

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL EXCHANGES: THE CASE OF NORTH CAROLINA-PAKISTAN SCHOOL EXCHANGE PROJECT

Jesse Lutabingwa, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA ¹
Arshad Bashir, COMSATS, Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan²

ABSTRACT

People-to-people direct public diplomacy is a powerful tool for helping to change people's perception of each other's countries and cultures. This paper discusses the cultural diplomacy and educational gains by educators and students of K-12 schools and communities in North Carolina (USA) and Taxila (Pakistan) as a result of school exchange project. Even though the U.S. and Pakistan have been partners for many years, after the event of September 2011, there has been an increase suspicion of each other, mistrust on both sides, and stereotypes. Many Pakistanis continue to hold negative views about the U.S. and vice versa. Underpinning the Project is the thinking that young people in middle to high schools rather than older ones provide greater potential in helping to reverse some of the strong negative held views about each other. The goal of the Project is to strengthen academic, professional, and cultural partnerships between K-12 educators and students in North Carolina and Taxila. The School Exchange Project provides opportunities for educators, students, and communities to get first-hand knowledge and learn more about each other's countries and cultures so that they can go beyond the media-shaped stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

People-to-people direct public diplomacy is a powerful tool for helping to change people's perceptions of each other's countries and cultures. International educational and professional exchanges play an important and vital part in public or cultural diplomacy particularly because face-to-face contacts between peoples of different countries and cultures helps to diminish stereotypes and ultimately facilitates inter-cultural communication. Ms. Ann Stocks, former Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of State, emphasizes the importance of public diplomacy in the following way: "Educational exchange is crucial to America's public diplomacy efforts and U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs have earned robust bipartisan support in [U.S.] Congress for over 60 years. Today educational exchanges remain vital to increasing mutual understanding and they fuel an engine for cooperation to meet common challenges that is unprecedented in American diplomacy."³

Even though the U.S. and Pakistan have been partners for many years, after the event of September 2011, there has been an increased suspicion of each other, mistrust on both sides, and stereotypes. Many Pakistanis continue to hold negative views about the U.S. and vice versa. Pervasive anti-American

¹ Dr. Jesse Lutabingwa is Associate Vice Chancellor for International Education and Development and Professor of Public Administration at Appalachian State University. He serves as Director of the North Carolina-Pakistan School Exchange Project.

² Dr. Arshad Bashir is Assistant Director at the Pakistan Commission of Higher Education and an Assistant Professor at COMSATS, Institute of Information Technology. He serves as Project Manager for the North Carolina-Pakistan School Exchange Project. When the project started, he was a doctoral student at Appalachian State University.

³ Ann Stock (November 24, 2010), "International Educational Exchange: A High-Dividend Investment in the Future," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

sentiment related largely to the drone attacks that kill numerous civilians exist in Pakistan. The Raymond Davis, a CIA agent, affair in Lahore, as well as the secretive manner in which Osama bi Laden was captured and killed inside Pakistan continued to fuels Pakistan’s suspicion of the U.S.⁴

On the other hand, U.S. Americans cannot understand why Pakistan continues to receive significant financial assistance from the U.S. Since 1948, Pakistan has historically been among the top five recipients of U.S. foreign aid. The U.S. has provided more than \$30 billion in direct aid to the country.⁵ Nearly half of this has been for military assistance. While the U.S. assistance to Pakistan has fluctuated considerably over the past 60 years, since 9/11 aid to Pakistan has continually increased as both the Bush and Obama Administrations have characterized Pakistan as a U.S. strategic partner in the Afghanistan war, in the fight against terrorism, and in efforts to stabilize the region. However, many U.S. Americans do not view Pakistan as very helpful in the war on terror. For example, many U.S. Americans asks the same questions that Pakistanis asked with regard to Osama bi Landen’s hiding place in Abbottabad: “How could a notorious terrorist be hiding in Pakistan and remain undetected for so many years?”⁶ There is also a large segment of the U.S. American population that views Pakistanis as Taliban terrorists.

It was in this context and under these circumstances that the North Carolina-Pakistan School Exchange Project was conceived. Underpinning the Project is the thinking that young people in middle to high schools rather than older ones provide greater potential in helping to reverse some of the strong negative held views about each other. The project is funded by the U.S. Embassy-Islamabad and implemented by Appalachian State University located in Boone, North Carolina (USA). The goal of the Project is to strengthen academic, professional, and cultural partnerships between K-12 educators and students in three North Carolina schools and the Heavy Industries Taxila Educational City (HITEC) in Taxila, Pakistan. In its third year now, the School Exchange Project provides opportunities for teachers, students, and communities to get first-hand knowledge and learn more about each other’s countries and cultures so that they can go beyond the media-shaped stereotypes. The Project is expected to generate more positive stories from both sides that would help to bridge the cultural gap that exists between peoples of the two countries.

CONSTRUCT OF THE EXCHANGE PROJECT AND ACTIVITIES

The Project is conceptually divided into three components. The first component is comprised of the two-way discussions using technology as a mechanism for collaboration. This component builds on the pilot online collaborative program between Pakistan and North Carolina that started in 2010 and under the “US-Pakistan Educational and Cultural Exchange Program.” Through the US-Pakistan Educational and Cultural Exchange Program, participants in the North Carolina schools and Pakistan exchanged ideas,

⁴ Mark Mazzetti (April 9, 2013), “How a Single Spy Helped Turn Pakistan Against the United States,” *The New York Times*.

⁵ Susan B. Epstein and K. Alan Kronstadt (July 2011), *Pakistan: U.S. Foreign Assistance*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service.

⁶ Malala Yousafzai (2013), *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban*, Little, Brown: New York.

subject matter contents, and cultural artifacts online. It was viewed that existing technological tools could help educators and students in both Pakistan and the U.S. interact with each other.

The second component of the project involves two-way exchanges, physical mobility of people. Students and educators travel to the U.S. and Pakistan for face-to-face interactions and dialogue. So far 70 students and educators have traveled to Pakistan and United States on exchanges (44 Pakistanis and 26 U.S. Americans). These exchange visits to Taxila and Islamabad in Pakistan and North Carolina and Washington, DC in the U.S. have strengthened the relationship between educational institutions and the communities in both countries. The exchanges have helped students and educators to experience cultures, values systems, and environments as virtues through which they have developed a better understanding of people and their way of life. The visits have also changed the way people think about each other and have improve their perception on issues of mutual interest, and dispel or clarify stereotypes and myths about each other. Additionally, participants from both the U.S. and Pakistan have been exposed to different educational systems.

The third component is the follow-on phase of this project whereby participants who travel to the U.S. and Pakistan implement their action plans that they developed during the visit to the U.S. or Pakistan. Participants also prepare presentations to share with their respective schools and communities about their experiences in the U.S. and Pakistan. In order to develop and maintain sustainable relationships, the collaborative partnerships among educators and students in the U.S. and Pakistan have been consolidated by providing more access to technological tools and technical support to the participants and their institutions. Partner teachers in both Pakistan and the U.S. have integrated their semester-long projects within their regular courses thus bringing creativity and innovation into their teaching pedagogies and exposing their students to other cultures. Students identify local and national holidays, rituals, and festivals in both countries and celebrate these events together. Fourth of July, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Halloween are some of the popular holidays in the U.S., whereas the two Eids, Spring Kite Festival, Independence Day, Iqbal Day, and Ramadhan are some of the most popular holidays and rituals in Pakistan. Students have shared historical background, myths, philosophy and procedures about these events and helped their partner students to learn more about the culture in context.

OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

Thus far, the Project has achieved and exceeded the goals and objectives established at the outset. The quarterly reports submitted to the U.S. Embassy-Islamabad include extensive reflections from various project participants telling stories of their experiences. These stories and reflections help to make the point of the extent to which the project has achieved and exceeded its intended goals and objectives. A small sample of those reflections and stories is presented here to demonstrate the powerful results of this exchange project between the U.S. and Pakistan and the value of the face-to-face interactions in the people-to-people and cultural diplomacy.

The outcomes achieved under the project are grouped in seven categories and participants' reflections for each of the outcomes are provided below.

- Improving Perceptions in Community about the U.S. and Pakistan;
- Overcoming Stereotypes;
- Increasing Understanding of the Religions on both Sides;
- Building Trust;
- Building Relationships among Students, Educators and Respective Communities;
- Achieving Academic Gains; and
- Achieving Positive Student Experiences.

Improving Perceptions in Community about the U.S. and Pakistan

Participants not only improved their perceptions about each other but also helped their respective communities to understand the issues in context. One of the teachers mentioned:

For those who question why I would go to Pakistan, "a terrorist country" whose citizens "only wish harm on Americans", my reply is this: I went to Pakistan not because I love Pakistan, but because I love America. And because I deeply love my country, I am willing to do my part to improve our relationship with other countries. How many citizens have the opportunity to make a long-lasting impact like this between two countries? It was my honor to represent America to a people who have misconceptions and stereotypes about us. And in my effort to be a blessing to strangers, I was blessed ten-fold. A lady said to me just last weekend, "I'm glad you're back safely from Pakistan. I didn't think it was a good idea for you to go in the first place." I replied about what a wonderful trip it was, and how kind the people were, and how we were never in danger or feared for our safety. She replied, "You know that they want to kill all Americans, right?" I looked at her and thought, "You are the reason this project needs to continue," but instead I said to her, "I lived among some of the kindest people I've ever met for 8 days. They welcomed me into their homes. They gave up their beds for me. They fed me. I read bedtime stories to their children. And the entire time I was there, I never met one person who wanted to kill me." People cannot argue with what someone has actually experienced.

Recently, one the North Carolina (U.S.) teachers who traveled to Pakistan shared about her conversation with a Facebook friend who is retired U.S. Navy. She shared with him a *New York Times* article, "What Pakistan Knew About Bin Laden" with the following comment:

Hi! Hope you are doing well. I thought of you when I read this article last week. I keep up with news out of Pakistan since visiting there last year. This article is one of the best I've seen to expose the complexity of the nation's inner turmoil that is hindering its own peace and progress. But what made me think of you (and the info you often post about the danger of weakening the US Navy) was something attributed to Bin Laden: "He wanted Akhtar and the Taliban to accelerate the recruitment and training of fighters so they could trap United States forces in Afghanistan with a well-organized guerrilla war. Bin Laden said that Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and the Indian Ocean region would be Al Qaeda's main battlefields in the coming years, and that he needed more fighters from those areas. He even offered naval training for militants,

saying that the United States would soon exit Afghanistan and that the next war would be waged on the seas."

Her friend was shocked that she had been to Pakistan and wrote:

Wow! I didn't realize you went to Pakistan. What was the purpose of that trip? Was it church related? Regardless, you went into the teeth of the tiger. I'm glad you're home safe and sound. That trip must have been an incredible experience.

She then replied as follows:

I spent 10 days in Taxila, Pakistan in Feb. 2013 as part of an educational & cultural exchange that included my school, App State [Appalachian State University], and HITEC (a pre-K through university) educational complex in Taxila. The law of hospitality is, ironically, stronger anywhere else in the Middle East, and I have never been treated with more kindness and generosity than I was there. A group of 20+ Pakistani teachers and students have come to Boone for 3 week visits in both Fall 2012 & 2013. In October 2013, we hosted a 13 year old boy from the Pakistan.... Our entire family fell in love with him and consider him part of our family. My oldest son was playing chess with him online just today. All that to say, I am not so blinded by their kindness that I gloss over the complex nature of their country & its relationship with the US. In fact, the more I'm involved with the program (funded by the State Dept & US Embassy in Islamabad), the less hope I have for the liberation of the Pakistani people from radical extremism and resulting violence both within and without its borders. But we know one boy there who KNOWS that Americans love him. And there's an American family here praying for him daily that KNOWS not all Pakistanis are jihadists bent on our very destruction. More info than you needed...

Finally, her friend sent the following reply which shows how the power of people-to-people and citizen diplomacy in helping people increase their understanding about others peoples and cultures:

Your experience is fascinating and your comments have helped me see Pakistan from a new perspective. Thank you for sharing your experience with me.

One young Pakistani teacher and unmarried who had been selected to travel to the U.S. had a very difficult time getting permission from her family. Her brother was exceptionally difficult and completely refused to allow her sister to travel to the U.S. After the intervention of several people and at the last minute, he grudgingly consented. His refusal was mainly based on his strongly held belief that the U.S. and Americans are not good people who hate Pakistanis and Muslims. In her reflections after her experience in the U.S., she wrote:

".... So far as our visit to US is concerned it was wonderful. At the back of my mind was the gnawing feeling that we might not be treated well but we received a very warm welcome by the staff and throughout my visit not for a single moment did I face any sort of discrimination. Even my smallest efforts were appreciated and most of the people there were keen to know about Pakistan and its traditions.... In Boone we were hosted by some lovely people. It was an amazing experience to be a part of a family who belong to diverse culture but the way they treated us, is unforgettable. It seems as if God has sent some special people on the earth for us.

I would like to thank my host family from the core of my heart who entertained me with love, care and affection. I shall never be able to forget affection and care of these lovely people. Moreover, here I want to mention one thing more, before coming to US there were some stereotypes I was having but during our 3 weeks visit those proved bubbles of water.... I really appreciate the people who understood my values and avoided shaking hands....

Two years later after participating in the visit to the U.S., this same woman has now married a Pakistani who lives in the U.S. and she herself has also moved to the U.S.

Overcoming Stereotypes

Most of the Pakistani and the U.S. participants possess stereotypes of each other. The project has helped the participants to overcome these stereotypes. One of the Pakistani school principals made the following comment:

The three-week visit to North Carolina was a unique, fun-filled, learning experience. Stereotypes were broken, perceptions were changed, gaps were bridged, visions were broadened, friendships were developed and bonds of love were strengthened. On a personal level, the host families became our second families or the American families. Every visitor thought that his/her family was the best, so close had every one grown to his/ her family. We tried to give our families a taste of Pakistan food by cooking for them! And they tried to develop our taste buds for American cuisine.

Another North Carolina (U.S.) teacher reflected on her Pakistan experience after returning back in the following manner:

After my return from my trip to Pakistan, my 15 year old son saw one of my pictures from the trip. I was standing next to one of the host family's daughters, and she was wearing a veil that covered everything but her eyes. My son, said, "Oh she looks scary." It was in that statement that I gained insight into what many others see when they look at Pakistan or many other Muslim countries. When I look at the picture of my friend wearing the veil, I remember her laughter and her witty sense of humor. I remember how she and her brother waited for their American guest (my friend) to return each night so excited to see her and talk to her about her day. I remember her serving us tea for the mendi (henna) party they held for all of the American women guests. This was a very conservative family that embraced us with as much love as our own families back home [in America]. So when my son said this, I told him all the stories from the week and the funny things she had said. I did the same thing with my students at school the next day, and I will continue to tell anyone who will listen about this family and their love.

A Pakistani student expressed her experience with overcoming stereotypes in the following way:

My visit to America...was an awesome experience in my life. Before going there I used to think that Americans are very rude people, they don't like to talk to Pakistanis and they don't live in family as we do. But when I met them and spent time with them all of my stereotypes were vanished. Americans lived like families and treated us very well. When we were living with our host families, they took care of us like their own children. Everyday they used to ask me if I need anything. My host family took me shopping in Charlotte. I went to a street with them to see the

Christmas lightening, which was so pretty.... My host family gifted me a stuffed toy as well which I named Aldridge after my host family whose family name was Aldridge.... The thing that I observed the most was that they [Americans] were really busy people. They didn't have time for themselves and they love sports.... My host family was very loving and caring.... She made all possible efforts to keep me happy and loved me as I was her own daughter. She did not cook anything that didn't like. She was very careful about my likes and dislikes.

Increasing Understanding of Religions on both Sides

During the visit to the U.S. some of the Pakistani students and educators went for the first time to Christian church services with their U.S. American families and observed some of the Christmas festivities. For the first time, U.S. American educators visited mosques on the HITEC campus and in Islamabad. One parent of a Pakistani student who had traveled to the U.S. shared the following comment:

My grandfather was a very conservative Muslim, my father is a very conservative Muslim, and I am a very conservative Muslim. I could not have allowed my daughter to go into a Christian church. But she did that in the U.S. When she came back and told us what Christians do in the churches, we were amazed. We now have very different views about Christians and their churches.

In February 2014, a group of North Carolina educators visited Pakistan for a period of 10 days. On one Sunday, the schedule indicated that the North Carolina group would be accompanied by several Pakistani educators and host families to visit the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad and followed immediately by going to a church service at the St. Thomas' Church (Anglican) in Islamabad. For most of the North Carolina participants, this was the second time to visit a mosque after visiting one on the HITEC campus. However, for the Pakistani Muslim educators and host families, this was the first time they had ever been in a Christian church. In the Pakistan context, this is a great achievement that no one had planned. It reflects how open people on both sides had become open and willing to learn about each other's religions.

In his reflections after visiting Pakistan, one of the North Carolina teachers made the following observation:

When it comes to religious values, I sensed a shift towards acceptance within our own American group. Since I had stayed in Egypt for eight weeks in 1992, I felt I had a basic understanding of Islam. I know that the Koran speaks a message of peace and respect for other religions, but there were many other teachers on the exchange who were not so sure. One of the teachers in our group interviewed the Imam at the mosque on campus. When my friend asked the Imam what he would like Americans to know about Pakistan, the Imam spoke a message of peace and respect, and said this is what Pakistanis want for their country and for the world. This message affected all members of our group, and I saw a change in our own belief systems and a greater understanding of Islam.

In one of the Facebook posts by one of the Pakistani Christian host families, he shared a photo of one of the North Carolina teachers holding a baby of one of Pakistani Muslim hosts and feeding her from a bottle. The Pakistani Christian made the following observation:

Look at this picture, this is Judd, a US citizen and a good Christian as I know him, the lady in the background is the mother of the baby Judd is feeding, she is a Pakistan citizen and a good Muslim, feel the trust the mother has in this man that she gave her baby to this man to take care of and see the good job Judd is doing. If our hearts are clear and we have love for each other nationalities and religion do not matter. The key word here is Love, let's start to value it.

One of the Pakistani students made the following comment in his reflections:

Before visiting a church, I expected that people at a Christian church would not like a Muslim visiting their church. But when I visited Mount Vernon Baptist Church [in Boone, North Carolina], the people were so welcoming. When I return to Pakistan, I will tell others that Americans are kind and grateful. They actually don't hate Pakistan. They love the people of Pakistan and love to help them.

Building Trust

One of the hallmarks of the exchange visits is that participants have to stay with host families. Prior to the first North Carolina group's visit to Pakistan in February 2013, HITEC experienced some difficulties in recruiting enough volunteers to host male educators from the U.S. As such, there was a discussion on who and how the Pakistanis would host these U.S. Americans men in their homes. Initially, several HITEC families were reluctant to host men in their homes. One can understand the hesitation on the part of the Pakistanis because in their culture, it is not socially acceptable for a woman to be in the close quarters with a man who is not a relative or a very close friend. It was during these discussions when one HITEC teacher who had visited the U.S. and had been hosted in one of the families stood up and gave his personal testimony to his colleagues and friends attending the meeting. His personal testimony completely changed the dynamics of the discussion. He said:

When I was in the U.S., I stayed with the Russel family. On night, Mr. Russel had to go to a meeting and left me alone with his wife and children in the house. I could not believe it that Mr. Russel would trust me alone in his house with his wife. I am a conservative Muslim and before going to the U.S., I would not have allowed a man to stay in my home but now I have changed. I am going to host Mr. Russel in my home and urge the rest of you to consider hosting some of the American men into your homes.

Building Relationships among Students, Educators and Respective Communities

The exchange visits resulted in development of deep relationship at personal and community level. One of the U.S. school principals' comments succinctly capture what happened in the following words:

The trip to Pakistan was so much more than a cultural experience and educational exchange. This was a relationship-building experience as the faculty and students of HITEC welcomed us into their classrooms and homes as honored guests. The Pakistanis are a generous and caring people that value their rich cultural heritage, family, faith, and education. They are working to diminish the reputation of violence that the media portrays about their country. Like us, the Pakistani

people want the world to be a better place for their children. My heart will forever hold onto the special gift of love that was shared with us. Providing our students with on-going international experiences will improve their communication skills and relationships with different people, and thereby increase their effectiveness as the future leaders of America. Every connection one can make on a more personal level brings all of us closer to caring about what happens to each other in the future. I hope this exchange will help our students learn to listen, understand differences, and work towards compromise in making peace an international experience for all.

Achieving Academic Gains

Though this unique school exchange, educators and students attain global awareness and academic skills. One of the U.S. participating teachers describes his experience in the following way:

First, I was very interested to learn more about how HITEC functions to educate students from pre-K through the university level. I have not heard of another educational institution that educates such a broad age-range of students on one campus. As an Academically & Intellectually Gifted Specialist, I was especially interested to observe how teachers at HITEC motivate and challenge their bright students throughout the various grade levels. After visiting HITEC, I was most impressed with the level of academic competition that is present within the school. This is something that we have lost in America and I have been trying to voice my concern that excellence does not have to be sacrificed for equality. Both can be achieved, and I believe academic competition is critical to the success of our gifted students. One unexpected benefit was spending time with the staff of HITEC and collaborating with our colleagues. Planning sessions allowed us to reflect on the projects students had completed in the Fall, and identify ways to make improvements as we developed together the next collaborative project. The gains we made in planning the next project could not have been accomplished through email alone.

A Pakistani teacher explains his experience in this manner:

I visited different classes and personally seen the physical facilities like, smartboards, projectors, used in the classrooms and noticed their impact on learning. I also analyzed the role of the teacher and of the student in the classroom. To my special interest was the impact of these things on both learning and students, in the development of their affective, cognitive and psychological domains.... I learned how teachers motivate students, how they arouse their interest in learning activities and doing assignments when back home. School timings, lesson timings, break timings and duration were also the areas of my interest. It was my endeavor to observe a class to record their timings for each activity done. I quite enjoyed learning all this.... Of special interest to me was the role of 'free inquiry' as practiced in the US. I also keenly observed how 8-15 years old are taught the basic life skills and multi-literacies and multi-modalities. I particularly visited classes which fairly represented the global diversity and observed how a multicultural society functions within a classroom under the same roof. The US educational objective of equal opportunity also attracted me to see and I feel that equal opportunity may be one of the factors in bringing more children to schools. I also noticed how teacher in the US maintains discipline inside the classes in its educational institutes, besides having extended so many liberties to the students. Being a physics teacher my special focus on the teaching of science in general and Physics in particular is natural. I am impressed by the ways in which the concepts of science are taught or learned through different classroom activities. I am also impressed by the role of classroom, of library, of laboratory, and of the different media used in the educational institutions

and their impact on the students and learning environment. I have learned a great deal about the use of modern technology in the classrooms....

The following quote captures how a North Carolina student was impacted by the project after the visit of the Pakistani students to her school:

When I heard about the visitors from Pakistan coming to our school I thought they were coming from a violent place because that is what I saw on television on the news. I did not think their country would be very beautiful like ours and that everyone in Pakistan is very poor. Once I met Ali and the other Pakistan students at our very first meeting, I realized they are funny, friendly, caring, smart, and so much like me and my friends! I also learned that their families are just like mine. I also saw that the kids from Pakistan had clothes just like ours. They also like the same kinds of music and video games. They are not violent or mean, but they are real kind and they care about the same things we do like helping the poor and saving the planet. I have made friends for life with the students from Pakistan. I will keep in contact with them online and I hope to go to Pakistan as soon as I can. This experience has also made me want to travel the world and meet people from all over the world. Now I am not afraid to go to new places and meet people that might seem different.

Three Pakistani students chronicle their experiences in the following manner:

The U.S education system uses more resources. The teacher makes sure that learning is interesting and every child understands the lesson properly. One particular thing I liked was that weak students in a specific area could take special class for that.

I am very much interested in painting, arts and music. So I have learnt new methods of painting and arts. I had also learnt music like guitar and piano in my host family.... Love America.

Their people [Americans] with disabilities have opportunity to get education. From this I started to question why is it that in Pakistan our disabled people do not have the opportunity to get education.

Achieving Positive Student Experiences

Students enjoyed the experience and transformed themselves as International learners. One of the Pakistani students expressed her experience as follows:

My experience has been amazing.... I have made some very special bonds with some very special people in America. They have made their place in my heart as true Americans. My host family has treated me like their very own daughter. I have not felt at any point that I am far away from home. I have had lots of fun with my new friends at Green Valley. I was impressed by their love for country, their lifestyle and how hospitable they were. I enjoyed the cuisine and the relations between families were strong. Stereotypes were immediately broken.... And this time when someone asks me WHAT ABOUT AMERICA? I would have an answer for that guy. I would love to come to America again to study.

A U.S. student made the following comment in his reflections:

What I knew about Pakistan before this trip [to Washington, DC] was very little but what I have learned has changed my life forever. Before this trip this is what I thought about Pakistan and the Pakistani people. First, I knew where Pakistan was! It is located between Iran, Afghanistan, India, and the Arabian Sea. Second, I always wondered why the older and sometimes younger women wore a scarf on their heads. Third, I thought that they did not live in a complex society and that they lived in homes that looked like huts. Lastly, I wondered what I would have in common with them on our trip. I was worried that I would not have anything to talk to them about. BOY WAS I WRONG!!

Through this experience, I have learned that the Pakistani society and culture is much like our own. They [Pakistani visitors] knew that there were things like iPads, iPhones, and laptops. I was surprised at how much electronics stuff they bought while they were here. The Pakistani girls dressed just like many girls in our very own school would dress. I also learned that this group of Pakistani people was very giving, kind, and curious throughout this trip. I was amazed at how much they knew about the American history. At The U.S. State Department, Ali answered a question about Albert Einstein that none of the American students knew the answer for. I learned all about the scarves (called Topis) and how they give women status in their society. The young girls on this trip only wore their topi at night because they are not recognized as full women yet.

This experience has taught me not to judge or have opinions about things that I don't have firsthand knowledge. When I was getting ready for the trip [to Washington, DC], I was excited about going to Washington, DC and learning about our nation's capital.... As we left the airport on Thursday night, I realized this trip was way more about the relationships that grew more and more each day. This will affect my life forever because I will always know that there are wonderful people and children in all countries even where the United States may have issues with their governments.

Another Pakistani student said the following:

After spending my wonderful trip in USA, I enjoyed it a lot.... I want to tell about their [American] customs, traditions and especially about their hospitality. They are very good, caring, and loving. They are really courteous to others. They are good and responsible citizens as they follow the rules very strictly. They are very polite and well-mannered and very conscious about cleanliness. They do not hesitate in doing any type of work. One day I got on the bus and did not say "hello" to the driver then the principal told me that the bus driver was our Assistant Principal. It was very shocking for me.

CONCLUSION

The North Carolina-Pakistan School Exchange Project is a great tool to improve perception of people living in two countries. The Project helped the participants and the communities to understand cultural diversity and educational system systems of Pakistan and the U.S. At the same time, the international exposure to educators and students helped them to broaden their worldview. There is no way of quantitatively measuring the impact of what has been achieved through the Project. However, one thing that is clear is that the people who have participated in this project, especially the young students, will never be the same. For young people, this project may have change the course of their life trajectories and we will never know where they end up or how this project has influenced their future decisions. This

Project is a small pebble dropped into a very large ocean. The hope is that this tiny pebble will generate large ripples of peace and mutual understanding between the U.S. American and Pakistani people.