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Teacher Mentoring Programme: A Vehicle to Support Professional Development for Improving the Quality of Education in Districts of Sindh and Balochistan of Pakistan

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Abstract

In general practices it is noticed that there is greater improvement in teacher's performance if they refresh themselves by attending different professional development programmes. They start rethinking about their role as effective teacher and how to support novice teachers. In order to support the novice teachers and develop them professionally there is a need of quality teacher education programme. Literature reveals that "Teacher mentoring programs have dramatically increased since the early 1980s as a vehicle to support and retain novice teachers. The vast majority of what has been written about mentoring focused on what mentors should believe and do in their work with respect to novice teachers. The professional literature typically describes the benefits for novice teachers" (Odell and Huling 2000). By keeping in mind the importance of shared literature and significant contribution of The Aga Khan University – Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) offered Certificate in Education: Primary Education Programmes (Mentoring Focus) under the Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) project to improve the quality in teacher education.

This paper presents some of the strategies used during the mentoring programmes, specifically focused on developing the participants' skills of 'mentoring' such as to provide facilitation, support and help to motivate less experienced selected primary teachers of the cluster schools to reach their true potential. The series of programmes developed participants as effective teachers for their classrooms and as mentors for their learning resource centres (LRCs) at union council level through reflective practice and critical thinking. This paper also describes the mechanism of professional support to develop the other primary school teachers (mentees) for their professional growth through Cluster Based Mentoring Programme (CBMP) and impact on their classroom teaching. Consequently the growth of mentees created friendly and enjoyable supportive

learning environment in their classes where children enhance their learning abilities. These facts showed quality of CBMP, which in turn improves the quality of Primary Teacher Education.

Hence, the graduate of Certificate in Education: Primary Education (Mentoring Focus) programmes are supporting their mentees professionally for improving the quality of teachers education in selected districts of Sindh and Balochistan of Pakistan. Furthermore the paper also highlights the experiences of the instructional team during teaching, follow up field visits, anecdotal records of feedback sessions, participants' reflections and interviews provided as evidences of how Mentoring Programme became a vehicle to support professional development for improving the quality of Education.

Introduction

The quality of teachers in the current education policy of Pakistan is a crucial factor in implementing educational reforms at the grass root level (Pakistan Ministry of Education, 1998). The recent Education Sector Reform Action Plan of 2001-2004 recognises teachers' professional development as one of the basic elements for improving the quality of education (Pakistan Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 35). According to the thesaurus of the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database, professional development refers to "activities to enhance professional career growth." Such activities may include individual development, continued education, and in-service education; as well as curriculum writing, peer collaboration, study groups, and peer coaching or mentoring.

In the context of education, the purpose of Professional Development can be summarized as the acquisition or extension of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities that enable individual teachers and the school-learning organization in which they work to (Blanford 2000).

In developing countries, the role of the Aga Khan University – Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) is remarkable as it provides opportunities that lead to the improvement in the quality of teacher education. Considering the significant contribution of AKU-IED for bringing change in the education sector, its role has been recognized as a national partner in the implementation of Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) initiatives. ESRA programmes are managed by Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through a bilateral agreement between the United States and the Government of Pakistan.

The AKU-IED is to take the lead in Component - 2 of Research Triangle Institute Education Sector Reform Assistance (RTI-ESRA), which is titled as “Professional Development for Educators, Teachers and Administrators”. Its primary objective is to assist provincial and district authorities to establish a sustainable organizational and institutional framework for ongoing teacher professional development, that makes the most effective and efficient use of available resources.

As per agreement, initially AKU- IED has developed capacity in the 9 selected districts of Sindh and Balochistan (Hyderabad, Khairpur, Sukkur, Thatta, Noshki, Chagai, Gwadar, Qila Saifullah and Turbat) to improve the quality of education at the primary level. This is a multi-pronged effort to develop the skills of education officers, teachers and teacher educators through a variety of customized courses. While working closely with the district governments, AKU-IED provided technical assistance for establishing Resource Centres (RCs) which will sustain in-service teacher education at the district and tehsil levels.

In order to build upon the capacity at the grass-root level, the AKU-IED plans to offer a series of programmes. The Certificate in Education: Primary Education (Mentoring Focus) programmes are designed for Supervisors (SPEs), Learning coordinators (LCs), Resource persons (RPs) and experienced teachers of elementary/primary schools. These programmes are field based; and comprise of three phases of 300 contact hours that spread over a period of ten weeks. The main aim of the programmes is to help the SPEs, LCs and RPs; along with teachers from Primary and Elementary schools to restructure their roles as mentors and to be able to provide professional support to teachers (mentees) at tehsil level. The long reaching aim of the programmes is to develop course participants (CPs) as mentors for their own clusters through reflective practice and critical thinking. The mentors developed through these programmes are expected to further develop the capabilities of the primary teachers through a cluster based mentoring programme, which is field based and encompasses 300 contact hours to improve teacher classroom practices and students’ learning.

Notion of Mentoring

Mentoring is usually an intense, dyadic relationship in which the mentors further the professional and personal development of the protégé by providing information, assistance, support and guidance. Levinson et al., (1978) define mentor as “a teacher, sponsor, counselor, developer of skills, and intellect host, guide, and exemplar” (Merriam, 1983, p. 162). This characterization of mentor as a teacher or guide who befriends, supports, and sponsors a protégé is repeated

frequently in literature (Anderson and Shannon, 1988; Daloz, 1983; Fagan and Walter, 1982; Galvez-Hjornevik, 1986, Gray and Gray, 1985; Klopff and Harrison, 1981; Odell, 1990; Zey, 1984).

Mentoring is also described in terms of professional relationships that mitigate teacher isolation, promote the concept of an educative workplace and lead to the creation or understanding of consensual norms in a school faculty or grade team (dialogic learning). (Little, 1985; Costa and Kallick, 1993; McCann and Radford, 1993; Yeomans and Sampson, 1994; Ballantyne, Hansford and Packer, 1995).

In reviewing the literature, a mentor's role can be synonymous with that of a teacher, coach, trainer, role model, nurturer, leader, talent-developer, and opener-of-doors (Sullivan, 1992). Professional development can come in a variety of forms such as mentoring, modeling, ongoing workshops, special courses, structured observations, and summer institutes (Rodriguez and Knuth 2000, p. 4). However, it must provide opportunities for teachers to explore new roles, develop new instructional techniques, refine their practice, and broaden themselves both as educators and as individuals. Beau Fly Jones contends that "effective professional development is necessary for all teachers involved in educational reform" (Cook and Fine 1996, p. 3). Mentoring supports professional growth and renewal, which in turn empowers the faculty through individuals and colleagues (Boice 1992).

In Pakistan, research studies, especially those pertaining to Balochistan, were conducted (see. Qaisrani et al., (1999) & Lalwani, 1999) and these provided some useful insights into the effectiveness of mentoring programmes. Some of the available literature (Ganser, 1995; Memon, Lalwani, Meher, n.d.) studies the voices of mentors by discussing the mentors' role in professional development. Qaisrani and his associates (1999) consider mentoring programme as an innovative programme of in-service teacher education. They show that the cluster-based mentoring programme has had a significant impact on students' learning. This programme has added a new dimension of group mentoring based on the cluster approach to in-service teacher education.

Applied Strategies

The following strategies were used during the Certificate in Education: Primary Education (Mentoring Focus) Programmes:

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has gained currency as bedrock for teachers' learning and for the improvement of their teaching practices. Dewey was the first educationist to promote reflection as a means of professional development in teaching. He believed that critical reflection is the most important quality a teacher must have, and that it has much more impact on the quality of schools and instructions, rather than the teaching techniques commonly used (Dewey, 1933). More recently, Donald Schon (1987) has suggested that the ability to reflect on one's action is a defining characteristic of professional practice. Schon has also noted that reflection can take place throughout the teaching process and is a crucial aspect of the process by which beginners in a discipline improve their work to make it more consistent with that of successful and experienced practitioners. Kottkamp (1990) defined reflection as "a cycle of paying deliberate attention to one's own actions in relation to intentions... for the purpose of expanding one's opinions and making decisions about improved ways of acting in the future, or in the midst of the action itself" (p. 182). We consider the meaningful role of reflection in the teaching practices we introduced, and in so doing develop a bridge between reflection and professional growth.

During the programmes, CPs were encouraged to rethink their existing beliefs, attitudes and practices towards the child and the teaching-learning process; and to reconsider the kinds of professional support they provide to teachers at the primary level. The CPs got the opportunity to reflect and get deeper insights into organizing the multi-grade teaching in different scenarios: as a practical model, as a curriculum, its narrowness and its aptness; the difference between curriculum, syllabus and scheme of studies; role of text books and the role of teachers as mediators of the prescribed curriculum. Participants also discussed and analyzed the primary curriculum to update their existing practices and to incorporate and demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge through classroom teaching. In order to be an effective teacher as well as an effective mentor, participants also got the chance to enhance their understanding of core subject areas, such as mathematics, science, social studies and languages (Urdu, English, Sindhi) through practically involved hands-on and mind-involved activities; and by reviewing planned lessons for adaptation and learning from good examples. The CPs also realized the importance of the reflective practice sessions and how these reflect on different areas; and how the practices mentioned above help to recognize the CPs' own strengths and weakness. They considered it as a professional development tool for further improving the teaching/learning process. Activities to promote and sustain reflection included:

1. Maintaining a reflective journal
2. Critical discourse of sessions
3. Evaluation and analyses
 - Lessons and workshops
 - Individual weekly assignments
 - Programme Evaluation questionnaires

In this regards the CPs maintained their reflective journals and shared it with their respective tutors for feedback. In these journals, they raised questions and related their experiences with their learning, by describing their reflections. Data that is presented in this paper was derived from the CPs' reflective journals. They developed their understanding about teaching and the learning process through reflective practices, as one CP mentions in his journal,

“Through reflections I have started thinking about my teaching methods. During writing reflection, the what, why and how improved my thinking skills, and I planned to improve my teaching skills as an effective teacher and an effective mentor. Now I realized it is a truly professional tool that helped me think logically and overcome my drawbacks during cluster based mentoring programme”. (Abdul Basit Khairpur)

One of the CPs expressed his feelings on reflective practices through the journal by saying, “Initially writing reflections was difficult for me but as time passed I have improved the writing in my journal through the feedback of tutors. In journal writing, I got the opportunity to discuss issues and raise questions. Writing reflective entries and critical thinking are important professional tools and without it I realized it is not possible for teachers to see the level of their own professional growth”. (Zamarrud Turbat)

In summary, reflection fosters professional growth and development; along with critical thinking, self assessment, and self-directed learning. It promotes the development of new knowledge, leads to broader understanding, and creates greater self-awareness (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). It facilitates sorting through and selecting from many ideas, helps to confront and challenge one's current conceptions of teaching and learning, and assists in identifying how these affect classroom decision making. Therefore, reflection is an invaluable tool in facilitating lifelong learning and professional growth.

Developing Mentoring Skills

The specific objectives of the programme revolved around the theme of 'Mentoring Skills'. To achieve the target of the programme, the team has planned to engage the CPs in different activities to develop their mentoring skills i.e. classroom presentations, lesson planning, team teaching, preparation of instruction material for conducting workshops and one year cluster based mentoring programme planning that allows them to think about their future roles as mentors.

During the whole programme CPs have ample opportunities to develop themselves in the following areas:

1. Enhancement of Pedagogical Knowledge
2. Practicing and improving their teaching skills in their own context
3. Exposure to observe the teaching and involvement in feedback session
4. Exploring the concept of peer coaching and team teaching
5. Planning and implementing the workshops in groups
6. Designing and reviewing the instructional materials
7. Planning and preparing a hand book of Cluster based Mentoring Programme
8. Individual strategy planning for:
 - Field component of the programme
 - Cluster based mentoring programme

It was one of the hallmark features of the programme that CPs were engaged in a variety of subjects' content based activities in order to rethink their existing notions and practices in core subject areas. For instance, in effective science teaching, teachers need to develop an understanding of the scientific concepts involved and also the pedagogical content (Shulman, 1986), that is how to integrate their knowledge of children's reasoning with their experience of classroom organization. The lesson plans were designed within the constructivist framework. Activities which promote thinking were included. Each lesson plan contained an extension, enabling teachers to differentiate between pupils of different ability. Pedagogy was focused upon along with content teaching,

exposure to new ideas in subject matter pedagogy and effective teaching; this promoted professional growth on the part of the mentors as well.

In order to provide the CPs with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of newly acquired pedagogical content knowledge and skills in core subject areas, the class was organized in pairs for teaching practice in a government school followed by a debriefing session. Each pair was given one period to deliver a lesson while other pairs were given the opportunity to observe their colleagues along with facilitators. After the lesson was delivered, a session was arranged for feedback from observers and facilitators. In this way they got experience on how to take feedback sessions with their mentees. As the CPs will work as mentors in their respective cluster schools, the session on classroom teaching provided them with an opportunity to widen their observation skills and to explore the means to impart professional feedback to their colleagues. This experience can be taken back by them to be applied in their own contexts. In this regard one of the CPs reflected, "Team teaching was good experience to plan lesson with my pair in which I learnt that about how newly acquired knowledge can be embedded in my teaching. (Zubair Khan, Hyderabad)

Another CPs reflected in her reflective journal:

Now as a mentor, I understand how to help mentees and how to give them realistic feedback. When I go through the process of team teaching and classroom teaching, I realize what type of problems mentees might face while teaching in this way according to acquired teaching knowledge. The session also helped me in understanding how to take notes during observations and how to provide feedback. (Nuzhat Zohara, Hyderabad)

For developing mentoring skills, during the programme, the participants got opportunities to explore the concept of peer coaching. These participants have to work with their cluster school teachers in order to enhance the teachers' professional learning by observing their teaching, providing feedback and discussing/suggesting alternatives on the teaching that they have observed. The participants received the session very productively and reflected that:

Peer coaching helped us to see how senior teachers facilitate each other in teaching. We need to get insights into the concept because after completion of the programme here we have to work with our cluster school teachers (mentees). (Saifa Aliyan, Turbat).

Workshop planning and implementing in a small group is one of the tasks assigned to CPs during the programme. All participants got experience in planning and implementing workshops for their colleagues at AKU-IED and in the field. During Phase-III at AKU-IED, after getting experiences by conducting workshops at AKU-IED and in the field, CPs were given a chance to review their Phase-I instructional materials in the light of their experiences. In this regard one CP reflected in his reflective journal:

Designing workshop in phase I was a helpful experience, but reviewing the instructional materials in phase III was more fruitful and strengthened our experiences to improve the instructional materials (workshops plan in core subjects) on the bases of field experiences. Consequently, we built up our confidence to be able to design workshop on any topic. (Munwar Baig, Hyderabad)

CPs developed the 300 contact hours 'Cluster Based Mentoring Programme' handbook with the guidance of the facilitators. At the end of each programme, the CPs learnt how to prepare a strategic plan for field based programme, and a long term action plan for one year long cluster based mentoring programme, and how to organize the said according to time and objectives.

To conduct one year cluster based mentoring programmes, CPs established Learning Resource Centres in Central Schools.

Establishment of Learning Resource Centre

The term "Professional Development" is a most attractive issue, and is the centre of attention nowadays. (Craft, 2000). Teachers' professional development programs are conducted in an environment where the process of learning takes place on various platforms, all of which aim at a long lasting qualitative change in the teachers' approach toward educating themselves. As Lieberman (1994) defines, the professional development of teachers is a foundation for the establishment of a supportive culture involving norms of collegiality, where teachers update themselves with new content within the scope of their work. Professional development activities that introduce a collaborative culture and collegiality among teachers need a centre, where they can be used to create opportunities to develop the teachers professionally. One such centre for creating opportunities for professional development should be the Learning Resource Centres (LRCs), which need to be established at the union council level of each selected districts. The rationale of an LRC is to provide a platform to the

teachers, to use within their own context, in which they can practice and implement learning. Eventually, these LRCs and cluster schools will provide a vital path, which the teachers can easily traverse within their own contexts.

Cluster-based Mentoring Programme

After successful completion of the AKU-IED based programmes, all mentors were given the responsibility to conduct a one year cluster-based mentoring programme at their respective LRCs. Each mentor is hence expected to develop the capacity of a cluster of primary school teachers at the LRC. Each cluster comprises of a maximum of 30 primary teachers, in which the mentor is expected to conduct a 300 contact hours long programme (192 hours of face-to-face sessions, comprising of 4 hour long sessions on every Saturdays of the month, and 108 hours of field based component). The main objectives of the cluster based mentoring programmes are to improve teachers' classroom practices and students' learning at the primary level.

Mentors from each cluster set-up are to be provided on-going support in organizing teaching and learning processes of the mentees (primary school teachers), and the children by district coordinators of the AKU-IED and the district government. The support mechanisms of the mentors remain available throughout the year, and the mentees who successful complete 300 contact hours of the programme are certified by AKU-IED.

Impact on Classroom Practices

Students' learning is at the core of all school improvement initiatives and therefore, it closely reflects the quality and practices of teachers and the overall performance of the schools. This is because of the fact that teaching approaches used in the schools reflect students learning. Those primary teachers (mentees) who are attending the cluster based mentoring programmes have shown their good performances and practices by implementing the acquired knowledge in their classroom. The mentors also provide help and follow up support to the mentees in their schools. During follow up, mentors help them in co-planning and co-teaching. Mentors shared their experienced reflections on follow-up visits by saying, "the great achievement I observed was that mentees adapted 'active learning' strategies of teaching and provided supportive learning environment where children enhance their learning abilities". (Noor Hussain, Khairpur) Hence, cluster based mentoring programmes improve the quality of teacher education at the grass root level.

Team Learning Experience

Reflective practice was the foundation for our professional development throughout the programmes and the in-field working with colleagues and mentors. The points most emphasized were the importance of thoughtful analysis and frequent revision of effective approaches to teaching and learning. The contextual diversity of Sindh and Balochistan, and the resulting experiences that these provided enhanced our learning. Diversity, whether related to gender, background, economic status, developmental level, learning style, or other characteristics was treated as a potential source of enrichment and not as an automatic scarcity.

Developing mentoring skills as a support by which teachers can break down their isolation and support professional learning in ways that focus on the daily tasks of the teachers and teaching/learning situations. The current interest in mentoring for professional development stems from the belief that mentoring, coaching and preceptor-ship are a way in which individuals and institutions can learn and develop.

Learning from the experience of working with government teachers and officials in ESRA focused on districts of Sindh and Balochistan Provinces.

Conclusion

Capacity building is a continuing process for professional development of individuals. Change is a slow process; however institutional change depends on both people and policies. With the support of the ESRA, AKU-IED is putting its efforts in selected district of Sindh and Balochistan for professional development activities and institutional development activities, by establishing leaning resources centres through cluster based mentoring programmes. We can hence say that these programmes are emerging as powerful vehicles to support professional development of primary school teachers at grass-roots level.

However, for sustainability there is a need to recognize the mentors' role, and to provide facilities for their mobility to engage them in the follow-up of professional development activities at cluster school level. Then these programmes will lead and help to sustain the teachers' education for improving the quality of primary education in schools. (Annual Project Report Jan-Dec 2005)

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