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A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION: A REFLECTIVE RECOUNT OF THE EVOLUTION OF AKES,P

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Abstract

This paper presents an overall picture of the evolution of the Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES,P) over a century. Reaching out to the remotest areas of Pakistan, AKES,P, has been providing quality education for over a hundred years. The first school of AKES,P, was established in 1905 in Gwadar, Balochistan. Over a century later, AKES,P, now operates 179 schools and 5 hostels in Gilgit-Baltistan, Chitral, Punjab and Sindh, mostly in rural areas. These represent very diverse schools, ranging from a rural school with less than 30 children to a large urban school with over 3000 children. AKES,P, places special emphasis on improving educational practice; leadership and management in diverse and challenging settings; child-centred teaching methods; increasing use of ICT; female education; school-based teacher development; and working in partnership with the government and communities. The paper elucidates the institution's journey since its inception, under five major themes, which include: Institutional Development, History of Teacher Development, Evolution of Teaching and Learning Practices, Creating a Child Friendly Environment, and Community Development.

Introduction

The Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES,P), an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), is amongst the largest private networks of education institutions in Pakistan. AKES,P's mission is "*to enable many generations of students to acquire both knowledge and the essential spiritual wisdom needed to balance that knowledge and enable their lives to attain the highest fulfilment*" (His Highness the Aga Khan).

Institutional Development

Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES,P), previously termed as Central Education Board (CEB), initiated its services in 1905 with the establishment of its first school in Gwadar, Balochistan. In the following decades, AKES,P's operations significantly expanded with the formation of six more Aga Khan Schools (AKSs) in key localities of Sindh – Karimabad, Garden and Kharadar in Karachi, and later in Hyderabad, Sultanabad and Mirpur Sakro in Interior Sindh. As a historical breakthrough, the institution managed to reach the harsh and rugged mountains of Northern Pakistan in 1946. Thus, the organisation expanded its reach from the extreme South to the extreme North. In the mid '40s, Diamond Jubilee (DJ) Schools for girls were established in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). From the outset, AKES,P, adopted an evolutionary approach and besides providing access to education in specific areas, efforts were made to create awareness about the importance of female education across the Ismaili population. The Mirs, other notables, and opinion leaders of the communities were taken into confidence and hence began the process of educational intervention.

Following a demand-driven approach, by the mid '50s, a good number of primary schools were established in different regions of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) including Hunza, Gojal, Punial,

Ishkoman, Gupis and Yasin. The educational facilities (physical, financial and human resources) were provided by the Imamat, and access to education was almost free of cost.

In 1962, the 'Central Education Board' (CEB) was established to deliver governance and management for the schools. Communities in the target areas gradually started getting involved in the educational process thereby providing rooms, facilitating teachers and convincing those community members who were not yet open towards the proliferation of education. The challenge now was to bridge the gap between the demand for education and the community's lack of willingness to pay for it. In 1968, the CEB was registered under the Societies Registration Act. Then in 1970, the Regional Education Boards (REBs) were established to assist the CEB in managing the schools in their respective regions. Until the mid '80s, these schools were mostly run by a voluntary setup, which included the Chairman of the REB and Council. Moreover, in the early '80s, professional management was introduced with the appointment of a school inspector who was responsible for facilitating teaching-learning and monitoring and supervision of school operations. A Central Education Office was also established, followed by a monitoring system in GB called the Inspectorate.

By the mid '80s, the Sherqilla School was founded as a Silver Jubilee project. It was followed by the construction of the Aga Khan Academy, Karimabad, Hunza, which was a residential facility for girls from across GB and Chitral (GB & C). Today the Academy is operating as a Higher Secondary School with excellent quality of education. When AKES,P, established the first school in Chitral in the early '80s, the overall literacy rate, according to the National Census 1981, was only 14.14%, with 24.12% for men and only 2.9% for women. The district now has the second highest female literacy rate in the KPK province.

In the Southern region, in 1972, the schools were nationalised. Nevertheless, the Sultan Mohamed Shah Aga Khan School was very quickly denationalised through a special appeal made by His Highness, and hence the quality remained consistent. In 1984, when all the schools were denationalised, there were many challenges, including the recruitment of 350 teachers in 1985. In order to mitigate those problems and bring-in quality of education, a *School Improvement Programme (SIP)* was developed focusing on: infrastructural refurbishment, governance, management training, and teacher education programmes.

In 1998, CEB was converted into AKES,P, and registered with the Government of Pakistan as a service company. An Executive Officer was hired to support the Education Administrator appointed by His Highness the Aga Khan. This was later followed by the recruitment of General Managers for the three regions.

With a special emphasis on tertiary education provision, the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed yet another level of expansion. The Aga Khan Higher Secondary School (AKHSS), Karachi, the first AKES,P, school to offer higher secondary education, was established in 1995, followed by two other AKHSSs in Gilgit and Hunza. In 2000, another AKHSS was established in Ghahkuch, district Ghizar, and a decade later in Seenlasht and Khuragh, in Chitral.

Moreover, AKES,P's first school in the province of Punjab, AKS, Hafizabad, was founded in 1997. This decade also witnessed the supportive endeavours for the establishment of Community Based Schools (CBSs), both in the rural and urban areas of Sindh.

In an effort to bring its support services closer to the schools, AKES,P, introduced the concept of Field Education Offices (FEOs) in 1996, which are now called Regional School Development Units (RSDUs).

In its pursuit of excellence, AKES,P, has strengthened its institutional capacity through partnerships and linkages with a wide range of partners. These include the International Academic Partnerships (IAPs) with Philips Academy-Andover, Salem School-Germany, and AKU-IED. Schools have also participated in Intel® ‘teach to the future programme’ and iEARN scholarships and programmes. Furthermore, institutions like the Karakoram International University, British Council, National Commission for Human Development, CIDA, USAID, EC, AusAid, ESRA, NORAD, JICA and AKDN agencies have collaborated in many academic and development endeavours.

Moreover, introduction of *Early Child Development (ECD)* programmes, affiliation with Aga Khan University – Examination Board (AKU-EB), establishment of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Research (MER) and IT units, and ICT integration are other institutional development initiatives at AKES,P.

History of Teacher Development

AKES,P, is known for its emphasis on the teacher development and learning opportunities it provides to its employees.

The history of teacher education goes way back to the early ‘70s when the then CEB started nominating teachers for Primary Teacher Certificate (PTC) and Certificate of Teaching (CT) offered by the Government College of Education, Gilgit. In the early ‘80s, AKES,P, in collaboration with the Directorate of Education, introduced an in-house teachers training programme called the *Field-Based Teachers’ Development Programme (FBTDP)*, which allowed a significant number of teachers to do their PTC & CT Courses. One of the unique features of this programme was its field based approach. Moreover, continuous refresher workshops were offered for teachers and head teachers. In order to address the shortage of teachers in small sized schools, in the ‘90s, short courses on Multi-grade teaching were organised under the FBTDP.

Correspondingly, from 1987-89, the school leaders in the Southern region designed a three year school improvement plan for the schools in Karachi and interior Sindh. The SIP mainly focused on the renovation of the schools, training of the leaders, training of the teachers, and the development of the curriculum. In 1989, another teacher education programme called the *Language Improvement Programme (LIP)* was launched to improve English language skills, in collaboration with the British council.

Thereafter, in the mid ‘90s, when schools adopted English as the medium of instruction, the *Language Enhancement and Achievement Programme (LEAP)* was launched to improve the English Language skills of teachers. With the support of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), native English speaking teachers were engaged in designing and implementing training programmes for teachers of English, Science & Mathematics. In the late ‘90s, the European Commission provided generous support for a ten-year education development programme called the *Northern Pakistan Education Programme (NPEP)*. Under this programme, AKES,P, offered a wide spectrum of professional development opportunities to its teachers, head teachers and managers. The major professional development initiatives included: courses in Content and Methodology, Early Child Development (ECD), English Language Improvement, Leadership and Management (e.g., ADPE & ADELM), and sponsorships for B. Ed, M. Ed, and Ph. D from national and international universities such as AKU-IED, Notre Dame Institute of Education, NUML, University of Toronto and others.

In 2003, a programme for ECD was initiated, called *Releasing Confidence and Creativity (RCC)*, funded by the Royal Netherland Embassy – which focused on improving the ability of families and communities to effectively support children’s early development; and improving system capacity and commitment to ECD programmes. It offered a wide spectrum of courses including diplomas, certificate courses and field-based courses to teachers, teacher educators and parents.

In 2009, under AusAid funding, the *Educational Development and Improvement Programme (EDIP)* was launched in the remotest regions of GB. Building on the experience of past interventions, the EDIP took up a whole-school-development approach towards professional development and a cluster-based model to provide field-based support to a network of schools.

Evolution of Teaching and Learning Practices

Since the inception of AKES,P, schools, the teaching and learning practices have massively evolved over time. Initially, traditional methods were in practice, whereby a teacher would read the text and students would repeat. The text was then translated from English to Urdu and then to the local language. The main focus was on memorising facts and reproducing them in the examination. The mode of assessment included verbal tests, dictations and solving mathematical problems.

In the ‘80s, as a result of multi-level interventions and professional development initiatives, the teachers were exposed to innovative pedagogies with a focus on child-centred activity-based teaching. This new approach led to a paradigm shift from mere memorisation of facts to a participatory learning approach where students were engaged in meaningful learning activities which fostered conceptual understanding and critical thinking and creativity.

Over time, the medium of instruction was changed from Urdu to English in all the three regions, which was supported by the ongoing professional development programmes. Teaching strategies gradually transformed from the lecture method to more interactive modes such as discussions, debates, and experiential learning where children were encouraged to observe, touch, and manipulate learning materials. The current decades have witnessed further innovations, as children are more and more exposed to diverse learning opportunities through projects and assignments in order to learn from various avenues, such as peer-interactions, libraries, online resources, CDs and DVDs, and participation in national and international events (for instance, IEARN, YES, and Olympiads).

Gradually, innovative ways of assessment were introduced and oral examinations were replaced by written examinations. The introduction of a centralised examination system in GB & C standardised the assessment of students’ learning, as students of all the schools appeared for the same test paper developed at the Regional level. The exam coordinators, field-based educators and teachers were trained in item writing and the use of Bloom’s Taxonomy to improve the standards of assessment. As a result, emphasis on assessing students learning at higher levels of comprehension, application and analysis increased. Furthermore, affiliation with the AKU-EB increased the validity and reliability of students’ assessments.

Along with professional development and capacity building of teachers, substantial work was carried out in the area of curriculum development and enrichment. This involved the alignment of *Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)* with the local context through relevant examples. A focus on Early Years Learning and Development during the recent decades has opened up new avenues in classroom teaching and learning practices. As a culmination of the

RCC programme, the *High-scope* approach was introduced in the Pre-Primary classes, whereby the provision of a conducive, stimulating, and nurturing environment to children is emphasized with an aim to foster holistic development of a child (physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual).

Creating a Child Friendly Environment

The history of creating a child friendly environment and purpose-built learning spaces at AKES,P, goes back to 1926, when a member of the Ismaili community donated the Alidina building to the Aga Khan Girls School Kharadar. Much later in the '60s and '70s, purpose-built schools were constructed in SMS School, Karimabad, and AKS, Garden.

In GB, however, till 1980, the DJ schools were run either in the 'house of the teacher' or in the private rooms adjacent to religious spaces (Jamats Khana), called '*Lunger Khana*', without any provision of furniture and equipment. Thereafter, the local communities built one or two rooms, mostly adjacent to the religious spaces. These rooms were constructed using locally available material (mud and stone), and employed primitive technologies. Thus, these facilities were vulnerable to natural calamities and not sustainable.

In the early '80s, the *Self-Help School Construction Programme (SHSCP)* was initiated, in GB & C, with a specific objective to construct seismically safe classrooms and toilet blocks. Under this programme, the construction activities were carried out in partnership with the local communities who provided free land, local materials and unskilled labour. This programme was launched with generous financial support from various international donor agencies. One of the major features of this programme was the provision of new and purposefully manufactured furniture and other equipment for schools where new construction was undertaken. In addition, under NPEP, 15 Community Learning Resource Centres (CLRCs) were constructed in GB & C, which provide a common learning space for the community.

Community Development

AKES,P, emphasises community mobilisation, knowledge of local conditions, rigorous management, appropriate technology and sustainability. The role of the Ismaili Council setup has always been integral for AKES,P's initiatives undertaken for community mobilisation. Through REBs and Local Education Boards (LEBs), the Council facilitates linkages and provides communication channels with and support mechanisms for the community, in order to develop awareness regarding education.

The history of community mobilisation activities goes back to the mid '40s when members of the Ismaili Council started dialogues with communities to create awareness regarding education. Most of these awareness campaigns consisted of self-driven, unstructured activities such as lectures, dialogues, discussions and informal talks carried out by community leaders at the local level. By the '80s, this relationship had turned into more formal and structured linkages, when under the guidance and supervision of the Council, LEBs and REBs were established. Later in the '90s, under the supervision of LEBs, School Management Committees (SMCs) and Village Education Committees (VECs) were formed with every school. These committees consisted of representatives from local communities, and provided a link between AKES,P, schools and the respective communities. Under NPEP in the Northern Pakistan, QUAID project in the South, and other funded programmes, extensive training courses were arranged to build the capacity of LEBs, VECs and SMCs. These committees played a huge role in creating awareness regarding quality education,

attracting more children towards AKES,P, schools, motivating parents to invest in the education of their children, and providing classrooms and other required resources to run a school. The launch of the SHSCP further enhanced ownership of the communities in AKES,P, activities – leading from community participation to community partnership.

One important initiative in empowering the community has been the setting up of CBSs in Karachi, rural Sindh, GB and Chitral. Under this concept, a local community is encouraged to mobilise its resources to set up schools where their children could have access to quality education at a reasonable cost. The community owns and manages the school, while AKES,P, provides teacher training and technical support. As a result of a number of interrelated activities undertaken through the generous support of the EC and other international donors, the communities are now more confident to sustain the CBSs and other community-based initiatives.

In addition, the registration of Community Based Education Societies (CBESs) with the government has been an important step towards sustainability. The purpose of registration was to make the SMCs more autonomous for decision-making and also for the mobilisation of resources. Since 2006, CLRCs have been established in GB (11 centres) and Chitral (4 centres). The objective of the CLRCs is to provide the local community with access to educational resources, including information and communication technology.

In 1997, the *Female Human Resource Development Programme (FHRDP)* was initiated with the objective to facilitate female students of GB & C to pursue secondary and higher education. Hundreds of female students from underprivileged and marginalised communities have benefited from this scholarship and many of them have joined various professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching and banking.

Conclusion

As a dynamic learning organisation, AKES,P, has gone through many phases of change. Viewing from diverse perspectives, these changes can be seen in multiple forms, particularly at the personal, social and institutional level. The personal change is perhaps the most remarkable one, as in some very remote, climatically harsh and geographically rough areas, AKES,P, has set milestones of human development. As a result of consistent efforts of over a century, the institution has developed considerable numbers of professionals in diverse fields. The impact at the social level is much wider, which can be seen in the form of basic orientation of the communities, their awareness and motivation regarding education and their constant drive to improve their quality of life and achieve excellence. In areas where access to school was once a dream, female literacy rate has now escalated. Over a century, AKES,P, has emerged as an institution of quality, repute and a point of reference in the field of school operations. The journey of transformation continues, as AKES,P, constantly endeavours to *reach out to inspire better lives*.