

New Development: Turning around failing schools - Lessons from Lahore

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This article reviews the operation of two improvement partnerships in Pakistan, where third sector organisations adopted selected state schools. We reflect on the lessons arising from both schemes in the light of the Institute of Educational Sciences' (IES) guidance on turning around schools. Although the operation of both partnership schemes is context specific, the findings should nevertheless be of interest to policy-makers in other countries. They also show how some aspects of the IES's guidance may need to be adapted and augmented, especially in the context of developing countries.

Keywords: School improvement; education partnerships; school turnaround; adopt-a-school; Pakistan

Introduction

How to turn around failing schools and improve low-performance is a key policy issue for many countries, especially where schools serve disadvantaged students (Herman et al 2008). Policy responses have varied across nations and over time. Governments have closely monitored such schools, for instance taking them into 'special measures' in the UK. And they have taken over some schools, such as transferring control to mayors and appointed oversight boards in the US (Green and Carl 2000).

Involving private and third sector organisations in school turnaround initiatives is popular in both developed and developing countries. In the UK, recent emphasis has been on encouraging and sometimes compelling underperforming schools to become 'sponsored academies'. Here private or third sector organisations (and increasingly other schools) become responsible for the operation and performance of the school(s) they sponsor (HCEC 2015). Involving outsiders can introduce fresh perspectives, management expertise and sometimes much needed additional resources. The Adopt-a-School Foundation in South Africa helps private and third sector organisations provide schools with resources for infrastructure improvements, teacher training, and other developments.

Evidence about the effectiveness of all these schemes is described as inconclusive, patchy and in need of improvement (Herman et al 2008; HCEC 2015; Hutchings et al 2016). There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of existing schemes and consider potential alternatives by learning from elsewhere.

To enable this learning, we present data on two adopt-a-school schemes operating in the Lahore District of Pakistan: a long-term adoption arrangement (where a third sector

organisation intervenes directly in the management and operation of schools); and a more temporary fostering arrangement (where a third sector organisation facilitates rather than directs school improvement). We reflect on the lessons arising from these schemes by drawing on the Institute of Educational Sciences' (IES) guidance on turning around schools, which recommends strong leadership, improving instruction, achieving quick wins, and building a committed staff (Herman et al 2008).

Although context has influenced how the Lahore schemes operate and their achievements, the findings should still be of interest to policy makers in other countries because they indicate how progress can be achieved despite inauspicious points of departure. They also show how the IES's guidance may need to be adapted and augmented, especially in the context of developing countries.

Study background and methods

Pakistan has poor pupil learning outcomes and is still far from meeting its Millennium Development Goals and providing Education for All (Tribune 2015). Current policy initiatives focus on expanding the number of schools, increasing enrolment and attendance rates, and improving pupil performance by working with private or third sector organisations. Different forms of partnership have been created. Here we discuss the Lahore District Government's (LDG) partnerships with the Cooperation for Advancement, Rehabilitation and Education (CARE) and Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aaghai (ITA).

The study of the partnerships involved 46 interviews with representatives of each partner (see Table 1), analysis of published documents, and field notes from observations and informal conversations while visiting partner organisations. All interview and observation data were collected over the period 2011-2012 but key published documents were monitored until August 2016. Data was analysed thematically both for the overall partnerships and at the level of fifteen adopted schools.

[Table 1 about here]

Findings

Background information on the two adopting organisations is provided below, followed by an account of the set-up and implementation of the adoptions. Finally, we consider partners' reflections on the success of the schemes.

The adopters

CARE is a charitable trust, funded mainly by national donations, that provides education in areas of need. CARE's first school opened in 1991 but it soon realised that its impact would be limited if it continued to work alone; CARE concluded that it needed to work with the government to improve state schools.

ITA is a public trust funded by national and international donors and established in 2000. From the start, its aim has been to work with a range of organisations to improve accessibility and standards in school education.

Scheme set-up and implementation

Both schemes were established by a top-down process, largely driven by CARE (in 1998) and ITA (in 2000). They drafted the memorandums of understanding (MoUs), which set-up the partnerships. The MoUs were negotiated and agreed with senior district officials (the *Nazim* and District Coordination Officer); the education department was not involved at this stage, even though they were subsequently responsible for implementing the schemes.

After the MoUs had been agreed, the education department was asked to identify state schools in need of support. Schools were not consulted about their inclusion on this list and many were far from willing candidates. The headteachers we interviewed commented that they knew little about their school's adoption until CARE or ITA visited them for the first time. Unsurprisingly, there was a good deal of school and education department resistance to both adoption schemes at the beginning. There were suspicions about the partnerships (e.g. that they were the first stage in school privatisation). Overall, the set-up of both schemes was a far cry from the operation of the South African Adopt-a-School Foundation, which specifies the need for willing involvement of schools and parents, a prior readiness for change in schools and a commitment to participate actively in the adoption process (Adopt-a-School 2016).

CARE's MoU gives it the responsibility for managing the 'entire affairs' of adopted schools and improving standards of education (subject to overall supervision and control by the LDG). The LDG is responsible for the running costs of adopted schools but CARE is expected to fund some additional facilities and teachers. CARE has taken a 'hands-on' approach to fulfilling its management responsibilities. CARE staff (teachers) work in adopted schools on a day-to-day basis. In the schools included in this research, the overall proportion of teachers employed directly by CARE varied between 10%-50%. The most experienced CARE teacher in a school becomes the 'Internal Coordinator' (IC). S/he teaches and has management responsibilities, including record keeping, data management and teacher evaluations. The IC observes both CARE and LDG teachers while they conduct classes, s/he looks at lesson plans and teaching methodologies, and is directly responsible for managing the CARE teachers placed in the school.

The IC is supported by a cluster manager who is responsible for managing up to six adopted schools. The IC and cluster manager undertake training needs analyses and arrange staff training in relevant areas. The LDG-employed headteacher remains in post in the adopted schools, so in effect CARE establishes a parallel management system and the success of this depends on how well the IC and headteacher work together.

The ITA-LDG MoU makes both parties jointly responsible for the ‘management of the entire affairs’ of adopted schools, but the funding arrangement is similar to CARE’s MoU. ITA’s approach is less interventionist than CARE’s. ITA sometimes provides additional teachers for adopted schools but, although these teachers are employed by ITA, on a day-to-day basis they are expected to work under the supervision of the school’s headteacher. There is no equivalent to the CARE IC. Instead, ITA has an education promoter who works with at least six adopted schools. S/he works in a facilitative way with headteachers, other school staff and school management committees. ITA’s main aim is to introduce new learning materials and programmes into adopted schools (e.g. early childhood education) and provide training courses to enable teachers to use these materials.

The adoption partnerships also differ in their time horizons. ITA envisages working with schools for an initial period of five years but CARE views adoption as a long term commitment. The scale of adoptions in Lahore differs too: in 2012, there were 12 ITA adopted schools, whereas CARE had adopted 151 schools in this area. This difference is partly explained by CARE’s greater concentration on schools in Lahore, while ITA has adopted school across Pakistan. By 2015 CARE had 181 adopted schools in total but equivalent figures for ITA are not available.

Given early resistance, both CARE and ITA have tried to avoid confrontation and overtly imposing their will on adopted schools. This has been easier with ITA’s facilitative approach and resistance subsided more quickly in this scheme. ITA’s ongoing relationship with both the education department and adopted schools has been characterised as generally cooperative (Irfan 2015). CARE’s more interventionist approach, and the fact that it has not been averse to escalating issues for resolution at a higher level when local persuasion fails (e.g. by District Coordinating Officer), has resulted in a more fraught change journey. Active resistance subsided over time but passive resistance remained in some of CARE’s adopted schools, where relationships have been characterised as grudgingly compliant at best (Irfan 2015). However, CARE’s approach has also produced highly collaborative relationships in other schools. In some schools, the IC and headteacher talked about their mutual trust and how they worked together to improve school performance.

Reflections on the success of the adoption schemes

The study was not designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the schemes, but our data allows us to make some observations on this. There were changes in teaching and administrative practices in the 15 adopted schools we studied in detail and most headteachers reported improvements in pupil performance. However, reliable and comparative performance data (such as exam results, enrolment and dropout rates) are not available to check these perceptions of improvement. Attributing reported improvements to the adoption schemes is not, in any case, straightforward and there is also a question about the embeddedness of the changes and whether they would survive the withdrawal of CARE or ITA from the schools. Some headteachers did attribute school improvements to the

partnership schemes and new ways of working. However, others thought improvements were more due to improved infrastructure and resources than changes in education practices. In general, education department officials considered that both schemes had resulted in worthwhile school improvements.

It is not possible to judge whether CARE's long term adoptions have been more effective than ITA's shorter term 'fostering' arrangement or vice versa. ITA's approach is probably less risky; CARE's approach seems capable of producing very good results in some schools but risks intransigence in others.

Emerging lessons

We conclude by discussing five lessons that can be drawn from a thematic analysis of the operation of both schemes.

1. Importance of leadership and management within and outwith schools

Many reports have emphasised the importance of leadership in turning around schools (Herman et al 2008; Leithwood et al 2010; Wallace Foundation 2011). The focus is usually on the role of the headteacher in signalling and leading changes in teaching practices. While we would not wish to underplay the role of the headteachers, it is clear that other leaders were crucial in the adoption schemes: the leaders of CARE and ITA set strategic direction, established the partnerships, and enabled them to operate; and CARE's ICs and ITA's education promoters led improvement changes at school level.

It was not just about leadership within schools; outward facing leadership was also needed to tackle broader problems in the education system which inhibited school performance. For example, ITA's Director of Programmes was able to persuade the LDG to change its restrictive budget structure for schools.

The two adoption schemes also highlight that establishing good management and administration systems should not be overlooked. CARE's analysis was that poor performance was mainly the result of mismanagement in the education system, which is why it introduced new management and administration systems in schools. ITA also sought to use its involvement in schools to influence education policy and administration procedures more broadly.

2. Improve instruction and monitor progress

The IES guidance (Herman et al 2008) recommends maintaining a consistent focus on improving instruction by reviewing the curriculum, providing professional development and making better use of data to understand student's needs and progress. This focus was important in the two adoption schemes but with the added twist of needing to improve the quality of student data and not just its use. CARE mistrusted many of the pre-existing monitoring and information systems operating at school and district levels and quickly set about collecting its own data. ITA, in contrast, relied on data collected by school headteachers, and some headteachers commented that ITA was wrong to trust existing

systems. One reported that when she joined her current school she found that there were 250 fake entries in the enrolment register', which ITA was not aware of. These fake entries had been used to argue for additional resources and to enhance the apparent performance of the school.

3. Make early visible improvements

The IES guidance, in line with the general change management literature, stresses the importance of quick wins and gives the example of swiftly improving a school's physical facilities. ITA's and CARE's provision of additional tangible resources (e.g. more teachers and classrooms, new technologies, and improved sanitation facilities) certainly helped them to gain the cooperation of school and education department staff. Many headteachers subsequently moved beyond seeing these resources as the main benefits arising from the adoptions but some retained this view.

4. Build a committed staff and local community

The IES guidance recommends assessing skills and commitment of school staff, and retraining, redeploying or replacing those who fall short on these counts. ITA focused on retraining rather than redeploying or replacing staff. Its training programmes were as much about reshaping thinking (e.g. the need for early education) as about enabling teachers to work in new ways.

CARE's strategy was rather different in that it focused on gaining compliance (behaviour change) in the hope that commitment would follow when teachers realised the benefits of working in new ways. CARE provided skills training, issued guidance, and observed and commented on classroom performance as part of its behaviour change strategy. New teaching practices were introduced by CARE-employed teachers into their own classes first and these were then spread to LDG teachers' classes. One headteacher talked about a healthy competition between LDG and CARE teachers, which encouraged each group to improve its performance.

In addition to building staff commitment, ITA also sought to get local communities involved in school improvement (similar to the South African Adopt-a-School Foundation). Early on in each ITA adopted school, a general meeting of all parents and teachers was organised to identify school problems and possibilities, and select parent and teacher representatives for the school management committee. This committee continued to meet each month and was reported to be an important driver of change.

5. Align strategies with context

The IES's recommendations do not mention the role of context, yet aligning strategies with context appears important in explaining the operation of both adoption schemes. There is a commonly held belief in Pakistan that the private sector is better than the public sector in delivering quality education (Andrabi et al. 2008). This belief is partly fuelled by evidence of corruption in state schools. For example, the existence of 'ghost schools' that have no

pupils but where teachers are still appointed and paid by the government (World Bank 2002). Such corruption has led many to accept the need for close management, monitoring and surveillance as part of a school improvement process.

There is also a cultural expectation that staff, especially those in government organisations, will do what those in authority tell them to do. This meant that the mandated nature of the school adoptions was not an insurmountable block to productive interactions between the two partners. Headteachers said that their main concern was to be treated with respect: as long as CARE and ITA were respectful in the interactions with schools and education officials, it was possible to develop good working relationships and achieve change.

Finally, the pre-existing, very poor performance of many of the adopted schools is important. Studies of local government improvement strategies in the UK, have noted that strategies for raising the performance of organisations from poor to adequate are likely to differ from those needed to move organisations from adequate to very good (e.g. Downe et al 2010).

Overall, there is much we can learn from studying how different countries tackle the problem of failing schools. We need better evidence about the effectiveness of different approaches but we also need to consider how they operate and why this does or does not work.

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Table 1: Interviewees

	Number of interviewees	Designations
CARE	20	Chair Head of Academics Head of Management Area managers Cluster Managers Internal Coordinators
ITA	4	Director Programmes Programme Coordinator District Manager Education Promoter
LDG	7 district education officials 8 headteachers in CARE- adopted schools 7 headteachers in ITA- adopted schools	Deputy Secretary District and Assistant Education Officers Government head teachers

Impact box

The study's account of two adopt-a-school schemes provides insights into alternative ways of tackling failing schools by comparing a long-term adoption partnership with a more temporary fostering arrangement. The latter seems less risky, while the former appears to have produced good results in some schools but intransigence in others. Although these insights are particularly relevant for policymakers and practitioners in developing countries, they should also be of interest to educationalists in other countries.

The five lessons emerging from the study both reinforce and extend (*shown in italics below*) existing practitioner guidance on turning around schools (Herman et al 2008):

1. Importance of leadership *and management* within *and outwith* schools
2. Improve instructions and monitor progress (*with reliable data*)
3. Make early visible improvements
4. Build a committed staff *and local community*
5. *Align strategies with context.*