Building Policy Change that Lasts: The Pakistan Reading Project

In 2013, educators and researchers in Pakistan conducted multiple national level reading assessments and observed that a full-blown literacy crisis was happening. Nearly half of third graders and more than a quarter of fifth graders struggled with essential literacy skills. This was an immediate emergency with potentially disastrous long-term consequences because children who do not develop literacy skills in early grades often never catch up.[1]

Beginning that year, the USAID-funded Pakistan Reading Project (PRP), implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and partners, set out to address this by improving the literacy skills of Pakistani children across seven provinces. PRP approached this endeavor with a focus on three components: improving the quality of literacy instruction in the classroom, fostering greater community support for a culture of reading and enhancing the policy environment across Pakistan in a way that built a sustained commitment to ensuring children learn to read.

Seven years later, PRP succeeded in reaching 1.7 million children and nearly 27,000 educators across Pakistan. Working with students in grades 1 and 2 and their teachers, PRP achieved meaningful impact at scale. PRP was identified as one of the most impactful large scale reading interventions by the Gates Foundation and was awarded with the 2020 International Prize of the Library of Congress Literacy Award Program. It remains the IRC's largest education project to date.

By program's end, students who went through two years of PRP demonstrated significant and moderate-to-large gains in their literacy skills.[2] But PRP also succeeded in improving dozens of literacy education-related policies throughout Pakistan. These policy changes likely mean that the measurable improvements this program achieved will endure and the changes that made them possible will continue to benefit schoolchildren in Pakistan in the years and decades ahead.

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This brief will reflect on the ways in which PRP's approach of policy analysis, engagement with policymakers and conducting policy-relevant research—particularly a rigorous study on the cost-effectiveness of different ingredients of teachers' professional development—shaped the institutionalization of changes that will hopefully continue strengthening education in Pakistan. The lessons learned from PRP hold great potential to continue improving policy approaches in Pakistan and worldwide, especially when funders are willing to support an ambitious program over the long-term, at a time when the need to address learning crises and bring about meaningful educational improvements for children in fragile contexts has never been more dire.

Key Policy Challenges

The literacy crisis in Pakistan is vast in scope and occurring in an acutely challenging context. Pakistan is a vast and mountainous country with a decentralized education system in which policy is conducted at the province level, with each province having its own curriculum, textbooks, teacher training institutes, etc. Millions of Pakistan's schoolchildren live in communities that are geographically isolated from major commercial hubs and struggle with grinding poverty and persistent security challenges. From the outset it was clear that any plan to meet the literacy crisis in Pakistan would have to consider scale at the forefront and take a multi-tiered approach in its pursuit of meaningful impact. As such, PRP was implemented using a staggered implementation, in which three cohorts benefited from 2 academic years of implementation.

In addition to these endemic challenges, several policy factors stood in PRP's way as it set out to improve the literacy skills of schoolchildren in Pakistan. When the program began, reading itself was not an explicit focus of instruction for early elementary grades in Pakistan. Schools focused more on language and grammar rather than equipping students with the ability to decode text. This made a curricular overhaul necessary to even begin laying the foundation to improve literacy skills. That new curriculum in turn meant that an entire cohort of educators across the country would have to receive new and ongoing professional development that could empower them to teach their students how to read effectively.

At the time, Pakistan also administered an EGRA national education assessment in grade 3. Because there had been no national standards in reading prior to PRP, national assessments did not explicitly test literacy skills. Educators often identified student struggles with literacy skills at too late of a stage in their education to effectively course-correct. It is crucial to spot and then address struggles with literacy skills early or children risk never catching up.
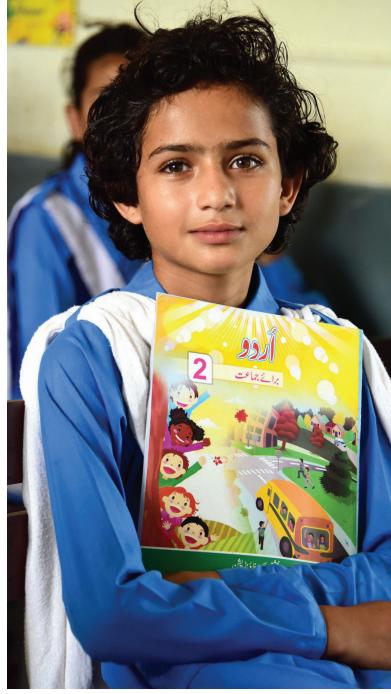

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Despite the challenges of this operating environment, the Government of Pakistan (GoP) and provincial governments were committed to reading reforms and PRP aimed to support these efforts by focusing on improving policies around what to teach and by whom in the early grades.

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Policy Analysis and Relationship-Building

PRP's strategy to improve policies for reading included analyzing and building upon existing institutional frameworks, conducting needs assessments and gap analyses, and strengthening the linkages and collaboration among various stakeholders. To do this, PRP budgeted and staffed for advocacy to ensure the project was well-resourced and equipped to achieve this multi-pronged and collaborative approach. That collaboration remained ongoing, as PRP identified and engaged policymakers in a meaningful way from the beginning and throughout the life of the project.

From the outset, it was necessary to develop an understanding of the educational policy environment across Pakistan. This process required a focus on national and provincial priorities and officials related to education. More specifically, it called for understanding how these policies were determined, who decided whether to enact them and the ways these policies contributed or failed to support the development of reading skills in the early grades.

During its first year, PRP conducted a policy scan of several provinces across Pakistan. That scan was shaped by a drive to better understand the literacy-related gaps in education policies and curricula and how these gaps were impeding the successful implementation of PRP. This scan also included an effort to ensure PRP activities were aligned to Pakistan's National Education Policy and the Curriculum Framework.

PRP built strong and productive working relationships between its program officials and key players at every level of Pakistan's education system, including and especially government officials and policymakers. Crucially, these efforts fostered the collaborative relationships necessary to pursue and deliver on meaningful, positive changes. That relationship-building itself was made possible by the funding structure of PRP, in which the program had the long-term financial support needed to work on these relationships over the course of multiple years.

Because the educational system in Pakistan is decentralized, efforts to improve policy required multiple levels of close and effective collaboration with different sets of local and provincial authorities across the country. PRP formed Project Steering Committees (PSCs) and Advisory Committees (ACs) at the inception of the project to ensure that stakeholders in Pakistan were essential partners in all stages of project development, implementation, monitoring and decision-making.

PSCs were chaired by the provincial education secretaries and comprised of members from government departments. ACs were composed of representatives from the professional bodies of education departments and universities. The ACs provided technical feedback during implementation of various project activities. A total of 107 PSC and AC meetings were held over the course of the project.

Furthermore, PRP staff met with policymakers to conduct bi-annual workshops about lessons learned. These workshops enabled the exchange of information around impact findings as PRP generated them to help inform decisions about what elements of the project should be sustained. These approaches to stakeholder

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engagement, relationship-building and collaboration more broadly led to a series of meaningful policy changes over the course of the project, including:

1. **Developing province-level Reading Improvement Strategies:** education is highly decentralized throughout Pakistan and immense decision-making power rests at the provincial level. PRP therefore collaborated closely with PSCs and ACs to assist provincial and national policymakers in the development and implementation of Reading Improvement Strategies tailored for each province. By working with officials within each province, PRP was able to better understand the specific needs and challenges facing students at a more localized level and to have that deeper understanding inform programming decisions.

2. **Allocating time for reading instruction:** before PRP, schools in Pakistan did not set aside time during the school day to focus on students developing reading skills. PRP worked with stakeholders to weave an explicit focus on literacy skills into the daily curriculum. As a result of PRP, all provinces approved between 30 – 45 minutes of allotted time for the teaching of reading at each school day. With the implementation of revised schemes of studies, children of all public schools now have mandatory specific time for reading instruction.

3. **Establishing benchmarks and standards of student progress:** when PRP began, Pakistan's education system had no grade-level reading proficiency standards or mechanisms in place to measure student progress. This left educators in the dark as to what students were learning and where they were falling behind in reading, particularly during the crucial early years of primary school. In 2015-2016, PRP supported the national and provincial education departments in establishing standards that define reading performance and serve as the foundation for comprehensive reading reform. Reading standards were first established at the national level, and then based on those, developed by provincial/regional education departments for their respective areas. PRP put in place a means for educators to ascertain student performance and adjust instruction based on the patterns of student need that emerged.

4. **Curricular revision:** prior to PRP, no province-level language curricula included specific reading skills such as phonological awareness, syllable identification and fluency. Working in collaboration with regional and provincial officials and departments responsible for curriculum development, PRP supported a curricular revision process that ensured provincial language curricula included reading skills in a manner that complied with the newly established reading performance standards. Following the same policy support steps, PRP facilitated numerous consultative meetings at the province level over a two-year period. These meetings resulted in the revision and adoption of language curricula with reading skills for grades one through five in five provinces: Azad Kashmir, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), Khyber Pakthunkhwa (KP) and Sindh. The Newly Merged Districts (formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) have followed KP's curriculum and textbooks, and the province Gilgit Baltistan does not have an institutional arrangement for curriculum development but is considering the revised language curriculum currently in use in ICT.

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5. **Revising textbooks and other instructional materials and securing approval for their use:** in collaboration with provincial education authorities, PRP succeeded in developing, producing and distributing new textbooks and other physical learning materials that provided students in Pakistan with more effective literacy skill instruction. In addition to incorporating more effective literacy learning strategies, these new textbooks included stronger pictorial sections and added a gender lens to specifically help girls learn to read. At the conclusion of the program, school systems in all but one of the PRP provinces were working with these updated and improved textbooks.

6. **Instituting continuous professional development plans:** particularly because there were no explicit commitments to literacy instruction before PRP began, all other policy changes would be limited in their effectiveness without the added support of better-trained and equipped educators. Working with education officials at the province level, PRP collaborated with stakeholders to develop and implement plans that support the continuous professional development of educators tasked with teaching their students key literacy skills. This professional development included face-to-face teacher (FtF) trainings, school support visits (SSVs) from more experienced educators and Teacher Inquiry Groups (TIGs) meant to help teachers share their experiences with their peers and learn from one another in discussions of best classroom practices.

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Policy-Relevant Research

One of the most important factors that influenced uptake was the evidence that PRP produced of program effectiveness. Two different evaluations were used to evaluate the impact of PRP on students' reading outcomes. An external evaluation with a pre-post design provided evidence that PRP was helping children in intervention schools improve their reading outcomes in all provinces where the program was implemented.[3] PRP's internal evaluation used a quasi-experimental design to compare the baseline (2016), midline (2017) and endline (2018) results of students in cohorts 1 and 3 for Urdu and Sindhi, with the results of students in cohort 3 schools, at a time when they had not yet received the interventions. Results of this evaluation showed that PRP interventions significantly increased the reading skills of children in both languages.[4] The positive results from these evaluations helped government officials in Pakistan overcome initial reluctance to adopt PRP's policy recommendations. One high-level government official even conceded directly that prior to these evaluations, he had been skeptical about the need for any program designed to address a literacy learning crisis in the country.[5]

Additionally, to further inform policy decision-making, PRP conducted a rigorous impact evaluation to identify the cost-effectiveness of different ingredients of teacher professional development. The continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers was one of the main cost-drivers of the intervention, but initially PRP did not have any information on the degree to which different ingredients of this model, including FtF trainings, SSVs and TIGs, were driving the impact. These components were evaluated on an individual basis and as packages working together. Attention to cost and cost-effectiveness are important in any education setting for helping identify what has potential for scale and what yields the best value for money. But these factors are particularly significant when designing and implementing education programs in under-resourced contexts. Knowing how to develop and deliver an impactful program to the greatest number of children at the lowest feasible cost to reach scale is particularly crucial in places like Pakistan with high need and limited resources.

Our study about the cost-effectiveness of different packages and ingredients of CPD was the kind of policy-relevant research that yields answers to the questions policymakers need to ask and answer. Specifically, the study shed light on where to invest to get the greatest value for money and provided insights on how to further refine different ingredients of teacher professional development to decrease cost and increase impact. It was designed to provide policymakers with a better understanding of the best ingredients and packages of components to invest in for teacher professional development, with emphasis on achieving the biggest and most sustained impact on both teacher practices and student outcomes for the lowest cost.

For this cost-effectiveness study PRP developed four different professional development packages that included different combinations of professional development ingredients and randomly assigned 200 schools and approximately 3100 children to receive one of these packages. Researchers collected qualitative, quantitative, monitoring and costing data and analyzed the information to identify the impact and cost of different components and packages of continuous professional development on teachers' instructional practices, children's reading outcomes and the degree to which stakeholders' experience with these packages and the quality and fidelity of the implementation affected the impact.

Through this study, PRP gained insights about what ingredients and packages of professional development worked, for whom, how and at what cost.[6] These findings included:

On the impact of professional development ingredients:

1. SSVs showed medium-to-large, statistically significant improvements on the instructional practices of teachers and small-to-large effects on children's reading skills. Teachers without SSVs were not able to compensate through FtFs and TIGs for the opportunity to obtain on-site feedback from trained experts.

2. FtF trainings had positive, medium effects on teachers' instructional practices and small-to-medium effects on children's reading skills. The data suggests that FtF trainings are a valuable ingredient of teacher professional development when combined with on-going professional development supports such as TIGs or SSVs but not as a standalone activity. The data also indicated that teachers without FtF trainings were able to partially compensate for the lack of this ingredient through SSVs and TIGs.

3. TIGs had positive effects on the instructional practices of teachers but negative effects on the reading skills of students. Data from monitoring systems and qualitative interviews suggest that teachers who did not receive TIGs were able to perform better than those who received TIGs because they created WhatsApp groups to share resources and support each other, obtaining the benefits of TIGs beneficiaries without having to spend time and resources attending TIGs.

On cost-effectiveness:

1. The most cost-effective combination of professional development components was shown to be the combination of Reading Learning Materials, FtF trainings and SSVs without the TIGs.

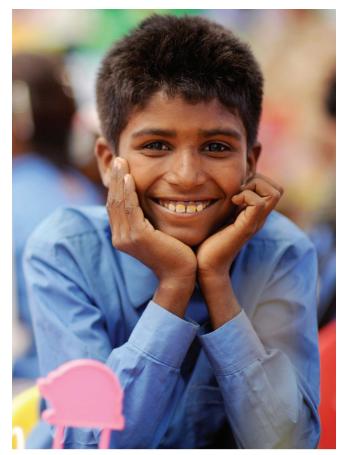2. SSVs were shown to be the most cost-effective program component.

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As our study was conducted towards the end of the project, we hope that the findings it yielded can offer guidance going forward to national and regional stakeholders in Pakistan and inspire similar investments in policy relevant research as part of education programs globally.

The GoP recognized that PRP's professional development component was one of the main contributions of the program and took action to institutionalize program practices. As a result of the evidence generated by PRP, the CPD framework obtained significant support from the state ministry, receiving an allocation of 1 billion PKR per year for its implementation in provinces. Before PRP, there was no such allocation for training and professional development.[7] Some provinces, such as KP and AJK, have also incorporated the continuous professional development model into their work and expanded it to provinces that had not been directly served by PRP.

Recommendations

In conclusion, these analyses and seven years of experience lead PRP to make the following actionable recommendations:

I. For policymakers:

a. Prioritize the continuous in-service professional development of educators. Progress on literacy outcomes hinges on quality classroom instruction. Without effective teachers, the best curricula in the world will struggle to deliver meaningful learning gains for students.

b. Per cost analysis in Pakistan, professional development should include the recruitment and hiring of teacher coaches who have a demonstrated knowledge of reading skills and the capacity to conduct SSVs and effectively train reading teachers. In other contexts, decisions should be based on similar studies that yield evidence on what components and packages are shown to achieve the greatest impact for the largest number of teachers and students at the lowest cost.

c. Ensure decisions are based not only on what is shown to work but under what conditions. Research should provide more than impact results and include information on conditions for success that can lead to program iteration and evidence-informed decision-making that do not contribute to declines in student performance.

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II. For donors:

a. Invest in policy-relevant research as part of programs from the early stages of implementation onward and ensure that research includes designing for cost-effectiveness and analysis of different ingredients of an intervention to determine which components drive the cost and impact of a program and specifically which can produce the best outcome for the largest number of students at the lowest cost.

b. Fund education programs in fragile and crisis contexts over multiple years. Significant and observable improvements in education rarely occur quickly and longer periods of time are necessary for programs to be effectively improved over the course of a project and to yield the sort of data around impact and cost-effectiveness necessary to both ensure a program itself is achieving its objectives and can contribute to a wider body of evidence and a more informed field. In PRP, the intervention was successful because we had the time needed to give coaches enough training and experience. Multi-year funding allows for capacity building necessary to achieve outcomes for children.

3. For practitioners:

To achieve sustainable impact, engage with national and local policymakers at every stage in program and research development to ensure policy changes are rooted in contextual challenges, aligned with country priorities and achieve buy-in and ownership throughout the life of the project.

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ENDNOTES

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