

## **Language and learning: Using Pashto in Pakistani classrooms.**

**By Shahzad S Mithani**

Urdu is Pakistan's national and official language of instruction in early and primary years; however it is spoken only by 7.57 per cent of the population (Gordon, 2005). Debate over the medium of instruction has been ongoing for over a decade in Pakistan and to date there is no consensus among the federal and provincial government on this subject. In the meantime, provincial languages are widely used in schools especially in the early and primary years and as a result, teachers support rote-reading and memorization in the Urdu language.

This paper presents the complex multilingual realities of Pakistan and illustrates factors that hinder learning. Given this context, achieving the MDGs by 2015 seems elusive yet it should be viewed as an aspiring process.

Findings from the baseline conducted by Save the Children/United States in the pilot Literacy Boost project in accessing the reading/listening comprehension in Urdu and Pushto for second graders concluded that only 22.5 per cent of the students could read and comprehend words in Urdu; whereas 93.25 per cent of the students could not comprehend Urdu words when passages were read to them. Similarly 90.12 per cent of children could not read Pashto text correctly; even though classroom teaching alternates between the Pashto and Urdu languages. This is exasperated by the lack of quality of teaching and teachers' inability to engage children in drawing meaning and relevance in reading and comprehension.

This paper elaborates on Save the Children's experience on material development and teaching learning processes from the classroom to highlight key findings with recommendations on language of instruction, reading comprehension and language for textbooks for the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, a province in the northwest region of the country.