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Teacher training in support of Early Childhood Education in Pakistan: A case study of the Teachers' Resource Centre

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A case study of the Teachers'
Resource Centre

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Introduction

In Pakistan, with its population of just over 180 million people, high primary school dropout rates and low adult literacy levels, too few children from impoverished backgrounds benefit from a quality early childhood education (ECE). The pre-primary (*kachi*) level was officially discontinued from the public education system in the 1980s and the pre-school learning environment available within the private system is within the reach of only a few.

Where primary level classes exist, the numbers are often so high that it is impossible for teachers to establish a child-centred and active learning environment, or to create meaningful relationships with their learners. Most teachers are lacking in the specialized skills needed to meet a preschooler's psychosocial and educational needs and continue to apply traditional teaching methods. Many are unaware that such skills are even needed, or why they are important, and for those who do want to learn more, there are still too few opportunities in the public system for in-service training around ECE concepts.

This technical paper presents a case study of the Teachers' Resource Centre (TRC), an independent, non-governmental organization created in 1986 by a small group of Karachi-based private school heads and teachers concerned by falling standards in education. As a starting point to improve quality, they decided to concentrate on nurturing the confidence, well-being and professional development of teachers, while at the same time changing teachers' perceptions of the learning process. To

this end, the TRC worked in consultation with school heads, teachers and parents to build an in-service teacher training process that would provide a support framework and stimulate a cultural shift among teachers immersed in traditional teaching approaches.

During the early 1990s, the centre fostered active learning approaches within government sector schools through the Initiating Change through Professional Development (1992-1996) project. This initiative exposed the poor standards of *kachi* care available in many communities and led to the 1997 Early Childhood Education Project (ECEP). Through the ECEP, the TRC was able to pilot an innovative in-service training strategy oriented around ECE concepts in 45 schools over a five-year period. The TRC also successfully piloted ECE curriculum guidelines and low-cost, locally prepared learning tools and resources. Indeed, the project initiated the beginnings of TRC's work with the Curriculum Development Wing of the Ministry of Education and Pakistan's first ever, early childhood education curriculum.

To date, nearly 40,000 people have benefited from the ECE capacity-building provided by the TRC. This paper offers a brief overview of education, ECE and teacher training in Pakistan, a rationale for the TRC approach, and outlines some of the ongoing challenges in taking the model to scale.

Overview and context for ECE in Pakistan

Children and their right to education

Pakistan is a low-income country with a population estimated at 180.7 million people (Economic Survey of Pakistan, 2011-2012). The country has been classified as a transitory and vulnerable state (Government of Pakistan, 2003), weakened by decades of internal political feuding, a declining export base and little new foreign investment. The rapidly growing population, the increasing pace of urbanization and a substantial influx of refugees in recent years have further aggravated an already inadequate public service infrastructure.

One-third of the population live below the poverty line and another 20 per cent hover just above it. The 2009 report, *The State of Pakistan's Children*, by the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) (The Express Tribune, 2010), highlighted that every year 400,000 children under the age of five die due to illness. Of these, 300,000 succumb in the first year of their life. Thousands of children are victims of internal conflict and displacement, while increasing poverty is forcing young children into the informal economy or exploitative work practices. In 2003, UNICEF estimated that there were about eight million child labourers in Pakistan. In 2005, the Pakistan Human Rights Commission estimated this number to have increased to 10 million (Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, 2009).

The SPARC report further underlined the lack of legislation and bare minimum

budgetary allocations for child-centred programming in the country. Millions of children are missing out on their right to education and basic health care as a result. Progress in meeting international commitments on universal access to primary education (UPE) is uneven between urban and rural areas, between girls and boys and between population groups even though the Government of Pakistan is constitutionally bound to provide free and compulsory secondary education for all its citizens since the 2010 Education Act.

The basic education system in Pakistan has been in crisis for many years with numerous educational policies and five-year plans introduced since 1947 all failing to reach targets for UPE (Mahmud et al., 2006). At institutional level, the lack of leadership and critical investment in policy commitments has led to some of the worst educational indicators in the region and the world (Warwick et al., 1995). The Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011 noted that 7.3 million primary school-aged children in Pakistan were out-of-school in 2008 (UNESCO, 2011), the majority of whom were girls. In addition, 51 per cent of the adult population in productive labour lack even the most basic literacy skills. The Government of Pakistan's own assessment of the rate is a little higher, but no less worrying, at 57.7 per cent (counting all people aged 10 years and above), with male literacy at 69.5 per cent and female literacy at 45.2 per cent (Government of Pakistan, 2011).

Early childhood education

The early months and years of a child's life are critical to their psychosocial, cognitive and educational development. It is during the early years that the key elements of emotional intelligence are nurtured, including confidence, curiosity, self-control, connectedness and the capacity to communicate and cooperate (Government of Pakistan, 2008). A vast body of evidence including neurological and sociological research and economic analysis also suggests that early childhood experiences can contribute to reducing poverty, improving social mobility from one generation to the next and lays the building blocks for lifelong learning.¹

The legacy of the pioneering work of Montessori, Dewey and Froebel is still alive around the world as the majority of early childhood experts and practitioners now recognize the importance of a rich and nurturing environment for young children to learn to read and write, to acquire basic numeracy and problem solving skills, and to develop a love of learning (Mahmud et al., 2006). In countries where national education policies have sought to improve the quality of pre-primary education, results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) confirm that participation in pre-primary education is associated with reading performance at age 15 (OECD, 2011).

The ECE policy in Pakistan does not take account of the research or the insights of early childhood education specialists. No special funds are allocated by the District Education Departments which, themselves, receive limited funds from Provincial Education Departments. Primary level teachers allocate a portion of their time to teaching *kachi* students and head teachers may provide the most basic of equipment such as chalk. In fact, the main method of teaching is chalk and talk and rote learning, even if textbooks are meant to be provided free of cost to children.

However, early childhood education in Pakistan has greatly benefited from private sector schools offering nursery, kindergarten or Montessori style education. But these schools are mostly located in urban centres and small towns. Here, children aged 2-5 years are taught in separate classrooms by teachers using adapted ECE materials. Religious schools also offer pre-primary services of varying quality to children.

1 The return on investment on ECCE programmes for low-income children range from \$4 to \$7 for every \$1 spent. Early Childhood Education: A Call to Action from the Business Community.

Recent policy reforms

ECE began to regain prominence among Pakistan's education policy-makers following the World Forum on Education for All (EFA), held in Dakar in 2000 when the international community again committed itself to "Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children" as one of the six EFA goals.

In response to this commitment, the Government of Pakistan developed a comprehensive National Plan of Action (NPA) for EFA and formulated a long-term framework (2001-15) with ECE as one of its three focus areas.² According to the NPA, over 40,000 ECE centres would be established over the period in question, and over 3,000 ECE teachers would be recruited and trained annually in the public sector - a total of 51,000 teachers. But besides the funds released to the provinces for ECE by the Federal Government under the Education Sector Reforms (ESR) in 2001/02 and 2002/03, no specific allocations have been made in the provincial budgets for these purposes to date.

The National Education Policy (NEP 1998-2010) further affirmed that: "Kachi class³ at primary level shall be introduced as a part of the effort to improve achievements of pupils"

and "Kachi class shall be institutionalized in the primary cycle gradually and progressively." Here again, widespread implementation is also far from being a reality. A continuing constraint is that the annual sector-wide budgeting and planning exercise for the education sector does not internalize a provision for ECE within the share of primary education budget. A major percentage (estimated at 90 per cent) of the budget is earmarked for teachers' salaries and school running costs, leaving very little for ECE training costs or the purchase of basic learning resources as per policies and commitments.

2 The other two being universal primary education and adult literacy.

3 The official age for entering the first year of primary school is five. Pre-primary or *Kachi* class that precedes the first year of primary school is known to have children aged 3 to 8.

Teachers and their importance to early childhood education

The status of the teaching profession

In Pakistan, the total teaching force is estimated at 1.35 million professionals working in both government and private institutions at different levels (primary and secondary schools, technical and vocational colleges, universities, teacher training institutions). Of this number, 445,835 teachers are active at primary level (including pre-primary teachers), 54 per cent of which are male. The total share of private sector teachers is 20 per cent, with most private schools located in urban areas. Women make up 78 per cent of the private sector teaching force.

The cultural, ethnic, sociological and economic history of Pakistan has had a great influence on how teachers and caregivers are perceived in society and within communities. The common perception is that teachers are one of the most crucial factors in imparting quality education (Government of Pakistan, 2008). Indeed, teachers at all levels are revered for the critical role they are seen to play in nurturing active, informed and responsible young citizens. The country's cultural history has also influenced children's perceptions about their teachers. Students respectfully follow their teachers as role models and teachers may still be viewed as spiritual guides, especially in certain rural areas although this is changing in rapidly growing urban centres.

While the role of teachers in the early development of the nation's children is

implicitly recognized, this is not matched by educational investments in the recruitment or training of ECE teachers, in curriculum development, or in the formulation of ECE learning materials. Overall, the teaching profession is increasingly losing its cachet as an attractive career option. Professions such as medicine and engineering, higher-level civil service positions, as well as the financially rewarding information technologies sector are considered more worthy of bright young professionals. Low salary and high student-teacher ratios (around 1:40 at the primary level and 1:36 at the secondary level) are just two of the disincentives. The lack of opportunities for professional development, weak support from head teachers and communities, inadequate teaching materials and poorly maintained school environments are further concerns pushing young people away from the profession.

All these factors take an obvious toll on ensuring the quality of education. But, for in-service teachers, they also have a significant impact on morale, motivation and self-esteem.

Why ECE demands reforms to teacher training

For younger learners, the daily challenges of coming to school, working in groups and learning to write are made easier if there is a connection with the teacher and a sense of safety and security through close personal relationships (Birch et al., 1997). Indeed for

toddlers, an emotionally close relationship with child-care providers has been linked with more positive social behaviour and more complex play later as pre-schoolers (Howes et al., 1994). Zeller (Zeller, 2011) also argued that when children feel more secure at school, they are more prepared to learn and more open to share how their lives are connected with the ideas and people they experience in the classroom.

The majority of teachers working in Pakistan's overcrowded classrooms are not immediately conscious of such considerations or the expectations that society, and children, have of them. On a day-to-day basis, there may, in fact, be little direct influence of such expectations on pedagogic approach and attitudes in the classroom. It is more likely that the teacher's personal beliefs and theories about what effective teaching is, as well as worldview and personal childhood experiences, will influence his or her relationship with the children. This is why the mainstreaming of child-centred teaching approaches presents important challenges in Pakistan.

A large part of the problem can be traced to how teacher training has historically been conceived and organized. For a long time, teacher training was lectured-based, focused on developing rote approaches to learning and often removed from the classroom. Pre-service courses such as the Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC) for teachers in Classes 1 to 5 and the Certificate of Teaching (CT) for Classes 6 to 8 were offered without any real analysis of their focus, or expected outcomes, and were accepted as adequate requirements for primary and elementary teachers. As one teacher trainer noted, "rote learning is the only pedagogical skill used for delivering PTC. The teaching practice sessions are lecture-based. There is absolutely no connection with schools, although many elementary colleges share their walls with model schools (Sayeed et al., 2007)."

The ECE level demands much greater content, depth and skills. A significant

reward in working with very young children lies in igniting their love of learning. As Marva Collins suggests: "Once children learn how to learn, nothing is going to narrow their mind. The essence of teaching is to make learning contagious, to have one idea spark another (Marva Collins)". But at primary level in Pakistan, experimenting with how to do this is rarely encouraged. A teacher may even be mocked by colleagues, or reproached by supervisors for introducing anything innovative as it could be perceived as increasing workload and raising the bar for others.

In short, teacher training in Pakistan is generally failing to stimulate a genuine interest in how children learn. Nor does it contribute to fostering the optimal conditions for early childhood learning. The result is that teachers go into the classroom unprepared for working with very young learners, including those in the early primary classes. Awareness about what constitutes age-appropriate learning is frequently lacking, with children expected to write and memorize maths tables before they can even recognize numbers or hold a pencil properly.

All of this underscores the need for a specific focus on ECE within teacher training and a greater use of active learning techniques to train teachers themselves. It is critical to introduce teachers to ECE concepts, theories of curriculum, effective teaching and assessment practices, at the same time making tangible and specific associations with their daily practice. Active and child-centred learning also calls for the development of self-monitoring skills that will enable teachers to assess and reflect on the effectiveness of the changes they are making to classroom practice.

Katz (Katz, 1995) has talked about development sequences, the stages that teachers pass through before they come to terms with their role in the classroom and the continuous need for improving their own professional competence. She argues that it is through constant engagement

in inquiry, experimentation and reflection that teachers really become interested in their own teaching and this interest, once developed, motivates and helps them resolve the challenges they face on a daily basis in and out of the classroom.

The major challenge for most newly qualified teachers in Pakistan is simply day-to-day survival and ensuring the curriculum has been implemented as expected by the Department of Education. There are also too few opportunities for teachers to spend time reflecting with their peers around evolving pedagogies or new research, or to engage in in-service professional training and development. In Pakistan, the overriding 'obey orders' culture prevents the development of teachers as facilitators and innovators.

The Teachers' Resource Centre

Marrying professional and personal support for teachers

The TRC was founded in 1986 on the belief that professional and personal support for teachers cannot be separated. Teachers must be able to share their thoughts with others relating to the application of curriculum, teaching pedagogies and student assessment practices. At the same time, the founding members recognized the impact of a teacher's morale and emotional wellbeing on the quality of instruction in the classroom. Seema Malik, Director of the Teachers' Resource Centre, said on 22 August 2002 at the launch of the National Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Islamabad, "...it is only when [teachers] feel positive about themselves that they can impart a positive influence on the children they teach."

Given the multi-layered daily struggles that teachers face, an alternative mechanism of in-service teacher training was conceived; one which would open up a space in which teachers could engage with the latest research, talk freely amongst themselves in an inspiring and uplifting way and be listened to with respect and empathy. During the first years, workshop-based training sessions were organized for community schools in urban slums in the Karachi area.

By 1991, the TRC had begun to work with under-privileged government schools, and while the training component expanded, the underlying philosophy remained the same:

empowering teachers through enabling conversations, empathy and constant encouragement. It was hoped that teachers would leave the training feeling valued and empowered for the vital role they play in society. It was also hoped that they would choose to adopt new tools and methods into their classroom practices because they recognized them as more conducive to a child's educational and individual needs.

Expanding into ECE: laying the foundations for lifelong learning

It was while working with government schools through the Initiating Change through Professional Development project (1992-1996) that TRC staff first observed younger siblings following their brothers and sisters to school. Groups of children, mostly under five years old, were then either left unattended or were engaged in memorizing the alphabet and numbers. There was no specific space or teacher allocated for them, and when there was, the teacher often did not know what to do as there was no curriculum for the early years.

Concerned with these makeshift arrangements and the negative consequences for children's motivation and interest in learning in the primary cycle (Mahmud, 2003), the TRC set about building an enabling framework for addressing the needs of pre-school children in Pakistan's public schools. This led to the conception of the ECEP for which a grant was

secured from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through the Aga Khan Foundation (Pakistan). The ECEP was also framed within the Social Institutions Development Programme (SIDP). A teacher training strategy, ECE curriculum guidance framework and various teaching-learning materials were developed, all based on action research techniques. Thanks to the CIDA grant, these components were tested and applied in 45 public sector schools in urban and rural areas in the province of Sindh over a five-year period.

Challenging traditional approaches to teaching at *kachi* and primary level

Understanding the culture of government education departments, the TRC realized that potential participants would not be able to devote themselves to a year-long teacher education programme. Public sector schools in urban areas often work in a two-shift system, which either have a primary boys and girls shift (one in the morning and one in the afternoon), or a primary and secondary shift in the same building. In-service teachers from the private sector are also rarely given time off for professional development. Limited time, resources and staff made an extensive education programme seem like a utopian ideal.

The challenge became to develop a quality, small scale and replicable in-service ECE teacher training programme.

The first strand of the strategy focused on mobilizing teachers to get involved, beginning with raising awareness about the critical foundation years and convincing teachers that they were the key to quality ECE. Before focusing on any skills, teachers explored the importance of brain stimulation, how children learn, the role of adults in an early years classroom and a simplified version of constructivist theories.

Through experiential learning exercises and reflection, the TRC helped teachers

to internalize the importance of trust and security in the learning environment. Emphasis was also placed on teacher-child interaction including support for individual children. The workshops further served to clarify misconceptions that teachers held about children and their behaviour in the classroom. These aspects are still constantly reinforced in TRC programmes.

Next, the training involved combining theory with daily classroom practice. Teachers in government schools rarely follow daily teaching plans. The trainees were equipped with guidance notes on age and culturally appropriate learning activities and practices. This allowed teachers to become more involved in organizing classroom activities and the learning environment and learn about pacing themselves and their students.

In the 'plan-do-review' segment of the daily routine, when children take responsibility for their own tasks and learning, the High Scope Educational Research Foundation's Curriculum for young children seemed like a good fit for TRC's training requirements. TRC had prior experience of implementing different segments of this curriculum and a contextualized learning plan for ECE in Pakistan was created around these principles. To assess progress, paper and pencil tests were replaced with on-going observations, checklists and portfolios.

A critical component of ECE capacity-building was to build classroom support into the training schedule, as well as encouraging trainees to keep reflective journals. During support visits, workshop leaders observed the trainees' interactions with their charges, gave feedback and helped reorganize the learning environment and set goals for further improvement. A relationship of trust was established so that teachers felt supported rather than judged. Head teachers and supervisors were also taught how to provide support to teachers and to get involved with the *kachi* class.

Overall, the TRC approach helped teachers to become co-creators of their own

professional development journey and to build self-reliance and self-accountability. TRC has also helped to ensure that an orientation session on ECE for teachers is now mandatory at *kachi* level, irrespective of the teacher's prior experience, professional or academic qualification.

Generating learning tools and resources to support active learning

The TRC showed teachers how to recycle locally sourced and easy-to-store materials as resources to support cognitive development and fine motor skills. A resource kit for ECE, *Pehla Taleemi Basta* (First Learning Bag: PTB), was produced within the ECEP containing pictures, puzzles, magnets and magnifying glasses, beads, laces and threading cards.

Building national ownership and support for ECE

Based on the successes of the Early Childhood Education Project, in March 2000, the Teachers' Resource Centre began a policy dialogue with the Ministry of Education (MoE) that led to the development of Pakistan's first ever National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, launched jointly with the Curriculum Wing, Ministry of Education in 2002. The curriculum focused on the holistic development of children from 3 to 5 with special emphasis on active learning and ECE concepts such as age-appropriate classroom routines, classroom layout, teaching methodologies and continuous assessment methods.

The curriculum framework combined expertise from teachers, heads and supervisors. As a measure of TRC's standing in 2006 it was asked by the ministry to revise the curriculum in 2006 in preparation for a complete overhaul of K-12 (*kachi* class up to grade 12). The MoE also asked TRC for major inputs for the ECE section of the

National Plan of Action (2001-15), as well as papers on ECE for the EFA conferences in Dakar (2000) and Beijing (2001).

Provincial governments started to come on board and UNESCO played a key role in facilitating the alignment of provincial teacher education curricula with ECE policy. In particular, the TRC worked closely with the Provincial Government of Sindh to train master ECE trainers, as well as educators within teacher education agencies so that they could offer pre, and in-service teacher-training courses.

While high level advocacy and dialogue are critical to initiating institutional change, support for new ideas at school and community levels is equally important. Head teachers, school supervisors, learning coordinators, education department officials and parents needed to be convinced of the importance of learning through play in the early years.

The TRC therefore organized outreach and awareness-raising sessions to make educational stakeholders and parents aware of why departures from traditional teaching methods were needed. For example reassurance was needed that the rise in noise levels that many schools were experiencing was a positive change connected to improved learning outcomes, rather than a lack of discipline. The outreach sessions also raised awareness among parents about child development, balanced diets and the importance of leisure time.

The impact of TRC's interventions

An intensive longitudinal study has looked at the effectiveness of the TRC's work through the ECEP over a period of time (Mahmud et al., 2006). Its successes and future challenges provide lessons and insights for ECE programming across the globe and in particular for South Asia. The TRC has demonstrated that, with commitment and in the midst of political and economic chaos, small-scale experiments are capable of changing policy directions and influencing public demand for quality ECE.

At school level, researchers, head teachers and parents all noted marked changes in the social-emotional development of the children who participated more fully in class activities, making choices, asking and answering questions, discovering new concepts and singing songs. It was also noted that basic self-help skills in areas such as washing, dressing and eating began to improve. Not surprisingly, children from higher classes were regularly observed 'peeping' into the ECE class to see what was going on.

One teacher remarked that ECE children were now keen rather than reluctant to return to class after the break. Another teacher commented on the high level of self-discipline and responsibility acquired by her pupils in a few short weeks. The confidence, spontaneity and enthusiasm displayed by the children in the classrooms visited by TRC researchers were a testament to the success of the programme. Some children spontaneously started singing nursery rhymes, others moved around talking to or helping fellow pupils and most responded

with great enthusiasm to their teacher's questions (Mahmud, 2006). The longer-term impact of these ECE capacity-building initiatives was reflected in the learning outcomes and achievements of children as they entered Class One.

TRC's training programme has empowered teachers to realise that they have meaningful contributions to make without being reprimanded or ridiculed. While some struggled initially with the educational concepts of child-centred and active learning, time and support ensured that shifting holistic development into the centre of the discourse helped teachers redefine their own roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, as in many other developing, fragile and post-conflict states, the full integration of ECE into sector-wide planning and operational systems is still a long way off. The financial and non-financial resources required to generate an enabling environment for ECE teacher training and professional development remain extremely limited. Improving planning and ECE policy-formulation capacities could act as a starting point to ensure education investment matches policy commitments.

The challenges are ever present, but Pakistan has seen significant institutional progress over the past decade. ECE now forms one of the three main priorities of the National Plan of Action for education in Pakistan and it has become a vital part of the National Education Policy 2009. Further major achievements are the introduction of a national ECE curriculum, the focus on ECE within teacher education curricula and the level of teacher readiness in certain provinces. Enhanced awareness about the importance of an ECE focus within teacher training has even influenced donor activities.

To improve the quality standards of teachers entering into service, in 2009 the National Education Policy adjusted the qualification requirements for becoming a primary school teacher. With the support of USAID, a two-year Associate Degree in Education (ADE) and a four-year Bachelor of Education were introduced. With the first batch of 625 students graduating in 2012, this new initiative strongly suggests the support of donors for a paradigm shift from a lecture-

based approach to active learning (USAID, 2012).

In ECE classes and primary schools across Pakistan, sharing control with a child and nurturing self-reliance is still far from common practice. But the TRC and its ECE capacity -activities have demonstrated that attitudes about how children learn can be changed through reflection, dialogue and active classroom practice. They have underlined the need to give teachers, the enablers of quality ECE, the opportunity to become children again, to explore paints, sounds, natural materials and “junk” found in the environment. In setting free their own joy at learning through play and creativity, they can inspire their pupils to do the same.

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