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Mehrun - Nisa

Department of Education, Northern Areas, Gilgit, Pakistan

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT - INNOVATIVE PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

Mehrun-Nisa

Department of Education, Northern Areas, Gilgit, Pakistan

Abstract

This paper reflects field experiences in setting up and running the Academic Cell and the Model Teachers Resource Centre. The paper is based on work done in April 2001 up to August 2003. As a Professional Development Teacher (PDT), school improvement has been the core objective for me. This paper points out to the contributions made for the purpose of school improvement and curriculum enrichment through material development, which focuses on developing two main areas: firstly, a Guide for Low Cost Teaching Aids and secondly, textbooks and corresponding Teacher's Guides. Also, it discusses the procedures that were adopted in setting up a model Teacher's Resource Centre. The fact that this centre functioned as backup for the Academic Cell's activities and also as a source of facilitation for district based Teacher's Resource Centres has also been elaborated on. It was found that material developing is a lengthy and complex process and requires detailed knowledge of a particular subject and the ability to clearly and effectively communicate with an audience.

There are certain criteria that need to be considered in developing textbooks such as:

- 1) Textbooks must address the objectives of the National Curriculum.
- 2) The content and language should be appropriate enough in making a smooth transition from the previous level to the one that is aimed at.
- 3) The content must provide to students with room for creativity.
- 4) The presentation has to be engaging and interesting. For this purpose, an appropriate ratio of text and illustration needs to be considered. Gender balance and cultural appropriateness must also be addressed.

As part of my responsibilities I was also involved with the development of Indicators for Monitoring and Supporting Schools. It is hoped that this document will play a significant role in making judgments based on evidence whether schools are progressing or not.

I also worked towards setting standards for quality education in colleges through teaching, arranging workshops, making lists of teaching and learning material plus library books all of which play a vital role in achieving that purpose.

I learnt that within their scope of work, Professional Development Teachers can make a big difference by providing opportunities for school improvement. In doing this however the system needed to be thoroughly understood and a personal commitment also counted.

Introduction

I started my career as a Secondary school teacher in February 1987. In 1998 I was selected for the Masters programme by AKU-IED for the academic session 1998-2000. The Department for International Development (DFID) sponsored my degree through Northern Areas Education Project (NAEP). After completing my studies and conducting the Visiting Teachers' Programme, I joined the Department of Education and was deputed as Manager Academic Cell to work with NAEP as a Consultant in the "Improvement of Quality of Education" component of the project.

The Department of Education established the Academic Cell in May 2002, with technical support from NAEP. The prime functions of the Academic Cell were to develop educational material to support the quality components (Curriculum and Material Development, Teacher Training, Assessment and Testing). The material developed will be published at the Desktop Publishing Unit, the Directorate of Education. The cell would also conduct research studies with an aim to identify the needs of teachers and students and develop supplementary material to enrich the curriculum.

It was decided to equip the Academic Cell with personnel from the existing cadre of teachers. A trainee writer, an illustrator and a designer were collectively identified following this decision. The NAEP consultants trained these selected personnel in computing and illustration skills.

Role and responsibilities as 'Manager Academic Cell'

As Manager of the Academic Cell, my prime responsibilities include managing a team of professionals and assisting the AD Curriculum in developing educational material, textbooks and teachers guides for primary classes planned under the Northern Education

Project. I also assisted the AD Teacher Training in organizing training programmes for educators and the AD Assessment in developing competencies and achievement tests for primary classes. In addition to these activities, I undertake any other responsibility assigned by the Department of Education such as writing different memos, briefs, presentations, proposals and reports for the department.

Following is my field experience and learning on the basis of these interventions. As a PDT so far, I have contributed to curriculum-development and setting up a Model Teachers Resource Centre. I would like to add that the area of Curriculum Development was a role assigned to me by the Department of Education, whereas the setting up a Model Resource Centre at the Northern Area level has been an initiative that Huma Mirza and I share.

Materials development for curriculum enrichment

I worked closely with NAEP, the National and International Consultant, in developing the educational material.

Guide on low cost/no cost teaching aids

In 2001, the task assigned to me by the Education Department was to contribute to developing a guide on Low Cost Teaching Aids for primary classes. The guide was already going through the developmental phase. The short-term NAEP, National Consultant held meetings to familiarize me with the nature of this venture.

We also had several meetings with aims to discuss the content illustration and design elements of the guide. We developed, reviewed and edited and prepared lessons and came up with camera-ready Copy. This document was printed and then distributed to all Northern Areas primary schools.

Learning

Developing the guide was a great opportunity for me to reflect upon and transfer what I learnt at IED. Most of the time, I referred back to different modules and specially Science where we used to collect different items for composing and using teaching and learning material. My experiences as a teacher and teacher educator going through the M. Ed Course has tremendously helped me in incorporating gained knowledge with developing material with an aim to make the guide more practical and relevant to primary

level requirements. Through this guide, I tried to share with primary school teachers the development and use of material in a wider context.

In May 2002, during a workshop in Islamabad with NAEP, National / International Consultants, we piloted all the elements and activities to audit their practicality. Later in Gilgit, we replicated the same workshop with Master Trainers selected from schools in the government and private sectors. In the near future we also plan to organize cluster-based training through the appointed Master Trainers to educate primary school teachers about the use of low cost / no cost teaching aids, so that the end beneficiaries, the children, can collectively benefit from all these efforts. The purpose is to enable teachers to form and use teaching / learning aids to make its process more child-centred and interactive rather than anything else.

The development of a textbook and teacher's guide

I have contributed in developing textbooks for the primary level through reviewing and editing integrated books for class two and three with teachers' guides. These books are more culturally and environmentally amiable especially with lower primary requirements has been appreciated by its users (teachers and students).

Learning

This provided me with a chance to incorporate knowledge with making these more child-centred and teacher-friendly. During my studies at IED, while studying different modules, especially in the subject of Social Studies, we were involved in reviewing textbooks and matching them with the National Curriculum to identify gaps and ways to enrich the prevailing content. In the Social Studies module we were also assigned the task of developing a chapter and a chapter guide for teachers. That exercise really paid off during developing materials for Textbooks and Teacher Guides.

It was also a great opportunity for me to work with professionals such as Huma Mirza, who have vast experience in this field.

In the Northern Areas, a team of part-time local writers was working with the NAEP, National/International Consultants on this project. The manuscripts produced by these writers required huge editorial inputs to make it adequate in terms of content, language and level.

Conclusions

Writing textbooks is a complex task, and requires detailed knowledge of the subject and an ability to communicate clearly and effectively with the audience.

Textbooks are an important part of most learning programmes irrespective of subject or level. Studies conducted in developing countries indicate that teachers rely heavily on textbooks because of a lack of adequate training or because their own tutelage is restricted to a basic level. It has become extremely important to ensure that the books produced should be aligned with the standards, which can be achieved by adopting standard procedures of textbook development.

From my field experience in the Northern Areas and the tour I had to the Oxford University Press and Open University in the UK, I found by way of analysis, that certain criteria need to be considered in developing textbooks such as: textbooks must address the objectives of the National Curriculum. The content and language are appropriate to the level for which it is intended and progression is made from previous level. The content provides creative and imaginative opportunities to the students. The presentation is attractive and interesting, and an appropriate ratio of text and illustration is considered. Gender balance is addressed and cultural appropriateness is focused. Activities and exercises stimulate observation and critical thinking.

School improvement: quality indicators for monitoring and supporting schools

I have also contributed in developing the draft of quality indicators for monitoring and supporting schools. The Education Department Authority, which include Assistant Education Officers (AEOs) and District Inspectors Schools (DIS), uses these indicators for monitoring and supporting schools. These Quality Indicators have been developed with a working group comprising of senior officials from the Education Department along with international and national consultants. These Indicators are now in the piloting stage and will be geared for implementation within the project period's time-frame. The document focuses on the five basic elements that constitute an effective school (Leadership and Management, Community and Parental Involvement, Teachers, Students and School Environment).

Learning/Issues

Indicators or standard measures help us in consistently calibrating practices and in

measuring progress over time and provide reliable and consistent information about the improvement in schools.

Studying the School Improvement Module helped me tremendously in developing indicators for monitoring and supporting schools. It was a chance for me to retrospect the discussions we had regarding effective school and school improvement.

A lot of effort was put into developing a skeleton draft for quality indicators. There was a need to address issues such as: potential users, the monitoring systems' perpetuation and how the information acquired would be useful reaching effective conclusions.

Conclusion

Indicators or standard measures help us in making a fair judgment on whether schools are effectively progressing or not and deciding on taking further steps towards School Development.

Sustaining the academic cell activities

Academic Cell Activities such as material development and teacher training were part of the Northern Education Project (NEP). The NEP was to conclude in June 2003, and NAEP in December 2003. This project's main concern was to sustain the Academic Cell Activities. A big hall at the Academic Cell was used as a Multi-Purpose Resource Centre. This room was equipped with appropriate teaching/ learning material. The NAEP Consultants and Government officials have used this Resource Centre for training purposes ever since the inception of the project but there was no provision special of a regular government budget for sustaining these activities.

With the passage of time the issue of sustaining the Academic Cell brought forth the idea of linking it with any government funded activity/association i.e. Teachers' Resource Centre under the Education Sector Reform (ESR) Programme.

Background: Academic Cell's conversion to a model Teachers' Resource Centre

In the financial year of 2001-2, the Government of Pakistan introduced the ESR Programme. This programme aims at increased access, enhanced equity and an improved quality of education. There are seven components of the ESR programme and one of these is the Teachers' Resource Centres.

The functions of Teachers Resource Centres (TRCs) are as follows:

- provision of training and information facilities at the decentralized level;
- provision of venue and resources for professional development of teachers and education managers and;
- establishment of linkages with other professional institutions.

The Education Sector Reform Programme was implemented in the Northern Areas during the year 2002-03. A total of 6.329 million rupees was invested in establishing 10 Resource Centres across the Northern Areas. Even though these TRCs have been equipped no activities have been planned or initiated so far. This shortcoming can be attributed to the modernity, which takes a little time to settle down. Therefore, the main issue that emerged indicated towards providing clear objectives, regular directives and appropriate human resources, establishing professional linkages between the centres within the area and at the national level. There were several solutions to these issues and one way forward was establishing a Model Teachers' Resource Centres at a regional level, keeping in mind the Northern Areas.

With support from Huma Mirza, NAEP, Material Development Consultant, I came up with a proposal focusing on setting up a Model Teachers' Resource Centre at the Academic Cell. The Secretary of Education, Northern Areas approved it and sanctioned funds under the ESR budget. After talks with relevant authorities, it was decided that the Academic Cell be renamed as Model Teachers' Resource Centre.

The effort of setting up a Model Resource Centre also reflects the insight I had gained from the UK study tour, which was arranged by DFID through NAEP for the senior education officers. The core purpose of this tour focused on Raising Schools - Improving Standards held from 10 November to the 1st of December 2002. During the visit, we had the opportunity to visit the Teachers Resource Centres (arranged by International Consultant, NAEP, Roger Pedler), and observe and learn from their experiences and emulate them as much as possible.

Functions of MTRC

- One of the main functions of TRC is facilitating district-based Teachers Resource Centres in consultation with DDE Offices
- Identifying appropriate teachers and appointing them as the In-charge of their respective Teachers' Resource Centres
- Managing the TRCs, setting up, developing a calendar of activities

- Executing training courses and developing related manuals

We hope that through the setting up a Model Resource Centre, we can contribute more towards school improvement through training and arranging theme-based activities and exhibitions for teachers and students alike.

Management of TRCs

- The Resource Centres should be properly setup and equipped for training. Material should be carefully chosen to support teaching and learning including reference books. Attention must be paid to the display and storage of material so that the centres look attractive and well-organized.
- A well-trained, committed staff should be available at the TRCs to impart teachers with advice, offer courses in response to National Curriculum and respond to requests from schools and the Department(s) of Education. Easy access to teachers (not too many rules and regulations), open to students, teachers and community.

From the 6th to the -8th August 2003, we arranged a three-day orientation workshop at the MTRC, Gilgit for teachers from district TRCs in order to familiarize them with the basic agenda of TRCs, their role and responsibilities and developing a calendar / schedule of activities and training courses. As a follow up we have planned to visit their respective districts TRCs and provide them with support and guidance in setting up the TRCs. From personal experience, I learnt that one learns more through arranging and conducting workshops. It is a reflective and two-way process. Moreover, the workshop also provided a forum for identifying basic requirements and discussing issues and questions, which teachers wanted to address.

It is now important that the trained staff is given maximum the opportunity to utilize their newly gained knowledge to render the TRCs functional. The support and guidance of respective head teachers and Deputy Directors are crucial for a smooth running of the TRCs. It was also observed that the concerned higher authorities needed to give more thought to appointing teachers to run district TRCs.

Conclusion

1. There is a need to make best of the different resources available, such as NEP, ESR /EFA and government regular budget

2. All stakeholders should have a common understanding about the role of TRCs
3. TRCs need to be staffed by enthusiastic ‘change agents’ who should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities
4. Long-term financial stability is crucial for sustaining the activities and developing the TRC
5. Need to develop links with other TRCs, and agencies at National and International level for capacity building and strengthening TRCs
6. Teachers’ Resource Centres serve as a driving force for School Improvement

Contribution to strengthening the Colleges of Education

Teacher Training colleges play a vital role in delivering pre-service and in-service trainings. In the academic year 2001-2002, I too, taught Educational Psychology (one of the core subjects) on the B. Ed (Bachelors in Education) level at the Elementary College of Education. The result that was announced in May 2003 by the Punjab University was 64% and the outcome in that particular subject was 100%.

Apart from teaching, I also conducted workshops for trainee teachers on lesson planning with special focus on writing SMART objectives and developing and using the teaching aids. As a result, I got requests from private schools to conduct workshops for their teachers but due to a tight working schedule, I could not manage it. However, on frequent requests, I conducted sessions on lesson planning, developing teaching /learning material and classroom management for teachers, master trainers and AEOs in different workshops arranged by NAEP consultant and Education Department officials.

Under the Northern Education Project, it was planned to construct two Elementary Colleges for women in the districts of Skardu and Gilgit. Due to low enrolment, the World Bank refused to provide an NOC for its construction. The reason for low enrolment was the admission policy of the Federal Board as the project was affiliated with it. I developed a proposal with justification to make some amendments in admission policy because since 2001, the Directorate of Education, Northern Areas, was responsible for conducting PTC (Primary Teaching Certificate) and CT (Certificate in Teaching) examinations. The Secretary Education approved it.

The following chart shows the enrolment in Elementary College of education for Women, Gilgit since 1999.

S. No	Academic Year	B. Ed	CT	PTC
1	1999-2000	07	19	09
2	2000-2001	11	16	10
3	2001-2002	15	43	30
4	2002-2003	19	55	33

The chart above shows that the enrolment has risen in the Academic years 2001-2 and 2002-3.

In addition, I worked with the Senior Account Officer NEP (Education Department) in 2001, to develop a detailed Justification Report for the World Bank focusing on the importance of college-building to enhance opportunities for the professional development of female teachers. The report and our efforts were appreciated by the World Bank team but due to protracted government procedures and severe weather conditions, the time for construction was not considered enough (it should have been completed by 30th June 2003). However, now senior government officials are concerned about the college-building and raise this issue at different forums.

To strengthen the newly constructed building in Skardu and the existing colleges of Education (female and male) in Gilgit, under NEP, it was decided to provide computers, equipment, teaching /learning material and library books etc. The department assigned the task of conducting a needs analysis based on the college's requirements to me and I submitted detailed lists of the above-mentioned items for three different colleges. It was a huge task and time was short. I requested NAEP for technical support through its Project Director. With a short-term consultant (11 days) I developed the required list and handed it over to the department. I prepared the revised lists based on feedback from my colleagues. It was a big challenge for me.

Conclusion

From this experience, I learnt that we could get any task from the department according to the situation, even on very short notice. I prepared myself mentally to be alert for challenges coming my way. On the other hand, I maintain that the concerned authorities need to properly plan everything beforehand.

I am content with the fact that my efforts have made a genuine impact in strengthening

areas of teacher training, provision of library books in colleges, teaching/learning materials, which play a vital role in improving teaching and learning and contribute to the quality of education.

Reflection

According to the scope of work, Professional Development Teachers can contribute towards school improvement and make a difference according to their job and responsibilities and opportunities for contributing towards school improvement. However, the important point is understating of the system and personal commitment in making that difference. I would like to share one such example during the UK study tour. At the end of the tour we were asked to develop an action plan. My focus for the action plan was strengthening the TRCs established under the ESR Programme. When I came back to the Northern Areas, I shared opinions with colleagues. With the support of Huma Mirza, National Consultant for Material Development, NAEP, we developed a proposal focusing on strengthening Teachers' Resource Centres and setting up a Model Teachers Resource Centre at the Academic Cell. The Education Department authorities and Chief Technical Advisor, NAEP and International Consultants appreciated this effort. I am quoting the remarks of an International Consultant who arranged the visit to TRCs at UK. He says that "[Mehr un nisa] On her return to the UK, she has worked hard to improve and develop the Academic Cell in Gilgit and to set up the new Model Teachers' Resource Centre. It has been largely due to her efforts that the MTRC has been founded and funds arranged"

I feel proud that due to initiatives taken by myself, the ten highly equipped district based Teachers' Resource Centres were given a chance to come out of their shells where they lay dormant for the last fifteen months; to play an active role in improving teaching and learning at the school level (Note: I also have the copies of participants reflection about the training)

In my opinion, it is extremely important that we get support and encouragement combined, which is the main propellant for our work to move forward. We can make a difference no matter where we are and we can contribute towards school improvement in more ways than one. This is our goal. We need to have a clear vision and proper planning, to seek opportunities to develop our professional and personal selves. Our continuous effort, hard work will make a difference. The practicality and the reality behind workplaces are not as smooth as they look. There are many challenges, especially for females, who are working and trying to make a difference. I always treasure the words of my tutors in that

life is not easy and we need to be patient. These words helped me give a practical shape to all the things I wanted to achieve during my work.

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