



Giving Hope to a World of Need

A Classroom Revolution in Pakistan

By Joe Lapp

There is a quiet revolution transforming schools in the mountains of Mansehra district in northern Pakistan. It is a revolution in the way teachers reach their students, and it promises to transform the lives of children in vulnerable communities still recovering from the horrific earthquake of October 2005.



Using new techniques like group learning and visual aids has helped Muhammad Naseem's students learn faster and made them more eager to come to school. Photo by Joe Lapp for CRS

Across these areas, where Catholic Relief Services has been rebuilding earthquake-destroyed schools, we are also working with communities to provide classroom-revolutionizing training for teachers in villages.

Muhammad Iqbal, head teacher at the government primary school in Chalundrian village, thinks the training has helped him manage his classroom better. "Now we can teach the different grades all at once through multigrade teaching," he explains.

In Chalundrian, CRS and community members recently built a community school to replace the government building destroyed in the earthquake. Because of the new building, enrollment has increased from 115 to 140 students. Now, effective classroom management skills are more important than ever for Chalundrian's three teachers, who together handle five grades.

But the real change in the school has come through the application of CRS-taught Joyful Learning techniques. Traditionally, students in Pakistan learn by rote memorization. Teachers roam the classroom with a stick, ready to rap the knuckles of any students not reciting their lessons properly.

In the training, teachers learned alternatives to the rod. "Before, there was corporal punishment," says Muhammad Siraj, a 10-year-old student in another new CRS-built school in the village of Khotri Hilkot. "We were afraid of the teachers. Now they are not using it, and we have better relationships with our teachers. We also started sitting in groups, and now we understand our studies better."

Creative learning activities like group learning and art projects are integral to the Joyful Learning approach.

Learning From Each Other

Khotri Hilkot head teacher Muhammad Naseem is enthusiastic about the creative teaching techniques. "The students have more interest in learning," he says, "so now they come regularly to the school and are very happy."



Aiman, a fifth-grader at a new CRS-built school in the northern mountains of Pakistan, appreciates the training CRS provided to her teachers. Now she understands and enjoys learning more. Photo by Joe Lapp for CRS

Before the teacher training, "We didn't understand the teachers, and the teachers didn't understand us," says fifth-grader Aiman. "But now the teachers are focusing on the students, and we are concentrating better and enjoying our studies more."

In both Chalundrian and Khotri Hilkot, a bright atmosphere has replaced once-drab classrooms, which are now decorated with educational posters and student drawings.

"Now we are using the activity-based learning instead of ruling with the harsh attitude that we had before," says Muhammad Iqbal. "Before the CRS training we could hardly find a single student who [was willing to] speak with the teacher or share something with the students. But now, especially when they learn in the groups, every student wants to talk with the teacher and wants to ask questions."

To strengthen the teacher training's impact, CRS pioneered a system of peer mentoring that helps teachers put the methods they learned into practice. Mentors visit assigned schools regularly, giving feedback on use of new techniques and suggesting areas for improvement.

"The peer visits are good for the teachers," says CRS Program Manager Malik Saeed Akhtar, "because if their colleague is visiting them, then they feel relaxed. The teachers that we train, they say that due to our mentor visits they are adopting the new [methods]."

"There is no organization that can match the work that CRS is doing," says Muhammad Naseem. "We will remember CRS and wish them well for the things they have provided to us."

Joe Lapp is a photojournalist working with CRS Pakistan. He recently visited education programs in the country.

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