measurement, volume, and area (Lawton, 2008; Pardhan & Juma, 2011).

During the ECDP-B trainings, course participants' existing beliefs and practices about sand and water play were explored. Their existing beliefs about sand and water play were that these are: a waste of time; create a mess inside and outside the classroom; unsafe, unclean and unhygienic; unavailable; and create classroom management issues.

Course participants were introduced to strategies on including sand and water play in their practice. Different sand and water play stations were set-up during the training programme

sessions where the teachers were actively engaged in making bubbles, washing dishes and washing clothes. The participants reflected upon how strategies like these could be integrated into their practice. They shared that their practical experiences with different sand and water activities has transformed their beliefs about sand and water play. Their reflections suggested their understanding of the range of skills children can learn through sand and water play and which are important for their development. Field experiences showed replication of some of the strategies around sand and water play in the participants' classrooms with the help of locally available resources.

School Management Systems

Research in educational leadership and school improvement across the world indicates that school leadership has strategic importance in any education system. Memon (2010) notes that, "The school head plays a pivotal role in making a school successful; and such leaders are not necessarily born, effective school heads are rigorously prepared through well designed programmes" (p. 286).

The existing beliefs and practices were elicited from the participants in the "Mentoring, Leadership and School Management" course of the training programme. The participants expressed views which reflected a hierarchical relationship with teachers and young children. According to them, within the norms of the context, it would undermine the status of stakeholders at the management level if they taught young children. The course participants were introduced to a range of ECE classroom pedagogies in a practical manner to enhance their understanding of how to effectively support young children's learning. This course objective of having the school management stakeholders experience learning as young children was critical in helping them to transform their beliefs about the nature of support which early years teachers require. During field visits, the link between theory and practice has been observed. The school management stakeholders have made attempts to support teachers with creating learning spaces, collecting and developing material, implementing the daily routine as per the Pakistan National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, and mobilizing the Parent Teachers School Management Committee (PTSMC). Moreover, there is evidence of school management stakeholders attempting to balance their managerial role with their academic role.

Implications

The experiences of the training programmes under the ECDP-B have addressed teachers and other stakeholders' knowledge and skills to effectively support young children's learning (Pardhan, 2012). In the case of the school management stakeholders', the training programmes have also helped them to consider and implement leadership practices to effectively support early childhood teachers. Pardhan (2012) has noted that in contexts like Pakistan where many untrained or poorly qualified teachers work with young children in classrooms, focused in-service professional development, which aims to understand teachers' beliefs about early childhood education to challenge and support them to transform their practice is critical. The pedagogy of the ECDP-B training programmes through critical reflection reflects the careful consideration which has been highlighted to ensure effective and appropriate practice to support young children's learning (Breffni, 2011; Pardhan, 2012).

This raises important implications for consistency in policies and practices to encourage and support effective pedagogy. School reforms which are emphasizing a shift from traditional practices to those which consider contemporary notions of children's learning as well as the diversity of their experiences are crucial to bringing about change and to ensuring that young children's learning needs are adequately and effectively supported (Pardhan, 2012). The ECDP-B has presented one such example of efforts in school reform.

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