Book Chapters

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Teachers professional development for quality education

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Abstract

Quality is at the heart of education and teachers play crucial role to provide quality education. This belief encourages us to state that the quality in education depends on teachers' role, which set scenario for the students. Every teacher has his / her own impact on his / her students. But what is it that enables the teachers to have the greatest impact? In this context there are several professional development programmes offered for the teachers in different parts of the world to build capacity of teachers so they can better serve the needs of the growing population.

This paper attempts to share some of the experiences, acquired during implementation and monitoring the programme. The data provides evidences as how professional development cropped up as a result of these courses through mentors' reflective journals, portfolios, classroom observations, group work, discussions and presentations. This paper specifically highlights the changes that took place in the school culture and pedagogical content knowledge due to the continuous guidance and support from the tutors and District Co-coordinators (DCs) through follow-up process and close monitoring system.

Introduction

Teachers are always recognized as key players in the education system and therefore professional development of these teachers is crucial if the quality of education is to be enhanced. Since these teachers are responsible for providing quality education to students, there is need for quality professional development programmes.

The worth of professional development of teachers is recognized in all educational policies since the independence of Pakistan. The current education policy also highlights the teacher's role in implementing educational reforms at the grass root level (Pakistan Ministry of Education, 1998).

This paper discusses a field-based professional development programme for Primary School teachers with a strong mentoring component. It also highlights how participants of this programme enhanced their pedagogical content knowledge while engaged in face-to-face sessions and in the field.

From the Course Participants' (CPs) reflections on the programme, their reflective journals, facilitators' experiences and observations of this programme, it appears that this programme has developed the teachers professionally, which is the basic element for improving quality of education.

Background

AKU–IED is a national partner in the implementation of 'Education Sector Reform Assistance' (ESRA) initiatives funded by USAID. Fundamentally, ESRA is about two things: school improvement and the ways and means by which key stakeholders throughout the system can continuously identify and solve their own problems regarding school improvement. AKU-IED focuses on improving the performance of teachers and other stakeholders by offering a variety of professional development opportunities leading to school improvement. In order to build upon the capacity at grassroots level, AKU –IED plans to offer the programme: Certificate in Primary Education (Mentoring Focus) for Primary school teachers, Supervisors in Primary Educations (SPEs), Learning Coordinators (LCs), Resource Persons (RPs) and Senior Stakeholders.

The Certificate in Education: Primary Education Programme (Mentoring Focus) is a field – based programme for Mentors from the nine selected District of Balochistan and Sindh under the Education Sector Reform Assistance to the Government of Pakistan by USAID through Research Triangle Institute – Education Sector Reform Assistance (RTI-ESRA).

The programme specifically focuses on developing the participants' 'Mentoring Skills' that can allow them to establish professional relationships to be boosted up between individuals based on their needs, aspiration, abilities, and the available resources. Therefore, throughout the programme participants will get ample opportunities to explore mentoring skills in order to work effectively and help their colleagues for professional growth. Furthermore, 'critical thinking' and 'reflective practice' will be the common themes, which will be embedded in the programme. Whilst throughout the programme they would be encouraged to develop abilities to question their own beliefs and practices, analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend options, make comparisons, draw inferences,

evaluate arguments and come with alternatives to minimize professional challenges.

Structure of the Programme

The programme has been developed as a field-based programme comprising three phases of 300 contact hours, spread over a period of three months.

Phase – I (AKU-IED)

During this phase at AKU – IED, the Course Participants (CPs) will be encouraged to rethink their existing beliefs, attitudes and practices towards the children and teaching/learning processes. After completion of this phase CPs are expected to

- Develop their skills to reflect upon their existing teaching practices and their role for curriculum enrichment,

- Enhanced their content knowledge in the core subject areas of primary education

- Prepare low – cost and high thought instructional material in the concerned areas.

- Developing mentoring skills

- Plan and test newly learnt ideas during the phase – I for performing proactive role as a teacher and as a mentor.

Phase - II (Field based)

During this phase the CPs are expected to practice their newly acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes in their respective contexts. Conduct and evaluate a workshop for their cluster school teachers (mentees). In order to help the CPs in their professional talks, the professional development team and the District Coordinator (DC) of that district will provide follow-up support during the field work. As a teacher the CPs will also Co-plan and Co- teach with mentees in the classrooms? They will share their experiences the facilitator regarding classroom teaching and prepare a teaching portfolio.

Phase - III

This is a face-to-face phase at AKU – IED, the CPs are expected to share their field experiences with the facilitators. More specifically the phase focuses on:

- Disseminate learning experiences amongst themselves and reflect critically on maximum utilization of their expertise to minimize their challenges.

- Continue enhancement of core subject areas

- Develop an action plan of 300 contact hours programme (192 hours face-to-face and 108 hours field-based component) for cluster school teachers.

Theoretical Framework

- Professional development

- Mentoring and cluster based mentoring programme

Professional Development

Professional development is a broad term that can refer to a variety of education, training, and development opportunities. For the purpose of this, the term will be applied to a full range of activities that have the common goals of increasing the knowledge and skills of the staff members. Professional development of school staff is defined as, systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs and the learning out-comes of the students. There is vast literature available that focuses the importance of teachers' professional development to improve quality of education. Most of the educationists agreed with the ideas of linking educational reforms with the professional development of teachers (Borko et al, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2001; Fullan, 2002).

In order to implement any professional development programme, one can think about the needs of the context and the teachers. However it was agreed by all educationists that professional development of the teachers is essential for improving quality of education, but still there is not only a one model for this purpose. (Guskey, 2000) suggests that for teachers' professional development the contextual needs should be considered.

Mentoring and cluster based mentoring programme

> Mentor not only touches someone's life .... They have the potential
> to touch and change the life of the nation. (Newsweek, 1999)

Mentoring is not a new concept; it has existed formally and informally in schools for a long time. Mentoring features desirable aspects of professional development

Informally elders play 'mentors' role for the young in families. This culture is reflected in schools as well: senior teachers often play mentors' role for novice teachers. In recent years these informal interactions between veterans and novices has considerably changed into formal interaction. Now, mentoring of novice teachers by veteran teachers is a central feature of many beginning teachers' programmes for their professional and personal development.

Mentoring is generally defined as a process of establishing personal and professional contacts between a mentor (more experienced) and a mentee (less experienced) for the purpose of professional development.

Anderson and Shannon (1998) describe that a mentor serves as a role model, sponsor, encourager, counselor and friend to a less skilled or less experience person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and personal growth. The above definitions indicate the importance of mentors' role, in providing support to the primary school teachers from less benefited areas. These mentors are performing the same job in their clusters as mentioned in the literature; they are working for the professional and personal growth of teachers from the cluster schools. During the programme, the mentors groomed and developed to facilitate mentees during workshops to expose them to new teaching/learning ideas, as indicated in the literature. The mentoring process is usually a one-to-one interaction between two individuals based on the needs of the mentees and the skills of the mentors. Qaisarani et al (1999) and Lalwani (1999) in their research studies in the context of Balochistan consider mentoring programme as an innovative programme for in-service teachers. They showed that cluster based mentoring programme helped in improving the quality of education at the grass root level.

Findings

As mentioned in the background about the programme, it was a field based mentoring programme, which was designed in a way that the mentors after completion of the programme, will implement field based mentoring programme

for primary teachers from the cluster schools. The main aim of FBMP was for the participants (mentees) of these programmes to develop themselves professionally and personally through a series of workshops conducted by the mentors. Development of the mentees helped them to create friendly and supportive learning environment for the children, which will improve the quality of education in schools.

It appeared from our observations and discussions during the programme that the mentees have developed in the following areas

- Reflective practice

- Role of mentor

- Pedagogical content knowledge

Reflective practice

Reflective practice was one of the major themes of the programme. Throughout the programme CPs were involved in different activities, which helped them to reflect on their existing notions about teaching and learning and to re-conceptualize these notions. At the end of each activity, the CPs were asked to reflect on that activity, to relate it to their real context, and to see whether the activity would be appropriate for their contexts or whether it needed modifications. The CPs realized the effectiveness of reflections for professional development and for their personal growth. As one of the mentors shared,

> Reflective practice is an important aspect of our profession that without it I think it is not possible for the teacher to see his/her level of professional and personal growth. (Zamarrud, Turbat, Balochistan)

The CPs were also engaged in writing reflective journals in order to reflect on the different activities introduced to them during the sessions. They wrote their reflective journals on regular bases and shared these with facilitators and their peers. Written feedback on these reflections developed CPs understanding about teaching and learning through reflective practice. In these journals the CPs raised questions for clarifications, and even brought in some suggestions for the tutors. One of the CP mentioned in his journal:

> Writing reflections was difficult for me initially but as time passed I improved writing journal through the feedback of tutors.

In the journal writing I got opportunity to discuss issues and raise questions about the points which I did not understand during the sessions. (Kashif Kakar, Qila Saifullah).

Through reflective practice the CPs have recognized the importance of observations; they have keenly observed their own and their colleagues' performance during classroom activities. As a CP shared her thinking during group discussions by saying,

I think reflective practice is the most important part of the programme. It enabled me to rethink about my practices as a teacher. I am now thinking about bringing changes in my teaching methods. (Darya Khatoon, Sukkar)

The reflections of the CPs and facilitators' observations reflect the fact that the programme provided the CPs a chance to rethink their existing practices and notions about teaching and learning. They developed habits of thinking about the positive and negative aspects of any idea they learn during the course. This exposure enabled them to realize that childrens' interest and needs should be valued rather imposing their own ideas.

Role of Mentor

During the programme, the CPs were also exposed to the activities in order to enhance mentoring skills and to understand their roles as mentors. The programme predominantly focuses on the theoretical and practical aspects of the role of a mentor at a primary school level. As mentioned in the background of the programme, as mentors, these teachers have to establish a Learning Resource Center at a central school, conduct and evaluate a series of workshops for teachers from primary schools, co-plan and co-teach with the mentees in their classrooms.

During the session of mentoring, rich discussions were carried out there, in respone to the many questions raised by CPs. Understanding the notion itself took longer and meant that CPs had to view themselves through different lenses.

As mentors, CPs were expected to perform different tasks. To expose them to some of these, the team emphasized developing CPs understanding about planning, conducting and evaluating workshops. CPs were asked to plan and conduct workshops in groups on different topics. These topics were related to core primary subjects areas such as languages, mathematics, science, social studies. Generic topics included how children learn, how adults learn, lesson

planning, and multi-grade teaching. During the planning facilitators helped CPs in designing activities and preparing teaching material by using low and no cost material. The CPs used to ask questions and give suggestions to improve the workshops conducted by their colleagues. The facilitators' feed back was also helpful for the CPs to improve the activities and time management. As some of the CPs reflected,

> During the workshop we learnt that how the time could be managed.

Another CP said,

> By discussing with the group members we not only learnt about the topic but also built our confidence.

After going through the planning and conducting of workshop CPs were above to conduct workshops for teachers from their own clusters. As one of the CPs Adil Jahngeer said,

> I think it is now possible for us to plan and conduct the workshop for mentees. He further said, "We have developed this skill at [AKU] IED. (23 July, 2004)

While observing and attending regular sessions, CPs were able to think and acquire some understanding of how more than one teachers could be engaged in planning and teaching. Facilitators' support and guidance helped them to plan and teach in a real classroom. During these sessions the CPs learnt to formulate SMART objectives related to the particular topics. As one of the CP wrote in his reflective journal,

> During planning, I learnt that how the objectives of the lessons could be established". (Asmat-Ullah, Killa Saifullah, July 26, 2004)

Another CP reflected that,

> The activities, during the teaching in real classroom helped students to broaden their thinking abilities. They were interacting with each other to complete the task. They came up with the results beyond our expectations. At this moment I realized that this is the real way of teaching. I will share these experiences with the teacher of my cluster.

He further said,

It was wrong that this is only the teacher who knows every thing but a student can think as good as teacher. (Bismillah, Killa Saifullah, 26 July, 2004)

Through observation of different classes it seemed that due to positive behavior of CPs that was very polite and soft, students were encouraged to interact freely with each other and with their teachers (CPs). During teaching they were trying to use almost all the teaching strategies. Forming groups of students and a creating friendly environment, where students were allowed to discuss, they were manipulating with given objects and at the end of the activities the students presented their work.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

One of the main objectives and expectations of the programme was to enhance CPs pedagogical content knowledge in core subject areas such as Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and Language (Urdu and English) in order to be an effective teachers as well as effective mentors. Consequently, sessions like planning and conducting workshops, and engaging in real classroom teaching and being involved in group tasks were planned in order to develop mentoring as well as teaching skills of the CPs. It was observed during the session that CPs were actively involved in different activities. Eliciting current notions, beliefs and practices regarding teaching of core subjects helped facilitators to be aware of their opinions about teaching of those subjects. The views of CPs regarding enhancement of pedagogical content knowledge showed the effectiveness of these sessions:

Before the programme in my opinion Social Studies was a boring subject, for that reason I always avoid teaching it. Now I realized that it is interesting and valuable subject to build childrens' attitude and develop them as a reflective citizen. The way in which I involved as learner provides me the opportunity to learn a lot and now I willing to teach this subject in my school. (Saeeda Bashir, Gawadar)

In Mathematics session I learnt that children can solve mathematical problems if we provide them the chance to think logically and discussing with each other about mathematical problems. (Gul Muhammed, Chagai)

> For me language teaching means only to complete the text books just by reading and giving with some question answers and grammer. But the language session provided me the opportunity to realize the importance of language skills that are reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing and comprehension. (M. Aslam, Killa Saifullah)

> In Science sessions we learnt about the importance of science education at primary level and how science concepts effectively learn by using different process skill such as observation, prediction, classification and explanation. As we have learn in our session concepts of 'SENSES' and 'MATTER' through simple hands-on activities, we can use them in our context with teachers and students. (Lal Muhammed, Chagai)

The above reflections from CPs showed how activities introduced during the programme helped CPs to develop their teaching skills as well as mentoring skills. The achievements of CPs throughout the programme demonstrate that teachers started have thinking of deviating from textbook-oriented activities and are trying to be more creative in their teaching approaches. This has enabled them to overcome misconceptions as well as enhance their own understanding of core subjects. Apart from the enhancement of pedagogical content knowledge, CPs have learnt to develop instructional material by using low cost and no cost material. CPs have used this material while engaged in real classroom teaching. During discussions, CPs realized that using low cost and no cost material would be helpful for them in their context; they also realized that the mentees should also be exposed to this activity during the workshops.

In light of the achievements of the programmes mentioned above, these mentoring programmes supported and helped the teachers of the Primary schools from remote areas of Sindh and Balochistan in their personal and professional growth. CPs' reflections recognize the quality of the programme. Mentors who have graduated from cohorts 1 and 2 of the mentoring programme have been almost completed a one-year cluster based mentoring programme successfully in their respective Districts, while th mentors from Cohorts 3 to 8 are still engaged in conducting these programmes. It appears from the feed back of the DCs (AKU-IED based District Coordinators) that these mentors are not only motivating the Primary School Teachers from cluster schools to participate in the workshops but also introducing innovative teaching techniques during the workshops. These mentors encouraged the teachers to plan lessons before going into the classes and created a friendly environment to promote child-centered

teaching/learning approach. With the cooperation of the DCs, mentors established a team in the districts to implement professional development activities. These mentors collaborated with their colleagues in planning, conducting and evaluating workshops. The mentors are also involved in follow-up activities during which these mentors provide support to their mentees in planning and implementing lessons in their classrooms. During follow-up visits the mentors also observe the impact of activities on students' learning, which have been introduced by the mentees.

To ensure the quality of the programme AKU-IED based District Coordinators have been placed in the nine Districts. These DCs maintained the records of all the professional development activities carried out by the mentors. The mentors supported by these DCs in maintaining the master file of each and every activity. The mentees are also keeping the records of their activities in their classrooms; these mentees are also encouraged by the mentors to write reflective journals. During our visits to these districts we got an opportunity to see these resources and discussed with the mentees and about the benefits they were getting from the workshops, some of the mentees shared their views as,

> Although the mentor is from us but I am surprised how he has learnt so many things, the methods he taught us would be helpful for us to teach our students about the difficult concepts.

Another mentee reveals,

> The workshops helped me to understand how the children learn, I have never thought about the childrens' interest, I have always imposed, whatever I want to teach them, but now I have realized that as teachers we have to care about childrens' level of understanding and their interest.

Apart from mentors, another role played by these teachers in their context is that of classroom teachers. Mentors are asked to spend four days in their schools and two days for professional activities for clusters. As classroom teachers these mentors introduced newly established ideas in their classes, it was observed during our visits to respective districts of Sindh and Balochistan. It was good to see that the students were engaged in group activities; they were actively participating in these activities and enjoying the lessons. The encouraging aspect was that these mentors allowed their colleagues to sit in their classes and asked to share their feedback about the lesson at the end. It showed that these mentors not only worked for the cluster school teachers but they were trying to bring about changes in the existing school culture to improve the quality of education.

Conclusion

The quality of mentoring programme can be evident from the impact of the programme on mentees' cluster schools and students' progress.

The mentoring programme developed the mentors professionally and they are still benefiting from the field based mentoring programme while planning and conducting workshops. Mentors continue to observe mentees during follow-up activities, provide them feedback, and allow them to review and reflect upon their own practices. Mentors have become more confident and are creating environments in their clusters that stimulate the interest of mentees to be lifelong learners. Mentors encourage mentees and their colleagues to focus on students' learning and attainment and set challenging targets that will raise the quality of education.

Mentees are implementing acquired knowledge and skills in their classes to motivate students' effective learning. The interest of mentees in bringing about changes in their teaching methods demonstrate that the mentors who conduct workshops for them are committed to the profession and the system and the mentoring programme gave them lots of opportunities to help others. It showed that the mentors who are now responsible to conduct mentoring programmes in their districts have developed themselves to support their colleagues, students and the system. This all has been achieved through a quality teacher education programme, that is, "Certificate in Education: Primary Education Programme (Mentoring Focus).

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