Indigenizing Pedagogy: A Freedom Concept for Harsukh School  
Lahore, Pakistan  
Muhammad Ali Imran, Denison University

**Background:** Generations of Pakistani students have entered academia and learning communities in precarious circumstances. For many, schooling itself is a violent experience — a product of inequalities inflected by histories of colonialism, militarism, state-neglect, and heteropatriarchy. For women, queer, and *khwaja sira*¹ students, and for students from marginalized ethnic and religious groups, claiming an education for themselves and their communities can be a challenging endeavor. Furthermore, the learning process is often instituted through spaces, tools, and vernaculars that are unfamiliar and do not honor the students' lifeworlds, communities, and passions (Zulfiqar, 2). When learning is not socially relevant and does not benefit students and their communities, it is a tool of oppression and reinforces inequalities (Jackson and Howard, 157).

It is also important to underscore the absence of necessary educational infrastructure and academic and administrative careers in Pakistan that contributes to precarity and institutional violence. The vast majority of young people in Pakistan do not have access to private elite institutions. Research consistently indicates high levels of inequities in literacy at a national level inflected along lines of class, gender, caste, and ethnicity (ASER, 2019). However, even with major developments in expanding literacy for women and minority communities (Malala Fund Report, 17), it is clear that the delivery and implementation of educational curricula consistently fail to remedy “historical educational neglect, vacation- or pandemic-based learning losses, and socioeconomic odds criminally stacked against the typical public school learner” (Zulfiqar, 3).

**Project Description and Goals:** I will implement this project in partnership with Kitab Ghar², a public library, and Harsukh *Idara-e-Ilm-o–Funn³*, a school, in Lahore, Pakistan to develop a “freedom school” curriculum, cultivate intergenerational community volunteers, and curate a Harsukh Freedom School training guide and resource archive. I will use my existing connections and the network of activists and educators at Kitab Ghar and Harsukh School to recruit 5-6 educators and education specialists. This team will implement a multipronged process that critically analyzes the existing system and curricula to envision and codify a “Freedom School” curriculum for students at Harsukh. This curriculum will delineate and integrate culturally, historically, and ethically informed pedagogy, community engagement, and consciousness-raising within its framework based on a socially-aware collaboration of the core team with students, community-members, and other stakeholders. I will further work with curriculum specialists and administrators at Harsukh to develop guidelines and training sessions to implement the curriculum. My role in the program will primarily be one of an administrator, but I will also act as a facilitator and educator in various capacities. For the duration of the project, the core team will be teaching for 3-4 days per week at Harsukh school (dependent on the program’s summer schedule) and spending 3 days per week working on curriculum development at Kitab Ghar.

Harsukh School is a non-profit initiative by a former Chief Justice of Pakistan and offers classes to students from grade one to nine. It offers an unusual mode of operation compared to most schools in Lahore and students are taught in multilingual settings, with a strong emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy and social awareness. Many students come from underprivileged and minoritized communities in the village where the school building is located. Kitab Ghar is privately operated and an open to public library space in the densely populated town of Ichara in Lahore, with a vision to “popularize citizen initiatives that serve the public.” Kitab Ghar will provide the Freedom Concept program with office space and access to its literary and logistical resources. Both project locations are sites for youth, feminist, and education activist networks and this will serve in the interest of project sustainability. For the duration of the project, Dr. Emily Nemeth, Professor of Education Studies, and Dr. Jane Saffitz, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology, at Denison University have agreed to be my project and research supervisors.

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¹ *Khwaja Sira* (“caretaker of the house”) are intersex, non-binary, genderqueer, transgender, and gender fluid people. The term is preferred by many in Pakistan over other variations like *hijra* or *khusra*.
³ https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/740435-a-passion-project
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Significance and Definition of Peace: My project design responds to the urgent need to reconstruct not only the dominant modes of schooling but also the pedagogical and administrative interventions usually staged through developmental programs in Pakistan. This project is invested in “the interest of the preservation and survival” of the communities where it is situated and is predicated on the notion that knowledge already exists within communities and a successful education responds to, understands, and honors that knowledge (Cooper et al., 170). Taking inspiration from the 1964 Freedom Summer projects by African American activists and the contemporary Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools, this project will work with community members, educators, youth activists, and administrators at Harsukh School, Lahore to develop and implement a freedom school curriculum.

I believe that the struggle for a liberating education cannot be separated from various other collective struggles against oppression. Therefore, in this project, peace is inextricably linked to community health and justice and might be defined as communal recourse to liberation from historical and contemporary forms of oppression and inequities. Community involvement, intergenerational leadership, and culturally and historically informed pedagogy are necessary to address forms of (socioeconomic, sexual, environmental) oppression. By modeling striving towards justice for the students, this project situates itself as one of the many steps necessary for peace in communities marked by extreme inequities. This expansive and complex framing is necessary to shape classroom, institutional, and community-specific ethos and resources (training, political education, tracking program outcomes, nutritional needs, etc.) for Harsukh School that then could be replicated elsewhere.

Project Sustainability: A primary goal of my project is to create a holistic, culturally informed, and consciousness-raising curriculum and model that serves the educators and students of Harsukh School. This curriculum will be implemented this summer at Harsukh but the project will codify a core curriculum and institute the program to be replicated yearly. A secondary goal of this curriculum will be to generate networks of intergenerational youth leaders and students advocating for their right to a liberating education. This community of educators and students will further identify community resources available to be employed in the implementation of freedom schools in communities and schools elsewhere in Lahore and Pakistan. I plan to continue my existing research and involvement in Lahore at Kitab Ghar and Harsukh School and this will also ensure my continued involvement beyond the project implementation.

Qualifications: This project builds on my research, grassroots organizing, job experiences, and scholarly interests. I have been involved with youth and feminist activists in Lahore since 2016 in various forms. This involvement formed the basis of my scholarly interests during my time at Denison University through a fully-funded summer research project on feminist and indigenous knowledges and literatures of Punjab, Pakistan, which I subsequently presented at multiple conferences. I have extensive experience as an educator, having held multiple departmental teaching and research assistant positions and consultant and management positions at Denison’s Writing Center. I worked at the CDF Freedom Schools of Licking County, Ohio in 2022 as a youth educator and was inspired to develop this project. This project will serve as the ethnographic basis and data-collection for my year-long joint senior research in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology and the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at Denison University.

References:
Project Timeline

January
A tentative contract has already been made with Kitab Ghar, to be officially signed if the grant is approved.

February
I will draft the teacher job description and contract (in Urdu), teacher workshop schedule, and extend conditional offers (pending project decision) to an education specialist and Harsukh teachers.

March
In case of a positive preliminary decision, contracts will be signed between program manager, Ali Imran, and Kitab Ghar. Job offers will be made and contracts will be finalized. Transportation for educators and curriculum specialists between Harsukh and Kitab Ghar will be arranged.

April 10 - May 1
Ali Imran and a curriculum specialist will complete the initial research and development phase for training and curriculum development plan.

May 2023 - August, 2023: A Freedom Concept for Harsukh

May 1
Payments will be made to Kitab Ghar and curriculum specialist, and travel funds will be disbursed as needed. Art supplies funds will be used to purchase supplies for Harsukh and Kitab Ghar.

May 15 - May 27
Teacher training, pedagogy workshops, and safety and consent training will be held. The timeline for the curriculum development program will be finalized alongside the final summer program schedule for students. Student enrollment will commence and community day for caretakers and students will be arranged.

May 27 - June 1
Kitab Ghar office set-up and Harsukh classroom set-up.

June 1 - July 29
Educators and researchers teach at Harsukh and work on curriculum development (dates and exact logistics subject to change per the final agreements with Kitab Ghar and Harsukh School).

August 1 -
Immediate structural recommendations will be implemented at Harsukh, final drafts for research, teacher and student observations, and other data will be finalized and archived, final drafts for core curriculum and other materials will be compiled and made publicly available by the project team.
December 15, 2023

Dear Committee Members:

It is with great pleasure that I write this recommendation in support of Ali Imran’s application for the Projects of Peace Fellowship. Ali is a highly motivated and insightful person, willing to initiate new undertakings, and exhibits commitment and creativity in his work. I believe that Ali’s intelligence, adaptability, language skills, experiences and commitment to public service will make him an outstanding candidate for your program.

I know Ali for the last two years. He was a student in the Issues in Feminism class in fall 2021 as well as my teaching assistant for two classes in spring 2022. Ali was also my research assistant working on social movements in the Middle East and North Africa. I know Ali as a student worker at the Women’s and Gender Studies (WGST) office. He ranks among the top two percent of all the students I worked with at Denison and beyond. He rose to the challenge and handled the responsibilities of his classwork and research assignments with utmost dedication. Ali’s attention to details and in-depth critical reading of the material allowed him to write excellent research papers. He was able to absorb new information and his comparative and insightful analysis and integration of the material were impressive. His papers and class presentations were thorough, comprehensive, and combined analytical and creative use of academic and media sources. In his work as my research assistant, Ali looked for academic and media sources. He was engaged, thorough, and very professional. His analysis always combined an intersectional and feminist approach to understanding local, regional, and transnational power structures.

Ali showed flexibility and adaptability in working in groups and individually. He worked around the clock to meet the demands of his heavy course schedule at Denison and still found the time to be active with many student and community organizations on and off campus. His work showed consistent engagement with the world around him. He has been working with youth, feminist, and literacy activists in Lahore since 2016. He took a leadership role on campus in raising awareness and speaking out against hateful attacks on Asians in the USA.

What distinguishes Ali from other students is his humility and commitment to social and political justice. It was impressive to witness his personal and intellectual growth, leadership skills, and ability to engage with his classmates during group presentations and class discussion. Ali is responsible, dedicated and very thorough. He is also an excellent listener, facilitator and communicator who does not hesitate to move out of his comfort zone. On more than one occasion, and as the students were ready to move on with class discussion, he would raise his hand and ask a hard question about the marginalized voices left out of our conversation. He did that with utmost respect to his peers and to their contribution to the conversation.

Ali’s application for the Davis Peace Project aims to develop a critical curriculum for underprivileged students at Harsukh schools, a non-traditional literacy school project in Lahore, Pakistan. He will work in collaboration with Kitab Ghar, a public library initiative started by queer and feminist activists. The project is feasible and much needed in the community. Ali and his team are well qualified to carry out this project. Ali not only has the skills but the will and commitment to make it succeed. He is committed to equality in access to education especially among girls and
minority students. He is also aware of class, caste, gender, and ethnic differences as well as the enduring presence of histories of colonialism, militarism, and heteropatriarchy.

This proposed project responds to the urgent need to reconstruct not only the dominant modes of schooling but also pedagogical and administrative interventions in various developmental programs in Pakistan. Inspired by the 1964 Freedom Summer projects by African American activists and the contemporary Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools, this project will work with educators, youth activists and volunteers to develop and implement a freedom school curriculum. Peace in this context is inextricably linked to community health and justice. The project combines community involvement, intergenerational leadership, and culturally and historically informed pedagogy. These are necessary for addressing economic, social, and political inequalities.

Ali and his team had already established partnership in the community and chose locations that are already a hub for activist work. This project builds on this established work as well as expand its scope and reach. The curriculum developed will be drawn on in the future and will become a pillar in designing and implementing educational work for peace and justice. A central goal of the project is to create a holistic, culturally informed, and consciousness-raising curriculum and model that serves the educators and students of Harsukh Schools. It will generate networks of intergenerational youth leaders, activists, and students advocating for their right to a liberating education that will allow for the implementation of free of charge freedom schools in communities and schools elsewhere in Lahore and Pakistan.

Ali is planning to remain involved in the community beyond the project implementation. He plans to conduct virtual and in-person research work at Kitab Ghar and Harsukh School from January 2022 to May 2024. He also plans to connect this project to his education at Denison. He will complement this project with ethnographic research through the Denison summer research program and joint senior research in Anthropology and Sociology and WGST.

Ali was recognized for his academic achievements and activist work at Denison through awards from both the WGST and English departments. He was granted the Nan-Nowik and the Critical Writing Awards. Ali is an intellectually curious and engaged person, and a well-rounded scholar who strives tirelessly to learn and grow. He is a mature and thoughtful person with high work ethics. Ali is disciplined, extremely motivated and able to cooperate with others as well as adapt and learn from them. His intellect, personality and energy lead me to believe that he should adapt to any situation with great success.

Ali is both a thinker and a doer, and it is the combination of these two elements that will make him succeed in his endeavors. His scholarship, leadership, and commitment to public service and to making a difference in the world will make him an outstanding candidate for this fellowship. I can say without reservation that Ali will make great contributions to your program.

If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (740)587-8537 or at nusairi@denison.edu.

Sincerely,
To Whom It May Concern:

It is with **great enthusiasm** that I write this letter of recommendation in support of Ali Imran who has submitted a proposal for Projects for Peace. I was fortunate to first meet Ali in the spring of 2022 when we met to discuss the servant leader intern position (~teacher) with the Children’s Defense Fund’s (CDF) Freedom Schools of Licking County, a nation-wide summer literacy program. As the faculty liaison between the local program and Denison University, I met with Ali early in his deliberations about the program. I was immediately impressed by the research he had done about the program and the level of intention he was putting into finding a meaningful experience for the summer following his sophomore year. I continued to meet with Ali through the application phase, and eventually, when he was hired to work as a level 2 instructor to work with 2nd through 5th graders. I have continued to meet with Ali regularly throughout the fall semester to discuss his Projects for Peace proposal and to engage ideas related to Freedom Schools, including community, equity, literacy, and critical pedagogies. Based on our frequent conversations and Ali’s thorough work on his proposal, I am in full, enthusiastic support of his proposal. His skills, experiences, knowledge, and community relationships in Lahore, Pakistan put him in an excellent position to bring his project to fruition.

As I noted above, I first met Ali when he interned with the Children’s Defense Fund’s Freedom Schools program in Johnstown, Ohio at our Northridge site, a rural population with a large farming community. The CDF Freedom School of Licking County is designed to serve young people from low-income backgrounds during the summer months to combat summer learning loss, to nurture fluency in young readers, to support comprehension strategies, and to cultivate self-efficacy among youth participants. As a servant leader intern for the program, Ali delivered a reading curriculum built around making a difference in oneself, family, community, country, and world through hope, education and action. Ali led conversations with young learners about equity, race, gender, social class, social movements, and racial history in the U.S., among other significant themes. He demonstrated tremendous capacity to translate complex themes to an age-appropriate level, scaffolding students’ understandings of those themes, and simultaneously supporting their vocabulary development, and decoding and comprehension skills. His involvement in the program allowed me to learn about some of Ali’s strengths, which included a critical intellect, humility, generosity, and a deep respect for human dignity. Ali was also very responsive to feedback. As a new teacher with only two weeks of training, he strengthened his pedagogical skills throughout the six week program, learning more about literacy instruction and how to infuse daily activities with the important legacy of the Freedom Schools summer.

Ali is in the top 1 percent of the over 100 servant leader interns I have worked over the past decade who, in addition to his work as a teacher in the program, dutifully studied the history of Freedom Schools and Freedom Summer, as well as the lives and contributions of the teachers and youth participants who navigated that important freedom struggle. My meetings and email exchanges with Ali evidenced his careful reading of scholarly articles, his curiosity about the curriculum, his capacity for questioning and research, and his developing strengths as a critical pedagogue. Ali’s Project Director (his direct supervisor) reported that his lesson plans were thorough and reflective of learning objectives outlined in the national curriculum, that he was an active participant in afternoon programming, helping scholars to...
connect to their local communities, and that he was a valuable member of their site staff, supporting staff morale and contributing to the debrief sessions each afternoon.

Ali’s work in the local community is not isolated to Freedom Schools. In addition, he is an active member of Denison’s intellectual and social life, promoting peace within and beyond the classroom. He has worked as a teaching and research assistant for the Women’s and Gender Studies Department and has led organizing efforts as vice president for Outlook, an “organization that is committed to educating the campus about GLBTQA issues and offering support to those who need it, as well as creating a safe and social space where students can embrace and explore their sexuality and gender expression.” In each of these settings, Ali endeavors to support a critical education that is bound to learner’s cultures, identities, and ultimately their liberation, freeing them up to unlearn harmful knowledge about themselves, others, and the world around them, and replace it with important tools of inquiry that center Freirean principles of trust, love, humility, and human dignity.

Ali has established a strong skillset and knowledge base in pedagogy and community collaborations, which are integral to his success for his Davis Projects for Peace proposal. His training with curriculum specialists at Children’s Defense Fund’s national training and his application of that training through daily classroom instruction for over six weeks of the program (including family nights) have informed his vision for next summer and will undoubtedly shape his practice working with young people, educators, and community leaders at Kitab Ghar and Harsukh Idara-e-Ilm-o-Funn in Lahore, Pakistan. It is for these reasons as well as my experiences with Ali over the past year that led to my enthusiastic support of his proposal. I admire his passion for educating young people, his skillful integration of theory, experience, and story to act with intention in his everyday life, and finally, his vision for a more socially just future for all children. Should I be able to provide further information in support of his application, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Emily A. Nemeth, Ph.D.
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To whom it may concern,

We are pleased to write a letter of support for Muhammad Ali Imran’s proposal to the Lisska Centre for Intellectual Engagement at Denison University for the development and institution of a “Freedom School” curriculum for Harsukh Idara-e-Ilm-o-Funn in collaboration with Kitab Ghar, Lahore. Critical, liberatory education is a rarity in education accessible to Pakistani masses. We strongly support Mr. Ali Imran’s proposal to organize a Freedom School transformation for Harsukh School, with working support from the academics, researchers and patrons who frequent Kitab Ghar.

Through this letter, we acknowledge the specific roles and responsibilities we will fulfill in this partnership. In the event this proposal is funded, we would expect our role in this project to include:

- Providing access to Kitab Ghar resources and space to launch, develop, and implement the project including on-site logistical support for the entirety of the project’s duration in the summer of 2023.

- Engaging in a collaborative effort with Muhammad Ali Imran and Harsukh School for developing and instituting a curriculum that is designed in the interest and on the terms of Harsukh teachers, students and related communities.

Muhammad Ali Imran and the team involved with the project will be responsible for the day to day workings of the program and for ensuring the development and implementation of the project. This is not a legally binding agreement and all parties reserve the right to modify the aforementioned terms and suggestions. Once the project is funded, we will take the next steps to enter a legal agreement. We look forward to working with Muhammad Ali Imran to design and model this exciting project.

Sincerely,

Zulfiqar Suhail Mannan  
Founder, Kitab Ghar