

Role of Head Teachers in Managing the Forces Emanating from the External World of Schools in Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan

Dr. Mola Dad Shafa

The Aga Khan University – Institute for Educational Development
Professional Development Center, North
University Road, Konadass, Gilgit
Pakistan

Abstract

This paper reviews the nature and intensity of some external forces that shape and re-shape headteachers' school improvement efforts in the mountainous and rural Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan. The external forces emanating from the outside world of the schools are categorized under three themes: divisions within the school community, influences of the district office, and issues of communication with parents. The divisions within the school community were clear and deep. The major divisions included the uneven socioeconomic levels, the various tribal systems, the sense of local and non-locals, and the different religious denominations. The challenges related to the District Office were: monetary challenges, monitoring and supervision, and a surfeit of assignments given to schools. The issues of communication with parents were: parents' lack of interest in school improvement issues and the low socioeconomic background of parents. The paper also examines headteachers' roles in addressing these ongoing school improvement challenges.

Key Words: Headteachers' roles, external forces, school improvement challenges.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Cultural and Religious Diversity in Gilgit-Baltistan

The people living in the mountainous and rural Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan are characterized by their different ethnic orientations, values and traditions. Here, people speak many languages; some of the major ones are Shina, Brushaski, Balti, Khowar, Wakhi and Pushto. However, Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, is used as the lingua franca. Culturally, a sense of tribalism is embedded in the communal life of the people. Since ancient times, people in Gilgit-Baltistan have traced their roots in, and attributed their family recognition to, their clans or the wider tribe. Therefore, tribalism has been an important institution in uniting people of a common descent together. The extended family system and the closely-knit sectarian groups further reinforce the sense of belongingness amongst the people. All these deep-rooted diverse characteristics, however, have emerged in the past as sources of conflicts rather than as positive and learning-conducive opportunities.

By religion, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are Muslims attached to one of four different sects of Islam, each following a different school of jurisprudence. These sects are known as the *Sunni* Muslims, the *Shia IthnaAshari* Muslims, the *Shia Ismaili* Muslims, and *Noor Bakhshi* Muslims. Despite their religious differences, the people had always believed in co-existence, tolerance, and peace, as they had been living together in Gilgit-Baltistan for centuries. However, from the 1980s onward several sectarian conflicts have created tensions, more so in some areas than others, which have jeopardized peace and harmony in the region. While these communal conflicts have brought people adhering to the same faith closer to each other, on the one hand, they have created a gulf amongst people following different interpretations, on the other. A sectarian conflict that erupted between local *Sunnis* and *Shias* during 1988, and which was considered to be the worst in the history of Gilgit-Baltistan, resulted in the loss of many lives and destruction of much property on both sides. The years following this unfortunate event witnessed increasing tensions, intermittent communal clashes and resulting widespread sectarian hatred. Such sectarian conflicts and the resultant turbulent conditions made some schools vulnerable to various kinds of disruptions, confronting them with severe disciplinary challenges.

Although the unspoiled landscape and the serenity of the valleys between the majestic snow-capped mountains form an attraction for visitors, majority of people living in Gilgit-Baltistan face numerous hardships and often live without the basic necessities of life. These circumstances add to the already complex process of improving educational conditions both for the teachers and the taught. As the discussion in the following pages will illustrate, many of the conditions that affect and shape life in Gilgit-Baltistan also influence headteachers' daily efforts to improve what happens in schools.

1.2. Development of the Study

In many parts of the world, schools have been under considerable pressure to improve what they do, and headteachers are increasingly expected to ensure that these improvements happen (Goldring & Sims, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rouse & Markham, 2004). This pressure is also felt in the mountainous and rural areas of Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan (Shafa, 2003). The author's interest in the challenges of headteachers and their role in school improvement has been longstanding. The foundations for the present study were in part laid on the very first day of his career, when he first encountered the complexities of teaching students in six grades, dealing with the challenges of school discipline, and addressing community- and central office-related issues, all in one go, because he was the only teacher in the school. Over the last twenty five years the author has either worked as a headteacher or worked with headteachers. In the former role, he encountered various challenges specific to the context of that one school. These included issues both about dealing with the students, the teachers and the curriculum, as well as issues to do with parents, school visitors and the central office.

In the latter role, he has had many opportunities to observe and, on occasion, support headteachers in their ongoing efforts to improve what happens in their schools. These efforts inevitably faced numerous challenges, which the headteachers had to address in the course of sustaining their schools' improvement. Working with other headteachers also showed how the contextual and cultural influences added to the complexity of introducing school improvement initiatives. It also made him realize that in general the unique context of the school, the make-up of the school community, the local cultures and traditions, and, above all, the unique individuals in each school, created the unique school improvement challenges for each headteacher. Likewise, working with heads also provided insights on the complexity of headteachers' world and illustrated that dealing with issues was for them an ongoing and unavoidable commitment. In particular, it was learnt that headteachers had a vital role in stimulating school improvement. Some of the frequently encountered challenges of the headteachers with whom the author worked included role ambiguity, the conflicting expectations of the various stakeholders, the tensions of inadequate resources, and the lack of incentives and authority to deal with the relevant issues. Hence, it's with this backdrop that an attempt was made to investigate into the forces emanating from the outside world and confronting the headteachers with numerous school improvement issues.

2. Statement of the Problem

Numerous studies suggest that headteachers' role is crucial to any effort in school improvement (e.g. Harris, 2002; Maden, 2001; West, Jackson, Harris & Hopkins, 2000). However, there is scarcity of research, specifically in the developing world, on how the school heads address their school improvement challenges at the secondary level. For instance, examining the headteachers' role in the context of restructured schools, Dimmock and Hattie (1996) argue that "relatively little research to-date has been conducted on how principals respond to the challenges and pressures of change brought about by restructuring" (p. 62). Furthermore, the school improvement literature also reflects the fact that there has been relatively less research in secondary schools (see Midthassel, Brue & Idsoe, 2000).

A study was conducted to explore the nature and intensity of the school improvement challenges, specifically focusing on the influences emanating from the outside-school world and constraining headteacher's school improvement efforts. The ethnographic case study approach was employed to collect data for this study. A secondary school headteacher (hereafter called Iqbal) was shadowed for six months in his school (hereafter called Federal Government Boys High School Salimabad, Gilgit) to understand the scale and intensity of external forces reaching school from the outside world and how these influences often disrupted school discipline as well as the teaching and learning conditions in school. Analysis of the data on headteacher's school improvement challenges also reflected valuable insights on the processes and approaches by which he addresses his challenges, and his overall role in undertaking school improvement.

Headteacher's school improvement challenges are inextricably linked to the location, the historical background and the diverse population of the schools. The reticent parents (Korson, 1993; Khan, 2002), the turbulent sectarian issues, the policies of the District Office, inadequate financial resources (Hoodbhoy, 1998b), and the flight of talented students to other highly reputed schools provide other sources of challenge. Adding to that the school became more susceptible to socio-political and sectarian conflicts and disruptions since the late-1980s. Consequently, headteacher paid relatively more attention to maintaining order and discipline than to addressing the issues of staff development and students' academic achievement.

Head's efforts to improve various aspects of schools, however, include strategic actions valuable in improving the learning conditions for both teachers and students. Though the district officials, the staff, and the school management committee see the headteacher's contribution in improving the Saleemabad High School as significant, he himself sees improving things at school as an ongoing process that requires renewed and concerted efforts to address newly emerging conditions. No wonder he maintains a list of some evolving plans of various strategies and initiatives that he intends to implement at the "right time."

3. Divisions within the School Community

The data reflected various kinds of divisions within the school community, which included the tribal systems, the languages, the religious denominations, the unequal socioeconomic backgrounds, the concept of local versus non-local, and the various values and traditions. A sense of tribalism seems very much embedded in the communal life of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. People trace their roots through clans in the wider tribal system. The five larger languages and many dialects spoken, too, divide the local population into several groups. Likewise, people are generally divided into four sects of Islam, namely the *Sunni* Muslims, the *Shia IthnaAshari* Muslims, the *Shia Ismaili* Muslims, and the *Noor Bakhshi* Muslims (Dani, 1989). In places where sizeable numbers of people have moved in from outside Gilgit-Baltistan, local versus non-local divisions if not hostilities are evident. Many of these issues divide the school community outside the school and affect life inside the school. However, the sectarian divisions, the socioeconomic inequalities, and the local versus non-local divisions dominate the other divisions amongst the students and the teachers at Saleemabad High School.

3.1. The Socioeconomic Divisions

The socioeconomic divisions amongst people are starkly uneven, and an overwhelming majority of them live below the poverty line. The socioeconomic divisions in the wider society were also evident amongst the students at Saleemabad High School. Many poorer students did not have textbooks, exercise books and, in some cases, pens and pencils, and they found it difficult to purchase these necessary items. Some students came to school in torn shoes and worn-out school uniforms.

3.2. The Local versus Non-Local Division

The local versus non-local division was a case of tension of insiders versus outsiders. Some teachers in the school were from Gilgit-Baltistan and some teachers came to work at Saleemabad from outside Gilgit-Baltistan. There were 10 non-local and 13 local teachers in Saleemabad High School. Iqbal himself was from the Punjab, i.e. a non-local. The non-local teachers working in the school were quite cognizant of the sense of localism, and were concerned about "being treated as second-class citizens." Iqbal believed that the non-local teachers, with no domicile of Gilgit-Baltistan, encountered difficulties in the schools. For example, both the students and the local teachers considered the non-local teachers as outsiders; therefore, they shied away from them and refused to trust or to affiliate with them. Although both local and non-local groups used Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, for communication, they had different regional mother tongues. Because they did not speak the local languages, the non-local teachers experienced another disadvantage as this sometimes made communication with students and their parents difficult. During his interactions with local visitors to the school, Iqbal would try to understand people's viewpoints from the perspective of the local traditions.

3.3. The Sectarian Divisions

Islam, as a religion, is divided into two major sects. One, Sunni Islam, is followed by a vast majority (about 85 percent) of the Muslim world. This group believes that the teachings of the Holy Quran, and the noble examples from the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) of Islam (including what was said and done by the Prophet) are the sources of salvation for mankind for all times. The other, Shia Islam, whose doctrine also rests on the teachings of the Holy Quran, believes in continued guidance by later representatives of the Prophet, known as *Imams* (the spiritual leaders or saints). Generally, this concept of *Imamat* (spiritual leadership) distinguishes the two major denominations. There are also several other divisions within these two larger groups. The four sects, often living peacefully in Gilgit-Baltistan for centuries, experienced sectarian hatred and conflicts (predominantly Sunnis and Shias) that became particularly rife from the 1980s onwards. Several factors had adversely affected the relations amongst these people of different sects. Extreme poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and the presence of foreign agitators who wanted to create disruption and chaos in Gilgit-Baltistan, fuelled the sectarian conflicts. The development of intolerant extremism undermined the formerly peaceful existence of human diversity in Gilgit-Baltistan, using this human diversity instead to create and widen gaps among people of different sects and tribes.

Consequently, the social implications of the Sunni-Shia sectarian conflicts permeated all aspects of life and reached and affected the schools also. The tensions that erupted occasionally resulted in sectarian unrest and violence, and the spin-offs of such conflicts, disrupted the Saleemabad School. Iqbal observed the sociopolitical changes that occurred as a result of the 1988 sectarian clashes. He claimed that the 1988 sectarian clash changed everything. "It changed the patterns of social relations. People preferred to buy things from the shopkeepers of their own sects. It affected all social institutions and it led to a weapons-collection race amongst the people."

Unlike the majority of secondary schools in Gilgit-Baltistan, which were entirely single-sect, the Saleemabad High School community was very diversified in religious affiliation. Of the 23 teachers, 12 were Sunni, 10 Shia, and one Ismaili. Iqbal himself belonged to the Sunni sect. The student population in the school comprised roughly equal numbers of both Sunnis and Shias. The staff, teachers and students at the school spoke several different languages, and represented different cultures from all over Gilgit-Baltistan as well as from other parts of Pakistan. However, the pluralistic nature of the school community seemed more a source of the school's vulnerability to eruptions and confrontations than a cultural and religious mosaic adding to a learning-conducive environment in the school.

However, because of the deeply held nature of their religious beliefs, it seemed impossible for the teachers or students to exhibit neutral approach in the school. Therefore, Iqbal's expectations that his school community would leave their sectarian affiliations outside the school seemed too ambitious. Sectarian affiliations and biases obviously influenced the relations amongst the Saleemabad High School community in various ways. Teachers and students belonging to the same sects tended to group together, and demonstrated more care and sympathy towards each other than to non-members. Some previous headteachers of the school also had had tacit sectarian affiliations with staff and students. One such headteacher reputedly visited all the classrooms and asked the students belonging to his sect to raise their hands so that he could recognize them. One teacher stated that he no longer made the mistake of punishing students of other sects, no matter how grave their misconduct, because some students distorted the facts about their case and tried to blame the teachers for being religiously prejudiced.

4. The Influences of the District Education Office

The District Office had an immense influence on the day-to-day management of Saleemabad High School. The District Office dealt with almost all school-related decisions; sanctioning leave cases, recruiting and transferring teachers and headteachers, nominating staff for training programs, releasing salaries each month, and approving teachers' promotions, among others. Also, the District Office expected the headteachers to get prior approval before spending the school budgets, which it provided. The headteachers did not even have the authority to auction abandoned furniture in their schools without the prior approval of the Director of Education. For managing schools in the entire district with inadequate and low-skilled staff, the District Office could not provide schools with much-needed professional and resource assistance. The District Office itself suffered from inadequate resources, both human and material, and could not do much to act as a source of motivation and inspiration for the schools. Many of Iqbal's challenges emanated from the District Office's policies and procedures. However, three major themes emerged from the data: challenges about financial matters, the problems of monitoring and supervision by the District Office, and the issue of additional assignments to Saleemabad High School. The following pages discuss these themes.

4.1. The Monetary Challenges

Although the District Office allocated Saleemabad High School a nominal budget to meet everyday needs, Iqbal was supposed to get prior permission from the District Office to utilize the budget. At the end of each year, the school account was audited and the audit report was sent to the Director of Education. Any adverse audit remarks were reflected in the annual confidential report on the headteachers. Iqbal was, therefore, very cautious in following the procedures for utilizing his budget. On several occasions, Iqbal phoned the District Office to seek permission and opinion on utilizing different funds in the budget. Iqbal was thus constrained by the District's financial policies in utilizing financial resources to address various school needs. Resource constraints emerged as one dimension of the financial challenges that hindered school improvement. The school had a nominal budget to meet the most basic necessities; for instance, furniture repair, firewood for heating during the harsh winter days, library books, laboratory equipment, and machinery. However, there was no budget for student activities.

In another case, Iqbal wanted to change the system of quarterly school examinations. He wanted to stop the practices of either writing the questions on the blackboards for the students to copy or dictating questions to them.

He wanted to get the question papers printed, so that the quarterly examinations could be conducted similar to the annual examinations. However, no money was allocated for the quarterly examinations in the school budget; Iqbal just could not implement his plan. Issues related to teachers' salaries and allowances emerged as another main aspect of the District Office's financial policies. The majority of the teachers interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with their salary package. Some teachers were under tremendous economic pressures in order to meet their basic domestic needs; often they had to find extra sources of income and, consequently, could not fully concentrate on their profession. Several teachers did other part-time jobs to add to their monthly income. Such jobs included running private tuition centers to give additional coaching to students, becoming tutors for the Allama Iqbal Open University, running part-time businesses, or working in their fields and gardens after school. Teachers nearly always left the school with the students when the school day ended, because they needed to meet their after-school commitments.

4.2. Issues of Monitoring and Supervision by the District Office

Three Directors of Education assisted the Secretary of Education in the administration and the management of the government schools in Gilgit-Baltistan. There were two Directors responsible for academics and administration: one is responsible for Gilgit region including five districts while the other looked after the Baltistan region including two districts. In each one of the seven districts, there was an office for the Deputy Director of Education, who was assisted by the District Inspector of Schools, in managing the schools. Visiting high schools, evaluating the staff, and providing feedback for further improvement were some of the Deputy Director's responsibilities. The District Inspector of Schools and the Assistant District Inspector of schools were responsible for the smooth operation of the middle and primary schools. The District Office people visited Saleemabad High School quite often, but they never observed lessons or provided feedback to the teachers. Iqbal commented that because the district officials did not visit the classrooms, some teachers started believing that they were not accountable for their classroom obligations. No visits also reflected no interest on the part of the district officials, with respect to what was going on in the classes.

This negligence, in turn, affected the interest level of some high-performing teachers. The teachers generally felt that the people who worked at the District Office accorded them insufficient respect. Some teachers said the gap between the District Office and the school had widened during the last few years. People who worked at the District Office were also reputed to operate by nepotism. Two teachers, with 13 and 17 years' service each, mentioned that they never got a single chance for professional development during their careers. They and other teachers believed that the officials who had the responsibility for deciding on teachers' nominations for various professional courses at the District Office, sent their own relatives. Teachers also voiced their concerns about unnecessary delays in getting their rights from the District Office. Iqbal, the teachers, and the school management committee also believed that the District Office was not really serious about supporting improvement in schools. The staff generally felt that the District Office treated both the committed and the less committed teachers alike, with no rewards for committed teachers; therefore, the system actually demoralized committed teachers.

4.3. The Challenge of a Surfeit of Additional Assignments

Saleemabad High School received several additional assignments from the District Office. Both Iqbal and his teachers complained about such assignments, because they stretched the school's resources too thin and, therefore, adversely affected the school's operation. Iqbal cited the proximity of the school to the District Office, the professional reputation of some of the teachers, and the school's comparatively better resources for co-curricular activities (e.g., school band and gymnastic equipment, and well-trained boy scouts) all attracting additional assignments from the District Office. Iqbal, his teachers, and the students all received various types of official assignments. Iqbal mentioned that the District Office usually expected that the school should always be ready to send teachers, or students, for various additional activities outside the school.

However, these additional assignments disturbed the school routine. Iqbal was on three committees established by the District Office: the teachers' recruitment committee, the furniture committee, and the school affiliation committee. The teachers' recruitment committee met whenever a need to discuss and settle teachers' recruitment issues arose. The furniture committee was responsible for announcing and finalizing contracts for school and office furniture in the whole District. The school affiliation committee was supposed to visit, prepare reports about, and present recommendations for schools that applied for affiliation with the Board of Examination and the Education Department. Iqbal also conducted inquiries into various administrative problems in the District.

In addition to these assignments, Iqbal was also invited to attend meetings with his senior officers at the District Office. Saleemabad High School was usually the first school the District Office asked to participate in rallies and walks. In one such walk, to demonstrate unity and moral support for the people of Kashmir in their struggle for freedom from India, students and staff from all five secondary schools in the town participated. The concluding ceremony of the Kashmir Solidarity Walk took place at Saleemabad High School, where students delivered speeches and sang national songs.

5. Communication with the Parents

Iqbal believed that the promotion of educational change in school required the concerted and coordinated efforts by teachers, students, and parents. For this reason, in certain areas he involved parents in supporting school improvement initiatives. The data illustrated Iqbal's parents related issues inextricably linked with parents' lack of awareness on school's progress and increasing contacts between parents and teachers.

5.1. The Issue of Keeping Parents Informed about School Activities

Achieving the goal of increased communication with parents was replete with risks, frustrations, and challenges. The initiatives required efforts to motivate and help parents to understand the need for such contacts. Also, he negotiated with the teachers to motivate them to show willingness, and to encourage them to prepare to receive parents. It was also important to motivate students so that they would encourage their parents to have dialogues with the teachers about their performance. The majority of the students at Saleemabad High School came from economically disadvantaged families. The parents' economic commitments and lack of awareness about the importance of education hindered the parents from developing close links with the school. The parents worked in the fields, looked after their cattle, or worked as laborers, government employees, or businessmen; these jobs took up most of their time. In addition, Saleemabad High School was a de facto regional institution; it had students coming from almost all parts of Gilgit-Baltistan. The lack of proper local transportation and communication facilities posed challenges for the school, and prevented it from keeping a close liaison with the parents in the more remote villages of Gilgit-Baltistan.

5.2. The Challenges of Fostering Teacher-Parent Interaction

Iqbal had to address the issue of fostering teacher-parent contacts on several fronts. He compared the issue of inviting parents to school as similar to buying an elephant and bringing it home. "One has to think about the place for an elephant at home before buying it," he commented. He meant things needed to be put in order at school before he could encourage the parents to keep closer contacts with the teachers. Fostering the teacher-parent contacts was constrained by the factors related to both teachers and parents. A vast majority of the parents had not even visited the Saleemabad High School after their children had been admitted. The teachers frequently complained about the lack of cooperation from parents. Iqbal believed that if parents would be vigilant about their children's performance in school, it would increase teachers' sense of accountability about how they teach the students. Inadequate interactions between teachers and parents thus, in a way, constrained the school from delivering quality educational service to the students. Two teachers mentioned, that despite several verbal and written requests from the school, parents failed to attend meetings to discuss issues related to their children. Another teacher blamed parents for not showing interest in their children's education. He stated that they did not care about their children because they do not value the free education their children get here. This teacher further commented that the school just got those students who were either rejected by other English-medium schools for admissions or failed in the examinations there.

6. Coping with the External Forces

Saleemabad High School seemed particularly vulnerable to numerous external forces because of its accessibility (located right in the heart of town) and because it had a heterogynous student population representing different sects. Some of the external forces influenced the school included sectarian conflicts, political interference, reticent parents, inadequate resources, and the influence of the District Office. Such forces had roots in the sociocultural values and traditions of the wider society; they were ongoing, unpredictable, and capable of negatively and positively affecting the school. Iqbal took certain initiatives to address these external forces, so as not to let them cause turbulence or problems in the school, but he could not control them completely. He realized that all those who entered the school — students, teachers, staff members, parents, or community members, official or other visitors — brought with them the traditions, values, complexities, and even conflicts that defined the world of which the school was a part.

6.1. Managing the Sectarian Challenges in Saleemabad School

Iqbal knew that the fragile sectarian relations and resulting tensions in the wider society easily made their way into the school. However, his moderate approach and respect for the whole school community, irrespective of their denomination, assisted him in his efforts to create a relatively more tolerant and harmonious environment at Saleemabad High School. A majority of his staff liked Iqbal's tolerant approach; the teachers from the various sects equally respected him. In his everyday obligations, for example, nominating teachers and students for different programs or giving staff members particular responsibilities, treated all individuals equally regardless of their particular denominations. The data reflected that the staff, as a result, played a significant role in maintaining discipline in the school. Among others, one strategy Iqbal used for addressing the sectarian conflicts was maintaining contacts with the various local religious leaders, which considerably helped to curb the risk of communal confrontations. When he first assumed duty as the headteacher, he met the local religious leaders and requested their cooperation in improving the situation in the school. Their support helped maintain peace, improve discipline, and discourage students' fighting on the basis of sectarian divisions.

In addition to the external support he got from the religious leaders, Iqbal also created structures and conditions at school that curtailed the issues of sectarianism. Besides the school management committee, he had created five other committees, composed of staff, to deal with various school issues. In view of the fragile sectarian conditions, Iqbal was sensitive to maintain equal religious representation on these committees. A sense of unequal representation, or a perceived bias on his part, could have shaken the trust of the staff members. A pattern emerged in how Iqbal addressed the sectarian challenges he confronted. He would first try to deal with the issues himself. However, if the issues seemed to be unmanageable or if they seemed to taking a confrontational turn he would ask the school discipline committee to deal with the challenge. In case of urgency, when the discipline committee could not come together at a short notice, he would seek help from the teachers belonging to the same denomination as the disputants, to mediate the issue.

6.2. Responding to the Influences of the District Education Office

The issues discussed in the foregoing paragraphs affected Saleemabad High School in many ways. The challenges of the District Office's financial policies and lax monitoring and administration were not easy to deal with. In addition, additional assignments impeded the routine operations of Saleemabad High School. On the other hand, Iqbal also viewed these assignments as an indication of the District Office's trust in and high expectations of the school. Although the organizational culture expected subordinates to always comply with official instructions, Iqbal sometimes negotiated with the senior District officials and got them to change their decisions. Iqbal worked in an administrative environment replete with tensions and uncertainties. A brief description of how Iqbal tried to address the District Office related challenges follows:

6.2.1. Addressing the Monetary Challenges

The issues of financial resources constrained Iqbal, the teachers, and the staff members. The school got a meager annual budget, which could merely meet its most basic needs. There was no budget at all for students' school-based activities, educational trips, or celebrating important days in the school. Except for utilizing the available funds in the most efficient manner possible, Iqbal could not do much to address his financial constraints.

The Committee Fund was an initiative Iqbal took at Saleemabad High School to address staff members' financial issues. Teachers and other staff members volunteered to join the Committee Fund. There were twelve members, including Iqbal, who joined the Committee Fund scheme. Each committee member contributed 1000 Rupees a month; thus they collected a total of 12000 Rupees each month in the Committee Fund. The committee members used two mechanisms for giving this whole amount to one of the members. First, they had a lottery, and the person whose name was drawn got the entire amount. Second, they unanimously decided to give the whole amount to someone who was found to be in critical financial condition. Those who had already received the amount could not be considered again during the same school year, but everyone kept contributing until every member got the money.

6.2.2. Coping with the District Office's Monitoring and Supervision Issues

Since Iqbal felt obliged to obey and implement the official policies and procedures, he could not point at or raise his voice against such problems, per se. In certain cases, like the transfers of the three teachers, he used his personal influence to get orders cancelled. However, he had not begun to address the other challenges such as no classroom visits by the District Office personnel, lack of recognition for dedicated teachers, or the misuse of the annual confidential reports.

6.2.3. Managing the Challenge of A Surfeit of Additional Assignments

Iqbal had developed a system to fill in the gaps created by the absent teachers, so that their classes did not suffer. His first assignment every morning was to develop the substitute teaching plan. He would first identify teachers who had free periods, and assign them the teaching duties of the absent teachers. Sometimes, he combined two sections of the same class, so that the teacher of one section could teach both at the same time. The substitute teaching plan mechanism was not foolproof. Iqbal merely tried to minimize the risk of classes remaining unattended. In most cases, teachers getting substitute teaching duties did not actually teach, but merely went to the class to maintain discipline.

However, if teachers were sent away by the District Office on longer official duties, Iqbal took two steps. First, he requested the District Office to transfer some teachers from other schools into Saleemabad temporarily. Second, he requested additional funds to hire some substitute teachers for the interim period. He only asked the District Office for such arrangements when he could not meet the needs internally. Iqbal could not do much to eliminate these challenges. Occasionally, he would discuss his problems about staff shortage with the District Office and get some of his teachers excluded from additional responsibilities. Sometimes, he discussed with the District Office the space issues in the school, namely space needed for various extra activities, and was thus able to schedule these activities so that they would cause the least disturbance to the school routine.

6.3. Communication with the Parents

6.3.1. Keeping Parents Informed about School Activities

In order to develop close links with the school parents and to keep them informed about the school's progress, challenges, successes, events, and future plans, Iqbal used a range of strategies. He used the progress report cards to inform parents about the students' progress. He also asked the students to communicate all school information to their parents. The parents were informed about the exam results and admissions to the school using the local radion station. Iqbal sent two special letters to parents requesting them to keep closer contacts with the school. He designed the school prospectus to increase the parents' awareness about the importance of their children's education.

In addition to the annual examination, the school conducted two quarterly examinations, the first in June, and the second in November. The school used progress report cards to inform parents about the results. The school used the progress report cards three times a year to communicate with the parents. Other communication with the parents (and also from the parents) was mostly oral. When teachers wanted to communicate with parents, they generally did so orally. Iqbal and his teachers often instructed the students to convey school messages to their parents, and these messages were almost always oral. Iqbal often used the services of the local radio station to keep the parents informed about the school's news, events and future plans. Most people in Gilgit-Baltistan still did not have access to Pakistani television channels, except residents in the capital town of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Iqbal's efforts to keep parents informed about school-related activities also included two special letters designed to encourage parents' cooperation with the school. In these letters, Iqbal requested the parents to help the school achieve the goal of providing quality education to the students. He gave parents the school phone number, and asked them to contact the school if they wanted to know about their children's educational progress. As a result of one of these letters, a delegation of six parents came to the school and thanked Iqbal personally for the way he cared for their children. They were highly appreciative of the letter sent to them and assured Iqbal of all possible support in his school improvement endeavors.

6.3.2. Fostering Teacher-Parent Interaction

Iqbal employed several strategies to facilitate teacher-parent exchanges. He created more opportunities for face-to-face interactions between teachers and parents. His basic objective in these various initiatives for fostering interaction with parents was to bring teachers and parents closer together and increase face-to-face contacts. Though primarily aimed at improving the students' attendance, a new '3-6 attendance rule' also had a spin-off in terms of increased contacts with parents. Iqbal arranged to put up a suggestion box in the school, and appreciated the input from students and parents. He also had some plans to further enhance contacts and exchanges with parents, which included maintaining students' portfolios, and sharing of the school's original examination answer-sheets with the parents. Such initiatives fostered teacher-parent interaction. Iqbal made increased efforts for face-to-face meetings between the teachers and the parents.

His regulation that parents had to personally visit the school to plead their children's re-admission cases was primarily to reinforce the concept of face-to-face interaction between teachers and parents. As a result of various initiatives, the level of interaction between the school and parents was rising. Iqbal received seven phone calls from parents, in my presence, during the eight months that I was with him. He received many more calls when I was not with him. The parents made these calls for different purposes: Some asked about their children's progress in various classes; some registered complaints about less effective teaching by some teachers; and some requested Iqbal to grant leave to their children. In two cases, the calls were from mothers. One requested Iqbal to readmit her child to Grade 6. Her child's name was struck off the register for remaining absent for a long period without permission. Iqbal advised the mother to pay attention to the regularity of the child's attendance and readmitted her son. He advised her to tell her son to approach the admissions officer and to fill in the readmission form.

The other mother complained to Iqbal about a teacher who taught her child in Grade 9; she said that the teacher could not explain the concepts properly. Sometimes parents wrote letters to Iqbal to communicate their feelings. One of the letters he received came from an ex-graduate of Saleemabad High School who was in the Pakistan Navy in Karachi. This man had addressed his letter to all teachers and students, requesting them to take full advantage of the opportunity of getting an education at school. He reminded them that Saleemabad High School was a great institution, which had helped him to reach the stage where he was in his career. However, despite a modest beginning to foster links, achieving the goal of reaching out to all the parents and having more frequent and more regular contacts, discussions, and exchanges with them seemed to be an uphill task.

7. Analysis and Commentary

This paper on "coping with the external forces" described the nature and intensity of some external forces that shaped and re-shaped Iqbal's school improvement efforts. These external forces were categorized under three themes: divisions within the school community, influences of the District Office, and issues of communication with parents. The divisions amongst the school community were clear and deep. The uneven socioeconomic levels, the various tribal systems, the different languages spoken, the sense of locals versus non-locals among people, and different religious denominations were some of the sources of these divisions. Except for the last, the others emerged as undeniable realities within the school community, but they never caused a total disruption to school operations. The sectarian divisions, however, seemed more powerful and dominated all other divisions in the context of Saleemabad High School. Iqbal's initiatives of meeting with religious leaders, giving staff members of the two dominant sects an equal representation on the school committees, involving police to tackle the sectarian confrontations amongst students, having surprise siege and search operations in the school to seize the weapons, and expelling students caught with weapons, helped address some of the issues emanating from the sectarian divisions in the school community. Consequently, the school climate improved, and relatively more peace and normalcy returned to the school. However, while Iqbal seemed able to address these tensions and conflicts, they could still erupt.

The challenges related to the District Office's policies and procedures were: monetary challenges, monitoring and supervision issues, and the additional assignments constantly given to Saleemabad High School. The monetary challenges included inadequate financial resources to meet the various school needs, and the teachers' dissatisfaction with the financial package that they got from the District Office. Also, authority for using the financial resources was very much centralized. Iqbal needed to get prior permission from the District Office even for spending the budget allocated to the school. The District Office's monitoring and supervision system confronted Iqbal with several challenges. By not paying any academic visits to the school, the District Office inspectors conveyed to the teachers the message that they did not value what was going on inside the classroom. This attitude seemed to have negatively affected several teachers' priorities about how to teach, how much to teach, and why to teach. In addition, the issue of frequent and untimely transfer of teachers had several negative repercussions, such as demoralization of staff, lack of accountability of teachers for syllabus coverage, and frequent change in the school timetable. Frequent additional assignments from the District Office to Saleemabad High School confronted Iqbal with the dilemmas of releasing teachers for such assignments, and, at the same time, maintaining conducive teaching and learning conditions at the school.

Iqbal took some initiatives to resolve or, at times, to manage such challenges. Although he established a Committee Fund for staff to help them meet financial exigencies, he could not deal with their financial challenges entirely. Also, the school's budget remained constant, so the financial situation continued to be a constraint on the school.

On the monitoring and supervision front, Iqbal was able to negotiate with the District Office and cancel the transfers of three of his teachers. He could not do much with regard to the District Office's general approach of frequent, untimely transfers, or about its ineffective use of the annual confidential report system. With regard to the additional assignments to Saleemabad High School, Iqbal had developed a mechanism of substitute teaching arrangements, whenever teachers went away for additional assignments, or were on leave, another teacher took their classes. Such arrangements helped more in terms of maintaining discipline than in carrying on the teaching and learning in the classrooms. The District Office related challenges thus seemed to be ongoing; the same issues repeatedly confronted Iqbal during the entire course of the year. Despite the complicated nature of the District Office issues, Iqbal approached these challenges seriously, and would not give up on them. These challenges took a substantial amount of his time and effort, in terms of making sense of them, coping with them, managing them.

Communication with parents, the last theme about the external forces, portrayed several challenges to improving the two-way communication between parents and school staff. Most of the parents remained oblivious of both the school's achievements and its constraints. Nor did they pay any heed to their children's progress at school. In certain cases, poorer parents were not even able to provide their children with the basic educational necessities. Iqbal considered it important to inform parents about the school's successes, challenges, and future plans. He wanted to restore the parents' confidence in the school, and to increase their involvement in managing school issues. His initiatives of writing special letters to parents, using the Radio Pakistan facility to reach parents, encouraging face-to-face meetings between teachers and parents, and providing a suggestion box for frequent communication with students and parents did increase the flow of communication both to and from the parents. Increasing numbers of parents visited the school, contacted Iqbal by telephone, and wrote letters to communicate their feelings, or to know about the progress of their children.

8. Conclusion

This paper portrayed the nature and intensity of the external forces and the challenges which they posed to Iqbal. Saleemabad High School seemed particularly vulnerable to these external forces because of its accessibility and because it had a student population drawn from different Islamic sects. Some of the external forces influenced the school included sectarian conflicts, political interference, reticent parents, inadequate resources, and the influence of the District Office. Though they could have been potential sources of learning and strength, in most cases these challenges exacerbated the fragility of relations amongst people, both inside and outside the school world; they often confronted Iqbal with serious challenges. The analysis exhibited the fact that these forces had roots in the sociocultural values and traditions of the wider society; they were ongoing, unpredictable, and capable of negatively and positively affecting the school. Iqbal took certain initiatives to address these external forces, so as not to let them cause turbulence or problems in the school, but he could not control them completely. He realized that all those who entered the school brought with them the traditions, values, complexities, and even conflicts that defined the world of which the school was a part. The paper presented key insights on the factors posing "outside-inside" challenges: problems emanating from the outside world with which the school headteacher had to deal in terms of the school's internal functioning.

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