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IMPROVING EDUCATION IN MADRASAS: AN INDIA CASE STUDY



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, apprehension about the objectives and curricula of Islamic religious schools (madrasas) has increased. There is considerable concern that the growing numbers of madrasas,¹ either by intent or as a by-product of their narrow religious focus, are graduating radical fundamentalists who use violence to destabilize their own societies, oppose democracy and advocate for theocracy, and have very narrow perspectives on the role of women and minorities.

Such a broad generalization, of course, is inaccurate. While some extremists have attended madrasas, many of the schools are striving to provide a more rounded education and to prepare children, particularly poor Muslim children, to become responsible and contributing members of the community.

Currently in India, there is an increasingly lively debate about the role that madrasas should play in society. Some madrasa leaders are only interested in teaching and defending the medieval texts of their particular school of law, training religious officials, and/or ensuring that Muslims learn the tenets of their faith. Given Muslims' minority status, India's madrasas do play a particular role in reinforcing loyalties and preserving community boundaries. However, traditional madrasa curricula, with their emphasis on the memorization of particular texts, are not sufficient to prepare Muslim children to play a full role in India's growing economy and diverse, pluralistic democracy.

In addition, there is concern among Muslims about limited access to and/or the low quality of education in government-sponsored, Urdu-medium schools. For example, the literacy rate in India is lower for Muslims than it is for Hindus, and the school

dropout rates are higher, with girls' education remaining a particular problem. Due to these perceptions, marginalized Muslim communities are increasingly demanding more formal, academic education from their madrasas. Unfortunately, because many madrasas are privately run, madrasa leaders may not feel a need to respond to community desires.

Many madrasas, however, are responding to this demand. One such group of madrasas exists in the slums of Hyderabad, India. Working with a local NGO, community members, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), these madrasas have introduced the government's education curricula into their programs, established remedial classes for those children who had dropped out of school due to poverty or academic difficulties, and established vocational centers to provide tangible economic skills to Muslim adolescents in their late teens. These changes have taken place during a three-year period—a relatively short period of time—through the Child and Police (CAP) Project, under the guidance and supervision of madrasa administrators and local Muslim community leaders.

Why have Muslim leaders and educators in these communities become determined to change the social fabric of their communities by engaging in such activities? The following pages highlight the process and tell the story.

¹ The exact number of madrasas in India is not known. The government counted nearly 32,000 in 2002. Muslim sources might put the number higher.

THE CHILD AND POLICE PROJECT (CAP) – THE BEGINNING (2002)

THE CONTEXT

In 1997, Child and Police (CAP), a secular NGO focused on education and child labor, started working in Musheerabad, a very poor, predominantly Muslim neighborhood in Hyderabad city, on issues related to child labor. As part of its work, CAP conducted a community survey. The results showed that most men in the initial project area worked as unskilled laborers, e.g., as rickshaw pullers and drivers, construction workers, and recycling and scrap metal dealers. Nearly 70 percent of households survived on less than \$24 per month. Nearly 22 percent of children aged 6-14 were out of school. Many were working as domestic servants or were tanning leather, processing scrap metal, or begging. These activities paid miniscule wages and often exposed the children to hazardous and abusive working conditions.

Girls in particular were likely to drop out of school at an early age. They then sat at home, sometimes doing embroidery piecework, until they were married off. Parents were more inclined to see the utility of providing boys with some education, since it was likely that the boys would become family breadwinners while girls would become wives and mothers, supported by their husbands. Female labor force participation was, and continues to be, very low in the Muslim community generally.

As a strategic step, CAP first targeted working children aged 14 and under to persuade them to enroll in or return to school.

Since CAP did not employ significant numbers of Muslim staff at that time, it proceeded cautiously in working in Musheerabad. Rather uniquely, local police stations partnered with CAP in trying to get children into school. Police officers helped mobilize communities and local businesses against child labor. Community leaders, CAP, and the police were successful in getting many children in this community enrolled in remedial bridge courses—courses that prepared dropouts to reenter formal school—and then in government schools. As part of its community outreach, CAP formed mothers' committees to monitor children's attendance and retention in local government schools once they were enrolled.

Demand for these education services began to grow. Eventually, girls in the community also started aspiring to obtain an education. As a result, some mothers' groups requested CAP management to introduce some sort of educational intervention for their daughters. In addition, community members still saw a need to develop options for boys who had dropped out in grades 7 or 8 due to academic or financial difficulties and now were either working or sitting idle. These children could not always reenroll in public school due to the age/grade restrictions placed on enrollment. Third, some grades at the local government Urdu-medium school were full and could not accept more students.

More and more, the main local madrasa was seen as a potential avenue through which needy children could obtain an education. Since traditional Muslim families would rather send their girls to a religious school than a public school, the mothers' felt that CAP should work with a local madrasa called Madrasa Madinat-ul-Uloom.²

² One important point to note here is that the Government of India offers a special Urdu medium track for those Muslim children who want to obtain formal education within their cultural traditions. These schools are fully recognized government schools, but there are often too few of them to meet the needs of all Muslim students. Many Muslim parents prefer not to send their children to a non-Urdu language school because of language difficulties and teacher and textbook biases.

THE LOCAL MADRASA – SOME HISTORY

The Madrasa Madinat-ul-Uloom was established about 26 years ago to provide religious education to Muslim children. It was set up and funded by affluent members of the Muslim community. The land was purchased, and a two-room facility was erected to house a growing number of children who came to obtain religious education. Children were required to pay nominal fees, and those who could not pay received scholarships through community contributions.

Initially, Madrasa Madinat-ul Uloom's focus was on religious and moral education. A majority of the boys attending this madrasa also attended a regular government school for formal education. The girls, however, only attended the madrasa.

FORMAL EDUCATION IS INTRODUCED INTO THE MADRASA

As time passed, local Muslim leaders realized that while religious education was very important, it was not sufficient to improve the economic well-being of the Muslim community. With low quality education in the public schools, boys in the community engaging in antisocial activities due to a lack of formal schooling, and girls sitting idle at home, leaders decided to introduce some academic subjects in the madrasa curricula. By 1997, the school had a three-story building, one floor of which was still unfinished but which could accommodate about 300 students. The Madrasa Board hired a few female teachers to teach secular school subjects such as science, math, and social studies. Two male teachers taught religious studies.

Although the madrasa now offered some secular education in first through seventh grades, its education was not recognized by the state government. Students finishing Class 7 had to either give up their studies or repeat seventh grade in a government school in order to take the government's seventh standard exam. (They could take the exam as private students, but this was costly and the success rate was not very high because there was not a total match between the competencies gained through the madrasa curriculum and that of the state.)

COLLABORATION BETWEEN CAP AND THE MADRASA MADINAT-UL-ULOOM (2003)

Even though CAP-sponsored activities had been operating for many years, CAP staff had had no contact with staff or Board members of the Madrasa Madinat-ul-Uloom. Then, in 2003, based on suggestions from mothers in the community and CAP's growing credibility in the same vicinity, the CAP team contacted the madrasa administration for further talks. The madrasa administrators were welcoming and agreed to work with CAP to expand and improve educational offerings at the madrasa.

CAP REACHES OUT TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH: THE BRIDGE SCHOOL PROJECT

When the CAP team approached the leaders of Madrasa Madinat-ul-Uloom, they did not raise the issue of changing/improving the educational interventions in the madrasa program. Cognizant of religious sensitivities, the project team only asked the madrasa administrators if they would be willing

to donate the third floor of the madrasa to CAP to start a bridge school for older children (7th through 10th grades) who had dropped out from a regular government school. The madrasa Board agreed, and the bridge school project was financed by some seed funding from USAID/Delhi.

The bridge school is a concept that CAP had developed and tested for out-of-school youth. Bridge schools provide full-day accelerated learning and remedial tutoring to returning dropouts. The coaching is child-centered and tailored to suit the learning abilities of the students. In many cases, bridge school teachers provide one-on-one instruction. The ultimate purpose of the bridge school established at Madrasa Madinat-ul-Uloom was to prepare younger students for mainstreaming and older students for grades 7th and 10th board exams as private students.

CAP's bridge school project proved to be an effective way of bringing additional dropouts back to school. As the bridge school got underway in the madrasa facility, many dropouts, including a large number of boys, enrolled. The bridge school teachers, who were hired and paid by the CAP Project, provided creative, student-centered activities. Because the quality of education in the bridge school was far superior to the quality in regular government schools in the area, children continued to enroll. The bridge school information campaign and community mobilization efforts by the CAP team also helped in increasing the enrollment. In addition, many girls left their government school and joined the bridge school because it was located in a safe environment within the confines of the local madrasa. Slowly, due to the high pass rate of students in grades 7 and 10 from this school, the madrasa itself began to symbolize forward thinking and a positive vision in the community.

Witnessing the success of the bridge school, the madrasa administrators who were sharing the building showed interest in enhancing the educational quality in their own classes (grades 1-7). CAP agreed to help them.

THE MADRASA INTEGRATES THE STATE GOVERNMENT'S URDU-MEDIUM CURRICULA

After discussions with CAP management, the madrasa administrators agreed to increase the number of secular subjects and to improve the quality of instruction in the madrasa for classes through grade 7. CAP requested USAID/Delhi to provide funding for this pilot activity. Technical and financial support was promptly provided through USAID's Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity, which was implemented by Creative Associates International, Inc. in Washington, DC.

Since the madrasa administrators did not have the funds to hire all the required qualified teachers, CAP, through the financial assistance from USAID, agreed to pay the salaries of secular subject teachers for the madrasa. Three local Muslim females with B.Ed qualification, who were hired to teach math, biology, and physics in the bridge school classes, began working with other teachers of the madrasa to improve their teaching skills. Students now came to the madrasa for six hours, with two hours dedicated to Islamic education and the other four hours devoted to the government curricula.

CAP PROVIDES PEDAGOGY TRAINING FOR MADRASA TEACHERS

Even though there were now more qualified teachers in the madrasa, the other teachers lacked formal training in modern pedagogy and classroom management. The first through seventh

grade regular classes were taught by teachers with 12th or higher grade education but with limited knowledge of the subject matter and of effective teaching skills. There was limited interaction between individual students and the teacher: the structure in every classroom was top-down. Lesson planning and student assessments were poorly documented.

The CAP team, in conjunction with madrasa administrators, decided to focus on doing the following with primary-level teachers:

- Building their self confidence;
- Improving their knowledge of child psychology and the learning process of children;
- Training them to use a variety of teaching techniques to get points across to students;
- Introducing sequential learning and improved thinking by children;
- Enhancing their materials development capacity;
- Improving their documentation skills; and
- Improving their spoken English skills.

CAP trained madrasa teachers in child-centered teaching techniques and the development and use of visual aids. Teachers developed teaching materials for their own classes and committed to using them not only as classroom decorations but also as aids for student learning. In addition, life skills development became an integral part of the CAP madrasa curriculum.

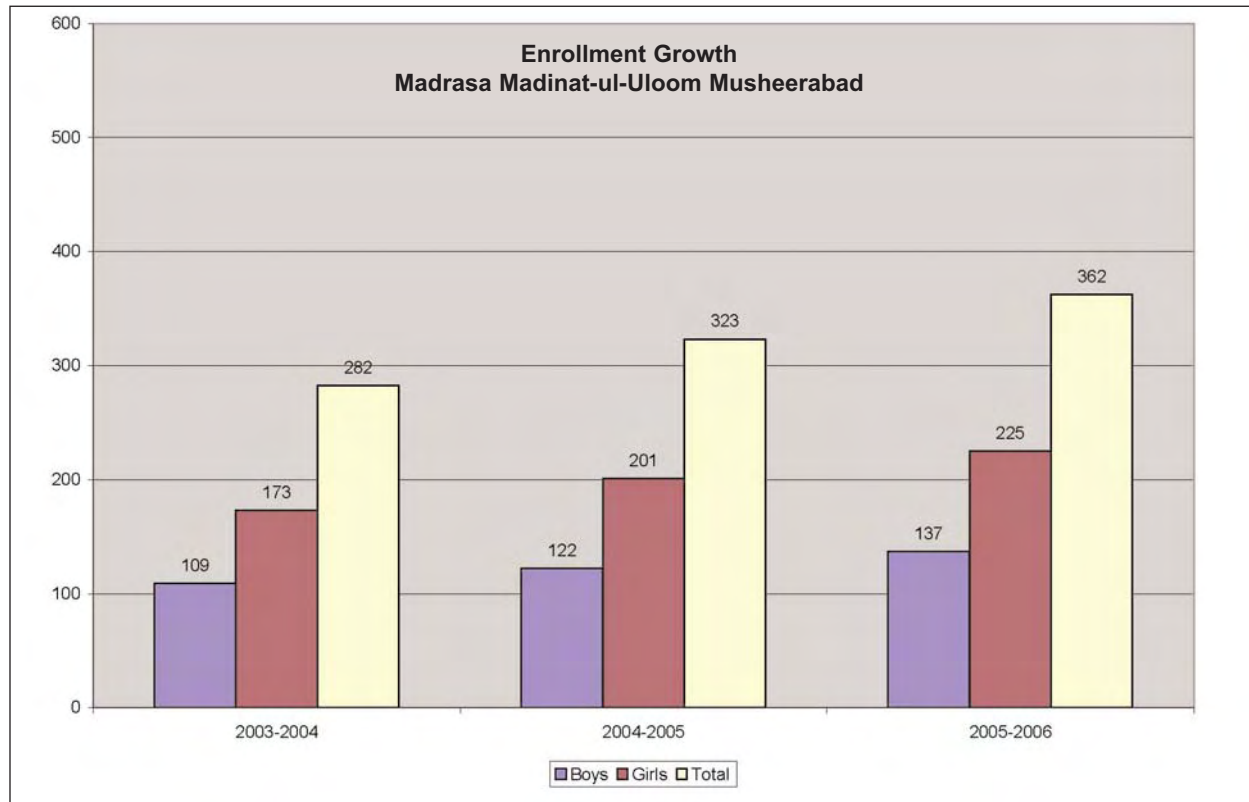
STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND PERFORMANCE IMPROVE

As explained above, the bridge school helped mainstream adolescent boys and girls into the regular government system by providing them with remedial training. In contrast, the focus in the madrasas' regular primary classes was to improve educational quality and offer academic education on a more formal basis.

According to interviews with the madrasa teachers in Musheerabad, as the quality of the school improved, more and more children enrolled. Within one year, the enrollment for boys and girls increased by 12 percent and 16 percent respectively. Students also performed well on the class exams. In 2005, all of the boys in classes II, III, V, VI, and VII passed the exam. During that same year, all of the girls who attended classes III, VI, and VII passed their exams. Also, those students who joined the regular public schools after studying at the madrasa became high performers in their new schools.

OTHER INTERVENTIONS COMPLEMENT ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

As part of the overall community mobilization and support theme, CAP initiated several complementary interventions. Children's Councils were set up to address children's issues, especially the issues for working children. Through these councils, children were mobilized to recruit other out-of-school youth and working children into the bridge school. Community volunteers and caseworkers were encouraged to follow up on mainstreamed children and their families. They monitored students in the community on a day-to-day basis to ensure retention and curb dropout. Local Monitoring Committees, comprised of

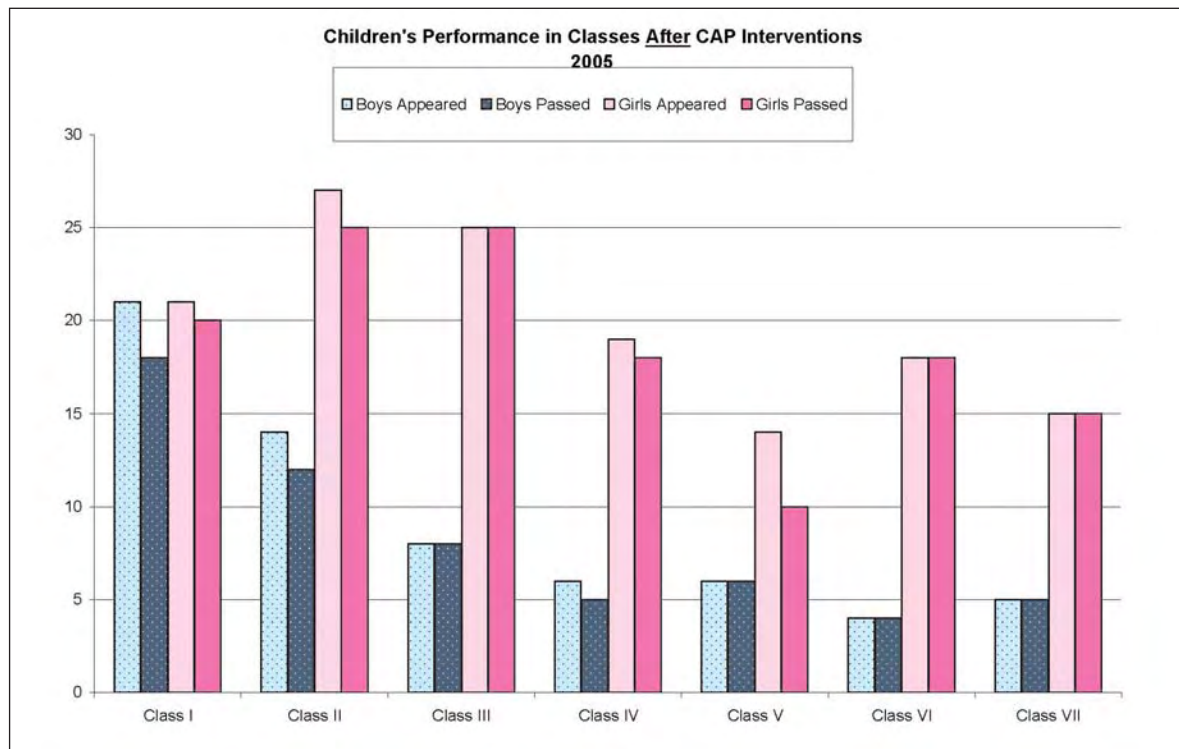


school headmasters, area police inspectors, teacher volunteers, community volunteers, parents, and social workers, were formed to follow the progress of children and their circumstances at home, and to act as needed. Mothers' Committees, established in the neighborhood to disseminate information about the growth and development of the child and about successful parenting practices to other mothers and parents, were used as an entry point into the community and helped in expanding the basis of the project beyond the CAP children and their families. To improve the child's family situation, skill development programs (vocational) were designed for parents and adolescent siblings (over 16) of those children originally targeted by the program.

By the end of phase I of the USAID-financed project, word about the excellent work and good performance of students from the Madrasa Madinat-ul-Uloom had spread to other madrasas in and around the city of Hyderabad.

PROGRAM EXPANSION (2004)

As word about Musheerabad's success spread, additional madrasas contacted the CAP team and requested that similar interventions be introduced in their religious institutions. The frequently cited reason for integrating the government curricula in their plan of studies was that they wanted the Muslim children to obtain some formal education and at least have the chance to pursue further academic studies or vocational training.



USAID/DELHI FUNDS PROGRAM EXPANSION

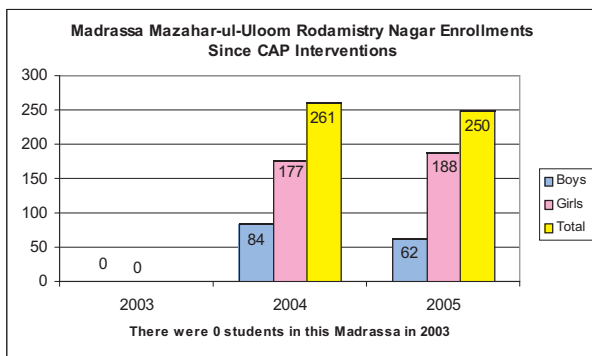
Given the interest among other madrasas, the CAP team requested additional CAP Phase II funding from USAID to expand first to two and later to as many as eight additional madrasas around Hyderabad. This phased expansion was implemented to ensure that the team did not negatively impact the program by moving too fast. The lessons learned from working with one madrasa were not sufficient to support a major expansion without running unnecessary risks.

With additional funds from USAID, the CAP team selected the two additional schools: Madrasa Mazhar-ul-Uloom in the slum of Rodamistry Nagar (near Secunderabad, a city adjoining Hyderabad), and Madrasa Irafan-ul-Uloom in Makhdoom Nagar (Shapur Nagar), also in the Hyderabad vicinity. Similar to

Musheerabad, bridge school programs were introduced in both areas to try first to mainstream those children who had dropped out of the area schools. At the same time, the madrasa administrators hired additional teachers to expand formal classes for grades 1-7. The CAP Project provided pedagogical training to teachers in all subjects. Brief descriptions of achievements in these two madrasas are provided below.

Madrasa Mazhar-ul-Uloom

The Headmaster of Madrasa Mazhar-ul-Uloom started this institution six years ago for Qur'an memorization and introductory Urdu language classes. At that time, approximately 30-40 children attended this madrasa for religious studies only. In January 2004, the Headmaster requested that CAP introduce a bridge school for older students and formal academic classes



from the first grade. The CAP team responded positively and immediately mobilized resources. The team also initiated community mobilization campaigns to identify out-of-school children to attend this school.

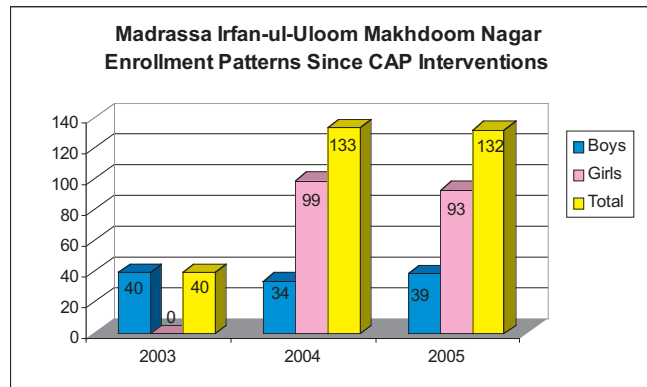
The madrasa now operates grades 1-7, with seven teachers whose salaries are paid through community contributions and donations. The bridge school project in this area has been very successful: most of the children who started with the bridge school are now fully mainstreamed into either the secular classes of the madrasa or the local public education system.

CAP interventions have helped the madrasa to increase the number of children enrolled in the 7th and 10th grades. In this madrasa, the bridge school instructors and madrasa school teachers interact regularly and hold mentoring sessions to help each other, which contribute to improved instruction. This year, the madrasa had a 100 percent pass rate on the 7th grade board exam, and 7 out of 8 children who took the grade 10 exam passed with 85 percent marks. Obtaining 85 percent marks in the 10th grade exam is very unusual since the final 10th grade exam is very tough for many children.

As reported by the mothers of children attending Madrasa Mazahar-ul-Uloom, two women's Self Help Groups (SHG) are operational in the community, with 14 members in each group. CAP interventions have helped them to think about saving money for their families and for their children's education. During the CAP mobilization campaigns, mothers were informed about the importance of educating their children and trained in income-generating skills. The women formed self-help groups and came for classes in topics such as soap making so that they could set up small home enterprises. Now they are seeking financial help to establish such businesses and market their own products.

Madrasa Irfan-ul-Uloom Makhdoom Nagar

This madrasa started as a private school with a focus on religious education and advanced to holding academic tutoring for children from the community. There is no formal madrasa board or trust to which they report. The area is predominantly a very poor slum neighborhood, so the prospects for community contributions are very small. After learning about the success in Musheerabad, the couple who ran the school contacted the CAP team and requested help. There is not an Urdu-medium government school nearby, creating problems particularly for girls to attend school. This madrasa, which has three religion teachers, hired six teachers, paid by CAP, to teach secular subjects. The school's owners hoped to mobilize additional out-of-school children from the community and now wish to approach the local education authorities for additional funds and space to run classes for these children. Space is a serious problem, as this is a neighborhood of very small, one-room structures.



With the assistance of CAP, children's enrollment in this madrasa increased. In addition, the expansion of formal instruction and the teachers' improved capabilities contributed to a 90 percent success rate for students taking the state's grade 7 and 10 exams.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT CONTINUES, AND THE URDU LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK IS REVISED

The CAP-USAID team continued to provide in-service training to teachers in all three madrasas during the course of the project. As mentioned above, materials development was also a focus. As madrasa teachers' capacity to develop new materials was enhanced, teachers decided to improve the Urdu-medium language textbook and the accompanying teaching manual.

Under the supervision of the CAP teacher trainer, these teachers rewrote the Urdu textbook and teaching guide and shared it with the local government's Education Department. The new book was so highly regarded by the Education Department and other Urdu-medium school teachers in the Hyderabad

vicinity that the Education Department currently is considering adopting these materials for all its Urdu-medium schools.

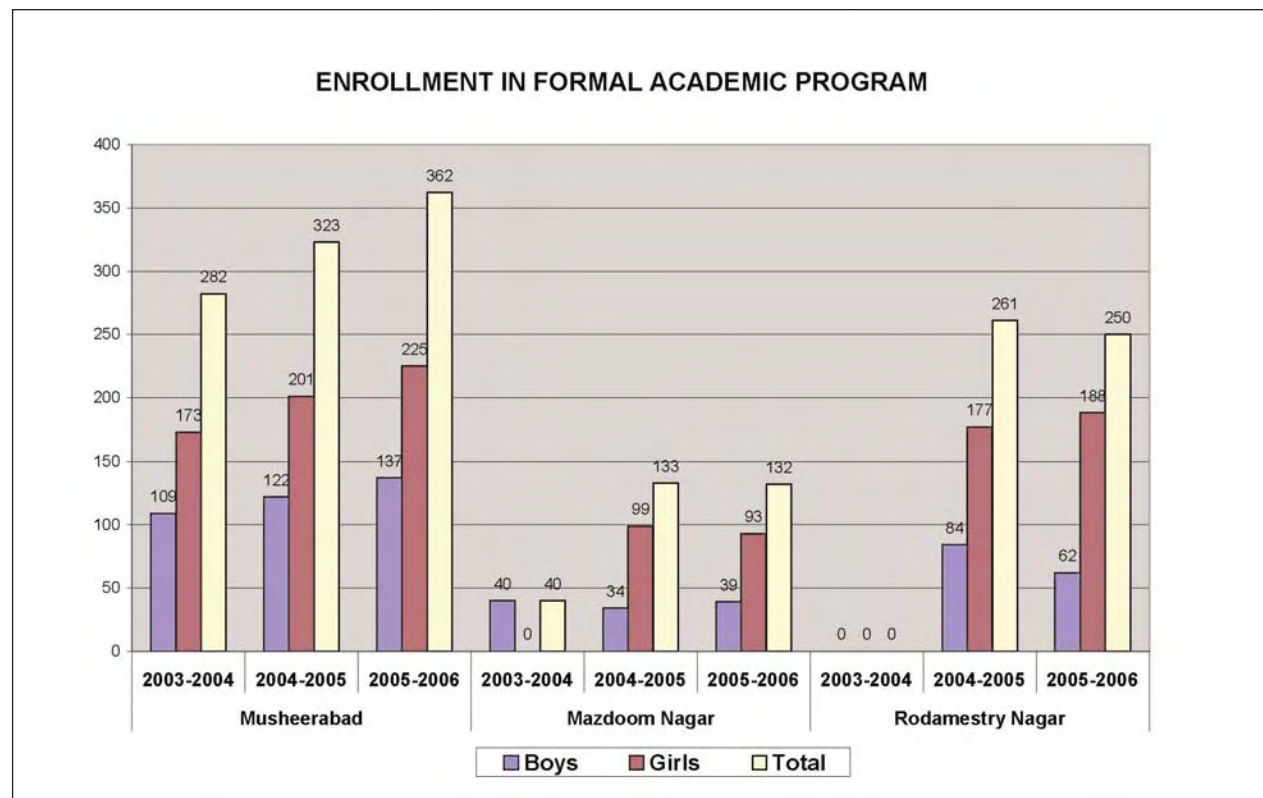
Encouraged by this success, the madrasa teachers are now working jointly to develop a similar book for the Telugu language (a key regional language in Andhra Pradesh) and to share it with the government after it is completed. The Telugu language is difficult for many Muslim children in this area because Urdu is spoken at home.

STUDENTS BENEFIT

The chart on the next page depicts the status of students who have finished seventh grade in the three participating madrasas as of September 2005. A significant number have either continued with their studies or have enrolled for vocational training.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION RESPONDS POSITIVELY TO THE ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS AND MADRASA IMPROVEMENTS

As part of its ongoing partnership with the state Education Department, CAP maintained close contact with state education authorities about CAP's work with madrasas. In June 2005, the CAP project team and the state authorities organized a large, state-level conference to disseminate the lessons and results from the three schools and to solicit the education authority's support in expanding the process and making it more formal. Education Department officials, several madrasa administrators, and local Muslim leaders attended this conference.



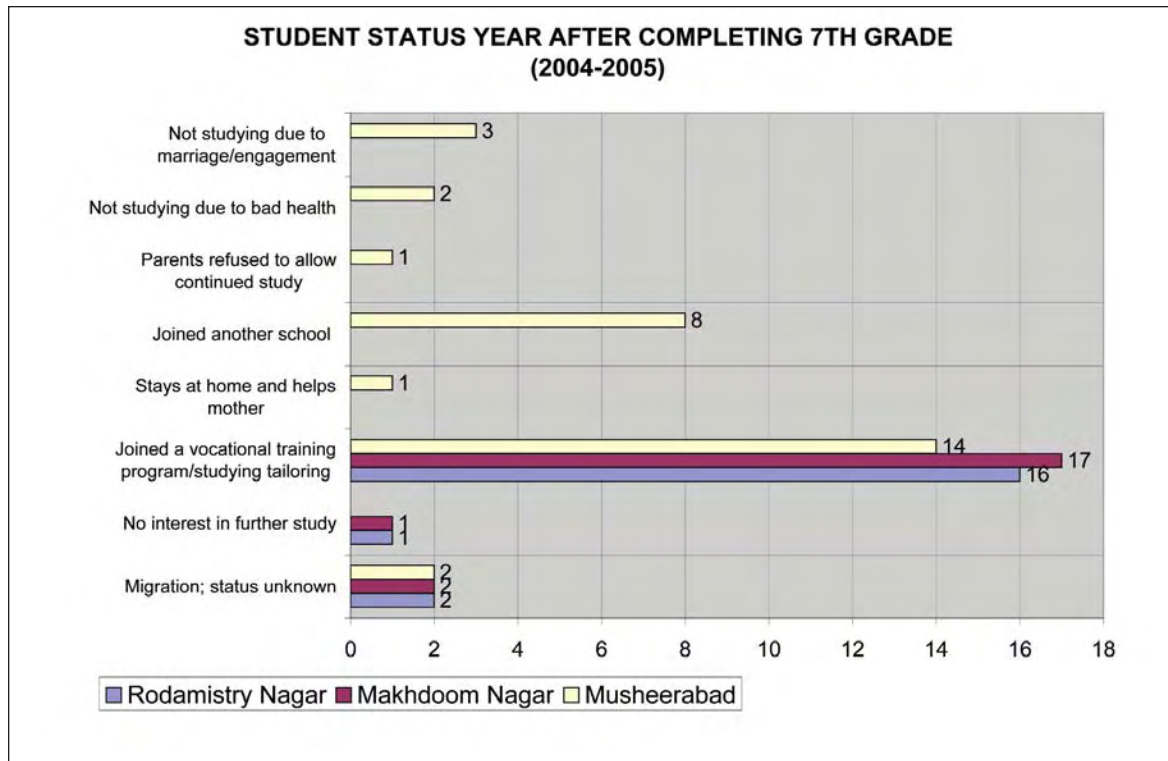
The conference heightened the interest of education officials in the project. They asked to make a visit to Madrasa Madinat-ul-Uloom in Musheerabad. After visiting the madrasa, education officials announced that they would provide official accreditation to Madinat-ul-Uloom. The Education Department also promised financial assistance to the madrasa.

Moreover, the Education Department, particularly the state chief of the SSA Program (the national program for universalizing primary education) took a keen interest in moving the pilot forward to all interested madrasas in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The Education Department also decided to allow students in grade 7 and 10 from madrasas to appear for the Government board exams without paying any fees (fees are

normally charged to external students). This government decision continues to have a direct positive impact on many poor Muslim students who fail to take the exams because they cannot afford to pay the exam registration fees. In addition, the Education Department has agreed to consider providing accreditation to any madrasa that introduces the Ministry's Urdu-medium curricula in its plan of studies. Until recently, a madrasa needed to pay Rs. 25,000-30,000 to gain accreditation from the state education authorities; however, now the Education Department has decided to provide free accreditation to madrasas that fulfill certain official requirements.³

The Education Department has further committed to provide the following for madrasas that gain accreditation:

³ Requirements relate to adequate provision of space, qualification of teachers, curricular content, etc. The Education Department also is considering revising these requirements, particularly because the space requirement can be difficult for small community madrasas to meet.



- Two teachers' salaries (Rs. 1500 per month per teacher on a contract basis for a few years);
- Annual grant of Rs. 500 to each teacher to develop learning materials;
- Free textbooks for all madrasa students;
- A grant of Rs. 5,000 for the physical maintenance of the madrasa;
- One computer per madrasa; and
- Pedagogical training for the teachers.

The scaling up of the work in the original three madrasas will be assisted by a resource team consisting of CAP and madrasa staff. This team will work with madrasas wishing to integrate or improve formal academic education as prescribed by the state government.

PHASE III EXPANSION FOCUSES ON COLLABORATION AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

CAP now has moved to a more targeted expansion for Phase III, which focuses on several collaborative, community-oriented actions: deciding academic program changes based on community demand, developing preliminary plans with madrasa administrators, creating linkages between madrasas and the Education Department, and providing vocational training.

In all three madrasas where CAP was working, in response to demand from the community and madrasa staff, USAID provided funds to start vocational training centers, both for the older siblings of children attending the madrasas and also for those children who had passed the 10th grade exam and needed workplace skills. Programs such as computer, multi-media, and data entry training, pre-school teacher training, and

automobile mechanics were started and are being provided through these vocational centers. CAP, through USAID funds, is paying the salaries of teachers who teach in these training sites. The availability of vocational training has a particularly positive impact on girls who are able to obtain low-cost training within their own communities without traveling too far from home. The previous chart shows the number of madrasa students pursuing further training.

LESSONS LEARNED AND KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS NEEDED FOR EXPANSION

Within the past three years, USAID, CAP, Creative Associates International, Inc., and their Indian partners achieved the following:

- The successful integration of high quality, formal academic education in the target madrasas;
- An increase in children's enrollment in these schools;
- Government willingness to provide accreditation to Islamic institutions; and
- A high degree of student success in the 7th and 10th grade exams.

Based on interviews with madrasa administrators and community members, one point clearly emerged: even though these madrasas were already progressive, they needed support,

both financial and technical, to improve their educational systems. Madrasas would have found it difficult to implement these changes on their own. A second point that emerged from the pilot is that the leadership role assumed by the madrasa administrators was critical to the success of this program. The key lessons learned from the CAP-madrasa partnership are summarized below.

A madrasa can be a very effective channel for improving the enrollment and completion rates of Muslim girls.

Anyone who has worked in the area of gender and education knows that almost always, parents in South Asia are more willing to invest in an education for their sons than for their daughters. This is especially true for poor Muslim parents whose daughters tend to get married at an early age and whose workforce participation is low due to conservative norms and parent fears for their daughters' security. The CAP experiment has shown that if parents trust that their girls will be learning in a low-cost and safe environment, they will send their girls to school. The CAP-supported madrasas, even though they teach the government curricula, are still religious institutions in essence because they are operated by religious leaders and dedicate up to two hours per day to religious education. Parents tend to think that their girls will be safer within the four walls of a religious school than a public school. That is why as the educational quality improved in these madrasas, more girls enrolled, and even those who were attending more expensive private schools joined the madrasas.⁴

⁴ Some of the girls who shifted from a private school to the madrasa explained that their parents had encountered financial difficulties and could not afford to continue paying private school tuition.

Despite the presence of public and private schools in the vicinity, Muslim parents often prefer low-cost but good quality madrasa education.

Public schools are formally free in India, but there are related costs for uniforms, books, and materials. These costs may be unaffordable by the very poor, but even those who can pay them may well not see the value of doing so when the education offered is of such low quality. The CAP experience in the three madrasas has shown that even if there are costs associated with sending children to a madrasa, if the quality of education is good and children are progressing, parents will invest whatever they can in their children's education.

The combination of religious and quality secular education provides an added advantage in that parents feel that their children are obtaining a balanced education—one that focuses on academics, religious duties, and moral behavior and where Muslim children do not face discrimination or bias. If parents determine that the quality of secular education is not good in the madrasas, parents might very well withdraw their children from secular classes and use the madrasa facility for religious education only. Therefore, continuous improvements and innovations in the quality of secular education in the madrasas are very important to keep the interest of both parents and students. One reason for the good degree of success in Board exams is that the madrasa classes are smaller and teachers pay more attention to individual student needs than in government schools.

Working with dropouts is one of the most important elements of this education improvement project.

Usually when such education programs are implemented, project implementers tend to focus on basic education and ignore demoralized and failed students. The CAP Project's strategy of recruiting children who were labeled "failures" by the system and making sure that they passed the grade 7 and 10 exams ignited a new fire of hope within the community itself. Students who had given up on any further education after failing in the government system started passing the government exams with flying colors. This not only boosted the morale of the children but made parents and the community as a whole more hopeful about their children's future prospects through education. Currently, there is so much enthusiasm within these communities that many of the parents and teachers interviewed expressed the hope that these madrasas would eventually become colleges as well.

Building trust within the community is an essential first step to integrating secular subjects into religious schools.

Secular organizations can work with madrasas, but they must establish their bona fides with the community first. The CAP Project team did not appear on the doorsteps of the madrasas claiming that they were there to help them. The CAP team initially worked in the community on other education and community development projects. The presence of the CAP team in the community and the good work that was happening resulted in the community members themselves requesting that

madrastas be used to provide secular education to children. In essence, the CAP team had built trust and credibility before any discussion on madrasa education was held with community members.

Demand from the community to strengthen the education provided in madrastas and the attitude of madrasa administrators towards opening their doors are not reciprocal variables.

The CAP experiment has shown that community demand does not necessarily draw an equivalent response from local madrasa leaders. At the start of the program in Musheerabad in 2003, even though community members were ready for new educational interventions in the madrasa, the madrasa administrators were not ready with a quick “yes.” They thoroughly debated the pros and cons and then allowed the CAP team to assist. CAP team members also reported that in the beginning, the madrasa administrators had some people “watching” what was happening; the administrators were ready “to pull the plug” if anything was done that was contrary to their beliefs and philosophy.

The CAP team, cognizant of this situation, created true partnerships with the administrators and ensured that the madrasa elders were part of all developments. Madrasa administrators also attended training sessions with teachers to mitigate any doubt that might exist.

Madrastas are not necessarily eager for government certification.

Madrasa leaders may see formal certification as an advantage for their students in helping those students qualify for further

training or education in government institutions, but they will not exchange their autonomy or their control over their institution in return for government certification and support. Government education authorities need to be aware of community and madrasa sensitivities and play a low-key role in providing support. The terminology used is particularly touchy. Talking about “modernization” or introducing “secular” education sends the wrong signals and discourages interest. Instead, focusing on the utility of integrating formal academic education with religious education or improving education quality in order to prepare students for the workplace is less controversial.

Community workers hired from the same community contribute to program success.

CAP is a secular NGO that is headed by non-Muslims. Given Hindu-Muslim sensitivities in India, when the work began in madrastas, the CAP Project ensured that most of the community workers they hired were from the community itself and belonged to the Muslim faith. Since the workers were from the community, they understood the community and were sympathetic to its concerns. These project personnel were trained in community communication techniques and were given clear objectives.

Vocational education helps to build local capacity and solidify support from the community.

NGOs often come to an area to bring children into schools and then leave these children to fend for themselves after completing certain grades. CAP acknowledged, however, that merely passing the grade 10 exam does not automatically lead to a decent job and that there was no demand for young people

with a general basic education. The CAP Project responded to the demand of the students and community for vocational and workplace skills. Establishing and expanding vocational training centers in these communities showed the community and its children that CAP was—and continues to be—really committed to improving their social and economic well being.

These vocational centers, however, need to be strengthened further by encouraging more boys to enroll and by introducing new subjects that relate to existing industries in the areas. The life skills training also is critical to successful employment since poor children tend to be weak in presentation and communication skills.

While parents are increasingly willing to send their daughters for vocational training, they are still reluctant to allow them to work outside the home, due to concerns about their girls' safety and reputation.

Labor force participation is generally low for Indian women, but it is particularly low for Muslim women and even lower for younger women. The girls in these communities often want to work, and those taking vocational courses said that they hoped to persuade their parents or in-laws to allow them to do so. CAP has found that it is essential to mentor those girls who obtain approval from their guardians to work for the first 12-18 months. The newly employed girls need help in negotiating issues with their families as those issues arise. For example, the first time a girl must work late on an assignment, her family will be upset and may press her to quit. Once past these initial hurdles, a young woman is likely to be able to remain employed if she wishes to be so. Over time, the community's tolerance for young women in the workplace will expand.

Girls' enrollment, retention, and success are powerful factors in creating a desire to delay marriage.

The girls interviewed for this study said that the right age for a girl to marry was 20 or 21. Many of the mothers interviewed agreed with this assessment. Before CAP began its work in these communities, the average age of marriage was below 15. Currently, it is around 18.

One size does not fit all.

In CAP, no one pre-planned blueprint was followed in all of the communities. CAP's strategy for madrasa interventions differed from community to community. Whereas in Musheerabad, the CAP team started dialoguing with madrasa administrators for educational improvements, in Rodamistry Nagar and Makhdoom Nagar, madrasa administrators themselves came to CAP and requested assistance. Also, whereas CAP had other programs going in the Musheerabad area and therefore was well known within the community, CAP was not implementing any programs in the other two communities. Therefore, CAP did not have to follow the path that was followed in Musheerabad, i.e., building initial trust through other projects in the community. The news of their good work was evidence enough for the other two communities that CAP was a trustworthy organization.

CONCLUSION

The model of intensive NGO efforts with the community and with madrasa leaders can be a very successful mechanism for enrolling and retaining Muslim children in school, particularly in areas where there are insufficient seats available in government schools or where the medium of instruction in available schools is a barrier to enrollment for Muslim children.

There are in fact many madrasas in India that would like to prepare Muslim children to be good Muslims and responsible, engaged, and productive members of society. Ultimately, however, government support for such schools can be very important for sustaining impact and expanding the life choices of Muslim children (especially girls). The comfort level with madrasas is very high in Muslim communities, and the low-cost structure makes them very affordable for even the poorest Muslim parents. Reviewing and relaxing non-essential government criteria for accreditation (such as physical space or playground equipment requirements) may be necessary for creating the possibility of accreditation for madrasa schools. Costs for accreditation need to be reduced.

Are the experiences and lessons learned from the CAP-USAID madrasa project in Hyderabad relevant to countries beyond India?

The answer is yes, particularly in terms of educating Muslim girls. In the poor Muslim communities of some countries in Africa and South Asia, madrasas that incorporate good quality public education can be an effective avenue to increase the literacy and education levels for girls. However, the quality of secular education should be good enough that parents become confident in the efficacy of their investment in their girls' education. Also, using madrasa facilities to provide remedial

tutoring and vocational education to boys (and girls) can be a powerful tool to keep them busy and prepare them for entering the job market.

It also is clear that leadership and support for interventions in Muslim religious schools must be shown by Muslim leaders themselves. Only when Muslim leaders and elders are willing to change and can understand the positive benefits of change can the results be sustainable.



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