CHAPTER 7

Conceptualizing Early Schooling in Pakistan: Perspectives from Teachers and Parents

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INTRODUCTION

Education has a long history and valued place in Pakistani society. From the earliest recorded history, teachers and schools, along with families and the broader community, have played fundamental roles in children’s learning as well as the development of their character (Gupta 2007a). However, the current public school system, shaped by a fairly recent colonial history, ongoing sociopolitical and religious tensions, natural disasters and a dearth of resources, is struggling. While most children initially enroll in school, many stop attending and drop out within the first year of schooling (UNESCO 2014). Those who stay in school often repeat grades or move through the system without gaining even basic literacy and numeracy skills (SAFED 2014).

Pakistan’s historical and current context provides rich perspectives within which to understand and address education issues. Indeed, systems of education evolve in response to societal values and beliefs—for example, beliefs about the aims of education, ideas about characteristics that are valued and to be cultivated in children and in adults, beliefs about the roles of teachers

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and parents, and ideas about how education will be used. However, discussions of education in Pakistan have tended to be driven by global trends—such as the recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), rather than being contextualized in local values, knowledge and practices. This is a tremendous missed opportunity, as approaches that are grounded in local values and responsive to local culture are likely to be more impactful and sustainable in the long term—not to mention that they recognize, benefit from and strengthen the richness of indigenous values and knowledge.

This chapter presents an effort to conceptualize early schooling in Pakistan from a more contextualized perspective. In the first half of the chapter, I review key aspects of the historical and current sociocultural context within which education has evolved in Pakistan, as well as the current education context in the country. In the second half, I describe findings from a recent qualitative study conducted in the Sindh province of Pakistan in which I explored the views of parents and teachers on early education, and on the role played by schools and teachers in supporting young children’s development and learning.

**Historical Perspectives**

Pakistan’s education system has been influenced by local cultural, social, political and economic factors, as well as the broader South Asian and global contexts.¹ This includes the influences over many centuries of various Eastern and Western philosophies and worldviews.

There is anthropological evidence that advanced thinking and education have been part of South Asian civilization for at least 5000 years, if not longer (Gupta 2007a). In this section, I review key concepts and influences from Hindu and Buddhist periods, Islamic periods, the British period, and finally the Partition of India and creation of Pakistan.

From about 2500 BC until 1500 AD, the Indian subcontinent experienced various Hindu periods as well as some Buddhist periods (Gupta 2007b). In Hindu/Vedic philosophy, teaching and learning are highly valued (Gupta 2007b). The Vedas are ancient scriptures at the foundation of the Hindu faith, and the word *Veda* comes from the root *vid* which means ‘to know’. When Hindu/Vedic influences were predominant in India, education encouraged philosophical, spiritual and secular learning. During periods when Buddhist influences were predominant, education—including both Buddhist theology and secular subjects—was made freely available to all those who desired to learn.

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Two fundamental Vedic concepts are *dharma*—one's roles and responsibilities toward family and society—and *karma*—that there are consequences to one's decisions and actions (Gupta 2007b). Both are important for individual and societal well-being, and learning and cognitive skills are considered necessary in order to make appropriate decisions in these matters. Historically, the role of the teacher was highly esteemed (Gupta 2007b). Education was intended to enlighten students, and the teacher was known as a *guru*—one who removes darkness (*gu* = darkness; *ru* = removal). The teacher was responsible for the child's intellectual and spiritual development, and parents trusted the teacher with this crucial role.

From the eleventh century onward, various Islamic invasions and influences entered the Indian region, the greatest and longest lasting of which was the Mughal Empire, which began in the 1500s and lasted about three centuries until British colonial rule. In Islam, education is considered to be a universal right. Many Islamic rulers supported the establishment of schools, colleges/universities and libraries, and encouraged healthy interaction between Hindu and Islamic cultures (Gupta 2007b). Education is considered to be a duty—across gender, age and social class (Ali and Farah 2007). In Islam, education is part of the process through which the individual is prepared to understand and fulfill her/his social responsibilities (Ebrahim 2017)—similar to the Hindu/Vedic perspective on the role of education in the fulfillment of one's *dharma*.

In early Islamic traditions, there was no distinction between worldly and religious education, and both were considered important (Ali and Farah 2007). Even in contemporary discourse, the aims of Islamic education include 'the balanced growth of the total personality of man through the training of the spirit, intellect, his rational self, feelings and bodily senses' (Ashraf 1985, as cited in Ebrahim 2017).

In the 1600s, Western influences increased in the Indian region, mostly through missionary work and trade. In the late 1700s, the British, as the East India Company, began gaining control over India, and in 1857, the British Crown established direct administrative control. The British aimed to colonize not just the land but also the minds of the Indian population. The British administration worked to convert the traditional 'Oriental' system of education into a modern 'Western' one (Gupta 2007b). This included changing curricula and teacher training, as well as shaping the values and ideals held by the people in India, particularly the elite. English was adopted as the language of instruction in all schools. This imperialist discourse and decision-making was explicit and deliberate (e.g., Macaulay’s Minutes on Education, 2 February 1835, as
cited in Ali and Farah 2007). Overall, the objectives of the British education system were to impress European behaviors and attitudes upon Indian children and to prepare them to work at lower- and middle-level positions in the colonial administration (Gupta 2007b). In contrast to Eastern worldviews, the Western worldviews spread by the British in India tended to separate morality and philosophy from religion (Gupta 2007b). The British also began to remove Eastern philosophy from its place of value within societal discourse and in the education system.

British administrators also designed and implemented standardized curricula, textbooks and examinations (Gupta 2007b). In earlier educational systems, teachers were responsible for the holistic education of their students. Their role involved setting and teaching a curriculum deemed appropriate for the society and for the children. In the British system, however, emphasis was placed on standardized textbooks and examinations focusing on secular subjects. This limited the autonomy and influence of teachers in deciding what and how to teach, and narrowed the vastness of their role in educating their students. Moreover, public school teachers were paid low salaries and held low statuses in the government education system hierarchy.

Under British rule, elite schools—staffed by British teachers and headmasters—served British students and children from elite Indian families and prepared them for the British certification examinations and higher education in England (Ali and Farah 2007). In contrast, schools in urban areas for the general public—staffed by local low-paid teachers—offered lower-quality education, intending to prepare students for jobs such as clerks in public service institutions. This British education system thereby established and reinforced class divisions between the English-speaking elites and the local-language speaking masses.

In the mid-1940s, when India was moving toward independence from British rule, Muslims in the country feared marginalization in an independent India made up of a majority Hindu population. Strong efforts by prominent Muslims convinced the British to divide India into two countries before withdrawing. The Partition of India and creation of Pakistan resulted in the largest mass migration and resettlement in history, fraught with horrific violence, the effects of which reverberate throughout the region to this day.

Initially, religious minorities were granted protections and rights by the Pakistani constitution and society. However, over time, the country’s Islamic identity has been emphasized, and extremist groups have increasingly promoted hostility and even violence toward non-Muslims as well as toward minority sects within Islam.
EDUCATION IN PRESENT-DAY PAKISTAN

When Pakistan was established as its own nation in 1947, the country had a weak administrative infrastructure and meager financial resources (Ali and Farah 2007). Free and compulsory education by the government was recommended in 1947 at the first educational conference. In 1971, the country’s constitution affirmed education as a universal right, with at least 10 years of education to be provided by the government. While there were massive increases in the provision of schooling, quality was and remains poor, particularly at schools serving rural areas, girls and children from poor families.

National education policy in Pakistan tends to be influenced by both local priorities and the influences of international donors and international development agencies. Education policies sometimes change in fundamental ways in a short period, according to the government in power as well as external and local influences. For example, policy around Urdu as the language of instruction in schools has changed a few times in recent years. Moreover, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often supplement government efforts in education. Thus, funds and strategic directions are often short-term and inconsistent, resulting in the unsustainability of many reform initiatives.

Globalization and international discourses also influence educational policy and practices in Pakistan. For example, the global emphasis on early childhood development has led to increased donor funds, NGO interventions and academic research focused on pre-primary education as well as infant and toddler care in the region. However, ongoing and increasing political insecurity, religious and ethnic conflicts and socioeconomic and demographic challenges all affect the stability and quality of education provided to young children.

Pre-primary in National Education Policy

In the 1970s, katchi 3 pre-primary classes were formally part of primary school; however, they were discontinued from official inclusion in the 1980s (UNESCO, International Bureau of Education 2006). When Pakistan committed to early childhood care and development activities as part of Education for All at the World Education Conference in 1990, the country’s National Education Policy (1998–2010) called for a reintroduction of katchi as a formal class in primary schools. This was followed by

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While katchi classes are officially recognized at the policy level, the corresponding funding and implementation has generally not trickled down to many government primary schools. Many NGOs have supported government schools in establishing or improving the quality of pre-primary education in katchi classrooms; sometimes this has been accompanied by government support.

In September 2014, a regional South Asian conference on the right to early childhood education and development was held in Karachi. This conference brought together 200 senior government officers from across Pakistan, along with practitioners, policy makers, academics, civil society organizations and development partners from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal. The outcome of this meeting was the Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) Karachi Consensus Statement (2014), adopted by key government officials for the province of Sindh. The statement proposed nine guiding principles and a number of related key actions for ECED, such as—that ECED be envisaged as an integrated approach to facilitate the holistic development of children aged 0–8 through health, nutrition, education, care and community support; that ECED coverage be universal, founded on a rights-based approach; and that ECED be customized to national and sub-national contexts. This statement provides an illustrative example of how the Western discourse around early childhood development (ECD), which has been globalized, has been accepted fairly uncritically within a particular region. For example, the statement describes brain development, public–private partnerships, data and accountability and integration with the SDGs, but doesn’t mention, much less engage with what ECD means within the Sindh context. Even when innovative approaches are discussed, the language generally reflects the Western and now global discourse, including the customary mention of mother tongue instruction and consideration of local communities. As a demonstrative example, the first key action under the ECED innovations heading reads:

Current and emerging research on brain development, learning, care, parenting, mother tongue, multi-grade teaching and ICTs should be utilized to develop Innovative [sic] pedagogies for incubation, evidence and up scaling ECED models. (ECED Karachi Consensus Statement 2014: 5)
Valuing Schools: Organization, Curriculum and Teaching

In Pakistan today, formal education is partitioned into four levels: primary schools from Grades 1–5 (some primary schools include one or two levels of nachi pre-primary education), middle schools from Grades 6–8, high schools for Grades 9 and 10, and college for two years to reach Intermediate level. After Intermediate, students can do two or three more years in college to get a Bachelor’s degree or go on to professional colleges. Bachelor’s degrees can be followed by Master’s degrees and then PhD degrees.

Four major types of schools exist in present-day Pakistan: government schools (public schools), private schools, community-based schools and madressas (Ali and Farah 2007). Government schools are owned and operated by the government and follow the national curriculum and examination system. The government is responsible for the school building, providing textbooks, hiring and paying teachers, and monitoring and supervision. While there are no or only nominal fees, families must pay for other expenses such as notebooks, stationary and uniforms. Government schools generally have limited resources and quality is often inadequate, particularly in rural areas. Children from low-income families generally attend government schools.

At all primary schools in Pakistan, the following subjects are compulsory: Urdu (replaced by Sindhi in some schools in Sindh), English, mathematics, science, social studies and Islamic studies (Ali and Farah 2007). In most government schools, Urdu is the language of instruction, although it is not the home language for many students. In Sindh, many government schools use Sindhi as the language of instruction.

As indicated throughout this section, the educational content and teaching methods currently used at schools in Pakistan are shaped by interactions between various historical influences, as well as by current local and global influences. Some of these influences are summarized below:

- In present-day Pakistan, many families and communities continue to value knowledge and education, both religious and worldly, so that one is well equipped to fulfill one’s responsibilities toward family, community and society. Education is considered a universal right, and public schooling is available for free to all children.
- Historically, the esteemed role of the teacher included children’s holistic intellectual, spiritual and societal development. Over time,
the teacher’s role has been narrowed to lead students through standardized curricula and examinations. The status and value accorded to teachers by society has also been greatly reduced. However, it seems that at least some parents continue to want teachers to provide holistic worldly and religious education to their children.

- The effects of the education system established by the British continue to this day. Effects include the continued stratification of the school system, where higher-quality private schools teach elite students in the English language using the British curriculum and lower-quality public schools teach poor students in the Urdu language (or other local languages) using the national curriculum.

- Teacher-driven teaching methodologies and rote learning approaches were common during Islamic periods if not earlier. Even today, these approaches are common in classrooms, particularly at government schools and madressas (Ali and Farah 2007). This is further reinforced by an examination system that tests memorization rather than understanding and application. Some private and community-based schools have begun using more learner-centered approaches with a focus on understanding and engagement with learning. NGOs have also tried to implement such approaches at government schools.

- The Partition of India resulted in many Urdu-speaking Mohajirs migrating from the Indian side and resettling in the new nation of Pakistan. Urdu has become the official language of instruction at most schools across the country (the province of Sindh has some Sindhi-language schools), although many families and children speak other languages at home. Furthermore, the education system, and society in general, sustain the central importance that was given to the English language during British colonization.

To summarize, education in Pakistan is shaped by a complex and multidimensional sociopolitical, historical and current context. While it is impossible to delineate and fully untangle the various interwoven and complex influences, it is nonetheless important to consider the range of sociocultural and political factors that have shaped the system and values underlying education in Pakistan.
PARENTS’ AND TEACHERS’ CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF EARLY SCHOOLING IN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY

I will now continue by presenting approaches and results from a case study conducted in Sindh province in Pakistan. The explorative analysis based on qualitative methods was part of a larger mixed-methods research study examining factors associated with children's success in early school (Shallwani 2015). The larger research study's objectives were to develop a contextually grounded, evidence-based understanding of 'ready schools' in Pakistan—schools that support and facilitate young children’s adjustment and learning. The qualitative component of the study involved interviews with four head teachers and four Grade 1 teachers, and focus group discussions with 22 parents of current Grade 1 students, from four purposefully selected government schools: an urban school serving female students (referred to in this study as City Girls' School), an urban school serving both female and male students (referred to as City Mixed School), a rural school serving male students (referred to as Village Boys' School) and a rural school serving both female and male students (referred to as Village Mixed School).

The interviews and discussions focused on the participants’ perspectives on children's transition from home to school—access to, adjustment to and success in early primary—and factors that affected it. However, as I analyzed the qualitative data toward the larger research objectives, I found distinct themes emerging relating to parents' and teachers' values and beliefs around knowledge and education, their perspectives and beliefs on how children adjust and learn in early schooling, and their thoughts on how other contextual factors affect children’s learning and success in schooling—which both reflected and brought additional insight to other conceptualizations of education in Pakistan. It is these perspectives that I discuss here in detail.

Key emerging themes on how early schooling is conceptualized and perceived included parents' and teachers' perspectives on how the context affects children’s learning outcomes, their beliefs and values around education and knowledge, and their views on how to teach and how children learn. I will summarize context-related themes, and then discuss the beliefs and views in more detail along with illustrative direct quotes from respondents.
Context-related themes included family poverty and its effects on children’s education, circumstances faced in rural areas and the government school system.

Poverty was mentioned repeatedly by most parents and teachers. Parents, often from large families with one or two income earners, described how many families struggled to manage household expenses. Respondents also described the difficulties in meeting the additional expenses related to schooling such as children’s notebooks, clothes and spending money. Government schools are free of tuition costs and much more affordable than private schools, but these additional ongoing costs posed a significant obstacle for parents sending children to school and for children’s success at school. Some respondents also described the need for children to work rather than go to school so that they could bring in additional income to help the family make ends meet.

Many parents valued education and spoke about trying their best to support their child’s studies, despite the financial strains. A few respondents acknowledged that, despite their best intentions, schooling may not necessarily result in jobs and better lives for their children in the future, suggesting that education may not be a cost-effective investment for many families.

Some parents and teachers, particularly those in rural areas, contrasted rural versus urban environments. While poverty was discussed even in urban contexts, respondents from rural contexts described the specific poverty of rural areas. In addition, some respondents indicated that in rural village areas, parents are less aware of the importance of education for their children and give less attention to their children’s studies.

A couple of respondents raised the issue that appropriate jobs—such as office jobs—were often not available to those who were educated, particularly in rural areas. Respondents explained that this was sometimes a reason parents did not send their children to school; they felt that nothing would be gained since their children would still end up doing the same farming work, labor work or family business that they would do without education.

The research participants spoke about the provisions offered to children by the government system, specifically free tuition and books. Parents noted that were it not for the affordability of government schools, their children would not be able to access education. Respondents also spoke about the limitations on what is provided; for example, parents still needed to purchase items like uniforms and notebooks, and sometimes teachers needed to find resourceful ways to get electricity, sweepers/cleaners and so on.
Many parents felt that the quality of government schools was lacking, and teachers spoke about corruption in the government system. However, parents did not have much choice as they could not afford private schools and there were often no NGO-supported schools in their area. Still, some parents said that even at a government school, children could get a good education.

The Social and Religious Value of Knowledge and Education

Participants’ responses suggested a number of underlying beliefs about knowledge and education. Themes that emerged included education making children ‘good’, education or knowledge as enlightening, the importance of religious education and girls’ right to education.

Parents at all the schools and teachers at two schools spoke about education as making one good. Sometimes this was described as becoming respectful, useful or empowered:

In our family, they say that the one who will study will become a good person, that’s what people say in our family. (Mother of Grade 1 child, City Girls’ School)

[An educated child] will behave respectfully/appropriately with the young and the old. Respect/appropriate behavior is also an important thing. (Father of Grade 1 child, Village Boys’ School)

We think that if our children study, Allah will give them education, then they, wherever they go, they will be able to speak with their intellect, their mind. (Mother of Grade 1 child, Village Mixed School)

Many respondents looked at education as an approach to opening a person’s mind, and gaining an increased awareness or consciousness about the value of learning and intellectual reflection.

Regarding why they send their children to school:

So that they gain understanding, that they can become a good person, when they grow up then the person gains consciousness, having studied, a person’s mind opens through that, when knowledge is attained, so this is a very good thing. (Mother of Grade 1 child, City Mixed School)

Regarding why parents’ send their children to school:
They send them to school so that consciousness is born in them, so that they attain education, the knowledge that they [parents] don't have, so that the education that they [parents] themselves were unable to attain, their children be able to attain that education. (Head teacher (female), City Girls' School)

Many parents and one head teacher spoke about the importance of religious education in addition to education on worldly matters. This was sometimes linked to the idea that people have both religious and worldly responsibilities; thus, education needed to provide both types of knowledge to children to prepare them for success in both types of responsibilities:

There is worldly [education], but one should also know what is there in religion, what is the religion saying, and our Prophet's (peace be upon him) lifestyle, his sayings (Mother of Grade 1 child, City Girls' School)

First of all, the Holy Prophet [said] that, 'Attain knowledge, from the cradle to the grave'. Whether you are man or whether you are woman, attain knowledge, from the cradle till the grave. [...] That is not just this education, it is also Islamic education. We should know religious information, what is our religion, what is our Prophet, what is our Qur'an, and what are the responsibilities of women and what are the responsibilities of men; this way our knowledge increases. [...] Religious knowledge should also be attained, this one should also be attained, this [unclear] our success. This education and degrees will make us successful in this world. And that religious education will make us successful ahead [in the afterlife]. (Head teacher (male), Village Boys' School)

Although gender was not an explicit part of the research questions, the importance of gender, and in particular of girls' rights to education, came up in a couple of interviews. Parents at one school and the head teacher at another school spoke about girls having the same rights to education and learning as boys:

Why is our Sindh's education [lagging] behind? Why are our Sindh's daughters [lagging] behind? If you look at other nations, women or daughters are advancing, why are our Sindh's daughters [lagging] behind? Why do daughters in Sindh have less education? That is because in rural/remote areas and in villages, the elders [think], 'How will our girl study? Why should she study?' and 'After getting her to pass fifth grade, make her sit at home, shut in some room, shut in the home, within the four walls, now do your house-
hold work'. And girls are even interested/motivated to study. That girl is even interested in studying but the parents [say] that, 'Now you stay at home'. [...] [Interviewer: In your opinion, why is daughters' education necessary? For what purpose?] Because daughters' – first of all the Holy Prophet [said] that. 'Attain knowledge, from the cradle to the grave', whether you are man or whether you are woman, attain knowledge, from the cradle till the grave. (Head teacher (male), Village Boys' School)

Views on How to Teach and How Children Learn

Participants' responses to various questions indicated a number of underlying views about how children learn and implications for how they should be taught. Themes that emerged included the role of the child's mind, the role of the child's own interest or motivation to study, the role of parent attention, the role of the teacher's approach and interaction, the role of the teacher's effectiveness in teaching, and the value of pre-primary education.

Many parents and teachers frequently attributed children's learning and success in school to their brain or mind. Some children with strong minds were able to grasp material quickly, while others were slower or unable to understand it at all. Often this was implied to be a natural or innate ability, not very susceptible to change:

It depends on the child's mental capacities. Some children understand quickly, some are okay, some are very poor – despite giving them a lot of attention they don't learn. (Grade 1 teacher (female), City Mixed School)

Children's own interest or motivation to go to school and study was frequently cited as a factor affecting children's coming to school (enrolment and attendance), staying in school and their learning and success in school. This was often implied to be intrinsic to the child:

There are many children who are more interested in playing, their attention is not in their studies, this also happens. (Mother of Grade 1 child, City Girls' School)

Parental attention was frequently mentioned as a critical factor associated with children's learning and success in school, especially by teachers but also by many parents. The concept of parental attention included sending the child to school in the morning, asking the child about their work at school and checking on their progress and homework:

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Parents, I say, should at least send them [the children, to school] every day. And the second thing is that they should maintain some questioning that is the child studying, not studying, what is s/he studying. Even if they are not literate, but there are some parents like this and still they maintain this [awareness/questioning], so that is also a help for our success. (Grade 1 teacher (female), City Girls' School)

The research participants at all four schools spoke about the importance of the teacher’s approach toward and interaction with children for their adjustment and success in early schooling. Many respondents spoke about the importance of teacher love, particularly for young children’s adjustment to school. Moreover, respondents contrasted how love and affection from the teacher drew children to school by increasing their interest and motivation to attend school, while scolding and harshness drove them away. However, some parents emphasized that some level of firmness and scolding was necessary—within limits and along with love, for children to study well.

Some parents and teachers spoke about the teacher’s role being like that of a parent. Parents spoke about the teacher being responsible for providing both love and scolding to the child, just as parents do. Teachers also emphasized the parental love that the teacher should give the child as well as the level of ‘familiarity’ among students and teachers:

Love. If the child gets love, then s/he gets adjusted. (Mother of Grade 1 child, City Mixed School)

I told you before right, that it depends upon the teacher. If the teacher’s approach is proper, then on his own child will come [to school] willingly. If the teacher’s approach with the child is [like] parents’ approach, if it is a good kind of approach, then on his own the child will come willingly. So [from the child’s perspective], ‘If the teacher gives me affection, if the teacher will give me love, on my own I go to school willingly’. All of this depends upon the teacher, what is the teacher’s approach with the children, how is his approach with the children? If that teacher is strict/harsh, then on his own the child will go away. Like a bird flees a hunter's bow. (Head teacher (male), Village Boys' School)

When asked about factors that affect children’s learning and success in school, many teachers and a couple of parents spoke about the importance of teacher effectiveness. In particular, respondents spoke about the need
for the teacher to understand a child’s mind or the way a child thinks and understands. Respondents explained that teachers needed to understand where the child was developmentally and teach or explain concepts to the child according to that level:

One needs to understand the child’s mind. See the child’s psychology, see the child’s psychology and do all the teaching accordingly. (Mother of Grade 1 child, City Girls’ School)

**Pre-primary Education Eases the Transition to School**

The participants were asked about their thoughts on pre-primary education. Most of them indicated that it was important for children’s success, and many of them explained that the pre-primary class experience eased children’s transition to school. In addition, pre-primary education was described as giving children basic knowledge that they needed as a foundation for further learning in later years:

Yes it is important, absolutely. Because like a place [building] has a foundation, if a place [building] does not have a foundation then that place won’t stand. If the foundation is solid/firm then the place [building] will be solid/strong for a hundred years. This education is the foundation, if the foundation thing is not solid/firm, then it cannot grow ahead. (Head teacher (male), Village Boys’ School)

Because the child, first of all doesn’t know how to sit. Obviously the child goes to school so the parents, first of all he should know how to sit, so that when he learns how to sit a bit in school, learns to come to school, then he … can do a bit of work, ABCD, etcetera. (Mother of Grade 1 child, City Girls’ School)

**DISCUSSION**

This study explored the perspectives of a relatively small number of parents and teachers at a handful of schools in one province of Pakistan. However, the findings are generally consistent with what has been found by other researchers and practitioners in the country.

In this study, many parents and teachers spoke about the struggles and effects of poverty, the disadvantages faced in rural areas, and the challenges embedded in the government school system. These themes are
consistent with previous research and experience in the Pakistani context (e.g., Shami and Hussain 2005; SAFED 2014). The relatively low quality of education in government schools is reflective of the inequality of educational opportunities and stratification of the education system in Pakistan (Ali and Farah 2007). However, the government system’s role in making education accessible to millions of children in Pakistan who otherwise could not afford schooling should not be understated.

Parents’ and teachers’ beliefs around knowledge and education also exemplified some of the other sociocultural and historical elements of the Pakistani education system. As discussed earlier, Eastern philosophies, including Islamic perspectives, emphasize the importance of pursuing knowledge and education (Ali and Farah 2007; Gupta 2007b). This value given to education was evident in the discussions with both parents and teachers in Pakistan. In Hindu/Vedic and Islamic value systems, both worldly and religious knowledge are considered important, as are worldly and religious responsibilities (Ali and Farah 2007; Gupta 2007b). Respondents in this study similarly emphasized the importance of both types of knowledge and responsibilities. Education was described as enabling a child to function effectively—respectfully, usefully, in a good way, in society. As well, participants in this study described education as opening one’s mind, or raising awareness/consciousness. This is similar to the notion of the guru in Hindu/Vedic perspectives—the teacher who removes darkness and opens the minds of her/his students (Gupta 2007b).

When considering the different people playing a role in influencing children’s early schooling, respondents in this study emphasized the role of the child (mind and motivation), the parent (attention and engagement) and the teacher (approach, attention and effectiveness).

The emphasis on the child’s own agency was striking, particularly in contrast to Western discourses, where children tend to be treated as recipients of education benefits. However, importantly, the description of children’s agency was limited to their capacity for or interest in attending school, and obeying or cooperating with what the teacher required them to do. Children were not described as being active actors or collaborators in the education process, which is consistent with the authoritarian structure of teacher–student relationships in Pakistan and many countries around the world.

While parents’ attention to their children’s studies was also highlighted, most parents focused on the importance of their support, making sure their children went to school and checking in on their homework—at home. Parents’ engagement with or within the school setting was gener-

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ally not mentioned. Part of this is probably due to parents simply not having the capacity to be present at the school given the burdens on their time and energy; however, part of it is also probably due to the traditional separation of home and school—the parents entrust the teacher and the school to educate their children (Gupta 2007b), and neither parents nor teachers see it as the parents’ role to provide input into or participate in educational activities happening at the school.

The importance of teachers was seen as highly significant for the success of children in the schools. Indeed, despite the reduced status accorded to teachers over the last few decades (Gupta 2007b), expectations of them seem to remain high in Pakistan. In this study, the role of the teacher was given the most importance in terms of factors affecting children’s adjustment, learning and success in early schooling. What was interesting was that in addition to instructional effectiveness, respondents emphasized the crucial role of the teacher’s approach and interactions. These included ways in which the teacher related with and treated the children, such as warmth or unfriendliness in attitudes, and affection or harshness in words and actions.

The teacher’s approach to and interactions with children were considered critical in supporting children in adjusting, learning and thriving in early schooling. This is consistent with previous research, in both majority and minority world contexts, that has found supportive teachers and classroom environments to be essential in easing children’s adjustment to school and facilitating children’s learning (e.g., Abadzi 2006), while harsh environments can be detrimental (e.g., Talwar et al. 2011).

Respondents also highlighted the importance of the teacher’s love and drew parallels between the roles played by parents and teachers toward children. These concepts have not generally been discussed in mainstream early childhood or education literature, although there has been some exploration in alternate discourses (e.g., Goldstein 1997). The emphasis given by respondents in this study suggests that this is a key dimension of children’s early schooling experience in Pakistan.

Seek Knowledge from the Cradle to the Grave: Education as a Right and a Responsibility

The study’s findings implicitly supported a rights-based perspective, in terms of the teacher’s perceived responsibility to meet each child’s needs and customize instruction accordingly. However, consistent with Islamic and Hindu/Vedic philosophies, education was viewed not just as a right but also
as a social responsibility. Indeed, respondents spoke about education making one 'good', enlightening one's mind and enabling one's effective participation in society. This may be part of the reason for the importance given by respondents to children's own motivation—and responsibility—in their education, as well as parents' attention—and responsibility—toward their children's education. Moreover, the integration of religious knowledge with worldly knowledge was contextualized with reference to one's religious and worldly responsibilities. It is each person's right as well as responsibility to 'seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave' (a saying of the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH]), also cited by a respondent in this study).

The conceptualization of education as a right as well as a responsibility places even greater obligations on all involved stakeholders—from children and families to schools, communities and government systems—to ensure that all children gain a quality and integrated education. However, what quality education looks like must be conceptualized and operationalized within the Pakistani context, taking into account local beliefs, values and perspectives, so that the education system can be made effective in preparing children to grow into grounded, integrated, aware, responsible and contributing members in their families, communities and society.

NOTES

1. This section is adapted from a series of blog posts written and published by me on my personal website (Shallwani 2014).
2. Pakistan's history is closely intertwined with India's and with other parts of South Asia. In fact, it was only in 1947 that Pakistan was partitioned from India and formed into its own nation. Thus, for much of the historical description, I refer to India—which includes the land and people who are now considered separate as Pakistan.
3. The Urdu word 'katcha' literally means 'unripened' or 'unfinished'. The word 'pakka' means 'ripened' or 'solid'/'finished'. It is common in Pakistan to refer to the pre-primary class as 'katchi' and pre-primary children as 'katcha', and to refer to the Grade 1 class as 'pakki' and Grade 1 children as 'pakka'.
4. Interviews and discussions were conducted in Sindhi and Urdu. Audio-recordings were first transcribed and translated to English by a professional transcriber and translator, and I then reviewed each audio-recording, transcript and translation, and improved them as needed.
5. It is customary among Muslims to follow a mention of the Prophet Muhammad’s name with the words ‘Peace be upon him’ – abbreviated as PBUH.

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REFERENCES


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