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# PAKISTAN READING PROJECT (PRP)

## PAKISTAN

## ACTIVITY BACKGROUND

The Pakistan Reading Project (PRP) was implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Creative Associates International Inc., the Institute for Rural Management, and World Learning to address the reading deficit among Pakistani 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students. The activity took place in 69 districts of Pakistan between 2013—2020 and engaged more than 1.7 million students and over 27,000 teachers.

## KEY FINDINGS

### CONCEPTUALIZATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

PRP's theory of change hypothesizes that in order to improve students' reading skills in Pakistan, it is necessary to improve the classroom learning environment, policies and systems, and community-based support. PRP's approach is based in part on IRC's Healing Classrooms approach, a model that helps teachers develop techniques to support the acquisition of reading skills within a safe environment for learners of different levels and linguistic backgrounds. Key informants noted that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) was not a main focus of the activity and, instead served a more supporting role to improve school climate and reinforce key lessons in teacher training and reading materials.

While SEL was not explicit in PRP programming, SEL had a clear and identifiable role in certain activity components. Reading materials implicitly incorporated SEL skills by highlighting subjects such as respect children with disabilities, harmony and relationships, and accepting one's defeat, and concepts were carefully included to complement the overarching goal of improving reading skills.

*“From the very beginning of the project, we were very clear that the focus was on improving reading. But some of the core things, for example, on which we were very clear from the very beginning includes, happiness, community service, love and care, harmony, tolerance, empathy, special children, human empowerment, and respecting each other. All these were basically part of our material development. So, we have a concept healing classroom environment—you know, safety of students and all those. Objectives are not like social-emotional learning, but we were clear what messages will be included; we identified them very carefully.” – Chief of Party*

Girls were given special consideration in the activity's conceptualization and contextualization phases. PRP developed gender-sensitive reading materials to support a culture of tolerance and inclusion, and promote discussions on the importance of girls' education and different forms of women's empowerment. One result of such an effort was the increase in female representation in transformative and leadership roles in textbooks from 24% to 47% over the span of the activity. In

### BEST PRACTICES

- Close collaboration with the Government of Pakistan to create teaching and reading materials and enact policy changes allowed for activity materials to be easily integrated into the official government curriculum and lent itself well to the scalability of the activity's impacts.
- To complement programming at the school level, having family and community as an entry point to promote SEL skills was noted as being very effective by respondents.
- Efforts to address gender differences in learning how to read and representation of girls and women in reading materials proved successful.
- PRP's teacher training interventions were noted as having positive impacts on school and classroom climate.
- Adaptation to changing contexts such as COVID-19 allowed for continuous student engagement despite political and socioeconomic challenges.

addition, the activity identified other marginalized populations including those from rural areas, children with disabilities, religious minorities, and children in conflict-affected areas such as Balochistan who were taken into account in the activity design and subsequent implementation. According to respondents, religious minorities were particularly included in the development of activity materials since certain regions within the scope of the activity have Christian or Hindu minority communities. Other key stakeholders consulted on content design and contextualization throughout PRP's lifespan included provincial and regional governments of intervention areas, the Bureau of Curriculum, the Provincial Institute of Education, and academic experts from local universities.

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND MEASUREMENT**

In addition to the work being done with teachers in schools, parents and caregivers were simultaneously involved through storytelling sessions to build their capacity to help children read at home and promote their SEL skills. Within the intervention communities, PRP engaged NGOs and school management bodies in supporting the revival of an early grade reading culture in Pakistan by providing grants to promote parental engagement, support education of children with disabilities, and more. The activity also identified and engaged Community-Based School Governance bodies to support schools and parents in improving reading skills of their children.

PRP also made conscious efforts to involve provincial and regional governments in activity implementation thereby creating buy-in for and investment in the materials and teaching methods developed under PRP. Respondents and activity reports alike spoke to the benefits of this collaborative relationship, particularly with regards to sustainability, as it pertained to activity materials, specifically, the integration of teacher training, textbooks, and other reading materials into the national curriculum of Pakistan. Building capacity, ownership, and consensus among government staff was also critical to facilitating continued learnings beyond the life of PRP.

*“Involving the government in every area makes the work easier. We inform them. We have the system of the steering committee meeting. We have the system of advisory committee meetings in every province. So, there you share with the secretary all the details of the program for every quarter, what are we doing. We share our successes and challenges. We share the performance of the students...it's more like an equal partnership.” – Director of Supplementary Reading Resource Development*

Respondents noted an improvement in school climate, attributing some of the success to improved teacher training. Formal school observations, document review, and key informant interviews indicate improved student-teacher interactions, positive effects of certain teaching practices on student well-being<sup>1</sup> and participation, and increased teacher attempts to relate learning content to students' lives. All these serve to create a friendlier and more welcoming classroom environment for children. Interesting to note, however, are the results of the Batch 2 Impact Evaluation study from January 2020, which used a quasi-experimental design to identify changes in student participation and well-being between baseline, endline and post endline for two cohorts of Urdu medium schools. While teachers in the treatment group demonstrated improved teaching competencies in positive and statistically significant ways at endline and post endline, findings indicate a reduction in their promotion of student participation and well-being. This suggests that after withdrawing professional

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<sup>1</sup> The main principles of student wellbeing, as described in Healing Classroom materials, are sense of control, sense of belonging, feelings of self-worth, positive peer and teacher relationships, and intellectual stimulation.

development supports, instructional quality may decrease, indicating the importance of providing teachers with cost-effective ways to maintain high quality teaching practices.

The Gender Study analysis conducted in 2017 found a lack of awareness among PRP teachers on gender issues and how to identify them to develop more inclusive and gender sensitive learning environments. In order to address these findings, PRP undertook the following actions: a) worked closely with provincial textbook boards to promote gender equality by increasing female representation in transformative and leadership roles in Urdu and Sindhi textbooks from 24% to 47%; b) distributed promotional materials such as pamphlets and posters among all PRP schools with gender-sensitive messages, tips, and strategies for teachers' classroom practices; and c) organized over 90 gender sensitization workshops and training sessions which were attended by teachers, mentors, academic supervisors, textbook writers, and members of the provincial apex institutions across Pakistan.

## LIMITATIONS

While PRP demonstrated success in improving school climate, increasing children's reading abilities in local languages, and improving the policy environment in Pakistan to support reading, key informants identified certain limitations of the activity. Respondents revealed that local stakeholders had to be convinced of the benefits of a reading activity at the onset of PRP, in large part due to cultural perceptions of reading instruction being treated as a subject to learn rather than as a foundational skill for cognitive development and learning. Activity staff also encountered resistance from government stakeholders during their early efforts to emphasize the importance of prioritizing child protection and girls' education.

*"We had material review committees and material development committees who were actually responsible for developing this material. There was a topic about child abuse and so we thought we might do a story or poem so children can know how to protect themselves. But it was so difficult for me to convince [them]. We incorporated it later on but the initial mindset at the time was, "No, no, no we cannot talk about that [child abuse] at home."*

*– Director of Supplementary Reading Resource Development*

PRP's main objective was to increase reading fluency among learners, and therefore, did not have as strong a focus on SEL programming and measurement of SEL outcomes. Respondents had different ideas for incorporating explicit SEL activities into basic education programming, but agreed that more needs to be done to familiarize key actors in Pakistan's education community on ways to effectively integrate SEL into education initiatives.