

# Impact of Professional Development on Small Communities: A Case Study of Sadpara, Skardu

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## Background-Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan, a vast region set in the north of Pakistan is home to the highest mountain ranges in the world, namely the Karakoram and the western Himalayas. Harsh climatic conditions, tough mountainous terrain, lack of resources and geographical isolation typify the region and contribute to its socio-economic backwardness. Most of the population is distributed across remote villages and urban centres are few and far in between (Ali, 2011). Even though Gilgit-Baltistan has come a long way in educational attainment in the past two decades, there are severe discrepancies at the district level. Percentage of out of school children amongst children of secondary school age (ages 10-14) is 49.3% for Diamer, 7.8 % for Skardu compared to 3.5% in Hunza (Gilgit-Baltistan, 2016). According to government statistics, 70,000 children are out of school at the primary level which is approximately a third of this population and 55% of middle school children are out of school with more than half being girls (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2016).

‘Sadpara’ or ‘Satpara’ is a village at the periphery of Skardu city and is known for its porters who have helped countless summit seekers achieve their dreams. It comprises of four small villages (approximately 200 households) that house three community and one government school. The classrooms in Gilgit-Baltistan are wrought with rote learning, teacher-centered methods and lack of student participation. The teachers demonstrate lack of content knowledge particularly Science and Mathematics and little exposure to English. There is inadequate materials and staff and poor quality of education set in a punitive school environment (The Agha Khan Education Service, 2005) which is characterized by insufficient, small and stuffy classrooms, no washroom or toilet facilities, a lack of collaboration among teachers, and a lack of teacher commitment (Shafa, 2003)

## *The teacher at the heart of it all*

In “Understanding the Evolving Roles of Improvement-Oriented High School Teachers in Gilgit-Baltistan”, Ali highlights the fundamental role of teacher in educational reform in addition to incorporating teachers’ perceptions, practices and underlying values in the reform process. In other words, the solution to reform does not lie in following a given, ready-made recipe. In fact, it needs to be contextualised and the teachers’ reflective voice (Ali, 2017) needs to be valued if change initiative targeting reform is to succeed.

An enquiry into improvement-oriented teachers (IOTs) at schools of both Ghizer and Gilgit districts show that there is a strong link between the efforts of IOTs in the classroom and their efforts in the school in fostering institutional changes and their efforts in the community as agents of social change. Hence, IOTs are not limiting themselves to implementing pedagogical changes in the classroom only but extending their role at the institutional level by mutual interaction, sharing of ideas, supporting and learning from each other, and cooperating in growth-oriented activities at the school while entrenching themselves into the

community as well by volunteering in social work and emancipatory activities. **Although in Sadpara, most teachers come on a daily basis from Skardu city, some teachers are deeply entrenched within schools, households and the community at large and could greatly benefit from professional development ventures that motivate them and enable them to make changes at both the individual, school and community level.**

The growing recognition that treating teachers as life-long learners has a positive correlation to better student learning underscores the importance of developing and continuously updating the skills of IOTs by providing them opportunities of professional development both inside and outside the classroom. Deepening their knowledge about the change process, exploring innovative strategies, learning newer and better ways to teach and expanding their capacity enables them to address the different challenges associated with reform across the classrooms, school and community in these remote villages (Ali, Understanding the Evolving Roles of Improvement-Oriented High School Teachers in Gilgit-Baltistan, 2011).

This holistic approach to schooling where the entire community comprising of teachers, education managers, government education officials and parents become involved in the educative process with the student at the heart became the premise of the School Improvement Plan for Northern Pakistan launched by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in partnership with the local government in 2016 and is still operational.

The SIP was instrumental in bringing together all key stakeholders on a common platform and make everyone responsible for the change process. The trainings specifically focused on (1) school development planning using a whole-school approach; (2) instructional leadership; (3) early childhood education and development; (4) promoting a culture of reading through the Reading for Children model; (5) multi grade teaching strategies; and (6) building education communities of practice (ECOP). The School Management Committee (SMC) which comprised of both teachers and parents along with the mother support group (MSG) was able to change the attitude of parents especially mothers who began taking more responsibility for their children's learning. **This could be particularly useful in Sadpara where mothers who lack any sort of formal education could take part in their childrens' learning via story- telling through pictures as was accomplished under SIP in the Reading for Children (RfC) program.**

Under SIP, bringing together the government officials on board improved access to information which helped the communities to feel more recognized and supported. Teachers were able to make their teaching more child-centric. The SIP schools showed better enrolment, retention rates and learning outcomes. Children showed eagerness to read by borrowing books from SIP-supported libraries (School Improvement Plan, 2016)

Similarly, the Pakistan Teacher Education and Professional Development Programme (PTEPDP) implemented by the Academy for Educational Development through USAID, Pakistan was designed to increase the number of teacher trainers from teacher colleges in Pakistan that were responsible for training primary school teachers in the teaching of Mathematics, Science and ESL between the years June 2003 to October 2006.

Classroom observations made in Baluchistan and Punjab indicated that the new student teachers performed better by employing newer methods and being more actively engaged in course activities (Pakistan Teacher Education and Professional Development Program (PTEPDP), 2007)

Other programmes like the cluster- based mentoring programme initiated by ESRA along with the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and USAID and focused on developing mentoring capacities in nine selected districts of Sindh and Balochistan has benefited many public-school teachers between the years 2004 and 2006.

The workshops focused on building content knowledge, pedagogy and use of learning aids which directly resulted in making the lessons more attractive and enjoyable for the students. Anecdotal experiences suggest that the resulting child-centred approach led to students becoming more regular, engaged and active in their classrooms (Husain & Ali, 2010). **The incorporation of teaching/ learning resources during activities related to professional development may help in making the classroom environment livelier at Sadpara schools due to the lack of any visual aids and electricity for most part of the day.**

The Whole School Improvement Program (WSIP) launched by the Professional Development Centre (PDCN) of the AKU-IED for improving quality education aimed at working with the three education systems prevalent in the northern areas namely the government, Aga Khan Educational Services (AKES) and the community schools run by NGOs in the year 2000 have also led to better outcomes for children.

The program focused on quality of teaching and learning, leadership, management and administration, community participation, curriculum and staff development, building, accommodation and resources, social and moral development of students and health education.

It was found that WSIP has had an impact in all the schools under its domain and this was largely attributed to the program's focus on the capacity building of teachers and head teacher in all project schools through formal programmes /workshops for professional development and providing school-based support. WSIP's focus on holistic development of the child impacted students' behaviour and the project team members also succeeded in mobilising community support, particularly through the involvement of mothers in their child's education (Shamim, 2005)

Additionally, the Northern Education Project (NEP) was the first donor-assisted project in Northern Areas between the years 1998 and 2003. It focused on improving access to quality education, strengthening the Department of Education's capacity and enhancing government-community partnerships.

The program commenced with establishing of baselines for student achievement for the first time in the country along with significant increases in achievement scores in key subjects. This was attributed to instructional improvement through the use of teaching aids, multi-grade and continuous assessment, new textbooks, and field-based teacher training.

The program also had significant impact in improving access to primary schooling specifically an increase in primary school gross enrollment by 59.3%, middle school by 48% and community school by 112.3%. The ratio of girls went up from 30% to 44% and an increase in primary level progression of 19% was observed (Pakistan: Northern Areas Education Project II, 2005)

A similar SIP by the Aga Khan Foundation in collaboration with the European Commission draws attention to the Kampala Schools' Improvement Project in Uganda. This program was

designed to train teachers in workshop settings, provide instructional materials to support learning, provide classroom-based technical assistance (on-the-job training) and support teachers as they attempted to integrate what they learned into their day-to-day teaching for a period of three years (1994 to 1997).

The program was successful in changing classroom environment, instilling child- centered approach in teaching, encouraging activity- based learning and skilling teachers to work with low cost indigenous materials. It also impacted teachers' expectations of themselves and the children and equipped them with new skills to incorporate more child- centered methods of classroom organization (Siraj-Blatchfor, Odada, & Omagor, 1997).

The case for initiating teacher training workshops and investing in early childhood education at Sadpara is compelling. A cascading model of training can be especially effective in the remote valleys of northern Pakistan, where both access and educational resources are limited. The success of such a program will heavily depend on the trainers' ability to inspire others to follow their lead. Moreover, parents in Sadpara are increasingly aware of the importance of education, particularly early childhood education. Therefore, the success of any professional development initiative will hinge on their collective ownership of the change process

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