

# Narratives of Success against the Odds: Why Some Children in State Schools Go Far in Life—Evidence from Pakistan

**Masooda Bano**

## Abstract

What makes some children succeed despite studying in failing education systems? Are these children exceptionally gifted, or do other psychological or sociological factors and family circumstances contribute to success? To address the learning crisis in state schools in developing countries, development agencies have primarily focused on identifying inputs that can improve state education provision. Yet, even from low-performing state schools, some children do manage to successfully complete primary and secondary education cycles, pursue higher education, and record upward social mobility, but we know very little about the factors that facilitate this success. This paper addresses this gap in the literature. Tracing life histories of successful alumni of state schools supported by CARE, an education foundation in Pakistan, this paper identifies children's motivation to succeed as having a major impact on educational performance. However, for most this motivation is not a product of an innate desire to excel, it is a product of contextual factors: parental encouragement; an acute desire to make parents happy and to alleviate their sufferings; the company of friends, cousins, and peers who are keen on education and thus help to create an aspiring, competitive spirit; encouragement given by good teachers; and exposure to new possibilities and role models that raise aspirations by showing that what might appear to the child unachievable is in fact attainable. High motivation in turn builds commitment to work hard. Equally important, however, is the provision of financial support at critical points, especially when transitioning from secondary school to college and university. Without financial support, which could be in the form of scholarships, loans, or income from part-time work, at critical junctures, even highly motivated children in state schools cannot succeed. The paper thus argues that rather than being focused solely on education inputs, development agencies should also seek to explore and understand the factors that can motivate children in state schools to aim high and work hard to succeed.

## **Narratives of Success against the Odds: Why Some Children in State Schools Go Far in Life—Evidence from Pakistan**

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## **Introduction**

Attempts to fix the learning crisis in developing countries have led development agencies to focus on introducing sector-wide education-support programmes which are primarily aimed at improving the functioning of education bureaucracies to deliver better education. Common areas of support include teacher training; advising governments on teachers' contracts to improve incentives to improve performance; curriculum and examination reforms; and encouraging community participation for increased school-level accountability (World Bank 2018). Driven by a moral commitment to provide every child with free education, this strong focus by the international development community on improving the working of the state schooling system is understandable, but this heavy focus on school inputs has resulted in a failure to understand how some children from low-income families do succeed in pursuing higher education even if the quality of education available in school is less than desirable. The continued failure of state schools to improve in many developing countries has led some development agencies to explore the potential of low-fee private schools to provide better-quality education to the poor (Ashley et al. 2014), but an attempt to understand the complex set of factors that impact children's performance is still missing. This paper addresses this gap as understanding student level factors can potentially help design additional strategies to support children in low performing state schools. Instead of examining causes of system-wide education failures, this paper thus considers cases of student success within such contexts by studying life histories of students who have successfully moved on to college and university education after completing state primary and secondary education in Pakistan and have recorded clear upward social mobility greater than that achieved by their parents.

The paper studies this question by focusing on successful alumni of state schools supported by CARE, an education foundation which has been running a state-school support programme for more than 22 years. CARE keeps a record of the alumni of these schools; it also runs a scholarship programme, under which it provides financial support to students who perform well in matriculation exams to pursue college and university education. The foundation does not invest in intensive teacher training, or introducing new teaching methods, or fixing teacher incentives. Instead its focus is on ensuring that government teachers perform the basic teaching obligations, such as ensuring that they are actually present in the classroom, are actually teaching in the classroom, and covering the required curriculum (Bano forthcoming). Thus, a CARE-supported state school presents a functional state school as opposed to one where no teaching might be taking place due to high rates of teacher absenteeism or the non-committed attitudes of teachers, which are common challenges in the Pakistani state-schooling system, but it does not adopt some unique curriculum or bespoke teaching methods. The schools that the government hands over to CARE are often almost non-functional, and CARE's main contribution is to make them functional. By collaborating with CARE, it was thus possible for the purposes of this research to track state-school graduates who have already embarked on their professional lives or are in the final years of their college or university education.

The focus of the paper is on identifying the factors that can help a child from a low socio-economic background attending a state school in Pakistan to succeed in life. Children with this background are seen to be faced with most severe challenges to completing primary and secondary education and pursuing an optimal life path, given the poor quality of education provided in state schools and the inability of poor and often illiterate parents to provide any educational support at home.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 reviews existing studies, mainly conducted in Western contexts, aimed at understanding causes of within-group variation in children's

education performance, and it situates this study within them. Section 2 presents the method. Section 3 identifies the motivational factors that inspire a student to succeed. Section 4 documents the importance of hard work and the availability of financial support at critical junctures. The conclusion highlights the implications of these findings for the existing investment priorities of the development agencies within the education sector.

### **Section 1. Success in Challenging Contexts? Existing Studies**

Meeting the commitment to provide a good quality of education for all children in developing countries remains a major challenge for international development agencies. State schools in many contexts offer such a low quality of education that anyone who can afford it, even the relatively poor, increasingly prefers to send their child to private schools (Ashley et al. 2014). The children left in state schools are thus often from among the poorest segments of society, and many have illiterate parents. These children thus face severely limited life opportunities, as the quality of education that they receive in state schools is unable to act as an equaliser by providing pupils with opportunities for upward mobility: 22.7 million children of primary and secondary school age are out of school; the percentage of out of school children goes up from 20 per cent at primary school level to 70 percent at secondary school (Hunter 2020). Yet some children from these state schools manage to move on to higher education and then pursue life paths that gain them upward social mobility. But the reasons why some children from within such weak schooling systems, with limited or no educational support at home, manage to perform well in life, and record upward social mobility, have not received much attention in international development. Variation in performance among children within the same group has, however, been a question of interest in education research in Western countries for some decades. As Janine Bempechat (1999) notes growing evidence that in the USA poor and ethnic-minority students underachieve compared with their middle-class white peers also sparked interest in studying children from within ethnic-minority and working-class communities who are able to perform well and record upward social mobility. There has thus been interest in understanding why some children do well in a context which is not geared towards learning, and within these studies the importance of understanding factors that shape student motivation has gained recognition. Bempechat (1999) presents a good review of important trends in this studies, which are summarised below.

In accordance with achievement-motivation theory, Bernard Weiner (1972) has tried to understand how students' own perception about what determines success affects their motivation. His research shows that students variously believe that being smart, working hard, and being lucky play a role in shaping success. He goes on to show that students who attribute success to ability and effort tend to perform better in school than those who attribute it to luck. Other studies that have shown how children's view of their own abilities can have important consequences for their levels of motivation include works by John Nicholls (1989) who has shown that children who view ability or intelligence as a quality that is unfixed and changeable show a higher willingness to take on difficult and challenging tasks and to recover when met with failure, and in response they make increased efforts instead of giving up. Furthermore, Nicholls (1989) has shown that children's beliefs about their intellectual ability can become quite firm by the time they reach grade 5 or 6, although before that they are malleable. Thus interventions at an early age to give children confidence in their abilities can encourage them to aim high.

Other studies have explored the potential influence of parents in shaping students' success. A study that surveyed 1,000 students in grades 5 and 6 from ten public and Catholic schools in

poor neighbourhoods in Boston between 1991 and 1995 challenges the perception that poor parents are not concerned or engaged with their children's schooling (Bempechat 1999): in the children's view, their parents were very concerned and involved in their education and tried to help them at home with their education, and if they were unable to do so they still provided moral encouragement by emphasising to them repeatedly that investing in education would improve their life opportunities. Further, studies such as one by Park and Holloway (2017) have shown that parents' belief in their children's academic abilities strongly influences how the children view their own ability. Studies of adults from minority groups who do well indicate that motivational support from parents, such as statements that stress the value of education, can play an even more critical role in improving educational performance than whether parents can help their children with homework.

Finally, some studies have focused on exploring how lesson structure and learning methods might affect student motivation. It has been observed that the way teachers structure their classes can influence children's beliefs about the causes of success and failure. Nicholls (1989) has shown that traditionally organised classes can create competitive pressure, making students feel anxious about how they perform compared with their friends or peers, and as a result they make mistakes or start to develop low self-perception of their abilities. In such settings, children become focused on doing the right thing or giving the right answer, rather than thinking freely, as the fear of making a mistake becomes too strong. On the other hand, children studying in classes where they are encouraged to work co-operatively feel less concerned about judging their own abilities compared with others, and they engage with learning for its own sake: they are less fearful of making mistakes and they think creatively about how to accomplish a task. Nicholls (1989) thus concluded that classroom structure plays an important role in how students develop beliefs about their own abilities, and whether they come to classify themselves as low achievers or high achievers.

All the studies summarised above have been done in the USA; the study of student motivation has not been a subject of active research in the context of developing countries. This paper presents one of the first attempts to try to understand the factors that can help a child from a low socio-economic background succeed while attending a state-school system in countries like Pakistan where state schools are riddled with many challenges. In line with the findings from the studies reviewed above, we see that, as in the case of parents in minority/ recent immigrant communities in the USA, poor parents in Pakistan who belong to socially and economically marginalised segments of society do place heavy emphasis on their children's education, and most children are very conscious that their parents want them to perform well in education in order to secure a better economic future than they could offer to the family. We also see that moral support by parents, whereby they constantly motivate and encourage the child to excel in his or her education, plays a critical role in motivating the child to do well. However, the study also highlights the importance of other factors that can play a critical role in motivating the child to aim high and thus work hard. These factors include positive competition with friends, cousins, and peers who are doing well; good teachers who take an interest in the students and actively encourage and motivate them; and exposure to role models and opportunities on a sustained basis that can help them overcome their fears, build confidence in their own abilities, and teach them to aspire high. Thus, as in the case of the findings from the studies conducted in the Western context, this paper also shows that understanding what motivates children to succeed can be very important in designing policies or supporting programmes that can help children from different socio-economic backgrounds succeed in life, even when attending state schools that offer a very basic level of education. However, it also shows that in developing countries, where there is often no state-level support available for

students from low-income families to get scholarship or loans to carry on to college and university education, private donors or international development agencies can play a critical role in establishing endowments to provide such support. Even intensely driven children cannot sustain their motivation to study if they know they simply cannot make it beyond secondary education due to lack of financial resources.

## **Section 2. Method**

This study focuses on tracing life trajectories of successful students from state schools in Pakistan. In this paper success is defined as the ability to pass matriculation exams with high enough grades to pursue education in high-ranking colleges and universities in Pakistan and pursue career paths that show a clear upward social mobility as compared with the achievements of the parents' generation. In order to trace such children, the study draws on alumni records maintained by the CARE foundation on the children in the state schools that it supports. The CARE foundation has been running this programme for over 22 years, which makes it possible to trace graduates from state schools that it has supported who have completed their education and have been working in different fields for many years; the graduates from the early years are now in their mid-thirties. Established in 1988 to support education in poor communities, the CARE foundation is well known within Pakistan for its success in improving the quality of education in state schools, especially those on the verge of closure or performing at a very low level. CARE started this programme in 1998 when the City District Government of Lahore handed over ten failed government schools to CARE management. It supports these schools through improving school infrastructure, imposing basic discipline so that the teachers attend regularly, on time, and actually teach during the school day instead of making children run errands (Bano forthcoming). It thus raises the standards high enough to create normal functioning state school without exceptional inputs in terms of teacher-training methods. But it has had visible impact on improving student performance in these schools: 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 students from these schools secure top positions in the matriculation exams.

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 now exceed their approved capacity were almost closed at the time they were handed over to CARE; the low education standards had convinced the community to stop sending children to the school altogether. The children in these government schools thus come from the most economically deprived income groups, such as daily wage workers, small farmers, low-tier government staff, cleaners, etc. What is also important about the CARE case is that, although it does not introduce any unique curriculum or distinct teacher-training methods other than those followed in regular functional government schools, it does run additional programmes on the side, in some of the participating state schools. The three main programmes are the Access to English Language Programme, launched in 2004 with the objective of developing children's communication skills, which runs in 280 CARE-supported schools; the Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE) programme, started in 2015 to encourage creativity and critical thinking in classrooms by integrating arts into other school subjects, which runs in 75 schools; and the Lead to Success programme, started in 2017, which brings individuals from well-known local corporations and multinationals to the classroom for interactive sessions and in-depth discussions to enable students to gain exposure and awareness about various career paths. As we will see in this paper, the Access to English Language Programme, which CARE has been running in many of the state schools it supports, has played an important role in raising students' aspirations and motivation. The impact of the remaining

programmes, which have been launched in more recent years, would become clearer after they have been in operation for a few more years.

Working with the officials responsible for running the CARE alumni network, a list of thirty graduates from CARE-supported state schools who had performed well in their matriculation exams and gone on to pursue higher education was compiled. Purposive sampling techniques were used to ensure that the selected respondents represent both genders and a mix of professional profiles. Since the focus of the paper is not on establishing the percentage of students who went on to pursue higher education but to understand the factors that shaped success of those who did do well, such a purposively selected sample does not pose any bias. Data were gathered through open-ended in-depth interviews to ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences in as much detail as they want. These interviews enabled detailed discussions with respondents during which they could openly share their personal life histories. An interview guide was used to ensure that the core themes are covered with all the respondents; these included their family's socio-economic background, their educational history from primary school to the highest level, their experience of education in a CARE-supported government school, and the factors that they themselves think played a key role in shaping their success.

To give a more concrete account of what is being defined as success or upward social mobility in this study, profiles of two respondents are presented here. One of the respondents, who is working as a head of department in a commercial poultry business, had achieved a bachelor's degree in commerce (BComm), followed by a master's, after matriculating from a CARE-supported state school. He came from what he defined as a 'typical village family', whereby the father had not reached matriculation and the mother had never gone to school. They lived in an extended family and he had six older cousins, none of whom had been able to pass the matriculation exam. Completing matriculation with good grades was thus a big achievement in his family, let alone pursuing education to master's level and holding a senior position in a commercial firm. Noting how his life style has totally changed, he regarded himself as having been very successful and as being viewed so by his family.

Similarly, a female respondent who was in the final year of study for a BSc in business in a prestigious university in Lahore, while simultaneously being involved in many income-generating activities as well as welfare work, reported that her father used to be engaged in a small business of running public call offices (PCOs) when she was a child. The family, however, encountered extreme financial difficulties as the introduction of mobile phones led to the gradual closure of PCOs. Unable to find alternative income sources, the parents had to move the children from private schools to state schools when they were still in primary grades. Today, alongside her studies in a prestigious university, she is running a blogging channel and is also starting a YouTube channel. She also runs a small NGO to support education for disadvantaged children and to advance women's rights. She has also had an opportunity to attend a month-long study programme in the USA, leading to cultivation of strong ties with her host community; at the time of the interview, she was about to launch a new clothing brand in Pakistan in collaboration with an American friend whom she had come to know during her visit. Having achieved all this at 22 years of age, she was more than content and satisfied with her success and was very confident of her abilities to become a successful entrepreneur.

All the thirty respondents had witnessed similarly marked improvements in their own life standards, as compared with the socio-economic status of their parents, after completing secondary education in CARE-supported government schools. Through tracing their life

histories and understanding their own perceptions of the factors that contributed to their success, the paper identifies the factors that can help children from poor families, often unable to get any educational support at home, to succeed in life while studying in state schools, where the quality of education remains a serious challenge.

The above method has two limitations. Students have been sampled on the dependent variable (success) so the paper cannot document how much different the responses of ‘non-success’ children from those same schools would have been. Also, the paper only draws on interview data, which some would argue suffers from two limitations: one, respondents might say what they think the interlocutor wants to hear; two, the respondents might have themselves internalized a ‘false’ vision. However, it is widely recognised that undertaking 25-30 in-depth interviews normally helps reach the saturation point whereby despite the variation among respondents’ profiles and experiences, the responses to questions start to show enough similarity to enable the researcher to identify the core factors. Also, it is important to note that what people say about their own history and experience is important even if it might only be recording their perception of truth than an objective reality. This is particularly so when there is no material incentive attached to participation in the study.

All the fieldwork was carried out under the Oxford University ethics protocol. Informed consent (whereby the respondents are fully informed of the objective of the study and given a choice whether or not to participate) and anonymity of respondents are the core principles guiding this research. Interviews were carried out in Urdu and were recorded. They were then transcribed and 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. Determining Success: Motivation to Succeed**

The interviews with the respondents show that the motivation to succeed is critical to enabling children in state schools who are potentially overwhelmed by low socio-economic backgrounds to succeed in life. This motivation is, however, not intrinsic to the individual; rather, in most cases, it is cultivated through a combination of one or more of the following factors: parental encouragement; an acute desire to make the parents happy and to alleviate their sufferings; company of friends, cousins, and peers who are keen on education and thus help to create a competitive spirit to do well; encouragement given by good teachers; and exposure to new possibilities and role models that can raise their aspirations by showing that what to the children appeared unachievable is in fact attainable. Hard work was also shown to be critical to shaping success, but as a rule it was a direct outcome of high motivation to succeed. Overall, the strong desire to please parents who the children knew were leading very difficult lives, especially in the case of widowed mothers, acted as a key motivating factor, inspiring them to excel and do something for the family. The paper thus shows that challenging circumstances can, in fact, become a strong driver for success, provided that some basic but critical supporting mechanisms are available.

#### **3.1. Parental Encouragement**

The role of parental encouragement in motivating the respondents to excel was highlighted by all the respondents. They all identified this as being the most important factor in making them keen to perform well in their studies. Repeatedly, the respondents highlighted how their mother or father encouraged them to take studies seriously in order to lead a financially secure life.



Most respondents acknowledge the role of both parents, but a majority gave specific examples of the important role played by their mother in motivating them to excel in their education.

The male respondent profiled in the method section, who was the first member of his extended family to complete matriculation, explained: 'My parents played a big role in motivating me. My mother always emphasised that my son should study. One day in class nine, my mother made me sit down and told me to look at my cousins and see that they could not pass matric exams, she then told me that I must do it. She set the target for me.' The day he passed the exam, the family was jubilant. The parents gifted him a bike and now he could go to college, which was 20 miles away. This respondent reported that his mother, although illiterate, used to make him sit down and sit with him as he did his homework. 'It was due to this emphasis, she placed on education that I was motivated. I used to win all the awards in the school, be it for uniform, discipline or clean handwriting,' he added. Similarly, emphasising the role of parental support and encouragement, one of the female respondents reported: 'My mother and father supported me a lot. They never let me down, even though they had to hear a lot of things in the family, which was very conservative. They allowed me to go anywhere to pursue my education, which would be unusual in my family.' Another respondent, whose father was a food seller and whose older brothers and sisters could not study due to lack of resources, emphasised the role of his family, especially the mother, in making him pursue his studies seriously: 'My mother really motivated me; the motivation of the mother, her attachment to me as the youngest son, and her desire that at least one of her children get to study, all of that made me work hard. With love and care, she tried to instil in me the importance of pursuing education. Her motivation and love became inspiration for me.' Commenting that his mother was not literate, he added, 'But her contribution was 100 per cent.' Having completed MPhil studies in Linguistics with the National University of Modern Language (NUML), the most prestigious university for the study of languages in Pakistan, he was now teaching in a group of private colleges in Lahore.

While highlighting the important role played by parental support and encouragement in motivating them to work hard, many respondents also noted how they had seen among their peers how lack of parental support and a failure to value education can result in very bright and talented children being unable to pursue a successful life path. As one respondent explained: 'I did well because my parents placed such high emphasis on my education. But a classmate of mine, who was from a Gujjar family was not so lucky. Though he has secured exceptional grades, he had no one to appreciate his success. When I asked him, he said that "I have secured 999 marks out of 1100 but my sister could not tell the difference between just passing and getting exceptional scores. On hearing of my grades, all she could say was that it is good you have passed. It makes me very sad that my family cannot appreciate my success.'" This particular individual, the respondent explained, could not pursue higher education despite being very talented, as the parents wanted him instead to start working. Such examples of fellow students who were very bright and outshone others in matriculation exams, but could not pursue higher education due to their parents' lack of support and appreciation of education, was shared by many other respondents.

### **3.2. Recognition of the Tough Life of Parents**

In addition to encouragement provided by the parents, during the interviews it was also very clear that the realisation that their parents had had a tough life played a key role in motivating respondents to work hard and do something for them. The story of one of the female

respondents, who was now working as a radiology technician, and at the age of 23 was heading her department, was typical. Her mother was a housewife and her father was a police constable. All their children went to local private schools, but when she was in class 9 they had to shift to state school as the parents could not afford the fees any more. She joined a CARE-supported state school and later won a CARE scholarship to pursue college education. As she explains: 'I had a very strong motivation that I have to do something for my parents. My father is a simple graduate and could not study, but he really wanted his children to study. He was very appreciative of our success, and seeing him happy with our good grades made me and my younger sisters want to perform well.' Her younger sister, who studied in the same state school, is now studying electrical engineering at LUMS, the most prestigious university in Pakistan today, on a scholarship. The third sister is studying medicine in King Edward's College, a top medical college in Pakistan. As she adds, 'Our main support was our parents. We studied ourselves and there was no tuition provider engaged.' She noted that they belong to a conservative family and although initially the extended family did not think much of her parents' commitment to educate the girls, now they give her parents respect and tell them that 'We want our children to achieve what your daughters have achieved'; this, she noted, makes her and her sisters very happy.

The above case captures a general emphasis that resonated through all the interviews, namely that parental encouragement, especially when the parents are caring and affectionate, can make children from low-income families keen to perform well to please their parents, as they realise that their parents have had a tough life, despite recognising the value of education. Similarly, the tough work conditions that the fathers had to put up with and the work burden the mothers had to shoulder at home were key factors in making the respondents want to excel in education, so as to offer a better life to their parents. This sentiment was repeatedly expressed throughout the interviews. However, it is also very clear that the reason why the respondents could turn these challenges into a positive motivation to excel, instead of feeling crippled by them, was that the parents in all these cases had a good relationship with the children, where there was active communication between children and both parents, and particularly with the mother, and both parents repeatedly told the children that education is the way to securing a better future.

It is then not surprising that parental role and tough family circumstances in motivating a child to succeed became even more pronounced in cases where respondents faced the toughest life test possible for a child: namely, the loss of a father. Interviews suggest that a widowed mother, dependent for economic survival on any odd job that the eldest child can do and any help she can get from the extended family network, can provide the child with the strongest motivation to excel in life. Her vulnerability and the intense love and sympathy that the child feels for her can motivate him or her to work extremely hard to excel, provided that she demonstrates the internal strength necessary to keep encouraging the child to do well, despite the odds, and remain focused on education. This narrative came through strikingly in the case of six respondents.

The life trajectory of one of the male respondents in his late twenties, who now runs his own call centre, is typical of such cases. His father ran a small family business, but the business ran into serious trouble while the respondent was still quite young. He was thus enrolled in a CARE-supported government school post-primary, even though he had attended a private school in the early years. Then, when he was in his early teens, his father passed away. Being the eldest sibling, he had to take on the challenge of contributing to the family income for survival; but the heavy emphasis on education placed by his mother motivated him to work really long hours each day to continue to pursue his education while also giving private tutorials

to generate income. As he explained: ‘The most important factor that made me motivated to excel is my mother’s role in my education. Whenever I felt demotivated, she would motivate me by telling me that when you were young, I taught you to write; you were so keen to learn, I provided you copies and learning material. I provided you tools and freedom to do what you wanted to learn. These stories that she would tell me with a lot of love and hope were the ignition that I needed.’ Other family members also played a role in motivating him. He recalled how his grandfather used to tell him that when he (the respondent) was a child, the grandfather used to take him to school sitting on his shoulders when heavy rains blocked the road, to ensure that he never missed school. For the respondent, this emphasis that the mother and the grandfather placed on education as a route out of the family’s difficult circumstances was critical to shaping his motivation to succeed. While still in secondary school, the respondent became particularly interested in the English-language programme run by CARE and devoted himself to excelling in spoken English. This led to opportunities to start work at call centres run by foreign companies while still in college, so that after completing his education he was able to set up his own call centre in a partnership. Very pleased with what he had achieved in life, he spoke with a strong American accent which he had acquired consciously through practice, making his Pakistani identity unidentifiable to the listener at the other end of the line.

Another respondent, whose father had died when he was only seven years old, shared a similar experience. Now working in a private company in a senior position, he explained how his mother had to struggle a lot after his father passed away. Being the eldest of the three siblings, he particularly felt the desire to help ease the pressure on her. But she kept urging him to stay focused on education, saying that if he succeeded that would be a reward for all the hardship she was having to bear. Supported by a CARE scholarship fund, he was able to complete his school education and do an FSc course, followed by studies in civil engineering at UTE, the top engineering school in Pakistan. Very grateful for how life had turned out, he noted: ‘My mother feels very proud that I have met her expectations. My paternal as well as maternal side of the family are very proud of me because I have become a pillar for my family. My younger brothers are also studying because of me.’ One of his younger brothers was also doing an engineering degree, while the other was still in school.

The stories of other respondents who had lost fathers at a young age were very similar. However, it is interesting that while six out of the total group of 30 respondents had lost their fathers and for whom caring for a dependent mother and the family became the primary motivation to succeed, none of the respondents reported having lost a mother. This does raise the possibility that single fathers are less able than single mothers to motivate a child to excel in a culture where single mothers are often dependent on others and thus appear particularly vulnerable to the child.

### **3.3. Positive Competition: Friends, Cousins, Peers**

Another factor that played a supporting role in motivating some of the respondents was having good friends, same-age cousins, or peers who were serious about their education and about building a good future. Being in the company of such individuals was acknowledged by some respondents as having played an important role in motivating them.

The story of one of the respondents who had lost his father at a young age illustrates the motivational value of good friends who are focused on education and thus play an important supporting role. As in the case of the other respondents who had lost their fathers, this respondent attributed his primary motivation to succeed to his desire to do something for his mother. The family was originally based in a village. When the father passed away, the most

likely scenario was that the children would be unable to pursue education, as the village had rather a feudal structure, and access to education was difficult. The mother, however, took a stand against her in-laws and took the children to her parents' house in a city close to Lahore. 'Thus, we all children had a sense that she fought war with the society for us, we must deliver. We were conscious that our mother is keen that we study and don't become awara (acting rough on the streets), explained the respondent, who also had an older brother and a younger sister, both of whom are, like him, pursuing professional careers. Now working with a government department, this respondent had studied engineering at a leading university in Lahore. In addition to acknowledging his mother's role in motivating him to succeed, he noted the influence of having friends who were also serious about their studies and wanted to build a good future for themselves. 'I was also lucky to have good friends who were good at their studies. Being with them motivated me to excel as well because I felt if they can do it then I can do it too.' Commenting that his friends even today continue to motivate him to excel further, he explained how some of them were preparing for the civil-service exam, leading him to consider sitting for it too.

Another respondent who had also done an engineering degree similarly noted the positive influence of his cousins, of a similar age to himself, who were serious about education. 'My own cousins were engineers, and because of them I had a strong source of motivation,' he noted. He further added, 'I felt, if they can do it then why can't I do it.' As in the case of all the other respondents, this young man also attributed his drive to succeed primarily to the encouragement he received from his parents, and also from an older sibling. He recalled how his father always told him that he wished him to become an engineer. 'When I secured admission in the engineering college, my father himself went to see my name on the list. He took his photo against that list and to date keeps it with him and likes to show it to others,' he commented.

Another respondent similarly noted how comparing himself with his cousins played an important role in motivating him to do well. 'Every person has a paternal and a maternal side of the family. All my life, I have seen the parental side of my family struggling in their life, and the maternal side has done very well. From early on it was clear to me that personal effort can make a big difference. My maternal grandfather was a carpenter but his children studied and as a result led good lives. You have to work hard and God helps.'

### **3.4.Encouragement: Good Teachers**

While many respondents recorded standard concerns about government-school teachers, especially those who had moved to state schools after having studied in private schools in the early years, a few credited their teachers with having played a key role in their success. In the case of these respondents, their school teachers, especially in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, played a major role in motivating them to excel.

In one case the important role played by a teacher started quite early. As he noted, 'The story starts with my teacher in grade 6. Some teachers are committed and can see that this child can become something. Such teachers can also recognise that the child's family background is not strong and he might need financial support.' His grade 6 teacher not only encouraged him and told him that he had the ability to do well: he also encouraged him to come and ask him for help if there were things for which he could not get support at home. 'I was good at picking things so the teacher saw my potential and played a major role in encouraging me,' the respondent explained. Again, even for this respondent, the primary motivation was the parental

support at home, but engaging with supportive teachers gave him a boost, especially since the parents themselves were illiterate and faced economic hardship so were not able to assist the child at home.

Another respondent commented how it was his good luck that the teacher in grade 10, the final year of matriculation, in the CARE-supported government school that he joined was very good. 'He taught us as if we were his own children. This was a blessing of God. For me the teachers' guidance was very important.' Describing this teacher as his mentor, he explained how this man would find the best ways to teach everyone so that the children would understand the subject. More important, however, was the role that this teacher played in motivating the students to excel. 'He would give us examples of other boys who did well in their studies and what they achieved in life, as well as of those who did not study and as a result had very challenging lives,' he recalled. He also described how this teacher taught them to aim high and apply to the best college in the city: 'He always said, all my students will become Ravian (alumni of the most famous boys' college, now a university in Lahore) and half of the class did become that,' he added. The respondent explained that the teacher would advise the students on how to get good grades in exams, how to attempt the exam papers, and how to keep the response sheet very clean. 'He would say to us, you should write so well that the marker feels compelled to give the marks,' the respondent elaborated. In the view of this respondent, the matriculation level is the most important stage in shaping a student's career, as it is at this stage that children either stay on track or veer off it, so finding such an encouraging and supportive teacher at this stage of his life had had a lasting impact on his motivation. 'He was so committed to ensuring we stay on track that he would call our parents to say that your child did not come to school today,' added the respondent.

Another respondent, now working as an English-language teacher in a college, similarly noted the role that his teacher played in motivating and encouraging him to do well. Noting that 'the teacher can lead you to drop out of school or make your life,' this respondent argued that while many teachers in state schools do not do their job properly, there are still a few who are really good and committed. 'I have been inspired by good teachers and I was inspired by their examples to become a teacher myself,' he said. Like the above respondent, he noted the role of a particular teacher in grade 9 in inspiring him to aim high. This teacher was very good at motivating the students and imparting good moral values. However, just as good teachers can play a major role in motivating a child to succeed, he was also of the view that students can drop out of school due to being stuck with a bad teacher.

Similarly, another respondent noted, 'If I had not found the teachers which I did, I would not have become what I am. In 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I had teachers who really motivated me. One of these teachers was in my school and the other in the academy where I took tuition in the evening.' He explained that the teacher at the academy was himself an engineer, who really motivated him to study engineering. About the teacher in the government school, he noted how he provided children with all kinds of support. 'We used to say, that he is not our Sir, he is *waliullah* (friend of God). Even today when we meet him, we don't sit at his level, we sit at his feet,' he commented. For this respondent, the teacher at the academy helped him with the conceptual part of the studies, while the teacher at the school provided unmatched moral support and encouragement. 'It has been ten years since I studied with him, I don't think that in the whole year he took more than two holidays,' he noted about the teacher in the school. Similarly, he noted that the teacher at the academy was also equally committed to the students' well-being. Elaborating on this, he noted: 'Once I told him that "Sir I don't have fee today"'. For the next two years, he did not ask me for fee. In fact, he used to himself help me out. For

example, if I did something good in exams, he himself would give me a gift as he knew my financial situation was difficult. I feel such a deep bond with him that today I want to do as much for him as I do for my parents. I monthly go to meet him, take his *duas* (blessings), and take gifts for him.’

Again, in the case of all these respondents, parental support and encouragement at home was listed as the primary factor motivating them to excel; but the motivation was further strengthened and channelled through these teachers.

### **3.5. Opportunities and Role Models**

Last but not least, one of the factors that appears to have the potential to boost children’s motivation to excel is access to opportunities to explore new ideas and gain confidence to pursue them. The importance of this comes through most clearly with reference to the CARE Access to English programme, which, although aimed at building English-language skills, in reality ended up transforming how the children thought about themselves and what they were capable of achieving in life. A number of respondents emphasised the critical role that this programme played in changing their lives.

Particularly illuminating in this regard is the life history of the female respondent profiled in the Method section above who is engaged in numerous activities while still pursuing her university education. The oldest daughter in a family of four, she completed her primary education in a private school before her parents had to move her to a CARE-supported government school due to a financial crisis when her father’s business closed down. Very disturbed by the different culture she saw in the state school as opposed to what she was used to in the private school, she found relief in the CARE Access to English programme, which was open to students from grade 8. Introduced to it by a fellow student a month after joining the school, this respondent credits her success to the confidence and exposure that this programme gave her. She recalled, ‘They used to focus on public speaking, before I used to shake when going on stage but in this programme they gave us confidence that we can do it. They took us for debating competition to the leading colleges and universities. I started to do debates and entered competition at prestigious educational institutions such as LUMS and Aitchison.’ She also noted the role played by the CARE teacher running the Access programme, who gave her confidence and motivated her to aim high: ‘He always told me that you have the abilities, you can succeed.’ With the support of this teacher, she was selected to take part in a month-long summer ‘sisters exchange’ programme in the USA. ‘It was for 40 days. I was about to join 9<sup>th</sup> grade when this happened. We went to North Hampton town in the USA, which was a small place and we ended up forming strong bond with the hosts. This experience transformed my life. After I returned, I thought anything is possible. I also overcame any lack of confidence I felt due to studying at a state school. I now felt I have achieved more than what students in good private schools have.’

However, as in all the other cases, even this respondent noted family support as being the most critical factor in shaping her success. She recalled how her mother was very upset when the children had to be moved to a state school after being in a private school, as she was keen for her children to get a decent education. Her mother therefore actively looked around for a better-reputed government school and settled on this CARE-supported school. She also notes how her mother made real sacrifices to ensure that her daughter could study. ‘When we were in school, she had to make many rounds to the school each day as my brother and I were in different shifts. The government school was 20 minutes away. She dropped us in the morning,

then brought us lunch and then would come to collect us. When I joined the college, she commuted every day with me as we had to rely on public transport, which was not seemed safe for a young girl to travel alone. She used to sit all day waiting for me as I took classes,' the respondent explained. She equally credited her father for giving her full support to pursue these options, despite being from a conservative family. She was of the view that sometimes her mother feels that some of the choices that she is making are too radical, such as running a blog sharing personal experiences, but her father gives her full support.

A male respondent, running his own mobile and IT goods repair store, similarly noted the role played by the Access to English programme in motivating him to succeed. 'The strength of this programme was that they encouraged us to explore ideas and be ourselves. Whatever I had in mind, I could ask and got answers for it. They used to make us do speeches in front of 1,000 students, so shyness went away, one gained confidence. Confidence building is a big thing. This exposure gave me confidence to think for myself and explore new possibilities.' Noting that the school also invited speakers to motivate children, he added: 'When I was in class 10, I heard a speaker who was visiting from Germany explain how he became an entrepreneur, he really motivated me to start something of my own.' Looking forward, this respondent was thinking how to expand his work. Emphasising how he thinks anything is possible if one works hard, he commented, 'I want to compete with Google. I think of my competitor as Google. I have a belief that I can achieve whatever I want. From the beginning, I have had a focus on starting my own work. I have not taken any financial support from the family to set up my store. I had laptops with low memory but I coped with them and gradually could secure better facilities.'

Another respondent, who was now an English-language lecturer, identified the Access programme as critical to his success in these words: 'Access to English programme was not just about language, we had so many other exposures. Career counselling programmes used to be held, guests from the US Council, British Council, and Civil Service Academy used to come to talk to us. We were sent for debating to leading institutions. Participating in the programme activities made me realise I am a good communicator and that gradually led me to choose teaching as a profession.' Similarly, one of the respondents featured above, who was running his own call centre, identified the Access programme as being key to his success.

He enrolled in the Access to English programme when he was in matric and he recalled: 'The programme opened horizons that I had never imagined before. The teaching method was totally different than what was followed in the school. One could challenge the instructor's decision and offer one's own solutions. We were given scenarios to solve, then there were interactive talks like friends where you were exploring ideas. We were not just discussing our syllabus or boring topics; we were discussing real life situation, country's financial or political situation. There were millions of topics.' He and his friends found this exposure so exhilarating that they could not wait for the school day to be over and for them to get to the Access class, which normally lasted for two hours. It was there that he first came to learn about the growing industry of call centres; he learned that from the female teacher who led their Access classes. Her motivational talks, frank discussions, and encouragement played a key role in motivating this respondent to aim high.

Another male respondent, who at the time of the interview was heading one of the educational programmes at CARE and was also the project manager for the CARE alumni programme, explained how he himself had greatly benefitted from the Access to English programme. In his

case, his mother had encouraged him to join it. In his words, ‘That programme changed my life. Before that we had feeling of a traditional classroom. In the Access to English programme, we had the freedom to challenge things, think differently, be ourselves.’ He ended up taking a lot of initiative in the class and discovered that he had a literary streak. He started to write drama scripts. He also started allowing neighbourhood children to come to his home to practise English. At the end of the programme, he was offered a place as a teaching assistant on it. This encouraged him to develop an even better command of the language, realising that as a teacher he should know more than the students.

As in the case of all the respondents, parental support was the primary factor motivating children to take their education seriously and to work hard to succeed and go beyond secondary education. However, as is clear from the above cases, well-designed programmes aimed at giving children opportunities to build confidence in their abilities can also have a marked influence in inspiring them to set high goals for themselves and actively pursue them.

#### **Section 4. Hard Work and Financial Support**

While understanding the factors that motivate children to succeed is key to understanding how children can excel despite the odds, through interviews it is also clear that hard work and financial support are equally important contributing factors. Respondents’ life stories repeatedly highlighted their willingness to work hard, be disciplined, and invest dedicated energy to ensure that they complete the tasks they are faced with. None of the students perceived themselves as being exceptionally gifted or talented. They were confident of their ability to do well, but none of them mentioned having exceptionally high IQ or other exceptional mental abilities. They all, however, emphasised their willingness and ability to work hard. Some just worked hard in terms of studies, but others also spent much time trying to generate income while devoting enough time to their studies. In the words of one respondent, who lost his father while at school, ‘In order to support the family, I started to give private tuitions while I was doing intermediate studies. I used to walk miles and miles to go to houses of people to give home tuition. I used to give three tuitions in the morning then go to attend my own lectures in the afternoon after which I used to give another tuition and then go to take part in the CARE Access to English programme at one of the schools as a teaching assistant. I used to do dinner in small dhabas (on-street eateries) and return home around 11pm or midnight. I did a lot of hard work in those years.’

Other respondents placed similar emphasis on willingness and ability to work hard as being critical for success. However, it seems that willingness to work hard is an outcome of having high motivation to succeed and thus arguably it is better conceptualised as a sub-theme within the wider debate on the important role that motivation plays in children’s success. The factor that does need separate treatment is the importance of access to financial support, not just for primary or secondary grades but, even more critically, for covering tuition fees for college and university education. Knowing that such a support will be available if they work hard (as these respondents did, by being aware of CARE’s scholarship programme) plays a critical role in keeping children motivated to perform well at primary and secondary levels. The existence of the scholarship made possible the attainment of the aspirations they had formed. Also, the stories of these respondents show that access to part-time work can act as an important safety net for children from challenging backgrounds who need support to get through tough times. Lack of support at these critical moments can set a child on a downward trajectory, however much he or she might be motivated. In this regard, the life story of one of the female respondents was particularly illuminating.



Working as a full-time internal co-ordinator at CARE, this respondent was also pursuing an MBA degree at a good college. The daughter of a factory worker and a housewife, this respondent had studied in a CARE-supported government school from grade 1 to grade 10. Both mother and the father were very keen that their children should study. However, on receiving a good marriage proposal for her, with the in-laws promising that the respondent would be able to carry on her education after marriage, she was married off soon after matriculation. Life after marriage proved difficult, and she was not allowed to pursue further education. Her father intervened on her behalf and supported her decision to opt for divorce after a year of marriage. Struggling to find a way to resume her education, this respondent went back to the CARE foundation and was able to find part-time work as a teaching assistant while enrolling in a college to pursue a bachelor's degree. Finding financial security by working with CARE during this difficult period of her life enabled her to regain confidence in herself and her abilities post-divorce. Overall, the financial support provided by the CARE scholarship and loan schemes was critical in enabling her and her siblings to secure primary and secondary education. Her parents were unable to afford education for four children; financial support from CARE thus helped by providing books, covering the small tuition fees, and providing prizes for good performance in sports. Consequently, all siblings did well. One of her younger brothers is a lawyer and the other an engineer, while the young sister is also doing a master's degree.

One of the other respondents profiled above, who also worked as a teaching assistant on the CARE access programme while studying, recalled, 'I was learning and earning at the same time. I was not putting burden on my family. CARE supported so many children by offering part-time work.' Other respondents noted how they were able to pursue higher education only through a CARE foundation scholarship or loan scheme. The radiologist profiled in one of the above sections reported, 'I have to repay part of the money I received but I have 10 years to do that. Due to CARE financial support the time went very well. My younger sister who is becoming a doctor is also supported by CARE.'

Another graduate profiled above noted, 'There are many colleges in Lahore whose fees is not very high; I could have still studied without CARE, but I won't be a Ravian (alumni of the most prestigious boys' college in Lahore).' Emphasising the importance of financial support in helping children from poor families to go far, he added, 'Transition from secondary school to college or university life requires major financial investment. Only few can afford it.' Another graduate, now a lecturer in a college, added 'Finances cannot be ignored. Even if one is motivated, one needs funds. Finance stays at number 1.' Adding that students in government schools are doubly disadvantaged, as they don't have resources in school or at home, he noted, 'Motivation was there and it was important for my success but without finances I could not have progressed.'

## **Conclusion**

Looking at profiles of thirty graduates of CARE-supported state schools in Pakistan who have established visible upward social mobility compared with their parents, this paper has shown how parental encouragement, desire to support the parents and alleviate their sufferings, positive competition from friends and cousins, encouragement by good teachers, exposure to positive role models, and opportunities to build confidence are all factors that can help children from poor families excel despite the odds. Parental encouragement remains the most important factor acknowledged by all respondents, followed by a combination of the other factors. The paper, however, has also established the need for children in state schools to have access to

financial support, whether in the form of scholarships, loans, or part-time work, if they are to take education seriously and succeed; even the most motivated children cannot succeed if they cannot find the required financial support to cover essential costs, such as college or university fees, or have some safety net to fall back on in order to survive difficult periods. The above findings raise implications for two ongoing debates in the sphere international education: (1), is it adequate to focus solely on primary and secondary education if we want to motivate poor children, enrolled in state schools with access to limited support at home, to take education seriously?; and (2), is it meaningful to focus on measuring success as assessed by performance in international comparative exams, when high grades in nationally held matriculation exams (or their equivalent) are key to entering good colleges and universities that can help young people to achieve upward social mobility?

As is clear from the life histories of the students profiled in this paper, part of the reason why they could remain motivated was that they were studying in state schools which, although covering the regular curriculum, were supported by an organisation that invested heavily in motivating students to aim high and promised them financial support to pursue higher education if they did well. It was the long-term vision of how they can improve their lives by going to college and university that motivated these children to do well at the primary and secondary levels: merely completing primary or secondary school was not a powerful motivation for these students, as those levels of education promise no upward social mobility, securing which was the main goal for all these students. Thus, there is a need for development agencies to develop more comprehensive educational plans which cover primary, secondary, and higher education instead of focusing exclusively on basic education.

Further, given that eventually it is the upward social mobility that is guaranteed through higher education that acted as the main motivation for these children to work hard, development planners need to consider whether debates on measuring learning standards are meaningful in such contexts, where eventually it is the marks in matriculation exams that hold the key to entry to good colleges and universities and achieving upward social mobility. There is no evidence to suggest that these young people who succeeded in life would have done well in international student assessments, such as PISA, as they were taught in accordance with the standard state curriculum and using traditional teaching methods with an emphasis on exam preparation. They learned how to score well in matriculation exams, managed to enter leading colleges and universities, and performed well. The recent focus in international development on improving learning outcomes in developing countries, instead of just focusing on access, is indeed a positive move; however, there is a need for caution to ensure that such a focus does not result in developing unrealistic expectations, or developing complex assessment tools to measure aspects of learning which eventually remain elusive in many developing-country contexts, given that the overall educational standards are too low.

Finally, it is also worth acknowledging that there is a strand of the economics literature that emphasizes the role of ‘luck’ in shaping outcomes and argues that the role of ‘effort’ (and motivation) are overstated (Frank 2016; Kaufman 2018). The methodological approach adopted in this study does not allow for studying how much luck played a part in shaping students’ success, but it is notable that respondents hardly raised luck as an explanatory factor and instead emphasized the role of motivation, effort and abilities. As documented above, they all felt very lucky in how their lives have in the long term turned out compared to what would have been expected of their life trajectories at the outset, but this long-term success was never attributed to luck. Luck did seem to have played a role at specific points in time—living in an area where CARE adopted the school that changed their life trajectory could be considered

luck— but as the students' life experiences show to translate this into long term success, motivation and hard work were critical.

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