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## **School Improvement: a case from Bangladesh**

**YASMEEN BANO & SULTAN MAHMUD BHUIYAN**

Teachers' professional development plays an important role in school improvement. Teachers equipped with sound subject knowledge, better pedagogical skills and with necessary pedagogical content knowledge can effectively facilitate children to learn by creating meaningful learning opportunities for them. According to Barth in Law and Glover (2000), 'Probably nothing in a school has more impact on students in terms of skills, development, self confidence, or classroom behavior than the personal and professional growth of their teachers' (p. 238). There are various ways to facilitate teachers to grow professionally and in-service teacher education is one of the effective ways to do so. This study describes an in-service teacher education programme undertaken by the Aga Khan Education Service, Bangladesh (AKES, B) mainly for the teachers of Aga Khan School, Dhaka (AKS, D) in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Development at the Aga Khan University (AKU-IED), Pakistan. The background of the programme and the model used for teacher education, and strengths, challenges and issues related to the model are also discussed.

### **Background**

AKS, D is a coeducational and English medium school, which was established in 1989 with only 80 students. It follows the GCE Ordinary and Advanced Level Curriculum. At present it is nurturing over 1000 young people with the support of 106 teachers. It caters for education from playgroup to A level. Why did the school feel the need of having a school-based professional development programme? The answer lies in the fact that quality of education is at the heart of all AKES, B activities in order to achieve its vision, namely to make the school a centre of excellence. The aim of the school enumerates that, 'The Aga Khan School is a caring and nurturing educational environment in which every student is provided with the opportunities to develop artistically, emotionally, intellectually, morally,

physically and socially to his or her full potential' (Rehman & Bhuiyan, 2001). In order to achieve this, a group of competent teachers was essential who can facilitate children's learning process with its professional skills. AKES, B believes that the quality of education can be enhanced by providing opportunities to teachers for professional growth and in this regard AKES, B started a collaboration with AKU-IED. Initially the school sent two teachers for the Master's in Education programme and two for the Visiting Teachers Programme (VTP) [1], to AKU-IED, Pakistan. Later on it was realized that intensive professional development of the teachers cannot be done by sending the teachers to AKU-IED because of high cost, problems of substitute teachers in the absence of the teachers gone for training and a very long period required to complete the basic professional development of most of the teaching staff. Meanwhile in 1998 AKES, East Africa started an in-service teacher education programme in Kenya in collaboration with AKU-IED. The programme was named the VTP-Nairobi Model. It was a modified form of AKU-IED's VTP with a large field-based component. The idea was picked up by the AKES, B also as it seemed feasible because of the presence of two Professional Development Teachers (PDTs) at the AKS, D. Several visits and negotiations between AKU-IED and AKES, B evolved a further modified model for the VTP and was named the VTP-Dhaka Model. So far two VTPs have been conducted, that is the VTP-Dhaka Model 2000 and 2001 for the professional development of 44 AKS, D teachers. Basically the programmes were designed for the teachers of AKS, D but in 2000, three teachers from India and in 2001, two teachers from the two other educational institutes of Dhaka also participated.

### **The VTP-Dhaka Model**

#### *Structure*

The Dhaka Model was designed keeping in mind that teachers' routine teaching schedule did not get disturbed because of the in-service teacher education programme. For this purpose the whole programme was divided into the following three components:

- *Component I.* It was a three-week component held in the school's winter vacation. The main emphasis was to help the participating teachers to reflect upon their existing beliefs and practices of teaching and learning so that the process of reconceptualization about learning and teaching could be initiated in them. The teachers were also exposed to some interactive ways of learning and teaching, learning theories, ways of assessing students' learning, questioning skills, classroom management, lesson planning, and so forth.
- *Component II.* It was a five-month field-based component from January to May. During this component the teachers worked in their own schools according to their school timetable to practise new ideas learnt

during component I. This component emphasized on putting theory into practice. To provide the support to the teachers, PDTs and the principal observed their lessons and conducted feedback sessions according to a set schedule. The teachers were also provided with the support for lesson planning and trying out new teaching strategies in their classes as per their needs. Five seminars were also conducted during this period in order to provide the teachers with an opportunity to share their successes and challenges and to learn some more new ideas.

- *Component III.* It was also a three-week component conducted in the summer vacations. During this component the teachers were exposed to some other interactive ways of teaching and learning in the light of the needs identified during components I and II.

### **Features of the Dhaka Model**

There are certain characteristics which make the VTP-Dhaka Model a different model from the other models of VTPs. Some of these features may be found in the VTP-Nairobi Model as well.

- It was a collaborative model, namely a model that evolved with the partnership of a school and a university. The PDTs of Bangladesh and a coordinator from AKU-IED faculty worked together to design a programme according to the needs of AKS, D teachers. It was not a university-designed model for a school, rather it was a model designed by the school with the support of the university. This approach enhanced the ownership of the programme among its users and made it need based.
- It was a very contextualized and need-based model for the teachers of a particular context. The designers (PDTs) of the programme and the participants of the programme were from the same school context; they knew each other, were aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and knew both the needs of the students and the teachers. These commonalities were quite helpful in making the programme contextualized.
- It was a generic model, namely a model designed to cater for the needs of a variety of teachers in terms of teaching subjects and subject levels. Though it was named as the Primary Education VTP, the teachers of the pre-primary school, secondary school, O level teachers and A level teachers also participated in it besides the teachers of the primary school. In AKU-IED based VTP models, subject areas guide the design of the programme. For example the content of VTP Science caters to the needs of only science teachers. In the VTP-Dhaka Model, pedagogical strategies and ideas were at the forefront. The content selected for the programme was quite generic in nature and focused on the basic pedagogical knowledge, skills and attitude which it was

necessary for all the teachers to know like the stages of child development, cooperative learning, questioning skills, classroom management, lesson planning, and so forth. While discussing any of the ideas, links were made to various teaching levels and the subjects. In some cases after having an introductory session for a strategy or theory, participants were divided according to their teaching subjects and classes and then they did an in-depth study as per their teaching needs in order to make sense of it.

- It was a field-based and reflective model. It had a large field-based component in which the teachers got enough opportunities to implement their learning in a real classroom situation under the support of PDTs. This was the strongest feature of the model as it helped the teachers to internalize the new ideas as well as initiated the process of change in a supportive environment. Component II provided the teachers and the PDTs with enough opportunities to reflect on their successes and challenges and as a result of this ongoing reflection, ideas were modified to make them workable in the classes. This ongoing reflection was also very useful to plan component III in the light of the emerging needs of the teachers.
- It was a cost-effective and capacity building model in various ways. Most of the material resources required for the programme were generated from the school and in turn the resources developed during the programme were included in the school's resource collection. Most of the programme implementation team was also from the school. The team for conducting the programme comprised a Coordinator from AKU-IED, two PDTs of AKS, D and 3-4 school staff members as Support Faculty. In VTP-Dhaka Model 2000, the senior and experienced teachers were selected for this role and in VTP-Dhaka Model 2001, four graduates of VTP-2000 were identified for this role. In this way not only human resources were identified from the school but they were groomed as well to work as resource people in the future.

If we look at the above-mentioned features, one main thread can be picked up which generated all these features and that was the involvement of the school in the whole process right from idea conceiving stage to the evaluation of the programme. The major role taken by the school, made it possible to make the programme need based, reflective and flexible. Based on the experiences of the VTP-Dhaka Model, it can be argued that perhaps the school-based in-service teacher education programmes can play a more effective role in school improvement as compared to university-based in-service teacher education programmes.

#### *Impact of the Programme*

The impact of the VTP-Dhaka Model can be studied in various dimensions such as the impact on the teachers, children, PDTs, the school as a whole

and the impact for AKU-IED, and so forth. A vast research study needs to be done in order to explore all the above-mentioned dimensions in detail. However, the responses of the teachers in the final evaluation questionnaire, classroom observations, informal talk with PDTs, teachers, school principal, and so forth have made it possible to draw a few conclusions about the impact of the programme.

#### *Impact on the Teachers*

The majority of the teachers shared that they had enhanced their confidence a lot as a result of attending the programme. This enhanced confidence helped them to develop a good self-concept about themselves. Their responses and PDTs' observations showed that the teachers had become more confident for planning lessons and using new teaching strategies. The following are some of the responses of the teachers about the impact of the programme in terms of enhanced self-concept:

- I am now confident and proud of being a teacher.
- Now I can accept others' opinion easily with respect.
- I feel myself more capable of thinking.
- I have become assertive and positive about my teaching and learning.
- I can evaluate and analyse myself.

Several teachers shared that they had become more organized for their classes by planning lessons properly such as:

- The programme made me proactive and organized before the lesson.
- Now I have a clear concept of what, why and how I am going to teach my children.
- The programme has organized my thoughts.

Several teachers shared that they were more comfortable and competent for using various teaching strategies and approaches and handling the students in their classes. A few examples of such responses are:

- I am more skilled now.
- Selecting activities will be no problem for me.
- Project work will be done more systematically now.
- My lessons have become more student centred and lively.
- I can manage group work well using cooperative learning.

#### *Impact on PDTs*

Informal talk with PDTs, and their reflections, revealed that the programmes helped them to enhance their own understanding of various concepts. Getting ready for teaching teachers and supporting them in the field pushed the PDTs to think more critically and to broaden the schema of their own understanding for various pedagogical aspects. Since the programme was

school based, PDTs had to take care of several administrative aspects of the programme also and it helped them to learn how to be more organized and systematic. These programmes also made PDTs think very critically about several important issues related to adult learning such as how to develop a good relationship with very senior colleagues during the programme as facilitators, how to enhance patience while facing criticism from colleagues, how to practise what is being preached by them, and so forth. Reflections and deliberations on these issues helped the PDTs to grow themselves as more effective teacher educators.

#### *Impact on Children*

It is very difficult to make any conclusion about the impact on children but based on the classroom observation and teachers' views it can be said that the children have become more active learners in the classrooms as they are given opportunities for group discussions, making presentations, raising questions, presenting arguments, and so forth. The students have also enhanced their skills for working in groups and to be creative. All these things have enhanced students' confidence and interest for learning as some teachers stated that they had far less complaints about students' absences from the school.

#### **Challenges**

The following are a few major challenges related to VTP-Dhaka Models 2000 and 2001.

The biggest challenge of the programme was one of its strong features, namely to deal with a very heterogeneous group in terms of teachers teaching different levels and subjects. The team tried to present the ideas in a way that every one could benefit but still the teachers of O levels and A levels felt that their needs were not met very much. It was also very challenging for the team to put the ideas according to the needs of various teaching levels. For example, O level and A level teachers wanted to have more in-depth discussion on the requirements and needs of adolescents and ways to tackle their problems while pre-primary teachers were interested to know more how children in years 2-4 learn and what were their needs. The teachers also wanted to discuss a few concepts from their subject content areas but it was very difficult to do this because of having a variety of teachers. Facilitators were also not competent for some of the subjects like Accounting and Business Studies. Though the team helped the teachers to use various resources like the Internet, the library, and so on, in order to explore more about their own subject areas but there was still the need to cater for the individual needs of particular teaching levels.

Some ambiguity in the role and responsibilities of PDTs posed challenges for both for PDTs and the teachers. PDTs were assigned classes to teach even when the field- based component of the programme was going

on. It was very challenging for PDTs to manage the assigned routine classroom teaching together with all the activities of the VTP for about 23 teachers. This ambiguity affected the programme in the following two ways.

1. Most of the time PDTs remained busy in the assigned routine classroom teaching and with the activities of VTP. They could not get time for their own growth through reading recent literature, searching the Internet, collaborating with their colleagues for better planning, carrying out small scale research, and so forth. It was very important for PDTs to refresh themselves so that they could meet the needs of a context-based VTP. When PDTs work at AKU-IED they just concentrate fully on the planning, implementation and reflection of the programme and it brings creativity and effectiveness in their work. Working in a school environment with the routine responsibilities was challenging.
2. In component II of the programme, support of PDTs for the teachers plays an important role. In both the VTPs in Dhaka that support was given through four classroom observations conducted by PDTs. After each observation, the teachers were provided with an opportunity to discuss the strengths and areas for improvement of the observed lesson with PDTs. It was observed that the teachers needed more help than a few classroom observations during their field-based component. They needed a mentor to work with them. They needed a person who could make formal observations of classes, who could sit with them in their planning time to act as a catalyst for generating new ideas, a person who can scaffold them in the classes when they take a risk of trying out a new idea. The teachers also felt the need of more support as they mentioned it while responding to the evaluation questionnaires for components II and III. A few of such responses are as follows:
  - There should be unannounced/sudden/surprised/ informal observation besides formal observation by PDTs in component II.
  - More observations are required.
  - Teachers will learn more by teaching with an expert.
  - More PDTs are required so that they can provide us more help and feedback to our reflections and lesson plans.
  - 'Here' PDTs could not provide that much support because of their other school responsibilities as well.

Implementation of the new ideas in a real classroom situation was a big challenge for both PDTs and the teachers. The following were the special situations which imposed challenges for them:

1. Since a few teachers were selected from each section of the school, namely Senior, Junior and Primary, therefore some teachers from each section got an opportunity to attend the VTP and some did not. As a result of this selection approach, when the teachers returned to their schools, they faced challenges in working with those of their colleagues who did not

have this exposure. The challenge became severe in the light of the fact that in some school sections teachers of various class sections were expected to do the same planning for teaching in order to give similar experiences to all children and to maintain the similarity in written work. It was difficult for the teachers to make their colleagues understand the new techniques/ideas because they themselves were at the learning stage and not ready to coach others. The teachers themselves suggested that it would have been better if the programme was planned for the teachers of a particular section.

2. In the school, the process of professional development started from the teachers. Though the Principal and the Vice-Principals attended some sessions as observers no professional development was planned for them as such. When the teachers started applying their learning in the classes, the support, which was required in terms of supportive infrastructure, was not in place. In general, the school management was quite supportive to teachers to facilitate them to implement their learning but there was a need to bring certain changes in school policies and general practice in order to facilitate the process of change. For example, teachers' workload was kept the same as it was before though the expectations were raised high. They were now supposed to use library and computer laboratory resources, develop their own resources in the form of teaching material, plan lessons, write reflections, share with colleagues, and so on. To fulfil all these new expectations they needed time and they were not facilitated in this area. As a result teachers became quite exhausted and at times they questioned the applicability of all the new ideas learnt in the school in terms of available time. There were some other issues also which could have been addressed by the management like creating time for sharing, creating space for storing newly developed resources, reviewing teachers' workload, correction of work policy, and so on. Perhaps if the management had been well aware of the dynamics of change process and had a deeper understanding of school improvement, they could have reflected on all these issues in order to support their teachers.

### **Issues Related to School Improvement**

The VTP-Dhaka Model was a part of the school improvement effort. If we look at this model in a broader perspective in order to see its impact in the long run for school improvement, we find certain issues surrounding it. The Dhaka-Model for the professional development of the teachers, presents a model of in-service teacher education which was part of the school improvement initiatives. The school wanted to bring a change in the 'chalk and talk' method of learning and teaching by making the classes more student oriented, interactive, collaborative and inquiry based. The main issue was that the planning for the teacher education programme was done thoroughly but the planning of this innovation was not done as a change

process for school improvement. The aspects of implementation, institutionalization, sustainability, and so forth were not thought out carefully before the beginning of the programme. The major issue is the sustainability of the impact of the professional development in terms of changed classroom practices. The school embarked upon the programme without establishing a proper academic support system for the follow-up and support for the graduates of the programme. Though the two PDTs are in the system, in the absence of proper role and status they are not in a position to do the follow-up. After the completion of the VTP-Dhaka Model 2000, the graduates were not followed up in any way. In the absence of a proper professional/academic support system, the teachers may fall back to their old practices. It raises the issue of continuity also. How will the school provide further opportunities to the teachers to continue their professional development? How will novice teachers be inducted in the system in future? How will ongoing academic support be provided to them?

The challenges surrounding the model raise important issues about school improvement such as whether the process of school improvement should start with the extensive professional development of the teachers or must it start with the development of a basic framework/model for school improvement? Should the professional development of teachers come first or should the professional development of school management be at the top? Is it more effective to think about the aspects of follow-up and sustainability of change after the change starts or it is more appropriate to think about these issues and structure them in the planning before the initiation of change? To respond to the needs of the various school systems, should AKU-IED's role be limited to facilitate the process of professional development of the staff or should it be broader in order to support the systems to develop basic frameworks and think of various aspects of follow-up and sustainability before initiating a change?

### Note

- [1] The Visiting Teacher Programme is a short teacher education programme of AKU-IED. It is an eight-week course conducted at the university campus.

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