



A Touch of Magic

The story of the
RELEASING CONFIDENCE & CREATIVITY PROGRAMME
Building Sound Foundations for Early Learning in Pakistan –
its beginnings, development, impact and future

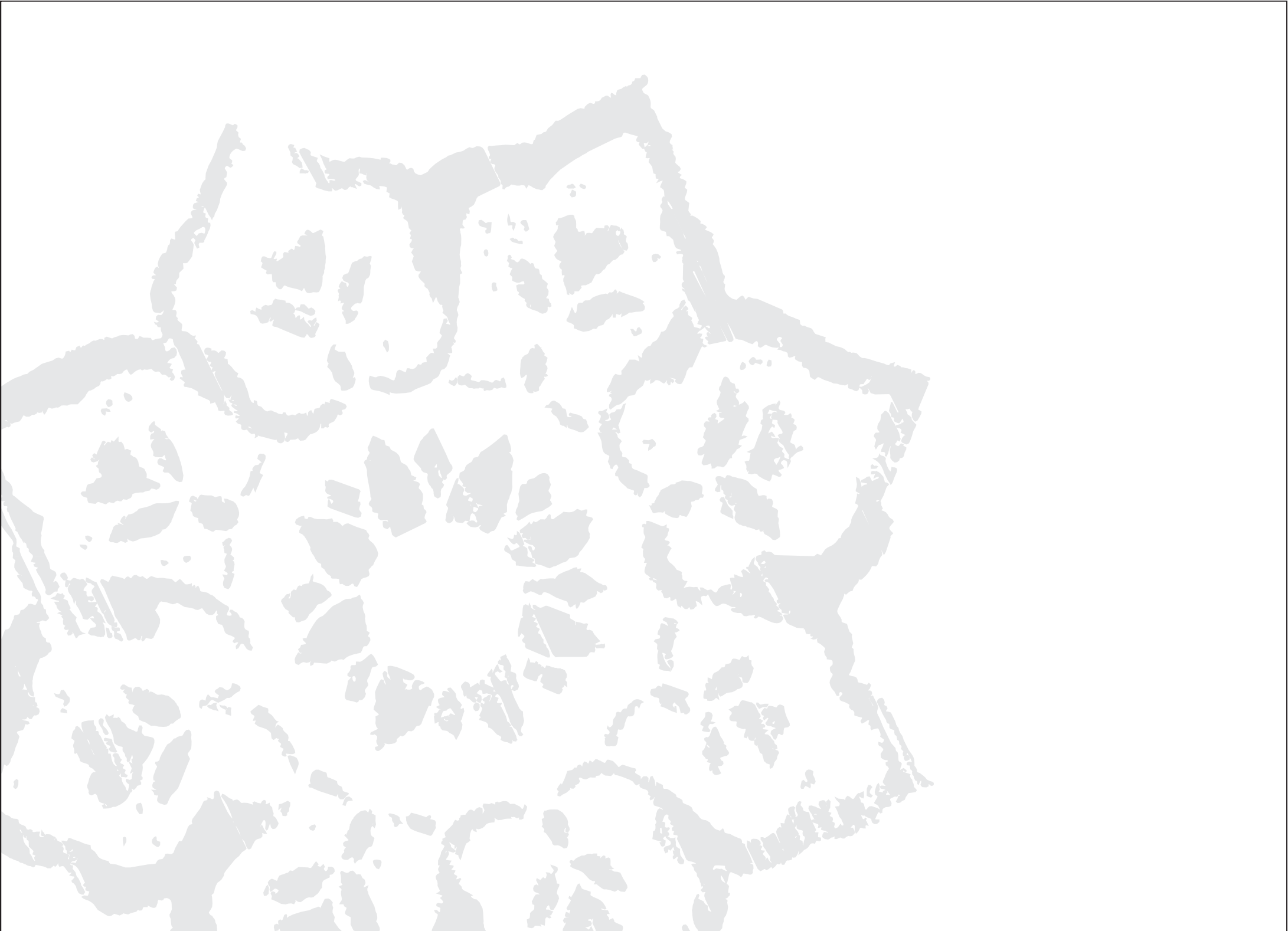


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A Touch of Magic

The story of the Releasing Confidence & Creativity Programme

Building Sound Foundations for Early Learning in Pakistan – its beginnings, development, impact and future



“I have come to the conclusion that there is no greater form of preparation for change than education.
I also think that there is no better investment that the individual, parents,
and the nation can make than an investment in education of the highest possible quality.”

– His Highness the Aga Khan



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Children enjoy class work while playing in their colorful and material-filled learning corners (goshas)

INTRODUCTION

Shabeena stands in the classroom door – her eyes bright with anticipation, one small hand holding a tiny clay pot she has made at home. Sliding her shoes off, she darts across the room to a table labeled “Home Corner” and adds her pot to the dozens of brightly coloured, miniature household items that have already been placed there. Her teacher, Zakia, leaves her work plan and comes over to look. She congratulates the five-year-old on the new model. Shabeena smiles widely, meeting her teacher’s eyes with confidence.

Such a small event, but it’s one that speaks volumes about an educational development in rural Pakistan that is sparking incredible changes not just among its young pupils but in teachers, parents and even in whole communities.

Shabeena, and thousands of children like her in Pakistan’s Balochistan and Sindh provinces, are part of the Releasing Confidence and Creativity (RCC) Programme. Facilitated by the Aga Khan Foundation - Pakistan (AKF-P), and funded by USAID for its first and second phases (from 2002-2006), RCC has also broken new ground in terms of effective co-operation between a diverse range of partners. The six organizations, Aga Khan University - Human Development Programme, (AKU-HDP), Sindh

Education Foundation, (SEF), Teachers’ Resource Centre (TRC), Aga Khan Education Services, (AKES,P), Health and Nutrition Development Society (HANDS) and Society for Community Support for Primary Education (SCSPEB) in Balochistan, working under the auspices of AKF (P), have to date delivered early childhood development and education services and teacher training in 155 schools and their communities, generated vital data on early childhood development statistics, and helped build community capacity in health, education and advocacy areas.

“Of all the projects and programmes I have been involved in during my career in South Asia, RCC is clearly one of the best, most cost-effective and most promising.”

Dr. Jim Irvine
Former Planning Coordinator
Aga Khan University - Human Development Programme

As RCC prepares to move into a new phase for early childhood development, it’s timely to look back at its beginnings, discuss the

challenges it has faced along the way and to celebrate its achievements. This booklet aims to do this through the voices of those most intimately involved – from children to facilitators, teachers to government officials.

Former UNICEF Regional Education Adviser and former AKU-HDP Planning Coordinator, Dr. Jim Irvine, who has followed the RCC story closely, describes it in these words:

“Of all the projects and programmes I have been involved in during my career in South Asia, RCC is clearly one of the best, most cost-effective and most promising.”

Asked how he would describe the impact of RCC in just a few words, he thought for a minute and said “A Touch of Magic.”

Journey with us back to RCC’s beginning and discover why thousands of bright, alert, enthusiastic Pakistani children would almost certainly agree with him.



What strikes a newcomer is the confidence and liveliness of every child in the RCC classroom



What is the Releasing Confidence & Creativity Concept

RCC is **CHILD-FRIENDLY**

RCC is child-centered **LEARNING**

RCC **NURTURES** children

RCC has an emphasis on **QUALITY** education.

RCC benefits young children but also **PARENTS**, teachers, **COMMUNITIES** and government

RCC is **INCLUSIVE** – families, communities and government (have all been consulted and actively encouraged to be involved).

RCC **BUILDS TRUST** with all participants.

RCC encourages personal growth and **BUILDS SELF-ESTEEM**

RCC **IMPROVES** classroom and school **ENVIRONMENTS**

RCC **BUILDS** teacher **COMPETENCY** and develops resource materials

RCC is **HOLISTIC** – offering a **TOTAL CARE** approach of children from **ANTE-NATAL** through to **AGE EIGHT**.

RCC **PROMOTES** early childhood **RESEARCH** and **ADVOCACY** for children.

RCC is **COST-EFFICIENT** and **SUSTAINABLE**
and most of all...

RCC IS A PASSIONATE COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN



Chapter I

The Beginnings



The Aga Khan Foundation team members and the RCC teachers from Balochistan posing for a group photograph.

THE BEGINNINGS

Talk to any adult involved in RCC about the Programme's early days and inevitably the name of Dr. Randy Hatfield will be mentioned.

Dr. Hatfield was formerly the Aga Khan Foundation (Pakistan)'s Programme Manager, Education and took on the mantle of RCC in 2002 when he joined AKF(P), after the idea for the project was sown and the proposal developed and approved by USAID in 2001. He was intimately involved in the implementation of the project through discussion with AKF, USAID and the governments of Balochistan and Sindh. In 2002 he was given the task of finding six non-government organization partners to help turn the concept into a reality.

"I thought it was a wonderful idea. I'd seen *katchi* (Pakistan's pre-primary) classes in Pakistan which had simply become child-minding spaces for younger siblings – the RCC approach offered something very different."

RCC was to begin, not on a country-wide massive scale, but slowly...with just 100 schools to start with. Like the majority of schools in Pakistan, most had no *katchi* classes at all, or had *katchi* class children simply sitting in older students' classes with no dedicated learning space or teacher of their own.

"I liked this cautious approach - it is better to start on small scale, and see what works before you try to expand."

Working as a team AKF(P) identified six potential partners with funding from USAID and the support of both regional and federal governments, to implement the Programme. Working directly in schools and communities in the chosen districts would be the Aga Khan Education Services, Pakistan (AKES,P) in Sindh, the Health and Development Society (HANDS), also in Sindh, and the Society for Community Support for Primary Education in Balochistan (SCSPEB). They would receive technical support from the Aga Khan University Human Development Programme (AKU-HDP), the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) and the Teachers' Resource Centre (TRC).

To Dr. Hatfield, this mix of partners and the aim of RCC to involve all sectors of the community reflect one of the fundamental truths of early childhood development and learning.

"Early childhood development is the handshake between families, educators and the community. Schools are vitally important, but that is not where learning begins...learning begins in families and in the communities so

we need to take special care of them."

He enjoyed seeing the first flowerings of the RCC approach in *katchi* classrooms in Balochistan and Sindh - watching the innovative combination of a government teacher and an RCC community teacher working together to transform their classroom environment and introduce a new teaching style. Gone were the desks, rote learning and the threat of physical punishment. In through the door came praise, attention, group work, self-expression and learning corners. These concepts were closely followed by an increasing number of young students.

"At first some teachers and parents could not believe this approach would not involve lots of expensive resources. But this is not about pens, pencils or fancy equipment. I watched the light bulb come on for one teacher when she took her class outside and taught them geometrical shapes simply by getting everyone to draw shapes in the dust."

Sughra Choudhry Khan, Chief Executive Officer of AKES,P and former Programme Manager, Education at AKF(P) when the RCC Programme was first proposed, also has vivid memories of its beginnings.

"There was the desire to replicate in public

sector schools, successful AKF(P) educational initiatives such as the Teachers' Resource Centre's early childhood development programme and the AKES,P's 'Improving Pre-Primary and Primary Education in Rural Sindh'. It was a chance to really make a difference with early childhood development in Pakistan."

The birth of RCC was a rapid one, she says, with key personnel only having a week to prepare the funding proposal.

RCC's creation coincided with the devolution of government education services from federal to provincial level. "This gave us the opportunity to begin this new approach with newly formed district offices and bring everyone on board from the start."

She remembers some early skepticism about the ability of the six partners, and their umbrella organization, to function together as a team.

"Some people said it would never work, that we could never get them to function together. But I felt that we should be brave enough to try it for AKF's work is about experiment, innovation and learning."

Dr. Irvine also saw merit in the RCC approach when he was asked to assess its potential.

"RCC is about communities as well as schools. You cannot have good primary schools without good preparation – preparation of children, families and communities. A strong emphasis on early childhood development is the key to reversing school drop-out rates, low literacy and numeracy, and, most importantly, the statistics that point to lack of knowledge and care of pregnant women. The strength of RCC is that it addresses human development by not simply wanting to explore ECD from *katchi* class up, but also from *katchi* class down."

"Early childhood development is the handshake between families, educators and the community. Schools are vitally important, but that is not where learning begins... learning begins in families and in the communities so we need to take special care of them."

Dr. Randy Hatfield
Former Programme Manager, Education
Aga Khan Foundation (Pakistan)

Challenging Statistics

The Pakistan Government has recognised the importance of early childhood education as part of its Education Action Plan, calling it the First Pillar of Education for All. It does so against a background of sobering statistics – Pakistan's literacy rate is about 41 per cent, dropping to 4 per cent in some rural areas. There are substantial gender, geographic and socio-economic disparities too. Drop-out rates are increasing alarmingly - 58 per cent of children who start school have dropped out by the time they reach Grade 5. The real crisis in education, however, is at the beginning of children's school life- in *katchi* and Grade 1. More than a quarter of the girls who enrol in school stay there for one year or less.

Research has shown that effective early childhood education and care from ante-natal stage to age eight can have a very positive impact on these indications, improving access, retention rates and intelligence scores. But that's not all – care and education of the under-eights reaps lifelong benefits in terms of relationships, behaviour, health and economic well-being.

What's in a Name?

Almost everyone involved with the RCC Programme calls it simply "RCC", but who actually conjured up the phrase "Releasing Creativity and Confidence" as part of the full title 'Releasing Confidence and Creativity, Building Sound Foundations for Early Learning in Pakistan'?

Sughra Choudhry Khan found it in a 1999 Teachers' Resource Centre early childhood education seminar report.

"It hit me at the time and I remembered it when I came to write the proposal. You really can do anything if you have self-belief or confidence and this can release your innate creativity."





Forging Strong Links

The RCC Partnership



Dr. Randy Hatfield of the Aga Khan Foundation Pakistan with team members of SCSPEB.

FORGING STRONG LINKS

THE RCC PARTNERSHIP

Seven organizations – diverse personalities and ethnicities, a range of management strategies and expertise, a variety of mission statements – even different geographical areas of interest.

It could have been a recipe for disaster, or at least a battle for supremacy ending in a mire of bureaucracy and inertia.

But the unique partnership that is RCC did not end in either of these ways. Instead, it is a glowing example of how non-government organizations can work together in a sustained, harmonious manner to produce great results.

The RCC partnership is often referred to as a ‘family’, and like any family it has had its moments of disagreements and odd times of misunderstanding. But it has not only been the children involved who have seen their confidence, creativity and co-operation built up through RCC – it has had a parallel effect on the partners. They too have forged effective, sustainable relationships through high levels of communication.

At first glance the RCC team composition appears complex but look a little closer and

it’s clear that one reason for its success is that each partner has clearly defined roles and activities, while at the same time working together towards the same objectives.

The RCC Programme is coordinated by the Aga Khan Foundation (Pakistan) with the governments of Balochistan and Sindh. Phases 1 and 2 were funded by USAID.

The Programme has been put into practice in Sindh and Balochistan by the following three implementing partners:

The Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES,P) is responsible for school improvements (and associated linkages with local communities), training and monitoring.

The Health and Nutrition Development Society (HANDS) focuses on health and early childhood development service provision to families and young children in Sindh and *katchi* class improvements.

The Society for Community Support for Primary Education in Balochistan (SCSPEB) constructs new *katchi* classes, distributes resource material and develops the skills of the RCC community and government *katchi*, class

1 and 2 teachers, along with lead teachers.

These three implementing partners have received technical support from three technical partners:

The Aga Khan University Human Development Programme (AKU-HDP) assists with capacity building, advocacy, research and government liaison. It has also established an Advanced Diploma in Human Development (Early Child Development), in which RCC staff is enrolled, along with other national and international ECD leaders.

The Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) carries out monitoring, research, advocacy, and most especially, the production of the ECD magazine *Nurture* (and its Urdu equivalent *Parwarish*), the www.ecdpak.com website and publicity and resource material.

Teachers’ Resource Centre (TRC) provided intensive teacher training programmes for RCC and government teachers and other personnel in both Balochistan and Sindh and has developed the National Early Childhood Education Curriculum with government teachers which includes the popular learning corners and “*Pehla Ta’aleemi Basta*” (first learning bags) used in RCC classrooms.

AKF(P) considers the partnership to be a real success story, but what do the NGOs themselves actually think of RCC and the unique blend of partners, and most importantly, why do they think it worked?

Irfan Ahmed, SCSPEB's Chief Executive Officer in Quetta, remembers most of those present at the first meeting of the partnership being somewhat daunted when the details of the Programme were first outlined to them.

"I was shocked when Dr. Randy Hatfield told me we'd be working with children from age three. In some countries children are not even starting school until they are eight years old – how were we going to persuade parents to send them at three! That was only something that happened in private schools in cities!"

"It was a very complex concept but the initial meeting was so friendly and open we wanted to make it work. And as it was explained I began to see this as the beginning of a new age in education for Pakistan.

"Looking back I think a symbol of the success of the partnership was when we were handed a rope at that meeting and had to pass it or throw it around the group as we talked to and got to know the other partners. By the time we had finished we were bound together – we'd

created a network of people."

Mr. Ahmed recalls how there were only about 20 people at that meeting. "That was the RCC family then – now we could not even count the number."

The partnership continues to work well, he believes, because of the partners' clearly defined roles, support and co-ordination from AKF(P), the continuity of personnel, especially those in a liaison role, regular meetings and the steady release of funds.

"I believe this is the only partnership of its kind in Pakistan that has lasted."

"Taking time to build links with the government at all levels was also so crucial. We needed time to convince them of the value of early childhood education – and that's not something you can achieve with a click of the fingers."

Saima Maheen
Programme Manager
AKES,P

SEF Director Mashhood Rizvi agrees that the distinct responsibilities of each NGO helped ensured the partnership stayed strong and focused.

"But it was more than that – it struck me that all the agencies involved felt very compassionate about children; If there were any insecurities these were set aside for the greater good."

The potential for RCC to be replicated on a national level was one of its key attractions for AKES,P according to Programme Manager Saima Maheen.

"It certainly needed a lot of co-ordination but it was worthwhile. Taking time to build links with the government at all levels was also so crucial. We needed time to convince them of the value of early childhood education – and that's not something you can achieve with a click of the fingers."

The complexity of the Programme is also one of its cornerstones, believes AKU-HDP's Programme Manager Naureen Madhani.

"RCC's biggest strength is that it is trying to integrate health, nutrition and developmental monitoring with education. That's something that's never been done in Pakistan before, and



Somaiya Ayoob from the Sindh Education Foundation briefing Dr. Hamida Khuhro, Minister for Education, Government of Sindh, on the RCC Programme.

has only just begun in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia.”

TRC Chief Executive Officer Mahnaz Mahmud believes Randy Hatfield, played a key role in the successful formation of the partnership.

“When I was first approached about RCC I felt the lead-up time was too short but Randy was very persuasive, saying that we were the NGO best placed to carry out early childhood training. Somehow, as a result of that, I found myself saying yes!”

“I’ve worked on the early childhood curriculum and seen those little *katchi* class children sitting on the school verandahs, with no programme or space of their own. It used to make my heart bleed. So even though I had my reservations I knew we had to do something because these children were coming to school whether the government liked it or not!”

Ms. Mahmud’s opinion is echoed by that of Jim Irvine.

“Randy Hatfield’s dedication to making this work and his fostering of a non-competitive environment has been crucial. He’s helped oversee a breaking down of artificial barriers between NGOs and the government.

“The RCC approach is, in my experience over many, many years working with NGOs, an outstanding example of partners working together with the Government to document the importance of early childhood development for quality education outcomes.”

RCC Programme A Snapshot

Number of Schools157
77 in Sindh and 80 in Balochistan

Total Enrollment15,192
10,064 girls and 5,128 boys

Total Number of Teachers531
372 Government Teachers and 152 RCC
Community Teachers

Dr. Hatfield, not surprisingly, prefers to give the accolades to the partners themselves.

“The partners have achieved something that is not common in development work – it’s an area where territorialism is rife. There might still be, from time to time, some suspicion and angst but generally it has been a success. People have learned to trust each other, to communicate...even buy services they need from each other.

Since December 2005, the RCC Programme has been coordinated by Wendy Griffin, an AFK(P) consultant. She has seen the partnership grow and mature over this time and having spent much time in the field, and in numerous meetings with the partners, has been able to observe at close quarters how well it is functioning

“I’ve seen evidence of huge capacity building with all team members enhancing their already considerable skills and talents.”

Regular meetings, symposia and workshops have helped forge strong partnership links, as have many informal contacts between the six NGOs. As Phase 2 drew to a close, AKF(P) also organized overseas study tours for partners’ representatives.

The study tours, to observe early childhood development and education Programmes in Bangladesh, Philippines, Kenya, Egypt and Portugal, not only broadened participants’ experience and knowledge but also further strengthened the partnerships themselves.

“Each study group was a mix of people from the different NGOs which has strengthened the bonds between them. And because they now have contacts overseas, there is a whole new support network formed – another



The RCC family of partners join together in a lively debate at the ECD Conference organized by SEF in April 2006 in Karachi.

essential ingredient to ensuring the long-term sustainability of RCC,” Wendy Griffin says.

Ensuring the partnership functions to its full potential has involved innovative leadership skills to ensure communication takes top priority, challenges are faced and relationships are built and sustained above and beyond normal office hours.

Such relationships can be fragile things, and many of those involved in the RCC partnership believe that trust, goodwill and dedication, helped ensure its survival. These qualities were not only crucial as the Programme became established (a time of vulnerability for any such intervention) but will also be a major factor in its on-going success.

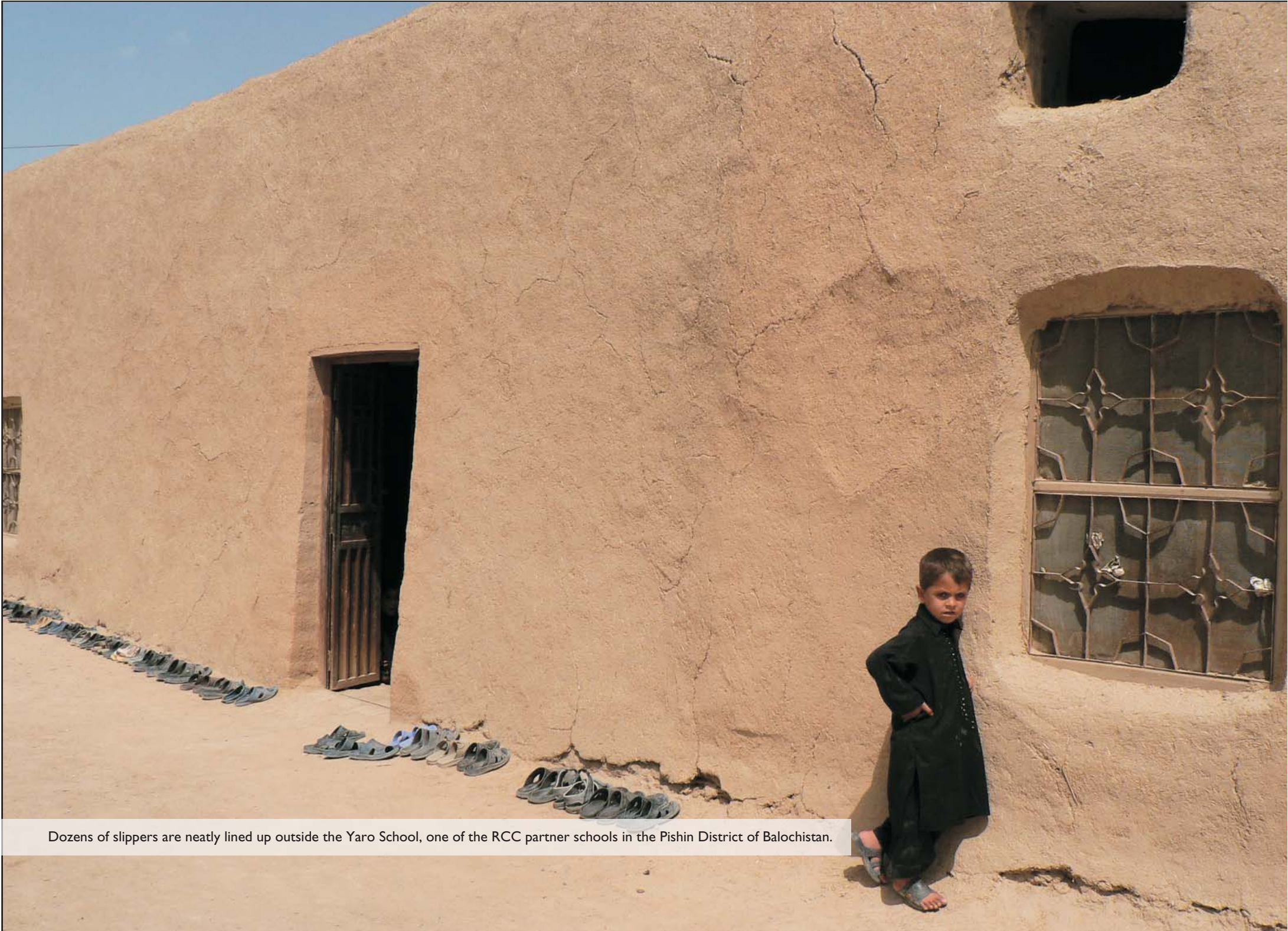
The RCC partnership is characterized by an abundance of respect, unwavering commitment and a sharing and celebration of collective and individual achievements.

“As a result of all these activities, and their own dedication, talents and hard work, the RCC group is now one of the most knowledgeable groups on early childhood development in the whole of Pakistan.”



Footsteps on the Path

The RCC Programme in Action



Dozens of slippers are neatly lined up outside the Yaro School, one of the RCC partner schools in the Pishin District of Balochistan.

FOOTSTEPS ON THE PATH

The RCC Programme in Action

Goals, objectives, strategies – like any development Programme, RCC comes with its own collection of complicated jargon and terminology.

But, if you peel away the layers of this complex programme, you eventually reach one essential seed from which flowers the multitude of RCC interventions. And that seed is the improvement of the quality of learning and teaching for young children in selected government schools and their communities.

That might sound, at first, like a Programme focused very much on the classroom, but this is where RCC is breaking new ground. RCC does not stop at the school gate – it extends in one direction into community involvement and engagement with local, federal and national government personnel, and in another direction, to children's homes, and even to the care of mothers before their babies are born. And, along the way, the RCC team is gathering data so that the changes that can be clearly observed already can be backed up with statistics and in-depth research.

Why go to all that trouble? Because without exception, those involved with RCC (including the children themselves and their parents)

want to see the concept spread further...not only in their own schools but to neighboring districts and to the rest of Pakistan. Why stop there, say the real enthusiasts? They believe the RCC concept could be successfully implemented in many other countries. But, to spread the message, hard evidence is needed to back up the anecdotal evidence that RCC team members, teachers, parents and children are observing for themselves.

So how does RCC work at grass roots level? Let's travel to some of the RCC communities in Sindh and Balochistan with Akbar Jawad, SCSPEB's Programme Officer, to find out. Dozens of sandals are lined up neatly outside the *katchi* classroom at Yaro School in the Pishin, district of Balochistan. Beyond the school walls the landscape has been bleached and drained by the summer sun. Even getting to the relative haven of the schoolyard is a challenge for many children. Many walk long distances in sweltering heat, wending their way through fields and alongside perilous roads.

But inside the classroom the walls are ablaze with color – alphabet posters, children's drawings, and bright charts. There are nearly 40 four-to-five year-olds sitting in a circle on

the floor, their two teachers sitting cross-legged in the centre. They're playing a math game together.

Join the circle and the children will happily chat and explain what they are doing, and proudly escort you to see their learning corners – tables set up with a range of educational resources, many made by the teachers themselves.

"I like the numbers corner best," says Farman, showing me a set of counting blocks.

"I like coming to school because of the pictures on the wall," Iztullah tells me. He also points out the first learning bag (another RCC innovation) – a wall-hanging consisting of a series of pockets, each containing simple resources for a range of learning activities.

In an increasingly sophisticated world these seem simple pleasures, that is, until one recalls what many more traditional Pakistani classrooms look like; children lined up at desks, bare walls, and a teacher at the front, writing on the blackboard and drumming information into his young charges by rote learning.

Under the RCC Programme (implemented

here by SCSPEB) two teachers are paired up in each *katchi* class (and as the Programme has grown, a similar approach is used in Grade 1 and 2 classes too). One teacher is a qualified government teacher, the other a community teacher, (selection of community teachers was facilitated by SCSPEB with government officials making the final choice). Both received the same RCC teacher-training.

This is the first early childhood education scheme to be introduced to this region of traditionally low levels of effective education and school access.

Abdullah Hameed is the community teacher in this classroom. He was a student before he was selected for training (the selection criteria requires community teachers to live in the village district, be fluent in at least their local language, willing to teach and have their matriculation certificate).

“I like the class environment and the relationship I have with the children. They always look so interested in what we are doing.”

RCC has spread to Grades 1 and 2 at Yaro School, and in the Grade 1 class, RCC community teacher, Balanstha is also enthusiastic.

“I like teaching in this friendly environment compared to the ways other schools work. The children are so enthusiastic about coming to school.”

At Killi Sangar, a second RCC school in Pishin District, the girls are sitting on the floor in four different groups, all intent on an English lesson in their airy, bright learning space. The walls have been freshly whitewashed (Parents Teacher School Management Committee, PTSMC, was responsible for this and for building a separate *katchi* classroom) and in the corner is the trophy the students won for their stage items presentation at cluster and district level competition seminars.

“I like teaching in this friendly environment compared to the ways other schools work. The children are so enthusiastic about coming to school.”

Balanstha,
RCC Community Teacher
Yaro School
Pishin District, Balochistan

The arrival of a large group of adults, including two foreigners, does not faze the girls at all.

They confidently show off their work and answer questions.

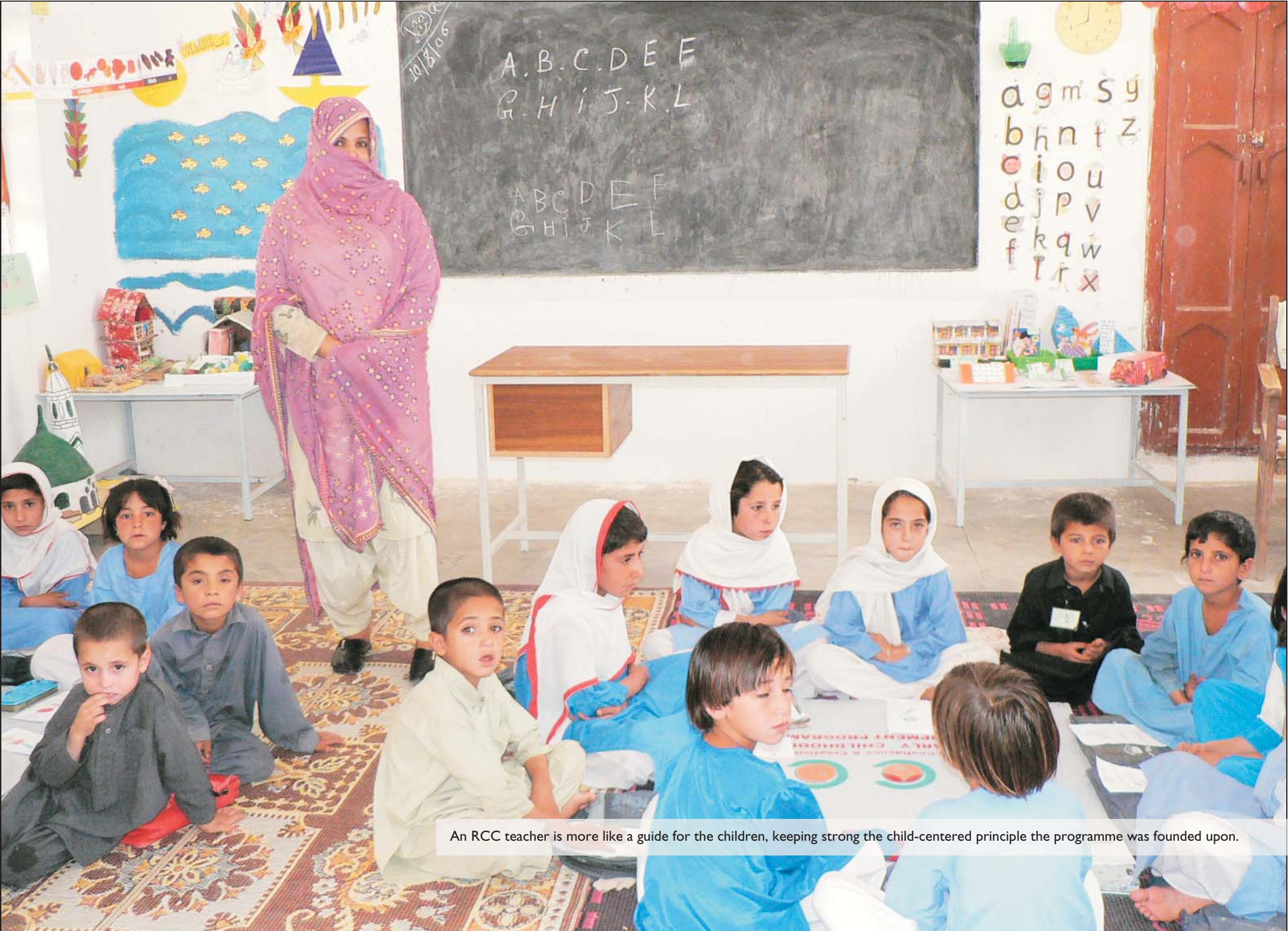
“Our school is very beautiful,” they tell me, “so we like coming.” They show us the flagpole outside, under which is a pile of stones each painted with a letter of the Urdu alphabet. There’s a small vegetable and herb garden nearby.

Before the RCC Programme was introduced, the school roll was 33 – now it is 70.

Watching from the doorway are parents who belong to the cluster’s education council. Pishin has a cluster of RCC schools each with its own PTSMC. From each committee, representatives are chosen for the cluster group’s education council. This community involvement is another RCC innovation.

As school finishes for the day, the council members and local Malik, Abdul Manan, meet to tell me about their new roles as school supporters and education advocates.

“Before the RCC Programme there was no-one really caring for the school. But now we work as a partnership for education,” says Saadullah (who has grandchildren in RCC classes).



An RCC teacher is more like a guide for the children, keeping strong the child-centered principle the programme was founded upon.

“We meet to discuss school problems, students’ progress and work out how to deal with officials. For example, one day we found that a government building contractor was not using good materials at a school so the council went to the local Nazim and he had the work stopped.”

Hundreds of kilometers away in Sindh, the culture and local language might be different, but the environment in the RCC classrooms is equally dynamic. While the Hyderabad District as a whole was struggling with the ravages of heavy monsoonal rains, the school environments were clean and tranquil.

Here too, government and community teachers work together to stimulate young minds. The RCC curriculum extends well beyond literacy and numeracy too – hygiene, nutrition and manners are part of the Programme. Children take home simple messages about washing hands before meals, the dangers of junk food and even the importance of greeting visitors and family with the customary Asalam o-aleikum message.

For some of the very youngest children in the RCC Programme these messages may be rather familiar by the time they reach *katchi* class, because they are fortunate enough to be taking part in some of RCC’s earliest intervention work.

In the Mir colony in the Hyderabad community of Sindh, 12 young women are gathering at the AKU-HDP’s centre to prepare for a morning making home visits to parents with young children. The RCC Programme has been running here since 2004 when the young women were first selected and trained in early childhood development, basic research techniques and communication skills.

The immaculately kept centre, with its courtyard, office, resource centre, and community meeting room, are alive with bustle and energy. Bhagwani Asma and Nisha Darakhshan took out the scales from a cupboard, along with a shallow tray decorated with a painting of Mickey Mouse that is used to measure height. (The tray is incidentally, an example of team problem-solving – when they first took this to homes families were horrified – painted a crisp, clean white the measuring tray looked too much like a coffin so the young women changed the color and added some decorations to help allay further fears).

We walked down the street, with Nisha telling me that when they’d first joined the RCC Programme in 2004 they had rarely ventured outside their own home compounds without a family member to accompany them, and would have been far too scared to visit the

home of someone they did not know.

That was hard to imagine as they knocked briefly on a compound door and stepped confidently over the threshold, cheerfully greeting the extended family inside. The centre of attention was baby Abdul Bari. Held in mother Shabana’s arms, Abdul Bari smiled broadly at the visitors, even the foreigner. His older sister would never have been that outgoing at the same age, Shabana told me. It was the regular visits from the team who had made the difference.

Bhagwani and Nisha chat with Shabana for some minutes before they set up their scales, weigh Abdul Bari, and then check his height and head circumference. Everyone, including his grandmother, gathered to see the new measurements plotted on his growth chart.

The community workers then talk about immunization and the importance of not leaving Abdul Bari lying unattended on a *charpoy* (the traditional Pakistani string bed).

“I’ve read about these things in your book,” Shabana says, showing me a well-thumbed baby and toddler care, growth and development book the RCC team had created. She told me that other mothers who were not part of the RCC Programme also enjoyed



Regular visits and close connections with parents and community members have been the most significant strength of the RCC Programme.

looking at it.

The community worker teams visit babies up to 12 months on a monthly basis, and quarterly after that. At first there was resistance to the Programme, even suspicion, and the young women themselves found the home visits nerve-wrecking. Grandmothers could be particularly reluctant, and even getting to the houses past the local dogs was an ordeal. “We faced a lot of problems – partly because the baseline questionnaire at the start and the child assessment take a long time to do. Sometimes the grandmothers became irritated!” recalls community coordinator Afsana Kharal.

But with patience, perseverance and the application of the creativity that is a hallmark of RCC, the teams of young women began to win over their community. Today people wave to them, even ring up to make sure they are still coming for the regular check-ups, and even invite “their” health visitors to family parties and weddings.

“When we first started, parents could not believe that their babies and little ones could understand them talking to them, but now even fathers are helping and talking to their babies,” Afsana Kharal says.

Families have become increasingly interested in the child development milestones that the community workers discuss and monitor with them.

“When we first started, parents could not believe that their babies and little ones could understand them talking to them, but now even fathers are helping and talking to their babies,”

Afsana Kharal
Community Co-ordinator
Aga Khan University- Human Development Programme

Community worker Aasma remembers how one family was concerned that, although their baby was making a wide range of sounds, she would never make them when the community workers were present.

“When we went back again, the mother got out her husband’s mobile phone. They’d recorded all the baby’s sounds for us to hear!”

The workers meet regularly as a team to discuss problems, devise new strategies and even design their own child development assessment kits.

They are proving very innovative thinkers. One worker was worried that a small child was not making the progress he should in learning to count up to 10.

“His mother was very busy and said she didn’t have time, so I thought of asking his older sister. She said she’d try. Next time we visited he counted up to 100 and his sister said that if we wanted, he could write all the numbers down for us as well!”

Not far away is another RCC centre, in the Rashid colony, where a team of 14 young women is carrying out a similar programme of home visits and centre-based workshops and seminars for the community.

Because this community had already heard about the work being done in the Mir Colony there was no resistance to the Programme, in fact the very opposite.

“What we were told was: ‘Why are you so late...you should have been here first’,” one of the workers says.

Many of the community workers in the Rashid colony had been primary school teachers before being recruited by AKU-HDP.

“We were already more confident than most



Community workers getting ready to visit a few more households to impart information on early childhood education amongst mothers.

because of our teaching,” one worker explains “but now we have discovered even more talents that we can use. We can do anything now!”

As teachers, they also recognized the transformation the RCC Programme was bringing to their local schools – they pinpointed the different teaching methods, the more creative, interesting classroom environment and learning materials.

They have extended this concept into the centre-based workshops they run for the community – topics include antenatal care, and focus groups on health, nutrition and early childhood development. Being young, and mostly unmarried, they are used to being asked by older mothers how they can know anything about antenatal care and babies.

“We tell them: ‘We might be young but we know a lot’ ”. One single worker admitted to telling one group of mothers she was married too, just so she could get her message across without so many questions!

The AKES,P team is also working in the Hyderabad area, creating flourishing schools and a brand new learning resource centre. Along with RCC training for grades 1 and 2 teachers, the team identified a key teacher in each school and provided them with a one-

year course so that they, in turn, could develop the capacity of their school.

Mothers’ groups meet regularly here to discuss their children’s progress, both at home and at school – another example of the RCC commitment to engaging with parents and communities.

AKES,P Programme Manager Saima Maheen says using the traditional Sindhi forum of a *katchehri* (meeting) proved an ideal way to involve the community.

“These started people thinking about their children in ways they had not done before and also gave us the chance to explore with them some wider concepts such as the importance of culture and local traditions.”

This was evident on a sultry afternoon, in between monsoon downpours, as about 30 mothers and their children crowded into a family compound to say what they thought of the RCC Programme.

First of all they pointed out that the mothers’ meetings themselves were of huge benefit, giving women a chance to gather and talk, and have a collective voice in the community.

“We’re very happy about our children being

involved with RCC,” says one mother. “These children are our future. RCC is so good we want to send our children only to RCC classrooms. Before we had this, we did not send our youngest children to school because there were no facilities for them.”

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Afsana Kharal
Community Co-ordinator
Aga Khan University- Human Development Programme

The mothers recount how their children regularly came home and taught them things such as hygiene tips.

“They tell us some of the names of Allah, and



Jill Worrall shares a light moment with the mothers of an RCC community and a member of HANDS.

ask us a lot of questions. I think we are learning a lot too!" says one mother.

"Before RCC we did not think very much about this age group, the babies to three-year-olds," says another, "But now we understand the importance of helping them to develop. We think with RCC our children will stay longer at school and maybe even go on to college and university."

Community engagement is also an important facet of the work of fellow implementing partner in Sindh, HANDS, which has introduced RCC to 50 local schools.

While RCC classes are in full swing at the Ilyas Abreja School, in a home nearby a HANDS-trained midwife is talking to a group of mothers about breastfeeding. She discusses the importance of breast-feeding immediately after birth and a lively discussion ensues as mothers debate its merits compared with the traditional approach of feeding newborns with honey.

They also talk about how to combine breastfeeding with the demands of seasonal work in the fields.

Several of the mothers have children in RCC classrooms at the school and comment on how they like the range of teaching materials

and how the teachers guide their children through their learning, rather than simply standing at the front of the classroom.

The school itself is a sheltered haven of trees with grass to play on. A set of swings is in constant use at playtime as children of all ages mingle happily. Here too, the RCC classrooms stand out with their stimulating environment and child-friendly teaching methods. But as in other centers, HANDS personnel had to work hard at first to convince their communities that RCC was worthwhile.

HANDS Programme Manager Abid Soomro says major community mobilization from community to district government level was needed to build up understanding.

"It was a very new concept, to bring children from age three into the school. We were presented with a lot of barriers such as parents saying: "This is not the age to send children to school...even the teachers were resistant."

Mr. Soomro also says much work had to go into childhood education was solely about learning ABCs and 123s.

"We wanted a holistic approach to education, including hygiene and health, and one that involved parents, teachers, health-workers, the education departments and so on. And

from everywhere at first came the comment 'But our parents didn't do this with us.'"

HANDS Hala has also established an impressive learning resource centre, which teachers can visit to gain new ideas for their classrooms. Learning corners brimming with ideas have been established and demonstrate how they can make their own learning materials cheaply and easily.

The HANDS team, like the other partners, has been living and breathing RCC for many months now, and the untold hours of work, the brainstorming, heart-searching and plain blood, sweat and tears is paying off.

"We wanted an holistic approach to education, including hygiene and health, and one that involved parents, teachers, health-workers, the education departments and so on. And from everywhere at first came the comment "But our parents didn't do this with us."

Mr. Abid Soomro
Programme Manager
HANDS



The Ilyas Abreja School, one of the RCC partner schools in Hala, is a sheltered haven of trees with grass for the children to play on.



RCC has always advocated the fact that learning is integral in the early years.

To date, the Programme has ensured more than 15,000 young children have access to lively, child-friendly early learning opportunities based on the national curriculum developed for the government by TRC. Programme monitoring data indicates that the Programme has already, in its short lifespan, achieved significant results:

- Comparison of enrolments in the 100 original Programme schools shows a marked increase between 2003 and 2005 – 12% in *katchi* class, 37% in class 1 and 63% in class 2.
- Drop-outs for girls declined from an already low 4.3% after one year of Programme interventions to less than 2% in *katchi* class and to less than 1% in class 1.
- Girls' attendance increased dramatically in all schools, from an average of 62% to 82% in *katchi* classes, and from 65% to 82% in class 1.
- Boys' attendance also improved, but from a lower base, going from 44% to 57% in class 1.
- All 157 *katchi* classes now have their own rooms, compared to a baseline figure of 20%.
- Classroom observations also indicated some notable gains:
 - The number of 'clean' classrooms increased from 22% to 68%;
 - The number of classrooms displaying children's work increased
 - 92% of classrooms had creative materials available;
 - Lecturing has largely been replaced by more active learning – 79% of teachers were found to encourage children's active participation in discussions; and
 - The number of schools using the national ECE curriculum had more than doubled to 89%.



Transforming Lives

The impact of RCC Programme



Opportunities to play and study with children create the ability to form strong and meaningful relationships later in life.

TRANSFORMING LIVES

The Impact of the RCC Programme

During the course of interviewing hundreds of children and adults for this publication I asked everyone about the impact RCC has had on their lives or on their communities.

There was an incredible consistency among their answers.

But, one reply stood out. It came from Moosa, a member of the HANDS Hala team that is working in communities in the Hyderabad district.

“There is only one answer you need to hear. Just keep the children in front of you. Forget all the other aspects, all the other impacts. The impact on the children is sufficient in itself, it is the key. The change in the children is just so obvious – that is all anyone needs to know.”

Moosa is absolutely right. Children, their health, abilities and hopes for the future are at the heart of the RCC Programme. But it is also true that this Programme consists of thousands of voices and faces, many of whom also want to have their say about what RCC has meant to them and how it has transformed their lives.

What changes has this Programme made in

the hundreds of children who have been brought into the RCC family? First of all, here’s what key people with the three implementing partners have to say.

Sughra Choudhry Khan recalls a scene she witnessed in a RCC Class 2 classroom in the Hyderabad area.

“There was no teacher in the classroom when I visited. But one of the pupils was taking the class. She had her own plan on a notepad that she referred to– (it was just like the RCC work plan on the wall). She must have been seven or eight. She was completely confident in front of her classmates and was taking group singing. She was actually doing an extremely good job. I just can’t imagine that happening anywhere else. An American with me was stunned and said that would never happen in America!”

“I’ve walked into an RCC classroom and no one looks up because all the students are 100 per cent engaged in what they are doing. On one occasion a mother was visiting to teach needlework and just about everyone was totally engrossed. The difference between that and a classroom where rote learning was in progress is quite amazing.”

AKES,P Programme Manager Saima Maheen

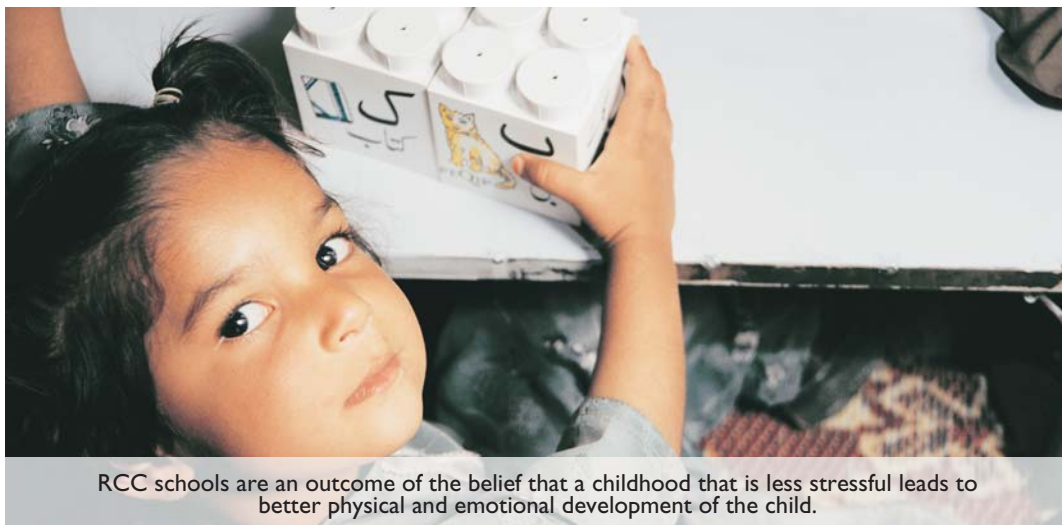
has observed many more RCC classrooms in operation.

“One teacher came up to me so excited that one of her children had stood up before her whole class and counted from 1 to 100. There was a real feeling of achievement. For me it was not the counting that was most important but the evidence of the children’s confidence, the teacher’s excitement and the sense of achievement that both of them felt.”

SCSPEB’s Programme Officer, Akbar Jawad is very clear about what gives him the greatest satisfaction from involvement with the RCC Programme in Sindh.

“It’s seeing the children’s confidence, the interaction they have with their teacher, the liberty to learn in their own way and then the commitment of their teachers to make it work. The caring, friendlier relationship between teacher and child attracts students to school, and encourages them to ask questions. The result is a new vision among teachers that there is a new holistic way to teach.”

He believes that because children so enjoy school under this approach it has drawn not only extra children to school, but also the parents.



RCC schools are an outcome of the belief that a childhood that is less stressful leads to better physical and emotional development of the child.

Mohammed Saleem, another member of the SCSPEB team says RCC children from isolated rural schools in Balochistan are now often mistaken for children educated in big city schools. “That’s how marked the difference is.”

Teachers have reported visiting homes in school holidays and discovering young pupils had set up their own “learning corners” and were running their own schools - along RCC principles of course.

HANDS Hala team member Khadija observed: “We now have children waking up to make

sure they get to school on time. Before RCC there was no pressure at all in some of these household to get children to school.”

Teachers and parents report that children are demanding to go to school, and cry if for some reason they cannot. In the past, it was often completely the opposite.

This is not the first education programme in Pakistan to witness an increase in enrolment. However, some of these have been linked with inducements such as gifts of cooking oil. HANDS team members comment that whereas in the past, school numbers would

drop off as the inducements stopped, under RCC parents’ and children’s enthusiasm is sustained because of they are seeing real results.

HANDS is especially pleased at the way fathers have become more supportive of their pregnant wives, and are now more involved in the care of their young children as a result of RCC interventions.

RCC’s technical support partners, and those who have been involved in coordinating the Programme have also witnessed impacts in the field:

Dr. Camer Vellani, AKU-HDP’s Acting Director, says some of the early indicators from research gathered during the first five years of RCC show that in Balochistan alone the drop-out rate in RCC classes is low – less than 10 percent in *katchi* classes – a tremendous improvement on the up to 50 percent drop-out recorded in other schools.

Sadiya Azeem, TRC’s Programme Manager says although TRC’s role has focused on teacher training rather than in direct involvement with the children, she can’t help but notice changes in the children.

“For me in particular, I think the greatest achievement of RCC is to see the shine in

For me in particular, I think the greatest achievement of RCC is to see the shine in children's eyes. It's a total paradigm shift on what we saw before. Children love coming to school. They are so happy.

Sadiya Azeem,
Programme Manager,
Teachers' Resource Centre

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The children are achieving better results – for example in Sindh children in Class 3 who have spent several years in RCC classrooms are completely different children compared with those in Class 4 who have had no contact with the Programme. There is a spark in the Class 3 children that's simply not there in the other group.

Wendy Griffin has watched RCC children rapidly mastering the government curriculum and asking what there is to do next.

"That in itself will bring changes in the curriculum - there's going to have to be more

for these children to do! And, even if RCC cannot develop further than Class 2, I believe we've given students the ability to cope and make the best of existing teaching methods and to deal successfully with the challenges that lie ahead. That will have a huge impact on their future."

Caroline Arnold, AKF's Geneva-based Co-Director, Education Programmes, has also spent time in schools where RCC is operating.

"The energy level is so exciting. You can see the contrast the moment you walk in. I'm so impressed with the liveliness of it all. It's spread to the teachers too – you can see that they are beginning to believe they are doing something important and making a difference in their community and even for their country."

Down at the grassroots level, in the classrooms themselves, teachers are bursting to describe the flowering of confidence and enthusiasm they have seen take place in front of them.

Abdul Hameed a Community RCC Teacher at Yaro School in the Pishin District of Balochistan commented:

"I've noticed many changes among the children – such as the development of their life skills such as washing hands before eating, saying



The biggest proof of RCC's work is the smile it has brought to children's faces.

thanks to Allah before meals and their general politeness. They are even telling their parents now to do these things. And there is very little absenteeism - just look at our attendance record,” he says, opening up the attendance register, which shows page after page of ticks with no crosses to be seen.

Zakia Kakar is a RCC facilitator in the Balochistan area and she too acknowledges transformation.

“I’ve noticed so many changes in the government schools where we operate. Previously there was not even a space or teacher for *katchi* classes, no joyful learning environment, or child-centered learning, no community involvement and the children were bored and lacked confidence.

“Now, thanks to RCC these children are sharp, active and bold. They learn so much more easily than other children and not just the basics such as their alphabet – they can do so many other things.”

Her opinion is backed up by a group of eight of the men teachers (both community and government) in Pishin District. They are certain their students are learning faster. “What used to take weeks to teach them now just takes days.”

“Schooling used to focus much more on learning essentials to avoid physical punishment. This reduced the teacher-child relationship. Now we all work together as friends – there is no gap between us and so the children have so much more confidence.”

Akbar Jawad of SCSBEB backs up the teachers’ impressions, noting that the culture of punishment had been significantly reduced in RCC schools, while at the same time greater job satisfaction for teachers had seen commitment levels rise.

A group of women teachers in the same districts had similar opinions, adding that their students were learning much more readily given the freedom of the RCC classroom and its learning corners.

“When children first arrive in *katchi* class there is fear on their faces, but their first experience of an RCC environment soon washes away their fear....they feel as if they are at home.

Both groups of teachers recount how children who have left the RCC environment to study in higher grades often gravitate back to their classrooms.

“Some children who have graduated to higher classes have refused to go. They cry. They

want to stay with us. Others come back to our classes because, without perhaps knowing why, they recognize that the RCC approach is so different.”

The impact on the children extends far beyond their classroom experiences. AKU-HDP’s community workers in Hyderabad have observed improvements in health and development among the young children they are now monitoring on a regular basis as part of the Programme.

In the Mir and Rashid colonies there is 100 percent immunization among RCC families and a better overall standard of health as a result of the Programme’s home visits and workshop sessions on issues such as boiling drinking water and other simply hygiene practices. Personal cleanliness has improved and signs of maltreatment have decreased.

Parents, in both Balochistan and Sindh have similar stories to tell about the transformation they have seen in their children and also how the Programme has had positive benefits for them as well.

Noted Saima Maheen, from the AKES,P perspective:

“As a result of the parents’ meetings we’ve run



Children will thrive in an environment that is emotionally nurturing, has good and strong relationships and engages the curiosity and excitement of the child

as part of our community involvement, there has been a major shift in awareness about early childhood development. Fathers tell us that when they used to go off to the fields each day they never gave a thought to what their children were doing. Now they do take notice and monitor activities such as television viewing. Mothers tell us that health care in pregnancy had also never been given much attention, nor had even the development of their young babies. All that had now changed.

“Parents are now a much more visible presence in schools – they visit their children’s classrooms, take an active part in school

management committees, are even teaching students often neglected traditional crafts, and explaining local customs and folklore. This has built up parents’ self-esteem – an impact that has flowed into the community as a whole, where respect for these cornerstones of culture has increased.”

Parent Teacher School Management Committees (PTSMCs) are now working much more effectively, according to Abid Soomro of HANDS. “Previously they did not know what they were doing. Now they understand their roles.”



Parents also love the fact that their children are now well mannered and more confident than they were before the RCC Programme.

Pishin District PTSMC member Naqib Agha has seen children’s skills increasing and with this a corresponding pride in their school.

“I’m very satisfied with RCC. Children know their alphabets, but they are better mannered as well.”

A male teacher in Pishin was amused one day when a father came to class and started to drink water while standing up. “His son told him to sit down to drink because that’s what we had been teaching him!”

Another teacher commented: “Before RCC some parents did not even know what classes their children were in – now they not only know, they are visiting the classroom.”

Parents in the two regions believe that the example set by RCC teachers through their warm, caring relationship with children has had a flow-on affect at home too. As one parent described it: “I think we tended to be a bit harsh before but now things are friendlier, and there is more sharing between children and parents.”

SCSBEB facilitator Zakia Kakar regularly visits 23 schools in which RCC classes are operating.

“When we started in 2003 with an orientation

meeting parents were very surprised. They said: 'How can you teach children without bags, books and slates?' But now they tell us they are so happy to see their children with more manners, discipline, good health and hygiene habits and who like to go to school every day."

She has parents pleading with her for RCC classes to continue past Class 2. "Our children have gone from having zero attention paid to them in school to individual attention. We want more of this for them."

Satisfied and enthusiastic parents bring other results. Irfan Ahmed of SCSPEB in Quetta says perceptions about enrolment have changed. Parents no longer laugh about the idea of sending their three- and four-year-olds to school. More years at school means great exposure to education and the potential for much better long-term outcomes.

SEF Director Mashhood Rizvi says the role of parents in the effective implementation of RCC cannot be underestimated.

"Parents are the best educators, irrespective of their background, but there is a lot of pressure on them these days. So, it is important for us to emphasis parenting issues as part of RCC. What I love to see is the intergenerational

relationships that RCC is fostering where children are spreading messages at home about health, hygiene, love and affection." Right from the Programme's inception, the RCC team has placed great faith on its potential to change the lives of young children. But, perhaps what has caught them by surprise is the tremendous growth in the teachers and

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Mashhood Rizvi,
Director,
Sindh Education Foundation

community workers.

Gail von Hahmann, an education consultant with the AKU-HDP has witnessed this first-hand when RCC personnel joined the certificate training course for early childhood development workers.

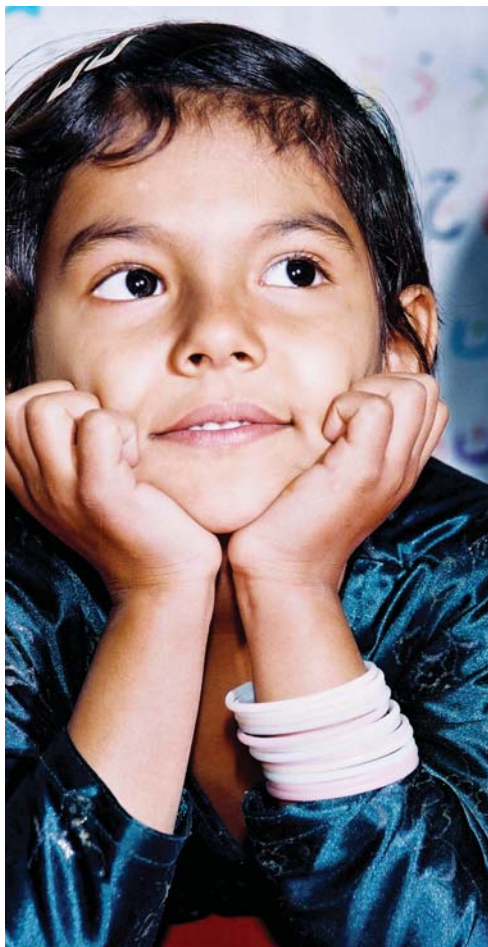
"One girl was in tears as she told me how her life had changed from one of waiting at home to get married, to being able to be taught by university faculty members.

"In 30 years in development work these young women are some of the most highly motivated I've seen, and they are making such great progress.

"As a result, the level of commitment of the teachers, trainers and community workers is striking."

Naureen Madhani, AKU-HDP Programme Manager, explains that the RCC Programme provided the first experience of employment for many of these young women.

"They have developed so much self confidence and self-esteem along with building up their own knowledge. As a result there have been changes in the behavior of their own siblings, children and relatives' children. I can't



The RCC Programme has provided many children with the opportunities they need to grow up as confident and creative human beings.

overemphasize how dramatic these have been.”

Dr. Irvine commented on some of the unplanned additional benefits of RCC:

“I watched one young lady community teacher hard at work in school during the morning, and later in the day I saw her again in a house taking a women’s literacy group. She was not being paid to do it, and no one in authority had asked her to do it - a mother of one of her pupils had asked her if she could teach her mother to read, too. I was so proud to have met this teacher because the future of this country depends on people like her with such high levels of commitment.”

Watching these young women develop has also been a moving experience for TRC CEO Mahenaz Mahmud.

“I remember some of the first community teachers we trained saying: ‘We are going back to our village to say, if we can do this, so can you’. It was beautiful to see the changes in them and hear them say: ‘We have changed ourselves, WE have done this’.”

Wendy Griffin agrees.

“The impact on government teachers has been huge. I’m astounded in some ways that such simple changes could cause so much impact.

When I first used to visit schools teachers wanted to tell me that they didn’t have this or that now the first thing they want to do is show you the models they’ve been making, and what their children have achieved.”

Some government teachers had been resistant to becoming part of the RCC Programme, understandably perhaps given that it was in some ways challenging their own teaching methods. But the special alchemy of RCC has come into play here too as, unlike community teachers, government teachers have had to unlearn previous techniques and take on board a whole new concept in teaching. The result has been a sincere enthusiasm and interest in implementing new ideas.

“And the community teachers are also totally devoted, and work such long hours. They have done so well, it is often impossible to tell the difference between them and government-registered teachers and both groups get along so well. For the community teachers there’s the added bonus that their parents are now so proud of them, which has improved their community status too,” Wendy says. She adds that the lives of the community workers, such as the teams of young women in Sindh, have also completely changed.

“Because they are working together and

constantly support each other they are really firing as a team. They are growing before our very eyes.”

AKU-HDP’s Hafeez Samo says it is the community workers’ transformation that has left the most lasting effect on him as well. “At first they were saying ‘How can we do this work?’ (home visits to monitor children’s growth and discuss child development issues). They were so painfully shy. I’ll never forget one girl who said she wanted to work with us but added ‘I can’t write anything’ We told her to come anyway and we’d do the writing. The way she has grown since then has been wonderful. She just needed the opportunity to make the most of the abilities that were already there.

“If I take great pride in anything from RCC it is the development of these women – it’s not because I’m responsible for that – they’ve done it for themselves.

“Even if no one else in the community benefited from RCC, if it is just these 26 women (the teams in Mir and Rashid colonies) this will have a huge impact on the community. These 26 are the best human resource you can develop in a community like this because they will stay here even if they get married.”

At a teachers’ meeting in Tando Jam in Sindh, community and government teachers explained how the ‘Releasing Confidence and Creativity’ concept has worked not just for pupils, but for them as well.

A government teacher commented: “I’ve been teaching for 15 years and knew nothing about the workings of the brain, early childhood development or even basic health topics. Now that I know more, I enjoy teaching so much more.”

Even the well qualified and highly educated members of the AKES,P’s Sindh teacher training team have seen their own capacity to learn and to teach increase through RCC. Those with their own families have even been

“I’ve been teaching for 15 years and knew nothing about the workings of the brain, early childhood development or even basic health topics. Now that I know more I enjoy teaching so much more.”

A Government School Teacher
of the RCC Programme

putting RCC principles into practice with their own babies and older children.

According to the AKES,P teacher training team, the teachers’ attitudes have changed markedly from the earlier days when they were reluctant to sign up for training during the school holidays. They didn’t like that idea but now they are asking for more and more classes because they realize that as they gain more skills they can teach better, and as a result they enjoy their work so much more.

Abid Soomro says the teachers’ commitment level has increased and at the same time the culture of punishment that prevailed in many classrooms has been significantly reduced.

The aim of RCC was always to extend its impact outside schools and even beyond families. The success of a goal such as this is hard to quantify but RCC at work in the community can be witnessed through the enthusiastic attendance at parents’ and school management committee meetings, and through the interest being generated among local education department officials. Engaging the community from the very start of the RCC Programme has been crucial in achieving this. Early childhood development and education were new concepts, as was the idea of community workers visiting homes

and the creation of school committees. If these ideas were to work it was crucial that communities understood and embrace them.

“At first communities were suspicious – what was this all about? But as a result of meetings, and as time has gone by, people are now thinking about their children in a new way – what are they doing when they are not at school, what’s best for their future,” says AKES,P’s Saima Maheen.

Exhibitions of children’s work (including Programmes created with the help of parents and other community members) and the production of booklets listing community resources have also strengthened RCC links with local populations.

HANDS also believes that their improvements to the school’s physical infrastructure, including provision of regular water and electricity supplies better ventilation, furnishing and fencing have all helped motivate and engage the entire school community.

As Saima Maheen puts it: “If you involve the community, good things will happen.” RCC has always strived to keep education department officials, from local to national level, ‘in the loop’. This has meant involving them with RCC developments at classroom

level through to community meetings, exhibitions and openings of new facilities such as teacher resource centers.

Abid Soomro believes the hard work that has gone into establishing this rapport is paying off, with government education personnel showing increased levels of support through school visits and an increased acceptance of

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Saima Maheen
Programme Manager
AKES,P

early childhood education in public schools. Education department officials are now bringing their VIP visitors to RCC schools.

Caroline Arnold believes these growing links

with government are another RCC success story.

“If we want to see children stay in school and do well in life we need this support for their early development at all levels.”

“RCC has started to make a difference – it’s proved very good at *katchi* class and classes 1 and 2 because of the attitude of all the partners and stakeholders including the government.”

RCC partners have further strengthened these links by signing memoranda of understanding with provincial and district governments on topics such as curriculum development, and the sharing of work plans and statistics.

One result of this is that the importance of early childhood development for the well-being of communities is reaching into high places.

In the Pishin District of Balochistan, Malik Abdul Manan is a member of the Education Council (a group representing several parent teacher management committees). He has also given land for a school and would give more if the RCC Programme could be extended.

“If we do not have education it is hard to progress. Knowledge and education is the best form of empowerment, especially for the poor.

Those with education do well in every field – the ill-educated find it very hard.”

Education department officials from Quetta are regular visitors at RCC classrooms in their region. They have observed greater confidence among pupils and that the previously huge gap between students and teachers has been reduced.

“Teachers are now not inspectors – they are facilitators of learning,” Deputy District Education Officer Kaleem Shah says. “And we’ve noticed that teachers in the higher grades who are not part of the RCC Programme are replicating RCC methods in their classrooms.”

There’s more respect in the community for their teachers too, according to Mr. Shah, as people observe the RCC teachers’ (both government and community) greater punctuality, enthusiasm and also the attention paid to preparing work plans. Apart from anything else, they say, the detailed work plans enable classes to still function well if their teacher is absent – reducing a major headache for head teachers (and the department too).

The picture is similar in Sindh. AKES,P teacher trainer Mohammad Khan. “The fact that we are able to change things at the grassroots level makes RCC sustainable. We are giving the



RCC has gradually but very convincingly won the respect of all the community members and parents whose children go to the RCC schools. It shows that everyone is on board.

government a model of how things can be changed and they are starting to accept this because they are inviting us to work in new villages.”

RCC teams working in this area have had the unique experience of being able to establish links with a brand new district administration. They have already signed a memorandum of understanding with them to encourage the sharing of ideas on education development in the area.

The Nazim of the new district of Tando Mohammad Khan, Mir Inayat Ali Khan Talpur, has ambitious plans for developing its education and health infrastructures. He wants new schools built and is already constructing a hospital.

He and his education department officers are familiar with RCC and are aware of its impact on his community.

“I know these RCC classrooms will benefit our district. They have a very good atmosphere and it is promising to see parents attending meetings and teachers having more opportunities to train. The new learning resource centre that has recently been created will be so good for them too.

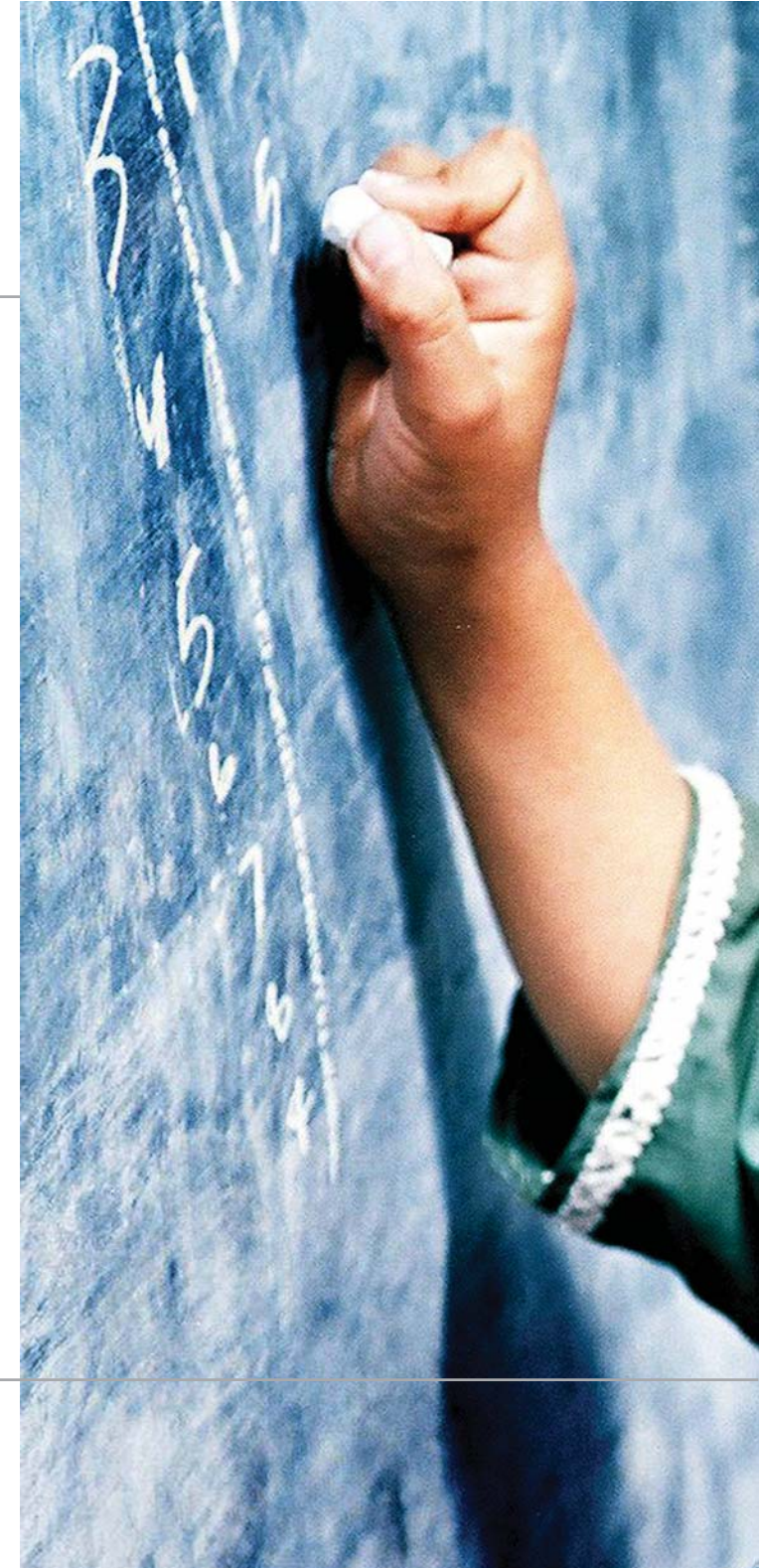
“If our children are healthy and well educated now, this will save the country money later on and will help us with community development. In a nutshell, if it’s good for the schools it’s good for all of us. I would not hesitate to support RCC.”

His comments are backed up by his District Officer for Education, M. Khan Samo.

“These are wonderful schools – the environment and the teaching methodologies. We appreciate being able to share in it. Because we are part of it we have the chance to change other schools, especially as we are a new district and can do this from the beginning.”

Summing up the success of RCC through all sectors of the community Wendy says:

“Is everyone on board? Yes. I can’t actually think of anyone who is NOT on board. We’ve managed to cross all boundaries from babies to *nazims*. The result is a huge number of people all working towards the same goal.”





RCC realized that if children are healthy, well educated and socially well rewarded it will help their communities to develop.



New Horizons

The Future & the Challenges Ahead



Life coming full circle: Children enjoying the simple pleasures of childhood.

NEW HORIZONS

The Future and the Challenges Ahead

Phases 1 and 2 of RCC Programme have had an impact on thousands of people since the Programme's beginnings in 2002.

The analysis and debate on just how major this impact has been is now under way. So, to some extent, the jury is still out on its success in quantitative terms and the implications of this for the future.

However, the partners already have data showing that enrolments have increased significantly in the schools where RCC has been operating and that attendance has increased dramatically, especially for girls. Drop-outs in *katchi* and Class 1 are less than 2% in the RCC schools which is extraordinarily low compared to the national average of around 20%.

With the commitment of the Royal Netherlands Embassy to support RCC as a full programme, for early childhood development in Pakistan, all those involved are already looking ahead.

The benefits of RCC have been recognized at almost all levels of the societies in which it has operated thus far. However, the partners

involved know that the Programme faces a number of challenges if it is to achieve even greater sustainable, measurable results in the future.

Caroline Arnold voices a dream that takes the Programme beyond its current goal of working in selected schools throughout Pakistan.

"I would love to see the Pakistan Government becoming really committed to adopting and adapting RCC itself for all schools. I hope that RCC will have an influence on the massive primary school improvement programmes in Pakistan – helping to build understanding of the importance of the early years in school. If these programmes give more attention to ensuring young children have enjoyable and successful learning opportunities in the vital foundation years in school the future will be bright."

That's a desire that many of those involved in RCC, from partners to parents, have also expressed, often very adamantly and with great passion.

However, Dr. Irvine cautions that anecdotal evidence, no matter how powerful is not enough when it comes to convincing a

government of a programme's worth.

"We've seen that enrolment in RCC schools is higher and taking place at the correct age, attendance is more regular, and there are fewer signs of growth faltering among younger children. Teachers are more motivated, and the children's health is better. But, we need hard data about all of this if we are to convince the Government of Pakistan that this approach can make a difference."

He says statistics that track children as they progress through RCC classes and then into higher classes, and which measure the number of years they stay in school, what they have learned, and whether they repeat classes are vital.

RCC has the potential to go far, he concludes:

"This Programme can expand indefinitely if RCC can continue to find partners to support it. In turn we have to deliver the goods in terms of evidence, by keeping the partnership alive and ensuring the RCC team always has a strong, visionary leader."

And to future donors and supporters he has this to say:



Dr Irvine, former Planning Co-ordinator AKU-HDP, claims that the RCC Programme is one of the most important programmes donors can ever support.

“This is one of the most important programmes you could ever support.”

Caroline Arnold also wants to see the Programme strengthen its commitment to younger children from birth to age three. This would deepen the links with parents and communities in general and acknowledge the contribution they make to their children’s welfare and future well-being.

Ask parents in Sindh and Balochistan what they want for the future education of their children, and the answer is to the point, if not necessarily easy to implement in the short term.

“We want RCC operating in all primary school classes, not stopping at Class 2,” said one parent in Sindh. Her feelings were echoed by parents in every RCC school.

Parents also want to see the government adopting the RCC approach. Both parents and RCC implementing and support partners have heard first hand of other communities demanding to know why they cannot have the Programme introduced to their schools.

Teachers who are part of the Programme are equally adamant about expanding RCC. Out of all the questions put to dozens of teachers

for this booklet, the one that had almost every teacher, even the quietest, become vocal and animated was when they were asked if RCC should be extended.

“Don’t stop RCC at Class 2 and let us bring the benefits of the Programme to more children and their communities, was the unanimous message.

“If this RCC environment could be extended to higher classes we know more children will complete their primary schooling,” said a teacher in Balochistan.

His view was echoed by a woman teacher working in the same area.

“Early childhood is such a vital time for putting children on the right path. They are like a blank piece of paper at this stage. RCC has the power to guide them the right way.”

With so much support at grassroots level it comes as no surprise that the implementing partners are equally enthusiastic.

Irfan Ahmed, backs all the calls from parents and teachers to see RCC’s scope widen.

“Of course I’d like to see more children involved and the concept extended up the school

system, maybe to Class 5. One way to do this is to strive to have RCC principles incorporated into government education policies.”

AKES,P also emphasizes the importance of working with government. Chief Executive Officer Sughra Choudhry Khan says although RCC has proved that there can be good early childhood education development taking place in government schools there are still barriers in the way.

She’s especially concerned about being able to retain newly trained *katchi* class teachers in the face of standard government practice to regularly relocate teachers. Addressing that will be a key area of discussion between RCC partners and the government in the future, she predicts.

“We would like to see more work with pregnant women and the birth to age three group. If we can succeed here we’ve won half the battle before the children even get to school. But we need more ammunition in the form of documented evidence. When all is said and done, what the government wants to see is if these children can pass exams.

“If we can get early childhood development right and get the government to take it on, we’ll set a whole new framework in place for

human development in Pakistan.

“There are a lot of people in Pakistan who are not happy, healthy and who harm others because of their low self-esteem (which itself is related to our very hierarchal society). Early childhood development builds self- esteem. If people have this they are less likely to hurt others. Add to that the attendance, improved mental and physical health and you will have a sounder society in the longer term.”

Implementing partner, the Teachers’ Resource Centre, is already working on a new initiative for the RCC Programme with plans to produce multi-grade manuals for teachers, having identified a need for new resource material for teachers with classes of mixed age and grade children. It also plans to continue to press for greater official recognition of early childhood education studies at tertiary level.

A prime concern for the Sindh Education Foundation, according to Manager Marketing, Advocacy & Publications Unit, Somaiya Ayoob, is ensuring that the investment in teachers trained in early childhood development is not lost through government’s transferring them to other, older classes.

“Transfers, changes in the government personnel with whom we’ve established



ECD Programmes like RCC help build the self-esteem of children, which helps build a sounder society in the longer term.

rapport, devolution of services – all these have to be continually addressed through advocacy and constant contact with governments at all levels.”

“We need to keep pushing for a long-term government policy on funding for early childhood education. The amount of support being extended for early childhood development at present is just not enough.”

The third of the supporting partners, AKU-HDP, is also placing increased emphasis on the collection of hard evidence. Dr. Vellani says this will provide leverage for policy changes at government level.

“There’s no more persuasive method of encouraging change than to be able to demonstrate it with data.

“RCC is doing exactly what its name suggests, producing bright, curious, active, observant children but it needs hard irrefutable evidence to this effect.”

Wendy Griffin also believes RCC has a bright future, adding that it had been very humbling to have been involved in making the concept work.

“With a potential 300 schools involved in the future, the RCC Programme has to be taken

as a very serious model for all children. I think the Programme is now ready to go into third gear and then slip very quickly into fourth.”

“RCC is ready to scale up now so that we can continue to make an investment in our children at an early age. If we do this we will have students who are less likely to drop out or repeat grades, and who are more likely to be employable, healthier, literate, numerate and be best possible mothers and fathers.”

Dr. Randy Hatfield
Former Programme Manager Education
Aga Khan Foundation

“Modern communication technology, such as texting and email, enables teams working across a wide geographic area to strengthen and maintain their strong supportive bonds,” she says. “This will be especially important in future. The plan is to extend RCC into Pakistan’s Northern Areas and Chitral and to bring more schools in Balochistan and Sindh into the Programme”.

“There’s a huge sense of pride throughout the partnership in what has been created and some very deep relationships established. The Programme has had a great history of attracting the right kind of people and mentoring them. For the future, maintaining this caliber of team members and nurturing the relationships between them will be very important.”

“So far a very small group of children in comparative terms has had the chance to have the environments they live in and the school they learn in to be enhanced in the best possible way. Now we need to build on this.”

It’s perhaps appropriate that some of the last words of the RCC should come from Dr. Hatfield, who helped formulate the Programme and then see it develop over the past four years.

“RCC is ready to scale up now so that we can continue to make an investment in our children at an early age. If we do this we will have students who are less likely to drop out or repeat grades, and who are more likely to be employable, healthier, literate, numerate and be best possible mothers and fathers.

“How do we make this happen? We need to keep it on the government’s radar. And never give up!”



"RCC is ready to scale up now so that we can continue to make an investment in our children at an early age. If we do this we will have students who are less likely to drop out or repeat grades and who are more likely to be employable, healthier, numerate and be best possible mothers and fathers."
Dr. Randy Hatfield, former Programme Manager Education, Aga Khan Foundation.



Reflections

The RCC Programme is the work of a team of hundreds of talented, imaginative and dedicated people. Of diverse cultures, customs and nationalities, they have worked together (in facilitating, implementing and support roles) towards the common goal of improving learning and teaching for young children.

RCC has involved 157 school institutions, three ECD centers, hundreds of adults and thousands of children. The benefits from the Programme have spanned whole communities - children excited about learning, teachers enthusing about new ways of teaching, fathers proud and happy about the progress of their children and mothers participating in classrooms and in awareness sessions. In the wider community government education officers take pride in bringing in visitors to see RCC in action and community craftspeople have a greater sense of self-worth as they share their skills with students.

It has been a project carried out with great heart and in a spirit of releasing confidence and creativity for the betterment of all lives.





“Quality education at all levels is, and has been, critically important for all societies at all times. In the developing world, education offers the poor opportunities for new futures”

– His Highness the Aga Khan

Thank you

Writing this booklet would not have been possible without the help of hundreds of people in Sindh, Balochistan and Karachi who gave up valuable time to talk to me, show me the workings of the RCC Programmes and answer dozens and dozens of questions. I want to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who took part, not just for the information and insights they provided, but also for the privilege of meeting them. The RCC team is an inspiration and I enjoyed the experience immensely. Life, and travel, especially, is always about making connections but then having to say goodbye, but it is my hope that sometime, I will get to meet some of you again. I have endless admiration for your skills and dedication. If any group of people can help bring change to Pakistan's education system, I'm confident you can.

Jill



Note about the Author Jill Worrall

Jill Worrall is an award-winning writer with about 25 years' experience in the industry. She has experience in publishing, interviewing, news writing, feature writing, promotional writing and editing.

Jill specializes in writing stories that take readers to the scene, make them feel part of the story – creating a sense of immediacy and empathy. She has been judged a New Zealand Travel Writer of the Year and has won two feature writing awards in New Zealand's most prestigious journalism awards, the Qantas Media Awards.

Jill is the author of *A Blonde in the Bazaar* (New Holland), a travel book recounting her experiences in Pakistan. This was judged runner-up best travel book published in New Zealand in 2004.

Jill has traveled extensively in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Iran, Central Asia, Australia, the UK, Europe and the United States.

At present Jill is a freelance writer for various publications and escorts groups overseas to Asian destinations.

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