

Since 1984 a dedicated Pakistani professor has been helping school teachers in the isolated northern reaches of his country to do their jobs better. An evaluation team describes the experimental training program he operates for the Aga Khan Foundation as "extremely useful" and worthy of replication elsewhere in Pakistan.

Photo: Jean-Luc Ray



Pakistani teachers are advancing beyond the traditional philosophy of 'spare the rod, spoil the child'.

'TEACHING THE TEACHERS IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN

by JOSEPHINE MACFADDEN

Professor Mubarak Hussain Shah's enthusiasm and commitment to his work are paying off. He has lived in the northern Pakistani city of Gilgit and has run the Field-Based Teacher Training Program from there since 1984.

"After my initial demonstration class," he explains, "I gather the teachers-in-training for their first impressions of the new teaching methods I have been demonstrating. 'What are the differences?' I ask them. It usually takes them a few moments before one will say, 'There's no stick.' 'Exactly!' I say. Then I have them.

"They can't help noticing that I have achieved discipline and an atmosphere of participation and learning without the use of physical violence, or the traditional method of unison chanting of information."

The experimental training program is jointly sponsored by the Aga Khan Foundation and the Pakistani Department of Education. The Aga Khan institutions began working in the Northern Areas of Pakistan in 1945 when, with the help of a large donation from its Ismaili leadership, it opened several schools. Since then it has worked diligently to fulfill its leader's instructions to educate children, especially girls for whom there were previously no schools at all.

The Northern Areas are rugged and isolated. They lie at the intersection of four of the world's highest mountain ranges—the Himalayas, Karakorams, Pamirs, and Hindu Kush—and border Afghanistan, the USSR, China, and India. About 90 percent of the population lives by subsistence farming, and the literacy rate of 10 percent is less than half the national average.

Gilgit is the main city of the Northern Areas. Until the paving of the historic silk road to China in the past decade, it was isolated—except for the intrepid traveller willing to fol-

low the winding dirt road suspended on the cliffs high above the Indus River. An airstrip has given mountaineers and other tourists access to the region, but fog often disrupts flights.

A research team from the Quaid-i-Azam University was funded by IDRC to evaluate the field-based teacher training program in this area. To this day there are virtually no roads linking the valleys, so in order to visit isolated schools, team members had to travel by jeep, horse, or yak, or on foot.

Such isolation mitigates against the teaching profession. Few teachers from the Northern Areas have had formal training. They simply begin to teach in the local village schools when their own schooling is completed. The methods by which they were taught become their own.

In order to break traditional teaching habits, the Aga Khan field-based method calls for teachers to be transferred to different village schools for nine months. During this time they are constantly supervised by a master teacher. Special manuals provide them with lesson plans and suggest appropriate techniques.

The teachers are encouraged to "use local events as learning experiences and aids, to get pupils more actively involved in learning through various practical activities and questioning patterns rather than rote memorization, to systematically evaluate pupil learning, to abstain from punishment and to use Urdu as the language of instruction."

Prof. Z.A Ansari is Director of the National Institute of Psychology at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad and led the evaluation project. His report is highly critical of the system of teacher training throughout Pakistan—one which has been in place since independence. He calls it "one of the most neglected areas of education".

Although Pakistan's 87 teacher training institutes have a capacity for 26 000 teachers, they are far from full. About 14 percent of male

teachers and 25 percent of female teachers enter service untrained.

The report argues that, for those who receive training, the standard one year is not enough. Furthermore, the lecturers themselves are not adequately trained and the "curriculum could do with a lot of improvement". There is too much theory and not enough emphasis on the art of teaching, the reports adds, and trainees are not given satisfactory instruction on how to motivate children or deal with behavioural problems.

It was against this backdrop of criticism of Pakistan's overall teacher training system that Prof. Ansari's team evaluated the Aga Khan field-based training program. The researchers specifically examined the backgrounds, attitudes, perceptions, and classroom skills of the participating teachers, as well as their students' learning behaviour, in order to assess the program's impact on teaching quality.

The evaluation report says the teachers give planned, structured lectures and offer clearer explanations and direction than conventionally trained teachers. Students' responses to questions and completion of class work indicate an increased learning capability.

Teachers punish students less and communicate with the class at large rather than focusing on individuals or specific groups.

Despite these promising results, participants in the training program do not stand out significantly from others in terms of innovative teaching styles. The report says this slow progress may be partly attributed to difficult conditions such as lack of teaching aids, materials, and funds.

The report recommends that information on the Aga Khan field-based training methods be disseminated so that model programs can be established in other areas of Pakistan. ■

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