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***Teachers learning from professional development
programme
for primary school teachers and translating their
new learning into actions in primary schools in the
context of Chitral Pakistan***

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ABSTRACT

Professional development programmes are criticized for not meeting the practical needs of teachers and teachers are blamed for going to their comfort zones despite their participations in professional development programmes. This qualitative case study explored effectiveness of the program of primary education certificate course looking into participant teachers' new knowledge, skills and attitude gained from the programme and the implementation of their new learning into their respective classrooms. One program graduate from each nine participating schools participated in the study. Data was collected through semi-structured and open-ended interviews, classroom observations, documents analysis and conducting focused group discussions with students.

The study reports a shift in teachers' non-reflective attitudes to more

reflective attitudes. Teachers' quality of their reflections however found to be technical in nature showing their inability to detect limitations of their teaching. The study also found graduate teachers using more learner-centered pedagogies but required more content specific trainings to teach some concepts. The findings also suggest that the graduate teachers developed skills in pedagogy and the utility of those pedagogical skills in their classrooms reshaped their beliefs of teaching, learning and learner. The positive experiences in turn reconstructed teachers' conception of classroom environment vital in fostering learning of students.

KEY WORDS *professional development program, teacher learning, teacher change, reconceptualization, pedagogy*

JEL CODES *A 14, A 20.*

1. Introduction

Professional Development Centre Chitral (PDCC) is a subunit of Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) Karachi Pakistan. The mission of AKU-IED PDCC is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools through professional development of teachers, head teachers and other stakeholders working both in private and public sectors. PDCC offers a number of courses under the auspices of AKU-IED since its establishment in 2003. Certificate in Education: Primary Education (CEPE) comprised of face-to face and workplace components being offered each year for primary school teachers of the three partner organizations i.e., public, private and Aga Khan Education Service (AKES, P) in Chitral Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The overall aim of the understudy course is to bring improvement in the teaching and learning processes in primary schools through enhancing content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge of primary schools teachers.

Teacher development programmes are criticized for their failure in changing teachers' practices and perceptions of teaching and learning situations in schools. Teacher educators and teachers are often heard expressing their concerns of teacher training programmes for not yielding the desired results in improving schools and changing teacher practices. As teacher educators our own experiences also reveal that sometimes teachers do participate in professional development programs but they do not translate their new knowledge and skills learned from the programmes into actions. Thus, professional development programs fail to achieve their goals and objectives. In this context we investigated programme effectiveness looking into teachers changed conceptions of teaching and learning and classroom practices.

This paper reports on the effects of CEPE programs offered by AKU-IED PDCC in the year 2007-8, on teachers' pedagogical knowledge and classroom practices.

2. Literature Review

Teachers' development programmes are of great significance for teacher learning and improving student learning outcomes. Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) recognize professional development for teachers as a vital component of policies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in our schools. Professional development programmes attempt to change teachers' beliefs about certain aspects of teaching a particular curriculum or instructional innovation (Guskey, 2010). Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) emphasize that professional development programmes should enhance teachers understanding of content or subject knowledge they teach and how students learn that content. According to them four aspects of the impact of professional development e.g., impact on teachers' knowledge; impact on teachers' practice; impact on student learning outcomes; and, impact on teacher efficacy can be investigated. Supovitz and Turner (2000) also identified the critical importance of focusing on content for improving teaching practices in professional development programmes. In their words

professional development programmes must provide participants' opportunities of inquiry forms of teaching rather than textbook centered teaching; must focus on subject-matter knowledge and deepen teachers' content skills. According to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999) successful programs involve teachers in learning activities that can be used by teachers in their respective classrooms.

Professional development programme are criticized for not been successful in changing teachers' practices and attitudes. In Guskey's (2010) view argues that professional development programs that do not meet the practical and concrete needs of teachers; do not expand teachers' knowledge and skills; fail to consider the process of teacher change do not give desired results. According to him the assumption that professional developments programs lead to change in the classroom practices of teachers then change their attitudes and beliefs, and leading to change in the learning outcomes of students may not be accurate. Rather, significant change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs occurs primarily after they gain evidence of improvements in student learning as a result changes in teachers classroom practices, their new instructional approach, the use of new materials or curricula, or simply a modification in teaching procedures or classroom format. Martha and Pennington (1995) make similar argument by saying that change in the behavior of teachers occurs as a result of trying something new, reflecting on its consequences, and then trying it again with alterations as needed or desired. Thus, a change occurs when teachers are able as well as motivated to try new things and to reflect on the consequences. They consider innovation and critical reflection

as means by which teachers' awareness and practice change. That is why Halai (2003) suggests that the impact of any intervention in social setting has to be seen as a change process and can not be assessed just measuring current practices and outcomes. She goes on to argue that impact study without taking into consideration other contextual factors may not be easy because many other factors such as prior inputs, implementation processes, and contextual factors truly explain the way the things are. According to Rizivi (2007) professional development opportunities go beyond mere support for teachers' acquisition of new skills or knowledge and must help teachers to critically reflect on their practice, knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy and learners. Thus, focus on reflective practice, on pedagogy, on subject matter and attitudinal and behavioural changes of teachers are some of the important aspects of professional development programmes.

3. Conceptual Framework of the Study

We used the teacher change model of Guskey (2010) as a theoretical guideline but our purpose was not to explore the occurrence of change process as per the sequence stated by Guskey (2010). We explored the programme effectiveness looking into teachers' new knowledge and skills in three areas e.g., (a) teachers' instructional strategies, (b) their reconceptualization of teaching and learning, and (c) change in teachers' attitudes towards students and classroom environment. Specifically, this study investigated whether teachers as a result of their participation in the CEPE programs are able to (a) reflect on their classroom practices and knowledge (b) use more effective teaching and learning strategies appropriate to the content they teach, (c) manage their classrooms more effectively.

4. Methodology

A qualitative case study method was used because it is appropriate method to explore perceptions and practices (Merriam 1998) of primary programme graduates in real school setting. Since case study method being the study of specific and particular case (Stake 2006) was appropriate method to investigate the effectiveness of a specific (CEPE) program. As facilitators of the understudy course, the intrinsic motivation of investigating the effectiveness of the particular and specific programme provided us another rationale to use case study method. Keeping in mind the appropriateness of case study for the exploration of a bounded system (Simons 2009) we investigated the program graduate teachers' changed practices and perceptions of teaching and learning in real schools contexts where graduate teachers were in-action.

Altogether 9 participating schools (3 schools from each system i.e., public, private and Aga Khan Education System) were selected as research sites. Total 9 primary teachers and 3 teachers from each system and 27 students participated in the study. The selection of the participant teachers were made on the basis of purposive sampling (Merriam 1998). Data was

collected through semi-structured and open ended interviews, classroom observations of teachers, documents analysis and conducting focused group discussions with students.

As facilitators of the course there was a risk of getting socially acceptable responses (Shamim 2003) from the participants due to our association with the programme and close interaction with the participant teachers during face-to-face sessions. In order to address validity issue we assigned the responsibility of fieldwork to the researcher who had less interaction with the graduates during face-to-face sessions and used multiple sources of data collection. Although multiple tools were used to gather data but this study mainly relied on teachers self-reports comparing their pedagogical knowledge and practices before and after the programme. The data gathered each day was brought together and reviewed thoroughly. The interviews were transcribed just after the interviews. The data then sorted out to find patterns and categories. Those categories were then developed into themes and conclusions were drawn.

5.0 FINDINGS

5.1 The Beginning of Reflective Practice

The findings suggest reflective practice as one of the most important changes in the approaches of graduate teachers. One of the research participants said that she found reflective practice very useful. She said that reflection helped her to be suspicious of her own practices and in knowing what went well and what did not go well? She said that she after attending the course reflects on factors responsible for facilitating or hindering her lessons. During post observation conference a teacher in another school reflected on his classroom action in terms of objectives. He expressed his satisfaction of doing a good job because he thought his students were able to discuss and identify different means of transportation and shared advantages of transportations. He could not discuss the misconception he developed not discussing the disadvantages of the modern means of transportations. We found majority of participants had difficulty in reflecting on their new classrooms practices. More often their reflections on their lessons appeared to be simple description of what they had done in their respective classrooms and what they thought were the strength of their lessons. They rarely identified their limitations nor suggested any other strategies to teach the lessons differently. The teachers found to be reluctant to detect their own assumptions of teaching and learning and approaches which informed their classroom actions.

- **5.2 Learner-Centered Instructional Strategies**

The study reports graduate teachers shifting from traditional way of teaching to activity based teaching engaging students in various types of meaningful activities. Before the courses

the teachers used chalk and talk and translation methods of teaching as one of the course-participants remarked:

“My main strategy of teaching to my students was reading out paragraph from the textbooks and sometimes translating the content into local language. Before attending this course I used old methods to teach the students. I would read a paragraph while the students would listen and then repeat the sentences. I used to tell them the meanings of difficult words. Often I asked the students to memorize the taught lessons by heart” (Teacher interview)

Another participant teacher reported of using different instructional strategies in her classroom after participating in the course. He specifically referred to group works, group discussions, presentation, role plays, picture reading and holding quiz programmes. The observation of teachers’ classroom practices also validates the use of various teaching and learning strategies in the classroom such as picture readings about different animals and historical places, students’ presentations on their families and use of real objects such as musical instruments, use of different models to teach about different concepts. Students also like such activities as they termed the new teaching and learning strategies interesting and productive in comprehending the concepts.

The participant teachers also demonstrated commitment to further improve their practices. One of the teachers said that the uses of different activities makes the children very happy and she did not want to ever stop working in that way rather she was looking for other activities to make her teaching interesting and productive. A graduate teacher described his new teaching approaches by saying, “after the exposure to the course I started to change the ways I was approaching my teaching. I put up displays, ask higher order questions, and involve my students in practical activities”.

Teachers do use different teaching and learning activities in their respective classrooms but these strategies seem to be less productive due to teachers’ superficial content knowledge. Therefore, the use of resources and activities do not prove to be more facilitative for learning as they ought to be. One of the teachers expressed this concern by admitting her lack of capacity of teaching English to grade 5. She said that she is not good at English but she has to teach English and there are concepts which are difficult for her to teach. It is better to have training on such difficult content. Specifically, she shared her lack of capacity of teaching poems. Likewise, another teacher shared that he had difficulty in teaching some concepts such as teaching about time and teaching about the world using the globe in Social Studies.

- **5.3 Change in Assessment Practices**

The findings also show teachers recognition of the importance of formative assessment in improving students learning. A programme graduate reported that, “I used assessment to grade my students. After attending this course, I ask questions and use the information to improve my teaching and students learning. However, I still face challenges in identifying

students' weaker areas where I could help them out." One of the course graduate teachers identified the problems attached to the traditional summative assessment practices which he used in his classroom prior to his participation in the course. He explained that the main problem in his assessment practice was that he could not appreciate aesthetic nature of students' work. As he said that he never assessed his students for their presentation skills, their original ideas and never focused on their multiple intelligences. His emphasis as he said, was more on written tests and he never thought that a good art work (drawing) was also an outcome of a type of intelligence. Similarly, one of the graduate teachers explained how she was attaching importance to memorization and reproduction of what was memorized. She further maintained that those who were sharp in memorization and reproduction of what was in the textbooks were being considered sharp. Those who used to add their own perspectives were discouraged and penalized.

- **5.4 Effective Classroom Management**

The findings reveal one aspect of teacher change in their increased abilities in managing their respective classrooms. The classroom management was one of the great concerns for the teachers prior to their participation in the course. This concern though still prevails, however, seems not a critical issue for teachers. There are evidences of teachers managing their classrooms using variety of instructional strategies and developing ground rules for students. The following quotation of a teacher confirms the above statement as he said:

"Before attending the program managing my classroom was a headache for me. But after the course I learnt how to involve students. I grouped the weaker students with the good ones and assigned them different roles and responsibilities as group members. Now classroom management is not an issue for me as it was before."

In six schools the teachers termed the techniques taught during the course effective in managing classrooms. They said that the ways of involving children in classroom activities, development of friendly relationships with students and developing classroom rules proved to be very successful in managing their classrooms. However in three schools no obvious change in teacher classroom management was reported.

- **5.5 Teachers' Pedagogical Creeds**

The findings of the study reveal somewhat success of the programme in terms of changing teachers' beliefs of teaching and learning. The data shows that prior to being exposed to the course the graduate teachers considered chalk and talk method as the only effective way of teaching, considered students as empty slates with no prior knowledge and their roles as passive receivers of knowledge to be transmitted by the teachers as a knowledgeable authority in the classroom. Most of the participant teachers considered teaching as pouring knowledge

from the reservoir of teachers' knowledge into the empty mind of the child. One of the programme graduates shared her feelings as below:

"Before [attending the course] I thought that students learn best when there is more talk from teacher on any topic or concept. That is why I always attached importance to lecture method. But after doing the course I learnt that students learn not only from the teacher but also by interacting with each other while working in groups. Students learn by doing. They learn when they are asked to solve a problem by themselves".

The changed classroom practices are not the only indicators of teachers change but the way they see teaching and learning also indicates their professional growth. For example, one of the teachers referred to the change in his conception thus: "The course has helped me change my outlook. It is completely changed the way I think about my teaching, the way I approach teaching, the way I look at the kids, the way I see how learning takes place". In addition, the findings also point to the change in teachers' conceptualization of learning. Some participants found to have the recognition of the importance of innovative activities in satisfying students' learning styles and in making learning happen. One of teachers shared that:

"Now I realize that learning takes place when students are engaged and active in the process of learning. So, I constantly keep them busy by giving them various tasks relevant to their interest and level. These strategies help students learn things in their own styles".

- **5.6 Conducive Classroom Environment**

A realization of the importance of friendly classroom environment as a pre-requisite for deeper learning is reflective of teachers changed conceptions of classroom environment as compared to their prior conceptions of controlled classroom environment affective for learning. One of the participant teachers said that, she was very tough with the students and always maintained distance and never tried to establish any friendly relations with them. She said that after attending the course she realized the need to develop good relationship with students. Another participant explained that before attending the course he considered maintaining strict discipline necessary for learning. He said that the discussion during the session changed his perception and he started considering friendly environment necessary for learning.

6. Discussions of the Findings

This study brings forth some important insights which have implications both for academicians and practitioners. The study confirms that reflection or reflective practice is certainly an effective school based teacher learning model as it provides tremendous opportunities for teachers to improve their practices and, thus, grow professionally. However, it was realized that it takes time for the teachers to understand the process of reflection and to get used to the practice. It is also realized the theoretical conceptualization of reflection must not be taken as indicator for teachers to be skillful reflective practitioners. Teachers understanding of reflection appeared to be technical in nature. Some of the teachers could not

take the level of their reflection to either practical or critical level. None of the teachers could detect the assumptions which inform their classroom practices. They question their practices but still they seem reluctant to question their assumptions of teaching and learning rather they look for superficial explanations for why a particular lesson did not go well. For example, reflecting on his lesson on means of transpiration the teacher described what went well but could not identify the limitation in his teaching of not being able to relate it with students daily experiences and could not reflect how he developed misconceptions as if modern means of transportations are the only means of transportations and do not have disadvantages for society. The insight lies for teacher educators is that reflection itself is an abstract notion but developing teachers as reflective practitioners is contextual as well as practical enterprise. Teachers become reflective when scaffolded to reflect on their own classroom actions. In the words of Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) effective professional development programs draw teachers into an analysis of their current practice in relation to professional standards for good practice and what their students are learning. Rizivi (2007) found reflective teachers constructing new knowledge and reflecting on their beliefs about content, pedagogy and learners. Therefore, teachers need external support in developing their reflective skills through reflection on their classroom actions.

The impact of the course on teachers' classroom practices is visible in the form of the adoption of new practices or improvements in their prior teaching practices. These new techniques appear to be more responsive to multiple learning styles of students. The chalk and talk method of teachers teaching seem transformed into learner-centered pedagogy. Traditional mode of teaching in which the teacher was the transmitter of knowledge as an authority to students to enable them memorize and reproduce the same knowledge has been replaced with learner-centered approach where teachers' role is to facilitate the learning of students. The use of group works, group discussions, presentation, role plays, picture reading, use of models and holding quiz programmes are examples of teachers' learner-centered pedagogies.

The shift from teacher as well as textbook centered teaching to learner-centered teaching does not fully reflect teachers' reconceptualization of teaching and learning but it also does not appear to be absolutely symbolic change. Their willingness and commitment to further improve their instructional strategies is somehow similar to the sequence of teacher change presented in the alternative model (Guskey 2010). The research findings illustrate that the teachers felt themselves more capable due to their participation in professional development programme and changed their beliefs about learner-centered instructional strategies when observed the effectiveness of such activities in their classrooms.

The learner-centered pedagogical strategies seem to be less productive as ought to be due to teachers' superficial content knowledge. The findings show teachers improved practices and changed attitudes in their respective classrooms but the support needed by participant

teachers in content knowledge emerged as an area where participant teachers could not show better performance. Rather they always felt the need for an external support to teach content. This is congruent with Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) who highlights that the strongest criticism of many professional development programs has been the lack of support for teachers in their classrooms as they apply new ideas and skills. Therefore, teachers must be provided on the spot support so that they could use the instructional strategies and techniques effectively, otherwise this problem is likely to prevail despite teachers' training in pedagogy. Another important insight of the findings is that majority of the teachers need support in content knowledge. Those who have capacities in content knowledge can better decide how to help learners in comprehending the concept as compared to those who are well equipped in terms of pedagogical content knowledge but are weak in content knowledge.

Some important insights emerge from the findings in terms of assessment practices of teachers. The programme graduates elucidated that as a result of going through the understudy programme a considerable change in the way the learners are assessed has taken place. Teachers demonstrated recognition of the importance of formative assessment taking it as a tool for improving teaching and learning. The participant teachers found questioning their assessment practices for measuring rote learning and encouraging memorization and reproduction. Their appreciation of aesthetic nature of learning and their shifting focus on assessing students' presentation skills, quality of their art work and their life skills demonstrates their new learning of assessment responsive to multiple intelligences of students. However, teachers still required support in preparing tools useful for formative purpose of assessment.

Findings of the study reveal somewhat success of the programme in terms of changing teachers' beliefs of teaching and learning. The data suggests that as a result of the course, teachers view teaching as responsible and informed facilitation rather than a rationale activity controlled by teachers. Likewise, they see learning as a process of constructing knowledge through active participation and problem solving. This conception of learning can be linked with the notion of constructivists learning theory in which learning is an active process of knowledge construction. The reconceptualization of teaching and learning seems changing teachers' outlook and image of learner as an active individual as compared to passive receiver of knowledge.

Almost all the research participants acknowledged that as a result of attending the course, now they have started to bridge the gape between them and their students. Therefore, the abolishment of corporal punishment and establishment of enabling learning environment seem driving teachers' pedagogical decisions. The participant students also validated this change referring to teachers changed attitude who were amusing them with funny jokes, making them laugh and encouraging them. Almost all the students being interviewed were of the opinion that after their teachers have attended the course they are no more harsh with them and do not punish them in the classroom. The findings not only show the decreasing gape

between teachers and students but they also reveal graduate teachers' recognition of possible implications of the establishment of conducive learning environment in the classrooms.

It sounds that the teachers have developed their understanding of child psychology and have shown a shift from student corporal punishment to creating a joyful environment for them, a tense classroom situation to a caring atmosphere, pin pointing children's mistakes to identifying their strengths and building on those strengths. This seems a positive and encouraging progression towards a desirable change and quality education, however to keep it sustained would need sincere efforts.

Teachers changed perceptions of effective classrooms management is another aspect of the changes in their pedagogical creeds. Teachers found trying out the tips of using variety of instructional strategies, developing classroom rules to empower and to make students responsible and assigning responsibilities to different students. Teachers believe that doing so they can make students responsible and make them feel empowered. These activities have helped the teachers become more efficient and skillful in managing their classrooms. The insight is that variety in teaching strategies, developing good relationship with students and developing ground rules for students are helpful techniques for teachers in managing their classrooms.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion the findings suggest some perceptual as well as cognitive changes which drive the classroom practices of participant teachers as a result of their participation in the primary course. This study reports various changes in the classroom practices, skills, and attitude of participant teachers. The course has helped the teachers in reconstructing their ideas and restructuring their classroom teaching practices by replacing their traditional teaching method with learner-centered pedagogies. The better results of the new instructional strategies in their respective classrooms have further contributed in changing teachers' conceptions of teaching, learning, learner and the conception of what kind of teacher-student relationship and learning environment fosters students learning.

The participant teachers reflect though in some cases superficially on their teaching practices as well as classroom environment. They have somehow adopted some innovative instructional strategies which can be seen as a departure from text-book oriented teaching mode. This shift has helped them manage their classrooms successfully in most participating schools although classroom management seems still a concern for some teachers. The graduate teachers are no more autocratic in their attitudes towards students rather viewing collegial classroom culture and friendly environment as a stimulus for deeper learning of students.

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