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# Understanding a novice teacher's learning to teach in a private school for girls in Karachi, Pakistan

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## Abstract

*This paper reports the findings of a qualitative case study conducted in order to understand the learning experiences of a novice primary school teacher, Sajda (pseudonym), who was teaching in a private Community-Based English-Medium School in Karachi. During her appointment as a teacher she had an intermediate level academic qualification and had no exposure to any professional training course.*

*The research question for the study was: How does a novice teacher experience her learning to teach in a private sector school in Karachi, Pakistan? Data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews and field notes and was analyzed through NVivo, which is a systematic software to analyze qualitative data.*

*Findings of the study show that when Sajda entered the teaching profession she faced different types of experiences in the process of learning to teach. She felt pride and happiness at the time of her appointment as a teacher.*

*Prior to experiencing in the classroom she thought of teaching to be an easy job and that everyone could do that, but as soon as she entered her classroom, she came across a very different situation. She experienced both frustration and shocks. These experiences thus prove to be very different from what she was expecting initially.*

*Data shows that preparations for her classroom teaching, collaborative school environment and professional development courses gave her confidence and encouraged her to overcome the challenges in the classroom. After taking all of this into account, the paper concludes with recommendations and implications for supporting novice teachers in the schools.*

## Background and Rationale of the Study

It was mid nineties when I became a teacher in a private high school in Northern Areas of Pakistan With lots of hopes and expectations I entered my classroom, but the experience I had on the first day in the school was very

different than that of my expectations and hopes. I found myself in a miserable condition in my classroom.

Class control and management, dealing with individual students and teaching to the large class were some of the dominant challenges of my classroom. Thus, I perceived myself as a victim of the classroom realities and I needed someone who I could trust to share my frustrations and worries, and get support. However, I continued my routine teaching while practicing and trying out things in my classroom. I call it a "solitaire action" and a practice through trial and error.

This is not a single story of mine, but general experiences of all those young teachers who step into the teaching profession every year. They experience more or less the same as I had in my classroom. Therefore, keeping all the facts in mind the focus of this particular study was to get a deeper understanding of a novice teacher's experiences of 'learning to teach' in the first year of her career as a teacher.

## Review of Literature on Novice Teachers' Experiences in Learning to Teach

Learning to teach begins with the beginning of one's schooling. It is a complex and never-ending journey with excitements and challenges (Carre, 1993; Arends, 1994). This learning process keeps on in pre and in-service as well as classroom based practices.

A very basic question here arises is that what novice teachers need to learn. Kennedy (2000) studied her own learning to teach in the first year of teaching in a new context. According to her realizing one's own assumptions, developing understanding of both the subject and the learners, revising one's own initial thinking and reframing them according to the new context and learning to including learners in the learning process were the things that she needed to learn during her first year.

Teachers' knowledge is a vast area of knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and learning to teach is a long and continues process which comprise of pleasant as well as frustrating experiences.

During the first year of their teaching beginning teachers come across 'reality shock' (Koetsier & Wubbels, 1995; Chubbuck, Clift, Allard & Quinland, 2001; Shamatov, 2005) when they face demands of teaching practices and see gaps

between their ideas and the classroom realities. Beginning teachers usually experience frustration, anxiety, and doubt during the first year of their teaching. Some logistical problems such as; classroom discipline, classroom management issues and dealing with the individual differences of the students are also the issues that beginning teachers experience in their classrooms (Carre, 1993). However, these challenges differ from context to context, from school to school and from person to person (Shamatov, 2005).

Arends (1994) talks about two basic models of teacher learning and development in her book *"Learning to Teach"*. One of them is Fuller's (1969) model and the other is Feiman-Nemser's (1983) stages of teacher development.

 The gist of both of the two models is that in the beginning years teachers start thinking about their own survival in the schools and with the passage of time they start thinking about their classroom related issues such as controlling the students and classroom management and organization. In this stage they also get some repertoire of skills for teaching and learning. In the third and final stage their thinking shifts from thinking about themselves and classroom control to thinking about students' learning as a whole. They give priority to students' learning and become confident in selecting learning activities and techniques from a variety of methods.

A question arise here is that "what do we need to ease the reality shock of teachers in the first year of their teaching?" Cortese's (2005) study identifies three aspects which support learning to teaching. They are the desire to use one's experiences, the encouraging school environment and dealing with a small number of the students rather than a large class. The motivation of using one's own experiences give opportunities to act and reflect up on one's experiences and learn from them.

Secondly, a good educational organization provides a healthy, unthreatening, encouraging, conducive and an engaging environment to the novice teachers to continue their learning.

Thirdly, if teachers are exposed to teach a smaller group of students rather than a large class then it helps them to overcome the classroom management issues and other related issues and get acquaintance with teaching. It can be a good strategy for induction; however, managing such arrangements may create difficulties in schools which lack teachers and extra classroom facilities. Nevertheless, it can be an effective approach to use in various types of teacher training courses.

Moreover, it is a fact that all teachers are adults and adults learn well in an environment that minimizes anxieties and encourages freedom to experiment new things (Smith, 1990). In this way a school culture puts a strong impact on teachers' learning and behaviors (Joyce, Bennett & Rotheiser-Bennett, 1990; Deal and Peterson, 1999). It is the culture that comprises of the fundamental social meanings that shape beliefs and behaviors of the teachers over time (Deal & Peterson 1999).Thus a collaborative school culture encourages a smooth teacher learning and an individualistic approach results in frustrations and disheartens for novice teachers.

Likewise, Shamatov (2005) favors professional support for beginning teachers and argues that it makes the beginning teachers' experiences less traumatic and more positive and encourages them to develop their teaching skills overtime. He advocates the notion that beginning teachers may be able to resolve challenges in more effective ways and bring positive changes in their practices when they get sufficient and systematic support from the school management and administration and from other experienced teachers.

Similarly, Lee & Dimmock (1999) argue that principals play their roles in communication, resource provision, extending instructional support, and insuring their presence among teachers in various school-wide activities. Their characteristics such as; being an effective manger, listener, less hierarchical and care giver (MacBeath, 1998) make school principals to be effective leaders for teachers and encourage teacher learning in the schools.

## The Study

I adopted a qualitative case study approach for the study where I was seeking answers to my question in the real world. One of the characteristics of the qualitative study is that it allows the researcher to go into a deeper level of understanding rather then just gathering data at the surface level. I gathered what I saw, heard and read from my research participant and from the context (Rossman & Rallis 1998) and the knowledge was socially constructed on the basis of the interaction between the researcher (myself) and the research participant. It is a study of a particular teacher in a particular school context and it may not represent the experiences of all the novice teachers' experiences in learning to teach in Pakistan.

I developed the following research questions in order to do the study. "How does a novice teacher experience learning to teach in a private sector school in

Karachi, Pakistan?" Moreover, the subsidiary questions, given bellow, helped me to get answers to the main research question.

1. What factors (positive or negative) affect her learning to teach in the school?

2. How does she experience those factors?

3. What implications for the educational institutions (if any) do the study come up with?

In order to seek answer to the main research question I selected a novice teacher, Sajda who was in her first year of teaching in a private English medium school in Karachi and studied her experiences in learning to teach.

## The Data

I used an interview guide as a major tool for data collection which involved open-ended questions followed by requests for explanations. Likewise, my own field notes that I had developed in the field during the school visits and document analysis (in terms of looking at the participant's lesson plans, worksheets and reference materials) were part of the data. I did three interviews - two from the research participant and one from the Principal of the school.

The initial interview with the research participant aimed at getting understanding of the research participant's educational and professional background, her perception of teaching and becoming teacher and her way of learning during her own school age as well as after becoming a teacher.

The second was a follow up interview that I did after analyzing the first interview. It strengthened my understanding and interpretation of her experiences in learning to teach. On the other hand, as that particular school was a new place for me and thus I needed to know some basic information about the school in terms of its vision, mission and how it perceived teaching and learning in the school therefore I also interviewed the principal of the school.

The interview with the head teacher also helped me in getting some understanding of the overall school culture. Without understanding basic information abbot the school I would not be able to understand the learning experiences of the research participant.

I transcribed all the three interviews in computer. The interview of the Principal was in English; however, both the interviews of the research participants were in

Urdu therefore, it was a challenging task for me to translate it from Urdu into English without changing the meanings of the actual terms.

For example, I could not find any parallel word for the term *KUCH NA KUCH* (Urdu) in English, however, I translated it as 'something' which is not a perfect translation of the word. Likewise, Sajda also used some English words in her interview like 'deal', 'class control', 'activities' and 'management'. Although these terms come from English, yet Sajda used them frequently in her interviews. Halai (2005) also came across such issues in her study which she names as '*minglish*' which is about the terms which come from English but frequently used in Urdu or in any local languages. Hence, having some know how in both the languages (Urdu and English) I was able to understand what the research participant was saying.

I used two approaches to analyze the data. One which is called an 'open coding' by Fielding and Lee (1998) which involved reading through the data several times and then writing marginal notes to categorize the data into sections. Secondly, using the NVivo software I categorized the data into further sub sections. This helped me to have all the data in a place pertaining to one theme. I printed out the node reports and then started going through them and writing analytical memos which later on took the shape of this research report.

## Ethical Considerations of the Study

The study was about understanding the experiences of a novice teacher in learning to teach. It seemed to be a sensitive issue. For example, the research participant might not want to share her experiences with me because of the fear of her job and associations with the school.

Therefore, I, as a researcher, needed to take the research participant in confidence. Hence, it was important for me to share an informed consent (Darlington & Scott, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). For this purpose, I shared the information about the study in written as well in oral form with the research participant and with the principal.

The participation of the research participant was voluntary. She accepted my request and agreed to give time for the study. As for as the confidentiality of the study is concerned, I have used pseudonyms for the research participant and for the school as well. Moreover, I have tried not to give any clue that could lead the readers to identify the school in general and the research participant in particular.

# Findings of the Study

This section sheds light on the findings of the study in terms of Sajda's experiences in learning to teach in her school. Sajda had mixed types of experiences in her class; a) she experienced pleasure as a teacher and b) she experienced some frustrations and shocks in her classroom. The section also sheds light on the factors that helped Sajda to ease those frustrations and shocks. Initially, I will present the finding about Sajda and her school. It will provide a background to see the experiences of Sajda in relation with who she is and where she works.

## Sajda as a Teacher

Sajda is a young female teacher in her early twenties and has been teaching in the primary section of the school for the last nine months. She has studied science in her secondary level, comers in intermediate level and currently doing her bachelor degree in the same subject area.

She usually teaches mathematics in the primary section and enjoys teaching it. She has attended some workshops at the Professional development Center PDC in the same subject area.

Sajda became a teacher on her own interests. She had been inspired by one of her teachers when she was in the school as a student. As a learner, Sajda is enthusiastic, eager and open to learn more. She sees herself as an effective and experienced teacher in future.

Sajda teaches in the Community Secondary School for girls in Karachi. It is a charity based school community school and was established in 1992 in an urban area of Karachi, Pakistan. The vision of the school is to develop students to become responsible and confident citizens with higher moral values.

In connection with the teachers' professional development the school has affiliations with AKU-IED, Notre dame Institution, Teacher Resource Center (TRC) and Professional Development Center (PDC) of their own system. Moreover, in-house professional development programs are also carried out in

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[1] The school has affiliations with a larger organization that runs a PDC for its cooperating schools.

the school by teachers, subject coordinators, vice principal and the principal herself. Talking about the notion of teacher learning the Principal said that

> If teachers are learners then they can cope up with the new challenges of schooling and thus can become better and effective teachers who can guide the students in the changing world. They need to know what is happening around and where the world is heading to. Therefore, they need to be learners themselves so that they can make the children as effective and creative learners. (Principal's interview)

There are computers, libraries, and laboratories in the school which are used by the students and teachers to facilitate learning in the school. Similarly, moral and logistical support is provided to teachers, in the school for using innovations in their classrooms.

## Experiencing Pride and Happiness

When Sajda became a teacher she had a kind of happiness and a sense of pride. There were several reasons for this feeling. The first thing was getting respect from the students. She felt pleasure whenever she got respect from the students. she said "at that time I felt very happy that I had become a teacher and the students were giving respect to me saying 'teacher' 'teacher'. 'Ms' 'Ms' and I was feeling good at that time" (interview 1).

As Sajda had joined teaching profession when she was a student she had completed her intermediate and was studying in bachelor level she joined the school. Hence there was a shift in her position from a student to a teacher. Therefore, she felt pride and happiness when she got respect from the students and when she saw herself as a teacher. This realization of respect and honor encouraged Sajda for further development as a teacher and a love towards teaching profession.

A second reason for this pride and happiness was that Sajda felt good to be with the children. Talking about her experience she said "I liked to deal with the children. I liked handling children doing different things. (Interview 1). This example shows Sajda's nature of loving children. By nature she liked to be with the small children; therefore, once when she became a teacher she got opportunity to be with the young children and work with them which gave her pleasure and happiness.

Thirdly, Sajda got encouragement from her parents, her parents and family members were pleased with her when she became a teacher. Her parents perceived teaching to be a respectable job and suitable for their daughter. She said in her interview that "My parents also felt pleasure when I became a teacher. They thought that it was an honorable job and good for me. Now I feel comfortable that my parents are also happy with my job" (interview 1). Sajda's words show that her parents intension was also a factor that made her feel pride and good as a teacher.

Sajda thinks that the profession she had adopted was liked by her parents as well. In other words, her decision to become a teacher was what her parents wanted for her and it was an ideal profession for her and for her parents well. Therefore, this was one of the factors that made Sajda to feel pride and happiness.

Sajda's parents' wanting her to be a teacher raises certain questions such as why did her parents like teaching as an appropriate profession for their daughter? Is it a general trend in the country or a specific case? In other words, do all the parents prefer teaching to other professions for their daughters? And if it is a general trend then finding the background reasons for such trends would be an interesting study to do.

Besides feeling pride and happiness Sajda also has been experiencing fears and shocks. The following section presents Sajda's experiences in this regard.

## Experiencing Frustrations and Shocks

Sajda has been experiencing frustrations, fears and shocks in her class while learning to teach. Classroom control and management, dealing with students' individual needs and lack of command on the content knowledge were some of the factors that resulted in fears and frustrations for Sajda. For example, talking about her initial issues and problems in her class Sajda said

> My initial problems in the class were handling the children. For example, whenever I was entering the classroom, I could see some of the children moving around. As they were small children, they were not mature. They did not think that they needed to sit down and be disciplined if a teacher was entering the classroom.... Hence, there used to be a bit problem for me in controlling and managing the class which I did not like. (Interview 1)

This quotation shows Sajda's prior conception of classroom teaching. She might have perceptions about the students to be calm and quiet and listen to her whatever she says. When she started teaching she came across different types of classroom realities in terms of controlling the students and managing the class.

As this reality was opposite to what she deemed; therefore, she was facing problems to cope up with the situations. Thus, there was an encounter between Sajda's prior beliefs about teaching and the reality of the classroom she faced. This encounter caused frustrations and fears of being incompetent to teach to the children.

Sharing her experiences of fears Sajda said:

> I used to have fears. I was thinking what would happen if I commit mistakes while teaching to the children. Once it happened that I was explaining something to the students and the children corrected me of my mistake. So, when the children caught my mistake, I felt very embarrassing and I still remember that. At that time, I was obviously shocked. You know, it made me work hard then. (Interview 1)

Here Sajda has expressed her fears of committing errors in front of the students. She seems to perceive teachers to be perfect who do not commit mistakes. She thought that she might lose her dignity among the students in case of committing mistakes. All this resulted experiencing of being shocked and frustrated and she felt discomfort in being seen less than perfect.

Her last sentence in the above example shows that because of the fear of committing mistakes in her classrooms Sajda used to work hard to prepare lessons. For this purpose she consulted reference books, peers and her principal. Sharing of her experiences on working hard Sajda said,

> It is good to work hard, to consult books; to browse the net and also to consult your seniors for preparing things. In this way I personally think that I am learning much. If you only use this book (refers to a textbook) then you are limiting yourself. Therefore, it is good to consult many books that is better not only for the students but also for us. Initially, it was a difficult work for me; because, it was a new thing for me, but you know, latter on I learnt working this way. (Interview 2)

In the above quote Sajda talks about two things; one, her beliefs of consultation of many books is better for both the students' and teachers' learning. On the other hand, she also labels it to be a challenging task that she had never experienced before.

However, with the passage of time she was able to overcome the initial fears and frustrations. The following sections highlights the factors that were supportive for her in this regard.

## Factors Supporting Sajda's Learning in the School

There are many factors that have positively influenced Sajda's learning to teach in her school and classroom. Firstly, it is evident in the findings that Sajda's preparation for her classroom teaching boosted up her confidence to play well in her classroom. For example she said

> I usually enjoy most in my class if I am prepared well before the class. You know, if you prepare activities for the students then they involve in the lesson with great interest and if I see my students working like that I enjoy it (interview 2).

Here Sajda has talked about two things: firstly; she enjoyed teaching whenever she was prepared well and equipped with activities for the students. This also shows her sensitivity towards everyday teaching in the classroom and a kind of fear of facing problems and challenges in case if could not prepare well for the lessons.

Secondly, if she was well equipped with a variety of activities then she could control the students in her class while involving them in different activities. Thus, preparation of activities has been a strategy for her to maintain the classroom routine and to control the class.

Secondly, professional development courses provided learning opportunities for Sajda overcome the challenges in her classrooms and to come out of the frustrations and shocks. For example, Sajda said,

When I did a course from the PDC, it was very helpful for me. There I leant how to handle the children, how to help them and how to behave with them in the class. In case if I face problems in using the new learning in my class, I contact my facilitators. They come to school on regular basis in case if I inform them about my problems. (Interview 1).

This shows that the course she attended at the PDC was supportive for her. The good thing about the course was that there was a mechanism of follow up support in case if Sajda had problems in implementing innovations in her classroom.

Likewise, the following extract from one of her interview shows that becoming familiar with the children and the school context was also supportive to lessen her frustrations and challenges.

> One of the reasons is that I got settled; I adjusted myself with the situation. Now I know why children make noises and how to control them. We need to understand why they are behaving in certain way. Then we can solve the issues in our classrooms. (Interview 1)

Thirdly, another factor that she mentioned was the collaborative and encouraging school culture. The school culture for Sajda was non-threatening and a kind of collaborative one where the principal and the Subject Heads were not there just to evaluate what she did not do, but to work with her as a supportive friend to enhance her learning as a teacher.

Sajda further shared her experiences regarding the importance of the school culture as;

> The school also encourages us do the things like that, but it is not the case that if you do not do certain thing they will penalize you. For example, our principal helped me out and guided me in preparing some of the worksheets and models. She did not order me, but she was with me in doing that which I like very much. (Interview 2)

This quotation from Sajda shows the importance of an effective leadership in the school. It portrays the quality of the principal who works with the teachers rather than asking them to do (Khaki, 2005). This characteristic of the principal has encouraged Sajda to learn as a teacher in the school and to overcome her frustrations.

Many themes have emerged so far in the above story regarding Sajda's experiences of learning to teach. Therefore, I will discuss them briefly in the section given below.

# Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the study show Sajda's experiences in two ways. Firstly, she felt pride and pleasure because of becoming a teacher. One of the reasons for feeling happiness and pride were that had interest in teaching. Literature also shows that teachers' own desire and interest play vital role in learning to teach and encourages them to face the challenges (Cortese, 2005). Secondly, she had good experiences whenever she had prepared well for her lessons.

 Studies have shown that teachers struggle hard to overcome the content and logistical issues in the first year of their teaching (Koetsier & Wubbels, 1995; Ball, 2000) therefore, whenever Sajda had prepared well, she could control and manage the class and thus her experiences were good in class. Thirdly, Sajda's parent wanted her to be a teacher which she did. Therefore, when she became a teacher she thought that she had done the thing that her parents wanted and she also got encouragement from her parents. All these factors made her to feel pleasure when became a teacher.

Likewise, she felt fears and shocks in her classroom as well. These challenges were due to her classroom realities. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, she did not have any pre-service course or experience of teaching in a school. Although she had a long term experience of observing her own teacher in the class when she was a student (Arends 1994), yet she did not have any experience of teaching in the real classrooms.

Secondly, as she had a particular frame of mind pertaining to her classroom, but when she saw the reality different than that of her perception, she felt frustrated and shocked (Koetsier & Wubbels 1995, Chubbuck, Clift, Allard & Quinland 2001; Shamatov, 2005).

Moreover, struggling with the classroom management issues, controlling the children, dealing with the individual children (Carre 1993; Shamatov, 2005), struggling to overcome the subject matter issues (Ball 2000, Shulman 1987; Feiman- Nemser & Parker, 1990) and thinking about teaching well to the students (Arends, 1994) were some of the reasons for Sajda's fears and shocks in her classrooms. The personal interest, professional development course, peer and supervisor support, collaborative school culture, encouraging and supportive leadership and availability of resources have been facilitating factors (Cartese 2005) in easing the fears and reality shocks and encouraging Sajda to tackle the situations properly.

# Implications and Recommendations

- The study has shown that in the first year of their teaching novice teachers come across many challenges in their classroom that result frustrations and shocks; therefore, it would be helpful if schools would develops a mechanism for teacher induction so that the teachers may not suffer alone in their classrooms.

- The study also shows that novice teachers usually struggle to overcome the logistical and content related issues more often; therefore, a mechanism of mentoring Gray and Gray 1985) or peer coaching (Watson & Kilcher, 1990) for them would help them solve these issues. However, developing mentoring and peer coaching in schools have also implications and questions. Whether or not schools would be able to adopt these strategies. Would the schools be able to carryout mentoring and peer coaching approaches in the schools? What type of structural change would they need? How will they manage time, space and resources to initiate such innovations in schools?

- It would be helpful if an orientation type of course could be design for those novice teachers who do not have any teaching experiences or pre-service courses. It will give them some idea about the school, the children and the teaching and learning in general.

- The findings also have implications for teacher development courses in the country. The professional development organizations and institutions need to design their courses to address the classroom reality issues of the teachers. Developing follow up mechanisms in schools may be one of the strategies; however, the feasibility of this raises questions of whether the institutions could be able to do so. Therefore, how to address the classroom realities through the pre and in-service training courses is a question for all the stakeholders.

# Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a qualitative study of understanding a novice teacher's (Sajda) experiences in learning to teach in a private school in an urban area of Karachi. The findings of the study show that Sajda had mixed type of experiences in the first year of her teaching.

Firstly, she felt pride and honoured with her enhanced status when she became a teacher and also enjoyed the sessions where she had prepared well.

Secondly, she experienced a kind of fears and shocks when came across different issues in her classrooms. Factors such as the reality being different than what she deemed, lack of content knowledge, and managing and controlling the students in the classroom were prominent challenges for Sajda which resulted in fears and shocks for her. Sajda's own interest, the collaborative school culture and the in-house professional development course help her ease these issues.

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