

# Beating the ‘Anti-Work’ Culture: Lessons from a Successful Attempt to Improve Performance in State Schools in Pakistan

**Masooda Bano**

## Abstract

What local-level factors, or horizontal pressures, can improve learning outcomes in government schools in developing countries, when the political elites and education bureaucracy are not exerting enough vertical pressure on principals and teachers to ensure improvement in learning outcomes? Existing research suggests the role of principals, investment in teacher training or improving financial incentives, and increased community participation as possible ways to enhance performance of teachers and principals. Assessing a 25-year state-school improvement programme run by CARE, a prominent education foundation in Pakistan, which has demonstrated visible success in improving student enrolment and performance in national matriculation exams and transition to college and university education, this paper shows that while principals can play a critical role in improving school performance, the real challenge is to suppress the ‘anti-work’ culture that prevails in state schools in countries where appointments of teachers as well as principals remain a source of political patronage. The paper shows that in such contexts NGOs, if given the contractual authority to monitor performance, can act as effective third-party enforcers to help shift the balance in favour of ‘pro-work’ teachers. However, for systematic long-term improvement in school performance, this support needs to come via the district-level education authorities—and this, as we shall see, is often also missing in such contexts. The findings from this study thus support growing evidence on the challenges confronting efforts to strengthen the short route of accountability in countries where the long route of accountability is weak. In such a political-economy context, even committed principals are unlikely to be able to shift school culture in favour of a ‘pro-work’ ethic unless there are wide-ranging reforms in the wider political and bureaucratic culture.

## **Beating the ‘Anti-Work’ Culture: Lessons from a Successful Attempt to Improve Performance in State Schools in Pakistan**

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## **Introduction**

The continued failure of states in many developing countries to provide good-quality education remains a serious development challenge. The cause of this failure is argued to be multifaceted; it includes ineffective teacher training, scarcity of required teaching and learning material in classrooms, and weak monitoring by district-level education inspectors (World Bank 2018). Recent years have seen significant growth in studies drawing on quantitative methods— in particular, randomised controlled trials – in an attempt to isolate the impact of specific variables affecting learning outcomes, but findings remain inconclusive; results often differ across different contexts. The specific education reforms that can help to improve learning outcomes in state schools in developing countries thus remain unclear. One particular strand of research has come to focus on studying the role of school-level variables to examine whether greater autonomy at the school level can help to improve school performance and student learning outcomes. This line of inquiry has received attention in response to evidence that even in failing education systems some schools do excel. In this paper, we look at the case of an NGO-led programme in Pakistan which has improved state schools and recorded major improvement in students’ learning outcomes as assessed by results of nationally held matriculation exams. Unlike the traditional focus on addressing the causes of large-scale education failures of state bureaucracies to deliver good-quality education, the paper looks at the factors shaping school-level success.

The paper shows that, as indicated by recent studies (Levy et al. 2018; Fry 2011), school principals can play a critical role in improving school performance; but it also shows that the extent to which they can reform a school environment depends on the local political-economy context. In political contexts where appointments as teachers and principals in government schools remain a source of political patronage, the standard assumptions about incentivising these actors by offering better financial incentives or introducing punitive measures for low performance do not hold. In such contexts, the real challenge is to change the ‘anti-work’ culture in the school, created through a patronage-based appointment system. Such an institutional culture is geared towards creating a low-performance environment, as the pressure on staff members is minimised when low performance is accepted as the norm. Those who either are incapable of meeting the required performance standards or are non-committed to the task create an environment where those who are committed to perform well are actively ridiculed and shunned in order to ensure collective low performance. The freedom to be absent from work, to teach badly, or to exploit students by assigning them to non-educational chores without being reprimanded is contingent on the prevalence of a collective culture that actively demotivates high performers. Even committed principals have limited ability to change the dominant culture, as exercising their authority to correct teachers’ behaviour can prompt politically appointed teachers to use their connections to create pressure from above. The challenge thus is not that committed teachers or principals do not exist in state education systems: it is that the system creates incentives for anti-work teachers and principals to put social pressure on the conscientious teachers or principals not to perform, so that expectations for improved performance cannot be built. Thus, even if a principal is committed to increasing performance at school level, it is difficult for him or her to enforce reforms when the institutionalised culture in state bureaucracy works to support low-performance outcomes.

As the paper shows, these low-performance outcomes at school level are protected because often a similar culture prevails at the district-government level and higher up the bureaucratic chain of command. Control of state schools whose work culture is improved through third-party monitoring, in this case by an NGO, is taken back by the district government for political reasons (partly to appease the complaints of teachers who promote an anti-work culture), or for

explicit financial gains (to gain access to the additional budget allocated to the improved school due to increased student numbers); the gains made in terms of improved learning are thus easily lost. The extent to which the principal, or a focus on other community-level variables, can improve school performance is therefore contingent on the context. It is thus not surprising that the push by the international development community to strengthen horizontal governance to improve service delivery in contexts where vertical governance is weak has largely failed to achieve major improvements. In line with the findings of recent studies, the paper shows that it is difficult to strengthen the short route of accountability in countries with weak democratic culture at the top, as the work ethic and culture at each tier of governance is largely produced and sustained in line with the political and bureaucratic culture prevalent at the top. To ensure that the majority of state schools focus on the provision of good-quality education, the support for a pro-work culture has to come from district education authorities and the upper tiers of governance, thereby highlighting that improved horizontal governance cannot replace the need for effective vertical governance structures. These findings admittedly seem pessimistic: recognising blockages to both short and long routes of accountability in contexts, as the one mapped in this paper, does suggest that change in working of the bureaucratic culture requires undertaking wider political reforms which often are not easy to initiate as they require a shift in existing balance of power. Yet in a few country contexts, such high-level shifts have happened (Grindle 2004). The findings from this paper highlight the need to learn from those contexts.

### **Section 1. Background: Literature Review**

The emphasis on decentralisation of authority within the education sector to allow for enhanced accountability of the district government and greater community involvement in school governance to improve state education provision has led to a focus on identifying school-level variables that can help to improve learning outcomes in state schools – as opposed to attempts aimed at reform of the entire education bureaucracy (Westhorp et al. 2014). This focus on school-level variables is also referred to as ‘bottom-up accountability’, or strengthening of ‘horizontal governance’, whereby significant resources and responsibility for school management are delegated to school-level actors, namely the principals and teachers, and community-level stakeholders (Levy et al. 2018). This is opposed to traditional ‘vertical governance’, consisting of hierarchical top-down bureaucracy going all the way from federal ministry to the district government, the lowest tier of state governance. Recent studies, even when adopting a wider conceptual lens, reinforce the importance of school-level variables and community participation by highlighting the role of school-based management committees (SBMCs) in improving school-level outcomes (Hickey and Hossain 2019). Others have specifically attempted to investigate the relative significance of district-government efficiency versus school-level inputs, especially the role of the principals and the impact of SBMCs, in improving school-level performance: Levy et al. (2018) show this when attempting to explain different educational outcomes in Western and Eastern Cape in South Africa. Studies of school-level variation in performance in the Western context have similarly emphasised the role of principals: Lupton (2004) shows that giving principals greater autonomy to deal with the localised nature of school challenges can help to improve performance in low-performing schools in the UK; considering the performance of Charter schools across a range of states in the USA, Fry (2011) also shows that a shared feature of high-performing schools was that they were led by committed and dynamic individuals.

In this paper, we see that school principals can indeed play a key role in improving school performance; but more significantly we see that the local political-economy context in which

the principal is operating, and not just his or her personal motivation or commitment, limits his or her ability to influence things. The results from a study by Bennett (2017) looking at factors shaping the performance of state schools in the UK are relevant here. He argues that critical to shaping success at school level is developing a good work culture, which they define as ‘the way we do things around here’ (p. 6). He notes that a clear understanding of the school culture and its core values is key to improving school performance. Arguing that establishing such a culture requires deliberate efforts to help the staff and students understand what is expected of them, the study notes that principals play an important role in institutionalising this culture by means of demonstrating it, communicating it thoroughly, and ensuring that every aspect of school life feeds into and reinforces that culture. Developing this culture, the study argues, is not specific to teaching and learning practices but applies also to all aspects of communal school life, such as students’ behaviour on buses, in the corridor and in the canteen.

The evidence presented in this paper is fully in line with these findings on the need to institutionalise a school culture with a focus on high performance, clear rules that apply not just to classroom behaviour but outside the school too, and clear guidance for teachers on the expected performance standards. It also shows that principals play a key role in enforcing this culture in schools. But we also see that such a culture cannot be effectively developed and sustained at school level without reforms at district-government level. The experience of CARE shows that in political-economy contexts where school appointments in state schools largely result from political patronage, the same anti-work culture that prevails at the school level is present across the state bureaucratic tiers of governance, including the district government. Thus, district-government authorities do not necessarily respond positively when specific schools start to show major improvement in performance. Such islands of excellence demonstrate that positive outcomes are possible within the available resources and systems, which in turn highlights the failure of the district-government officials to raise standards across all schools. Thus, in the case of CARE we see the district-government authorities actively trying to take back control of schools once CARE has improved them, re-establishing the old style of work instead of learning from CARE to spread the good practice across all the schools in the entire district or across the state. As a result, motivated principals face systematic challenges to their efforts to raise school standards, and they are often actively discouraged by the district-government officials, or by politically appointed teachers who are more comfortable preserving the status quo.

The paper thus shows that the importance of school-level variables in improving the learning experiences or outcomes in state schools in developing countries is specific to a given political-economy context. The context is not just different from Western contexts, where the accountability standards established through vertical governance are clearly articulated and enforced, and principals and teachers have strong incentives to perform according to the advertised standards: it varies widely within the context of the developing world. The emphasis placed on the importance of principals and horizontal governance in improving educational outcomes holds true in a context where the bureaucracy at district-government level is broadly working effectively and is providing schools with a basic level of support, as is the case with the South African example studied by Levy (2018). But a narrow focus on principals as agents of school-level reforms is likely to lead to inefficient outcomes in political-economy contexts whereby high-performing schools, principals, and teachers, especially when located in rural and remote areas, actually risk isolation and marginalisation within the wider state system, rather than being actively rewarded for their commitment, due to the pressure that their high performance puts on the overall system to improve collective performance. It is thus not surprising that Asim (2019), in her study of one of the districts in Punjab, Pakistan, found that

an intervention that required members of SBMCs to actively monitor the performance of teachers and principals led to lower teacher performance as measured through student results. Rather than feeling obliged to improve student learning in response to enhanced parental monitoring, the principals and teachers felt confident to resist such attempts to discipline them. Such a response is logical when they know that their appointments are sustained through continued political patronage and not through evidence of satisfactory performance or accountability to the public. The paper is thus pessimistic about the effectiveness of interventions focusing on principals as the key agents of reforms in contexts where the long route of accountability is not working. In such a context wider political economy reforms are required to shift the existing power balance in favour of pro-poor educational reforms.

## **Section 2. Educational Context**

The growing recognition of the importance of school-level variation in performance has led to an increase in studies aimed at identifying factors that contribute to or hinder the provision of good-quality education in state schools. Instead of focusing exclusively on understanding the causes of system-wide failures, these studies argue for learning from successful cases to understand what factors can help to improve school-level performance. Looking at challenges to basic education provision in Malawi, Watkins and Ashforth (2019). argue: ‘Our perspective is different: we write about the failures in learning, but we also write about the successes achieved by the collaboration of parents, teachers, chiefs, and low-level civil servants. Together, they aim to improve their school, and they sometimes succeed.’ Guided by a similar methodological preference for learning from successful schools, where children are seen to excel in state-administered exams in comparison with their peers in other schools, this paper examines factors that have helped the CARE foundation to improve the performance of low-performing state schools in a number of districts in Pakistan.

Established in 1988 to support education in poor communities, the CARE foundation, which is registered as a family trust, runs a number of its own schools, but it is primarily known for its programme aimed at improving the quality of education in state schools. In 1998, the District Government of Lahore handed over management of 10 low-performing government schools to CARE on instructions of senior politician who had been impressed by the quality of education that CARE was offering to low-income communities in its own schools. The demand for its services kept expanding gradually, moving beyond Lahore to other districts in Punjab and then to other provinces. Today, more than 300,000 children in 850 government schools across Pakistan benefit from CARE’s inputs. CARE supports regular government schools as well as the schools run by the municipal corporation which employ teachers in grades 13, 14, and 15, who are less qualified and trained than those in regular government schools who are appointed in grades 18, 19, and 20. What makes CARE a very good case study for an understanding of factors that can help to improve education quality in state schools in Pakistan is the evidence of its success in improving student performance, as measured through matriculation exam results, in the state schools that it supports: the matriculation pass rate is 87 percent in science and 80 percent in arts compared to 60 percent in regular state schools and routinely some of the graduates from these schools secure top positions in the matriculation exams; student dropout rate from primary to secondary is only 12 percent as compared to 70 percent in regular schools. These results are particularly noticeable given that the schools normally handed over to CARE are those that are beset with the most severe challenges. Some of the state schools under its management whose student numbers today exceed the schools’ approved capacity were on the verge of closure at the time when they were handed over to CARE; the low education standards had convinced the community to stop sending children to the school altogether.

In order to appreciate the importance of CARE's contributions, it is worth noting that despite the growth of low-fee private schools in Pakistan, which cater to the poor, state schools remain the primary providers of primary and secondary education (Hunter 2020). The quality of education challenges faced by the state schooling sector are severe: Pakistan, along with Nigeria, has the largest number of out-of-school children, and the quality of schooling is very poor. Teaching in most state schools lacks focus on child-centred learning, teachers are often absent, and teaching materials are scarce (Hunter 2020). In addition, Pakistan suffers from the challenge of the political appointment of teachers, meaning that teaching positions are often seen as a reward for political support (Hunter 2020). Those appointed on the basis of political backing feel less accountable – not only to the community but also to the school principals, as they feel confident of retaining their posts because their endorsement by the political hierarchy is irrespective of their performance. Thus, the challenges marring the education sector in Pakistan are multifaceted, including weak political will, genuine resource constraints, teacher absenteeism, and the politicisation of education appointments.

Within this overall challenging landscape, development actors have come to play a key role in influencing education policy. Over the past three decades, many donor-supported education-reform programmes have been implemented, but the impact of even highly advertised and widely promoted donor-funded programmes has been limited. One impact of strong donor influence on education policy and planning in Pakistan is that NGOs have been engaged in many education programmes, particularly those aimed at promoting non-formal schools (Bano 2008b). However, in line with the global evidence, donor reliance has also meant that NGOs have come to be associated with donor money, and they are often criticised for being self-serving, as the duration of their activities is tied to specific donor projects (Bano 2008a). It is therefore important to note that CARE is not a typical education NGO: it is a foundation established as a family trust and raises its funds from Pakistanis within Pakistan and from those in the diaspora. CARE does not take money from development agencies, because it wants to retain independence. Its mission is to provide 'quality marketable education to the underprivileged children of Pakistan, so as to empower them to build a happier, more prosperous nation' (CARE 2021).

### Section 3. Methodology

In order to understand what factors help to improve the performance of state schools, this article primarily focuses on documenting the learning that CARE itself has acquired over the 22 years of its work with state schools. The fieldwork consisted of two main methods: (1) closely examining CARE's strategy of supporting state schools by conducting in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with senior CARE management who oversee the programme, as well as with CARE-provided teachers and government-funded teachers and principals in CARE-supported state schools; and (2) paying school visits to observe the everyday working of a CARE-supported state school, to talk to the teachers and principals, and to visit classrooms to talk to the students. The in-depth interviews conducted with the senior CARE managers and the founder, Ms Seema Aziz, who is a prominent businesswoman in Pakistan (Bayrasli 2012) and who personally established the CARE foundation and remains actively in control of its work, were particularly focused on documenting the institution's internal learning over the years concerning what strategies work to turn around low-performing state schools. The interviews and focus-group discussions conducted with mid-level managers, including area managers responsible for ensuring the smooth running of day-to-day operations in the schools, conducting school visits, and identifying ongoing needs, including any aspects of teacher

training, played an important part in understanding the interactions between the CARE staff, the government-funded school teachers, the principals, and the community, and in understanding the challenges faced when engaging the government staff, and the strategies that help to overcome them. School visits helped researchers to observe the relational dynamics between CARE staff and government teachers and principals, to assess the school's basic facilities, and to get a sense of students' socio-economic backgrounds, future aspirations, and confidence levels.

The respondents within the CARE senior management were identified in consultation with the liaison officer appointed by CARE to ensure cross-department representation. Senior managers who were interviewed represented departments of teacher training, curriculum development, monitoring and evaluation, the English-language programme, and the CARE scholarship programme. The respondents in different categories were selected for their seniority, as those in senior positions had all started as teachers with CARE and had been with the foundation for 20 years or more. These respondents have seen the CARE model evolve from the start and contributed to its development; they thus were in a good position to explain the details of the CARE model of supporting education in state schools, the challenges faced when seeking the co-operation of teachers and principals in the state schools, and the factors that ensure that improvement happens across adopted state schools irrespective of the socio-economic profile of the community. One of the female managers interviewed, who had been with CARE for 10 years, explained her association with CARE as a result of *dilli lagaoo* (deep emotional attachment); with an MPhil in Botany, she had started as a CARE teacher in a state school before moving up the ranks. Her boss had in turn been with CARE for 21 years. Responsible for the school inspections team, he was one of the early appointments at CARE. Although he had a master's degree in Economics, he had started as a CARE teacher in a government school, having been inspired by Seema Aziz's commitment and then moved up the ranks. All the senior and mid-tier managers interviewed had similar profiles and thus were able to provide insights into the current challenges; but they could also trace the institutional history in detail and draw on their experiences of teaching in the state schools as CARE teachers.

In terms of selecting CARE-supported state schools for a visit, six schools were selected. In making this selection, an important criterion was that the selected schools should be among those that were performing particularly badly, even by the standards of average government schools. Such a focus was expected to provide clear evidence of the contribution of CARE inputs to improving school performance. The other criterion was to ensure that half of the schools selected had a higher ratio of government teachers compared with CARE teachers. As is explained in detail in the next section, one of the critical features of the CARE model of support to state schools is that it supplies a CARE-trained teacher to the school. This teacher is partly meant to provide additional teaching support, or fill a gap in case insufficient number of teachers are available in the given school, but his or her main role is to help to change the school culture in favour of learning. The number of CARE-provided teachers in a school can vary from one to many, depending on whether or not the government has allocated sufficient numbers of teachers to the given school. For the purpose of this study, it was deemed important to focus on schools that have a higher ratio of government-school teachers, as the focus is on understanding how the performance of state schools can be improved by its own staff. At the same time, inclusion of some schools where CARE teachers were in the majority helped study the extent of improvement that can take place in state schools if majority of the teachers naturally shared the enthusiasm and commitment to provide quality teaching. Thus, fieldwork was carried out in both categories of school.



CARE supports state schools across a number of districts in the province of Punjab, and also at some locations in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan. The fieldwork for this paper was conducted only in schools in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province. Lahore has a population of 11 million, and consequently there is a great deal of variation in state schools as well as in the socio-economic profiles of the communities to which they cater. The list of state schools that CARE supports in Lahore consists of schools which are right in the heart of the old city area, as well as those in the new colonies and those on the outskirts of Lahore catering to populations from the surrounding villages. Two schools in which detailed fieldwork was carried out captured this variation: one was at a central location in Lahore, while the other was on the outskirts close to Multan Road, catering to children from ten surrounding villages between 5 and 10 kilometres away. Such a selection ensured geographical variation as well as variation in the socio-economic profile of the communities: in the former schools, children came from families where fathers were daily wage workers or did petty trade, while in the latter the children came mainly from rural farming families. Both schools were handed over to CARE at a time when, due to teacher absenteeism and low learning standards, they hardly had any regular pupils. Today, there are 500 children in the former and 800 children in the latter.

Visits to the schools were thus an important way in which to verify the scale of the student body, to assess the quality of classroom and outdoor facilities, to observe the interactions between the CARE teacher and the principal and the government teachers, and to engage with students to explore whether they value education and the opportunity to attend the school, whether in their experience the teaching there is different from that in any other school they have attended before, and which subjects they like to study and why. These interactions with students were meant to assess their level of confidence to engage with outsiders, their attitudes towards learning, and their future aspirations. They also helped to capture their views and level of satisfaction with the teaching and extra-curricular facilities provided at the school.

As noted, during the school visits, meetings were held with the government teachers and principals, but these meetings were only meant to observe the dynamics of interaction between the CARE staff and them. During these meetings, the focus was on verifying details of CARE's involvement with the school. These respondents were not asked any questions about their own attitudes because given that these schools were under CARE management, government principals and teachers were very cautious in what they said. The paper's methodology thus does not draw on stated experiences of government school teachers and principals; it only presents analysis based on experience of the CARE staff. This is justified as the focus of the paper is on seeing if CARE's experience can teach us something about why state schools fail; it is not aimed at capturing perspectives of government school principals and teachers on CARE's interventions. The findings of this paper thus summarise what CARE as an organisation has learnt based on its 25 year experience of working with state schools.

School facilities observed included: school infrastructure, including the size of the building, the classroom facilities including the provision of tables, chairs, and a blackboard, and bathroom, and sports facilities. Student's socio-economic profile was judged from what they explained of their family background when the researcher paid a visit to a classroom. These visits were short and made in front of the school teacher. Students were asked to voluntarily share their views on why they come to this school, whether their parents valued education, and what were their future plans. The confidence with which the students spoke, the careers they wanted to pursue, and the details they told about their family background when talking about their parents helped assess their confidence level and spoken abilities, their future aspirations, and their socio-economic background.

All the fieldwork was carried out under the Oxford University ethics protocol. Anonymity of respondents, and informed consent, whereby the respondents are fully informed of the objective of the study and given a choice whether or not to participate, are the core principles guiding this research. Interviews were carried out in Urdu and hand notes were taken which were then translated into English. In terms of data protection, in accordance with Oxford University data-protection policy, the interview transcripts and diary notes from school visits were saved on a computer with an encrypted password. Also, as per the Oxford University ethics protocol, all respondents were promised anonymity unless they themselves expressed a desire to be quoted.

### **Section 3. Key Challenge: Persistent Anti-Work Culture**

A close study of CARE's working model and the practices that have helped it to improve education provision in state schools shows that turning these schools around does not require major investment in teacher training or developing the capacity of teachers or principals, which is often the focus of development programmes. Instead, government teachers can effectively teach at a level that ensures that children perform well in matriculation exams and can successfully transition to good colleges and universities and record visible upward social mobility compared with their parents (Bano forthcoming), if a governance framework can be put in place that counteracts the anti-work culture in the school.

Interviews with senior managers that traced CARE's experience of working in government schools over the years, as well as interviews with current CARE teachers, show that an average state school continues to suffer from the well-documented challenges posed by the non-committal attitudes of the school staff, especially the teachers; such challenges include teacher absenteeism or sending underpaid substitutes to teach on their behalf, using children to run errands or do odd jobs, sitting with colleagues drinking tea during teaching hours, entertaining guests, or encouraging students to pay to attend their evening tuition classes. These challenges were recurrent themes when researchers traced stories of specific schools at the time of their take over by CARE; these failure of the education system in Pakistan are also well-documented in numerous studies and education sector reform proposal developed by major development agencies (Hunter 2020). The spending on education at under 3 percent of the GDP also remains well below the requirement (Hunter 2020). One of the schools visited in the outskirts of Lahore, which has a very large school campus and now has more than 800 students from 10 surrounding villages and is recognised by the government as a model school, was, for example, handed over to CARE in 2000 with only 120 registered students. A CARE staff member recalled, 'When we arrived, there were just two government teachers appointed, there was one huge tree and 10 chickens roaming around on the school grounds. Some cows would also come into school grounds to graze. All day children used to do service to the teachers, including pressing their feet.' Also, often these teachers were absent as they came from Raiwind, and transport was often a problem.

Although it was officially a boys' school, for the primary grades girls were also admitted; but after fourth grade they were told to stay at home. The relationship with the parents was unlike what is usually expected: rather than the parents holding the teachers accountable, the teachers used to make parents feel irresponsible. 'Whenever teachers would call a parent, the parent would think that they are being called to respond to a complaint,' recalled the senior CARE teacher in the school. Now the school has 10 government-funded teachers, and are mostly local and graduates of the same school; also, in the same school building CARE has managed to

establish classes for female students all the way to matriculation. The quality of education provided in this school was evident during the school visits. Students interviewed from across the grades in their classrooms appeared highly motivated. Their handwriting was very neat; most could communicate in English; all expressed high ambitions – both boys and girls – and there were some unconventional aspirations, with one girl expressing interest in becoming a singer and another a make-up artist, even though such professions are still regarded as somewhat taboo for girls, particularly in conservative, low-income communities. Yet, prior to CARE intervention, this school was almost non-functional.

The reason, as one CARE staff member noted, for such failures is the non-serious attitude of the teachers: ‘These teachers do polio duty, exam duty, and all other government duties but what they don’t do is to teach. The attitude is that teaching is not the main job.’ There was a collective response from former and current CARE teachers that ‘young government teachers work seriously for a month or so and then also absorb the institutional culture and become like the rest’. For CARE, addressing this anti-work culture became the key focus from the beginning and remains the focus to date. What makes the CARE case particularly informative is that it provides unique insights into how the anti-work culture is created and sustained in the state schools, as its work model is based on providing a CARE teacher to the adopted state school. Since these teachers become part of the school, they get to observe the school’s work dynamics while at the same time trying to implant good practice through example. These CARE teachers fill a real resource gap as they take on teaching duties, but their main role is to influence the working of other teachers and principals while employed in the schools. CARE recruits these teachers from graduates with master’s degree who are then trained in short courses held at its teacher-training centre. They are paid quite a low starting salary compared with that of the government-school teachers.

The interviews with the CARE staff and teachers show that in the early years CARE was labelled by school principals and teachers as ‘the East India Company’ in an attempt to delegitimise CARE as a Western-style organisation trying to erode traditional moral values taught in the schools. Although such attempts to delegitimise CARE ceased over time as its programme became more established, the other method employed by the government principals and teachers to resist change remains in use to date: making active efforts to demotivate and frustrate the CARE teachers. Interviews with former CARE teachers who now are mid-level or senior managers, as well as with current teachers, show that there is an active effort made to demoralise those, whether CARE teachers or committed government teachers, who do want to work. These attempts to demotivate and demoralise those who want to work take a variety of forms. In the case of CARE teachers, who at the time of initial appointment are paid just a token salary which is much less than a regular government teacher’s salary, it is routine practice for principals or teachers in the state schools to try to demoralise them by making them feel that the low salary shows that they are not being valued by CARE. Many teachers shared similar stories, reporting that the headteachers or other teachers would ask about their comparatively low pay package from CARE, and then go on to suggest that they were being exploited. As one teacher recalled, ‘Once the head teacher invited me for a meeting and then called the sweeper in front of him to asked him how much does he earn. He said, Rs. 11000. He then turned towards me and said, you earn only Rs. 7000 while you have a master in science so why do you do this job?’. In the experience of CARE teachers, such attempts to demoralise them were part of the wider institutional culture, where the majority are in favour of an anti-work culture and even government teachers who are keen to work are made to feel under pressure.

A common practice is for the teachers and principals to sit together and spend a long time in conversation over tea during teaching hours. The school principals and teachers would routinely tell the CARE teachers to come and sit with them and have tea. 'It is very common to be made to feel a bit over-zealous and naïve if one is trying to do one's role as a teacher properly. They would say, come sit with us and relax a bit, don't be so conscientious. Your efforts won't change things much.' They ridicule efforts to perform well by asking 'Why waste energy when these children are not going to learn anyway?'. They would also taunt the CARE teachers by urging them not to be scared of Ms. Seema, who was known for being tough and demanding that teachers strictly follow CARE guidelines (see discussion in the next section). As one teacher explained, 'Routinely, I would be told come and sit and have tea with us, Ms. Seema won't know.' Thus, based on its experience, CARE came to identify early on that the real challenge in fixing poor-performing state schools is not a lack of teaching abilities, but a need to change this anti-work culture in favour of a pro-work culture; in other words, it is a challenge of governance rather than a lack of technical capacity per se. This assessment has proved correct over time, as the CARE programme even today focuses primarily on bringing about attitudinal shifts among the government-school teachers and principals, both through example but equally through threat of punishment, instead of focusing on organising training and capacity-building sessions for either government-school teachers or principals. Since this model has recorded significant improvements in student results in the matriculation exam in the CARE-supported schools, as we will see, its success does put into question the standard assumptions about the need for capacity development for government teachers and principals.

#### **Section 4. Changing the Anti-Work Culture**

In order to demonstrate that changing the anti-work culture is a core reason for the success recorded by CARE in improving children's educational performance, it is important to start by documenting CARE's approach and performance in three areas that are seen to be important for improving school-level performance: capability development and training for teachers and principals; active community participation; and the socio-economic profile of the communities in question. In the case of CARE, none of these three factors plays any visible role in explaining its success.

The CARE teacher-training system is well developed, but it does not train the government-school teachers; it is exclusively aimed at providing short and intense teacher-training sessions for CARE's own appointed teachers, who normally have just a master's degree, with no formal teacher-training qualifications. Even for them, the trainings are short, just three to four days at the start and then a few short refreshers, depending on need. Some ongoing teacher-training support is provided in all state-supported schools, but it is quite short and targeted: school inspectors assess the training needs of teachers in particular schools, and if some clear gaps are identified, then training is delivered on that particular issue. The CARE model thus does not claim to introduce unique teaching methods or techniques; instead, its focus is on ensuring that basic good teaching practices, ones that anyone can follow, are actively followed. Thus, its code of conduct for teachers emphasises the following (as extracted from CARE's list of Rules):

1. The teaching of nursery rhymes is compulsory in grade Nursery to grade 2 (10 to 15 rhymes every year).
2. Phonics must be taught in all classes, with a daily five-word dictation in each class (per language);

3. The timetable must be compiled within the first two weeks of the new term in co-ordination with CARE; subjects will be allocated according to the qualifications and abilities of the teachers and will not be altered unless absolutely necessary.
4. The timetable, homework, and test schedule will be displayed on the wall in each classroom.
5. The teacher will also have his/her own copy of the timetable (refer to timetable rules) in his/her Lesson Plan Register.
6. Double periods must be allocated for English and Mathematics, scheduled before break time whenever possible.
7. Two 40-minute periods (first session in the morning and the first session after recess) and six 35-minute periods, plus a 30-minute break, will make up the school day.
8. The duration of the remaining periods will be 35 minutes; no free periods for teachers from classes 1–5; teachers of senior classes may have up to one free period a day. This free period is to give them time to check student work etc. in school.
9. One library period per week for each class must be incorporated into the timetable.
10. One activity period per week per class must also be included. This period may be used for creative handicraft activities or for debates/quizzes, or other general activity, e.g. English conversation class.
11. Weekly meetings of the school staff with the Headteacher and CARE’s internal co-ordinator are important and should be held preferably on Friday or Saturday after school. Minute every meeting, along with an agenda, and make a proper report. This is to discuss administrative as well as educational problems and find solutions. All register work will be done after school / before school / during recess; Monthly / weekly work plans must be made.
12. Daily diaries must always be in order and should be checked regularly; zero periods / remedial classes should be scheduled for weak students in all classes. These may be conducted before or after school; The lesson planner must be up to date, with four-weekly syllabus divisions and weekly lesson plans, student test scores, and copy-checking records.
13. Lesson plans must be checked for the current week.
14. Teachers must not give private tuition to any student from a CARE school. No student may go for extra tuition to a CARE teacher or to an academy run by a teacher’s relative.
15. Class work and homework must be checked regularly. Corrections and re-corrections must be written by the teacher in the copy, and checked after they are completed by the students.
16. Teachers should discourage rote learning.
17. Essays should not be dictated. Students must be encouraged to ask questions.
18. Teachers must never check homework in the class. This must be done in their free time, before or after school. Records of copy checking must be entered into the lesson-plan register weekly.
19. Encourage good copy work and avoid making negative remarks.
20. In Nursery grade, the teacher must write the top line in students’ copies. From Class Prep, students should be encouraged to write it on their own, and this will be compulsory from Class 1.

As can be assessed from these rules for teachers, which are part of a long list of overall school-operating rules that CARE enforces in the state schools, the focus is not on training teachers to use new or innovative teaching methodologies, but to ensure that they do the basic stuff regularly.

Similarly, community participation does not appear to have played any significant role in the CARE model. CARE does not attempt to establish a parent–teacher association or an SBMC in the government schools entrusted to its management. Community members or parents thus do not play an active role in monitoring the teachers’ or principals’ performance. Interviews with teachers and students in the CARE-supported government schools do, however, confirm that even low-income parents place heavy emphasis on ensuring that their children get good-quality education. Students interviewed were all from low-income families, yet – whether male or female – they were of the view that their parents were willing to make great sacrifices for their education and were keen that they should do well in life. Students interviewed in the school on the outskirts of Lahore noted how in some cases parents were paying very high costs for their daily travel out of their limited monthly budgets, even if the school fee was covered by CARE. Similarly, CARE teachers mentioned that in their experience parents and communities do take interest in their children’s education, as once the CARE teachers spend some time in a state school, often parents start to come in to the school and say that they have heard their children talk about the new teacher.

Finally, CARE experience also seems to suggest that the variation in the socio-economic profile of the communities sending children to government schools, whereby some are slightly more affluent than others (even though they would all be classified as low-income), does not make much difference in how well the school responds to CARE’s intervention. In a RISE study in Indonesia, it was seen that communities that were slightly better off were able to mobilise funds to support extra-curriculum activities in the government school, thus raising the possibility that the socio-economic profile of the community can affect school performance (Bano 2021). In the case of CARE, there is no indication that the improvement in student scores in matriculation exams has varied across different communities. Instead, the CARE model shows that the longer it has been in a school, its work culture becomes more pro-learning, irrespective of the characteristics of the community. Thus, the question is: how does CARE change the anti-work culture in state schools to one that favours commitment and hard work on the part of teachers and principals?

## **Section 5. How Pro-Work Culture is Cultivated: Showing Respect, Supporting the Committed, and Fear of Punishment**

CARE experience shows that a combination of strategies helped to change school culture: (1) CARE teachers make a concerted effort to change the attitudes of the anti-work teachers and principals by engaging with them in a way that makes them appreciate the importance of their role; (2) CARE teachers try to identify those government teachers or principals who do want to work, so that they can be strengthened to counter the anti-work culture; and, (3), CARE complements these softer strategies with the imposition of a strict monitoring schedule from the top down.

### **5.1. Challenging Gently**

On starting work in a school, CARE teachers are assigned to a particular class, but their main task is to act as role models in terms of demonstrating good practice. In winning the support of the teachers and principals and changing their attitudes over time, the nature of the interactions that these CARE teachers develop with them is important. Instead of acting as monitors, CARE teachers work to win over the government-school principals and teachers by showing them respect. This approach, whereby they encourage and support rather than confront the government-school principals and teachers, is also adopted by other successful NGOs, such as

Pratham in India (Bano and Oberoi 2021), and it has worked in the case of CARE. Older principals especially, who pride themselves on their experience and resist outsiders coming to tell them what to do, respond well to such an approach. In fact, the CARE teachers actively work to alleviate any fear on the part of the government teachers and principals of being monitored when they (the CARE teachers) come to the school. As one of the CARE area managers noted, ‘The normal assumption is that these people (CARE teachers) are going to report negatively on us. Our approach is to tell that we won’t do it. We tell them that you know a lot, you have experience, we have knowledge. Let’s mix the two and we can take it forward.’

CARE instructs its teachers never to enter into conflict with the government principals and teachers, however much they might frustrate them or show disrespect. As one staff member explains: ‘Madam (Ms Aziz) made the rule that we must never enter in a conflict with the government teachers. We were told we have to correct them but do so very respectfully in order to keep the door open for communication and influence.’ There was also a conscious effort to show age-related respect, in line with cultural norms: ‘Our teachers are normally young, while many of the teachers in the government schools and especially the principal, can be quite senior in age. The teachers are thus encouraged to treat them with respect, as they are more of their parents’ age,’ the CARE official elaborated. Thus, rather than rudely snubbing them when the principals or teachers try to demotivate a CARE teacher, either by referring to their low salary or by making them feel naïve for working so hard, CARE teachers try to respond in a way that makes it difficult for the other side to persist with these tactics. For example, in the case of teachers who were repeatedly told ‘Seema is not watching you, so relax’, CARE teachers started to respond by saying ‘But Allah is watching us, we do this work because Allah expects this from us.’ After such a response, most felt that the principals and teachers would not persist with such statements. As one teacher said, ‘After hearing this response, the principal never said that to me again.’ Similarly, CARE teachers whose salaries were being compared with those of school cleaners, rather than feeling offended, learned to say things such as: ‘Education gives respect, being a teacher earns me respect and I contribute to the building of the society even if the salary I earn right now is low.’ Said respectfully rather than with anger, these kinds of response, in the experience of CARE teachers, do help to bring about a gradual change in the attitudes of the government principals and the teachers.

Finally, giving the credit to the teachers and principals and also to government officials who engage with CARE helps to win their co-operation. As one CARE staff member explained, ‘In many schools we added to the infrastructure as the bathroom was missing or additional classrooms were needed. We would make the room, but the banner we would put up at the inauguration would say that the local Member of National Assembly (MNA) has constructed it.’ Similarly, when the student results improve, CARE credits this improvement to the principal and teachers, and not to the CARE teacher(s).

In all of this, CARE places special emphasis on changing the attitudes of the principals; special attention is paid to developing a good working relationship with the principals, because, as argued in other studies, principals play a central role in enforcing rules within the schools. However, the CARE case also shows that principals alone cannot change the anti-work culture in favour of a pro-work culture in contexts such as these, where the overall institutional framework sustains and supports low performance. We turn to consider this evidence now.

## 5.2. Strengthening those who are Committed

While we have so far looked at how the CARE teachers, on arrival in government schools, face ridicule and marginalisation by government teachers and in some cases also by principals who

are keen to sustain the anti-work culture in the school, CARE experience also shows that within most government schools some principals and teachers are committed and do want to perform well. As one CARE staff emphasised during the interviews, ‘*Azzit* (respect) does still matter to people, and many principals and teachers are motivated by that.’ However, in CARE’s experience, these pro-work teachers or principals are normally out-numbered by those who favour an anti-work culture, and they thus face collective pressure not to out-perform the others. Thus, in most schools the committed principals and teachers are subjected to pressure similar to that exerted on the CARE teachers. Recognising this, CARE developed an active strategy to identify and support the pro-work teachers, in order to shift the balance of power within the school in favour of a pro-work ethic. CARE teachers thus actively befriend those teachers who are keen to work, and encourage them to be more vocal in the school. As a CARE teacher explained, ‘Teachers who are interested in reform, we befriend them and support them. Class competitions are also used to encourage those who are interested to perform, so that their skills and commitment is noticed and they feel encouraged.’

CARE managers have also developed another strategy to shift the balance of power in favour of pro-work principals and teachers, which is focused on adding to the numbers of pro-work teachers. Since according to the agreement signed with the government, the school comes under CARE management, CARE is free to decide how many CARE teachers to provide in a school. Thus, in some schools, CARE sends four to five teachers so that they can build a counter-culture in favour of higher performance as a group. The presence of CARE teachers supports those teachers and principals who are keen to improve the work ethic in the school but feel under pressure by the dominant anti-work culture. CARE staff explained that such external support is often crucial to enable pro-work principals to introduce reforms. CARE’s presence enables such principals to push teachers to follow rules, as they can now attribute their actions to the presence of CARE, instead of taking personal responsibility for enforcing them. This helps to deflect resistance from anti-work teachers who otherwise might subject the principal to collective pressure to let the status quo prevail.

### 5.3. Threat of Formal Punishment

While these softer measures – proceeding gradually and showing the government-school teachers respect and taking them along – form the central part of CARE strategy to shift the school culture in favour of a pro-work ethic, it is also very clear that these measures alone cannot yield the desired results. While CARE requires its teachers to cultivate trusting relations in the school, its senior management plays a very active monitoring role. Thus, the principal and teachers in the government schools under CARE management are given clear instructions by CARE senior management to follow a clear set of rules, violation of which is not tolerated in the long term. These rules have been developed over time to address what are seen as the core problems in most government schools and which need to be fixed in order to improve the overall work culture. These rules affect all aspects of teachers’ and principals’ behaviour in school, including the examination practices and the running of the classroom and development of study plans; but, as noted in Section 3, the list of rules related to teaching focuses on ensuring that the teachers follow the basic good teaching practices, without being required to adopt any new innovative teaching methodologies. More importantly, the thrust of these rules is directly aimed at fixing the anti-work culture in state schools. Thus, in addition to the rules already listed in Section 3, examples of additional rules include the following (extracted from the CARE list of rules):

1. No breakfast allowed during working hours.
2. No physical punishment or verbal abuse of children allowed.



3. Children can never be asked to make tea for teachers, principals, or their guests.
4. Mark attendance and times of arrival and departure every day.
5. No collection of funds for any purpose allowed.
6. Students cannot bring gifts for teachers.
7. Teachers' visitors must not enter classrooms.

As can be seen, these rules are directly aimed at correcting the anti-work culture prevalent in government schools and stopping the exploitation of students. What is equally important is that the government principals and teachers come to understand soon enough that CARE senior management is not at all flexible in application of these rules. During the fieldwork in the schools, it was clear that the founder, Seema Aziz, was viewed as being very tough and demanding, and that all the government principals and teachers were very conscious of her presence and active engagement with CARE's everyday operations; they were also very aware that she is a highly influential individual with strong political connections, thus making them averse to offending her. As one teacher explained, 'These rules developed by CARE help everyone to work. Many teachers did not come to school on time; now every day the gate is closed at a set time and one is not allowed to enter once it is closed unless there is a justifiable reason for delay. Similarly, principals as well as the teachers know that the basic requirements have to be met, such as developing proper lesson plans and following the timetable and curriculum plans.' The fact that CARE from the start worked across a number of state schools, and that teachers faced similar challenges across the different schools, helped CARE to identify the list of rules that are required to improve the work culture in the schools.

Overall, it suggests that vertical accountability established through involvement of NGOs or communities can improve school performance. Despite weak horizontal accountability from district government, CARE has been able to make the principal and teachers follow rules to ensure improved performance for the duration that CARE is in control. This shows that as argued in the World Development 2004 report, proper vertical accountability can help improve school performance. The challenge being documented by this paper, however, is that in systems with weak horizontal accountability, the incentives are such that officials at the higher tiers cannot allow space for vertical accountability to thrive as eventually that creates pressure on higher tiers to improve too.

#### **Part 6. The Politics of Adoption: Anti-Work Culture has Deeper Roots**

Despite being one of the very few organisations in Pakistan with such a strong record of improving performance in state schools, and although graduates from those schools can be easily traced and their upward social mobility recorded (Bano forthcoming), CARE has not been able to have its work model replicated by the government agencies, whether the district government or the municipal corporation. It is frequently approached by senior politicians and bureaucrats with requests to take over more government schools, often in areas where they have constituencies, but these senior figures do not try to absorb the learning from the CARE model and have it applied to the state schooling system as a whole. Instead, the current approach keeps putting more and more pressure on CARE, as the government gives CARE no financial support to support the teachers that it provides or to cover the costs that it incurs to improve school infrastructure. The result, as noted by Seema Aziz in the interview, is that CARE is increasingly having to refuse government requests to take on more schools, unless the government can budget for financial support. The biggest challenge for CARE, however, is not that the relevant government agencies are not willing to provide the required financial support to expand its operations, or to learn from it and apply the lessons to government schools

across the board; instead, the biggest challenge it faces is to fight the relevant education authorities to convince them not to spoil the pro-work culture successfully cultivated in schools which are under CARE management.

During interviews with Seema Aziz and other senior managers of CARE, they repeatedly noted that instead of getting support from the district-government education authorities, they face serious challenges from that quarter. It was mentioned by many senior managers that ‘once we improve the school, the district government comes to spoil it.’ In CARE’s experience, once a school is improved, especially if it had been a school which due to previous low performance had very few registered children, there are perverse incentives for the district government to take it back. A functional school with 500 or 700 children has additional positions for teachers allocated to it; the school is also allocated a larger budget. As soon as that happens, the district-government officials are keen to take back management of that school, in order to control appointments to these new positions and to control the increased budget. At the same time, there was also a view that the enforcement of the pro-work culture, even though supported by one or two reform-minded politicians or bureaucrats who ask CARE to get involved, is often a cause of strain with district-level bureaucrats, because improvements in some schools puts pressure on the politicians and officials to improve conditions in other schools. The presence of high-performing schools in a context of system-wide failure within the state schooling sector shows that low performance is not inevitable but is a result of low efficiency. Given that in Pakistan bureaucrats at all tiers of government remain vulnerable to political pressures, as they can be easily posted to different locations, most officials are keen to work with the status quo rather than out-perform their colleagues. Bureaucrats who try to enforce strict discipline or check corruption are often re-posted, often to remote areas seen as challenging destinations. In such a context, there is no incentive for school principals to raise school standards; further, even if the intrinsically motivated principals try to put pressure on teachers to improve performance, they do not receive the required moral or financial support from the district government. Rather, they risk being reprimanded if any of the teachers in the school decide to challenge their authority by mobilising their own political connections.

### **Conclusion**

For the past twenty years, the development community has come to place a heavy emphasis on decentralisation and community participation in improving the governance of state schools in contexts where at the national level the political will to invest in education is absent. This focus on local governance has brought into the limelight the role that principals can potentially play in improving school performance. This paper has, however, shown that the role that principals can play in improving school performance is heavily contingent on the local political-economy culture; the school culture does not work in isolation from the upper tiers of governance, be it the district government or above. The anti-work culture at one tier persists only because a similar culture persists at a higher tier. In a context where the status quo supports low performance, there is no incentive for officials at the higher tier of governance to reward high performers in the lower tiers, as the successful cases build pressure for lifting standards across the board. Thus, it is difficult to improve horizontal governance in contexts of weak vertical governance unless reforms within the wider political economy culture lead to creation of incentives that make politics elites prioritise investment in pro-poor education reforms; state schools with dynamic principals can change only up to a certain point without receiving support from district government. As the CARE experience shows, even committed principals need external support in order to build enough pressure to ensure that the teachers, many of whom might have political connections, follow the rules. In theory, this external support should come from district-government education authorities, but in practice the necessary support is mostly

missing. Thus, the recent focus within development research and practice on the role of school principals in improving school performance needs to be studied within the local cultural and political context.

Overall, CARE experience has also raised two other important points that are worthy of attention. First, given that the CARE model shows that student performance can be dramatically improved without making an investment in major training programmes in teaching methods and techniques for the government-school teachers and principals, it raises questions about the continued emphasis that most development agencies place on teacher training in their education-support programmes. This is particularly relevant, given that another RISE study, looking at the case of Pratham in India, an NGO which has been particularly effective in improving learning outcomes among children in state schools, similarly shows that it does not take very much training to empower local volunteers to teach children effectively at the primary level (Bano and Oberoi 2021). Second, the growing emphasis on improving the quality of education in state schools, as opposed to simply focusing on ensuring access, is making development agencies focus on comparing results through international student assessments, such as PISA, across developed and developing countries. In the case of CARE, we do not have evidence of how children in the state schools that it supports perform on these international assessment, but we have extensive evidence that children from these schools are able to perform much better in government-administrated matriculation exams; and when we trace the life histories of some of these students, we see evidence of major upward social mobility, whereby children of factory workers and fruit sellers are now studying in top universities or working in major firms, or are employed in government administration (Bano forthcoming). This suggests that we might need to be cautious in ascribing too much importance to results from international student assessments. As the CARE experience shows, improving performance in matriculation exams can dramatically improve low-income students' chances of upward social mobility, even though many of them might not fare well on international student assessments.

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