

Reading Beyond Pages: Building Literacy, Confidence and Voice

Abstract

I volunteered for six weeks in Pakistan: two weeks in Lahore and four weeks in Gilgit City. As someone deeply interested in social anthropology, I am incredibly grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for giving me the opportunity to undertake this experience.

I initially approached the placement with the fairly straightforward expectation that I would be volunteering in schools. However, after six weeks, I left with much more than I had anticipated: a deeper understanding of ground realities, countless new life stories, a different perspective on how people and communities make sense of the world in Gilgit, and an introduction to poets, singers, traditions and histories I had not encountered before.

Through my experiences in both Lahore and Gilgit, this report reflects on several themes that stood out to me: the educational landscape of Lahore and Gilgit, humanitarian governance in Gilgit-Baltistan, Gilgiti traditions and celebrations, and the region's mobility, folklore and processes of worldmaking.

What I Did

I collaborated with two organisations during my placement: Waduha Welfare Organisation in Lahore and the Organisation for Educational Change (OEC) in Gilgit.

One of Waduha Welfare's key projects is an orphanage in Gulberg, Lahore, which accommodates around 35 children. I volunteered there, teaching coding basics to students in Years 6–8.

I then moved to Gilgit City, where OEC placed me across several schools. One of the main programmes I contributed to was a reading circle at the Academy of Excellence in Danyore, working with Year 9 students. We met four days a week to read a book together, with the aim of strengthening English comprehension and public speaking.

We also conducted university admissions information sessions at Innova School and the Academy of Excellence's Zulfikarabad campus. These sessions covered different routes into higher education and helped students think about university opportunities beyond their

immediate surroundings. I also visited Aga Khan Higher Secondary School in Gilgit City and Aga Khan School in Naisrabad, Hunza.

It is important, however, to recognise the limits of volunteerism. I may arrive with high ambitions and good intentions, but six weeks is a very short amount of time. The people and communities I worked with are agents in their own lives, while I was an outsider with only a limited understanding of the challenges they face. There is therefore a limit to what I could meaningfully contribute in such a short period.

At the same time, I remain incredibly grateful for the opportunity. The Leadership in Action experience allowed me to step outside the classroom, engage directly with communities, and develop a much deeper understanding of the context in which I hope to work in the future.

Educational Landscape

Words are tools through which we interpret and make sense of reality. The ability to name something can also give us the ability to recognise, discuss and conceptualise it. This idea shaped much of my thinking during the reading circle.

One of my main aims was therefore to expand students' vocabulary, not simply in the sense of learning new English words, but by giving them concepts through which they could think about and discuss the world around them.

For the reading circle, we chose **Amal Unbound**, a novel rooted in rural Pakistani culture. It tells the story of Amal, a young girl living under a system of feudalism in Punjab. The book gave us a familiar cultural context through which we could also explore broader social issues.

Our sessions followed a consistent structure: we began by revisiting the previous session, then read a new chapter in groups, discussed what we had read, and finally explored the wider social issues raised by the chapter. Through these discussions, we explored topics including income inequality, intersectionality, systemic inequality, capitalism and patriarchy.

At first, it was difficult to encourage some students to participate or even read aloud. I was also given a class of 42 students to manage, some of whom were taller than me. Having a teacher present for safeguarding and other OEC volunteers supporting us on the ground made the experience considerably easier.

Over time, however, the classroom atmosphere changed. The students began to engage more openly with the discussions. For them, the reading circle became a space where they could have genuine conversations, express their opinions and, perhaps most importantly, relax. For me, it became a brief window in which I could introduce a new word or concept while creating space for students to connect with one another.

Beyond the reading circle, my experience also made me think differently about education in Gilgit-Baltistan. The region has a literacy rate of around 70%, and Gilgit City serves as an important educational hub for the wider region. Students from across Gilgit-Baltistan relocate to the city to pursue their education. Karakoram International University, one of the only two regional universities, is also located in Gilgit City.

It would therefore not be an exaggeration to describe Gilgit as a city of students. Hostels are a prominent feature of the city, reflecting the movement of young people from across the region in pursuit of education.

Humanitarian Governance

Religious diversity and sectarian identity were among the most interesting aspects of life in Gilgit that I encountered. Sunni, Shia and Ismaili Muslim communities coexist across the region. Religious identity can be deeply intertwined with people's sense of belonging, and different areas of Gilgit-Baltistan have historically had different sectarian majorities.

Gilgit City, however, has a particularly diverse population because people from across Gilgit-Baltistan move there for education and employment. This creates a city where the three communities are more visibly present alongside one another.

One aspect of this social landscape that particularly interested me was the strength of community networks and the role played by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). AKDN operates schools, including Aga Khan Higher Secondary Schools and Diamond Jubilee Schools, alongside healthcare facilities and rural development programmes across the region.

The organisation also supports higher education through scholarships for students pursuing education internationally. Its education work was particularly interesting to me because of the existence of its own education board in Gilgit-Baltistan, which operates alongside Pakistan's national education system.

As a student of Global Humanitarian Studies, I have spent considerable time thinking about how humanitarian organisations are funded and sustained. Against the backdrop of the financial pressures currently facing many international NGOs, seeing a different organisational model in practice was particularly fascinating to me. AKDN's model has been described as operating through interconnected pillars of asset generation, reinvestment and impact measurement.

What interested me most was not simply the scale of AKDN's work, but the way its institutions are embedded within the communities they serve. Observing this first-hand encouraged me to think more critically about what sustainable humanitarian governance can look like beyond conventional donor-dependent models.

Gilgiti Dances and Community

Dance is an important part of social and cultural life in Gilgit. During my stay, I had the opportunity to attend a wedding and experience the celebrations first-hand.

At the groom's Mehndi, the dancing followed a fascinating progression. The groom's father began with a solo performance, followed by the groom's brothers and close friends, and then his sisters. Eventually, members of the wider family formed a large circle and danced together.

What particularly struck me was how gender-inclusive the dancing appeared to be. This stood out to me because of the contrast with forms of gender segregation and stigma surrounding women's public dancing in other parts of Pakistan, particularly in the context of Punjab.

Bazms were another interesting form of community celebration that I encountered. Aziz Ali Dad, in **Beyond the Mountains**, describes them as resembling concerts; they could perhaps also be understood as something like community karaoke nights. Through events such as these, people come together to listen to music, dance, socialise and reconnect.

These experiences reminded me that culture is not simply something preserved in books or museums. It is continually produced through ordinary social interactions, celebrations and relationships between people.

Gilgit: Worldmaking and Mythology

Gilgit-Baltistan is a region with a long and complex history, stretching back to ancient civilisations and hunter-gatherer societies. Across generations, communities have constructed and reconstructed their understandings of the world and the 'otherworldly'.

During my time in Gilgit, I became particularly interested in the stories that continue to circulate through local communities: stories of cannibal kings, fairies, giants and supernatural beings. These stories provide another way of understanding how people make sense of their landscapes and histories.

The Legend of the Cannibal King

One local legend tells of Shri Badat, the feared cannibal king of Gilgit, who demanded children as sacrifices. According to the story, his reign eventually came to an end when the fairy prince Azur Jamshed rose against him, burned his fortress and freed the people from his rule.

Centuries later, the story continues to live on. During the Tumshilling festival, firewood is set alight and drums are played as people commemorate the defeat of the cannibal king. An old tale of terror is therefore transformed into a celebration.

The Man-Eating Giantess of Kargah

High above Kargah Nala stands a seventh-century Buddha. Yet local folklore offers another interpretation of the figure and its surrounding landscape. According to one story, the figure is associated with Yatchini, a man-eating giantess who terrorised Gilgit until a holy man trapped her within the mountainside.

Whether understood as historical fact, folklore or symbolic storytelling, these narratives demonstrate how landscapes acquire meaning through the stories attached to them.

Deos of the Bronze Age

Thousands of years before the Islamic-era folklore surrounding Deos, enormous human-like figures were carved into the rocks of the Upper Indus. Archaeologists have described these figures as 'giants' or 'giant devas'. Some stand more than two metres tall, with enormous hands and raised arms.

Their original meaning remains uncertain. They may have represented ancestors, mountain spirits, river gods or shamans transformed into supernatural beings. Their ambiguity is perhaps part of what makes them so fascinating: thousands of years later, we can see the figures, but we cannot know with certainty what their creators intended them to represent.

For me, these stories and monuments reinforced an idea that became increasingly important throughout my placement: places are not simply physical landscapes. They are also made through memory, storytelling, belief and imagination.

Reflections

I began my Leadership in Action placement thinking primarily about what I could *do*. I left thinking much more about what I could *learn*.

The most valuable part of the experience was not necessarily any single session I delivered, but the opportunity to observe how people navigate education, community, culture and identity within their own contexts. I came to Pakistan with certain assumptions about what volunteering would look like. Six weeks later, I found that many of those assumptions had been challenged.

The experience also reminded me of the importance of humility in humanitarian and development work. It is easy to arrive with the belief that you are there to solve a problem. In reality, communities already have their own knowledge, relationships, systems and solutions. As an outsider, my role was necessarily limited.

I therefore see my Leadership in Action experience less as a story of the impact I made and more as a story of the perspective I gained. I had the opportunity to contribute in small ways, but I also had the privilege of listening, observing and learning.

That is perhaps what I will carry forward from these six weeks: a stronger understanding that meaningful humanitarian work begins with understanding people in the contexts they themselves inhabit.