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February 2006

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Jamal Papieva

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

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Recommended Citation

Papieva, J. (2006). Pre-service teacher education in Central Asia. *Quality in education: Teaching and leadership in challenging times*, 2, 779-787.

Available at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/book_chapters/90

Pre-Service Teacher Education in Central Asia

Jamal Papieva, AKU-IED, Pakistan

This paper presents the nature of pre-service teacher education in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia, a case of Kyrgyzstan; highlights the main issues and discusses the possibilities and approaches undertaken for improving pre-service teacher education.

After Central Asian republics gained independence, their higher education was challenged by broad changes in political and economic life, and by the destruction of their ideological values. In general, higher education was always part of the bigger Soviet system of education. All principles of higher education structurization, its missions and goals, its strategy and main curriculum requirements were centrally developed in Moscow, and then sent for implementation to the republics. This experience of living in a big system and its historical legacy left our institutions of higher education unprepared for independence.

Structure of Pre-Service Teacher Education

Teachers of Central Asian schools are prepared in institutes and universities. During the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), all higher educational institutions were state-funded; which meant that students studied for free. Moreover, most students were also eligible for state stipends. Since independence, private institutions have been opened. In addition, contract education emerged within public universities, i.e. the state higher institutions also re-organized themselves into “budget” (no-fee) and “contract” (fee-paying) programs due to budget constraints.

Moreover, the number of higher educational institutions has been increasing: new institutions have been opened and also branches of institutions are opened in different districts, regions of the country. Although, this paints a picture of a more educated generation and of creating opportunities for the youth living in remote areas to get higher education, but the quality of education that these institutions and their branches provide is debatable. They compete with each other for students and constantly attempt to expand their enrolments. These institutions also “pump out” fees from people by opening market-oriented, fee-paying course specialties in haste without sufficient resources, thus offering

expensive but poor-quality education and graduating inadequately trained specialists (Beshimov, 2001).

Pre-service teacher education is normally for four to five years. Each academic year contains of two semesters: first is from September till January, the second from February till June (July).

Student Enrolment

Pre-service teacher education institutions generally enrol students via entrance examinations.

School graduates mostly prefer to enter the department that are more 'prestigious': medical, law, foreign languages and economic departments. These departments are considered to be more 'prestigious' than others, because there is more demand for the specialists of these areas, the salaries are higher and also there are possibilities of being involved in international organizations. Thus, interest for studying in departments specialized to prepare teachers is comparatively low; and student enrolment in teacher education departments is decreasing.

Although, foreign languages departments are mostly aimed at preparing foreign languages teachers, most of the students who apply for study there do not have the intentions of becoming teachers; rather their purpose is to learn languages. Some students enter teachers' specialized departments, because it is relatively easier to get admission to those departments, and after 1-2 years they can get transfer to other prestigious faculties, just for the sake of getting admission in the university.

Entrance examinations to higher educational institutions have been surrounded by controversies related to the objectivity of examination questions and tests, nepotism, favouritism and corruption. Those who had connections or could offer bribes were in better positions to get enrolment in higher education institutions. Children from rural areas and from poorer backgrounds find it difficult to enter higher education institutions (Romanchuk, 2002).

Seeking to combat this desperate state of affairs in entering higher educational institutions through corruption, nepotism and favouritism, in 2002 the government of Kyrgyzstan called for the creation of an independent testing center that would design and conduct a merit-based National Scholarship Test for scholarship selection purposes. (Drummond & DeYoung, 2004). This

examination replaced the previous system of examinations administered by higher education institutions for applicants seeking government scholarships. The testing enables the deserving applicants to win government scholarships and thus get enrolled in higher education institutions. Teams of the testing center claim that despite the success of the testing initiative since the three years of its implementation, weak governance and widespread corruption fosters conditions that might continue to make sustainability of independent testing challenging for its proponents. An issue that continues to occur in this project is that some schools, usually in urban areas, are better resourced and have better teachers; and hence they invest more in students and are often quicker at introducing innovation, and hence may be better at preparing kids for the kinds of tasks faced on tests. Most of the schools of rural areas face the problem of teacher shortage, and a subsequent lack of teaching and learning resources, and this situation effects on the students' performance at tests. Moreover, there is mismatch between the test and nature of school education i.e. test items require higher order thinking to which the students are not trained at schools

Curriculum

In pre-service teacher education programs, beginning teachers are introduced to theoretical and practical (formal) knowledge about teaching. As Feiman-Nemser and Remillard (1996) write, student teachers “lay an intellectual and practical foundation for teaching in education courses and field experiences” (p.65). Student teachers learn about teaching, learning, pupils and subject-matter (Cochran-Smith, 1991). They also obtain moral and values education.

Content

The student teachers study three interrelated disciplines (Kerr, 1990):

1. **Special Disciplines.** Student teachers study a particular subject such as Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Literature, History and so on. This portion of the curriculum constitutes about 70 percent of the total course of the study.

· See Drummond and DeYoung (2004) for a detailed discussion about the challenges of introducing national testing.

2. **Social Disciplines.** Formerly all social disciplines were heavily based on Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Nowadays, this portion of the curriculum is being replaced to focus on generic social disciplines including Basic Psychology and Sociology.
3. **Pedagogical Disciplines.** This portion of the curriculum includes Pedagogy, History of Education, Educational Psychology, Child Development, and Teaching Methods, in general and in particular to a specific subject (for example, Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages).

Although, Marxist-Leninist content is removed from the curriculum, still the content is overloaded. Some subjects taught in certain departments are not actually necessary for particular specializations. For example, the students of the foreign languages department have to study maths for one semester. There are no elective courses for the students, and all disciplines are compulsory.

Pre-service teacher educational institutions may not seem particularly attractive to prospective students, because the format, the methods and to a certain extent, the content of teacher preparation, have not substantially changed since independence. The system lacks student-centered orientation in methodological and academic training. Moreover, faculty staff of the higher education institutions is inadequate. As most of the teachers left teaching or changed their jobs for better paid ones, institutions have to hire young teachers - graduates who don't have teaching experience at all and school teachers who don't have enough experience working in the system of higher education. No professional support is structured and provided for them at the beginning.

Teaching Practicum

During pre-service teacher education, the students are involved in student teaching practicum, which is regarded as an important stage in future teachers' development (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985). Future teachers get opportunities to apply to their practice what they have learned in their formal training. During the initial years of their pre-service education, student teachers go to schools for a practicum focused on working with children to foster "upbringing" (Kerr, 1990). This school practicum is called 'passive practice'. Student teachers spend two weeks at school observing lessons conducted by senior students and teachers of the school. The purpose of this practice is to get acquainted with curricular and extracurricular activities of the school, the schoolteachers and the teaching in general. At the end of the practice the student teachers are to organize one activity in education / moral development. As a result of practicum, student

teachers get *zachet* (test-credit) based on the activity they conducted and according to their diligence. During the later stages of their teacher education, student teachers have a practicum of full-time subject teaching, for 6-8 weeks, supervised by both pedagogical institution faculty and school teachers. They carefully plan each lesson and conduct it under their guidance and supervision. They observe each others lessons and they are also given the responsibility for the students of one class acting as a class-tutor. It is good opportunity for the students to experiment with their learning and to practice them in real classrooms; to learn to deal with students' academic and non-academic matters; to realize the issues pertaining to teaching and seeking for their solutions or alternatives; and finally to learn how to design lesson plans and to prepare visual aids for teaching.

However, during teaching practicum the students face challenges with managing a classroom, applying the instructional strategies learned in their pre-service programs, and working under the close observation and guidance of their teacher education tutor and assigning school teacher. They worry about the pressures of the school and classroom culture; they feel insecure about their supervisors and their evaluation. Pupils also realize that student teachers are not their real full-time teachers, and consequently they may treat student teachers less seriously than they treat their full-time teachers. As a result, student teachers mostly complete their practicum as merely a formal degree requirement; some view practicum experiences as frustrating and fraught with unmet expectations. They feel that they are often not provided opportunities and freedom to practice as they wish, due to the constraints of their practicum, issues with their tutors' agendas and expectations, and because of the school teachers' views of teaching, which may vary from their own. Due to numerous pressures, student teachers aim to meet their supervisors' expectations, and at times may end up acting in ways that do not match their images of teaching; as a result, student teachers become vulnerable, conservative and unwilling to take risks.

Textbooks

Since independence, education reform has focused on revising textbooks published during the Soviet times – particularly textbooks containing outdated information. Although the ideological stance has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the legacy of an ideology that stressed the existence of one truth prevails, and most of the educators are still searching for the definitive textbook that will replace the old one. There are very limited skills in developing good quality textbooks that would be more comprehensive, be aware of age group requirements, be less abstract and fact oriented, and result in encouraging

critical thinking. Textbooks developed in past years are not linked to the new pedagogy and teacher training. Moreover, higher education institutions are mostly using textbooks that were published during the USSR, and as mostly books are in Russian there is huge demand for the textbooks in national languages. The situation of the students who study in departments with the Uzbek medium of instruction is critical. Textbooks and other resources used to be obtained from Uzbekistan, but due to a shift from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, which was introduced in 1996 in Uzbekistan; it became difficult for Uzbek students with textbooks. Because, mostly textbooks published in Uzbekistan are in the Latin alphabet, but Kyrgyzstan follows Cyrillic.

In general the shortage of textbooks and other learning materials ranges from significant to critical.

Assessment

At the end of each semester the students have to take a number of examinations and *zachets* (test-credit) on the subjects they study throughout the semester. Corruption can also be seen in the process of the assessment. The students who fail exams and tests usually bribe faculty members to get passing marks and a promotion to the next level. Such cases discourage students to study, as they might think that if they can get marks easily then why waste time and effort in understanding the course work. For example, as the students of foreign languages departments study mathematics for one semester, they bribe teachers of maths to get marks for exams, as they do not study it, thinking they don't need it, however they have to pass that course because all subjects are compulsory.

Moreover, all examinations are oral which entail cramming and cheating, hence leaving no opportunity for developing the students' writing skills.

At the end of last semester of the final year, the students have to write diploma papers and have to sit for state exams. As the students are not encouraged to practice paper writing during the study and not offered the courses of academic writing, the quality of diploma paper is not up to the level. It looks like just literature review with image of plagiarism.

After Graduation

It is very disturbing that a large number of teacher education graduates never become full-time teachers, because of the unattractiveness of the teaching

profession. The greater majority of students in pre-service teacher education programs in higher educational institutions do not want to become teachers upon graduation. Every year, between 1000 and 1500 people graduate from pre-service teacher education programs, both state-funded and fee-funded. Only about 30 percent of all these graduates take teaching jobs at all, further exacerbating the serious teacher shortage (Open Society Institute, 2002).

Teachers in Kyrgyzstan struggle with many problems, including teacher shortages, unqualified colleagues, low payment and a shortage of resources including textbooks, unmotivated pupils; along with working and living in worsening conditions. Therefore, the graduates of pre-service teacher education institutions are reluctant to work as teachers upon graduation. Instead, they try to get well-paid jobs, even if they are not in the specialized area.

To address the issue of teacher shortages, the Ministry of Education of Kyrgyzstan issued a decree in 1993 which obliges the graduates from the state-funded “budget” programs, to be placed in a school to teach two years before they are awarded their teaching certificate (Kerr, 1990; Sweeney, 1993). However, only half of the graduates from state-funded courses go to the schools assigned in their placements (Bekbolotov, 2000). In addition, the placement program often allows new teachers to negotiate placement in preferred urban areas. For example, 1984 graduates from pedagogic institutions were assigned to schools in 2004, but only 270 of them were assigned to rural schools (*Kyrgyzinfo*, September 1, 2004). Moreover, the same issue of corruption can be observed here, graduates try to get their degrees before the two years and get assigned to rural areas through personal connections and bribing.

The government is trying to attract and retain more young teachers at schools to address the issue of teacher shortage. To encourage the new graduates of teacher education institutions into joining teaching, the government of Kyrgyzstan and the Ministry of Education have been attempting to provide these young people with various incentives. As an additional inducement for new graduates to enter the profession, new teachers with less than 3 years of teaching experience are also entitled to location allowances in addition to their salaries; they get an extra 100, 200 or 300 *som* (Kyrgyz money currency) per month in town, rural and remote schools respectively. Especially, officials are trying to attract new teacher education graduates to rural schools by promising to create better working

· Concessions are provided to married graduates as well as to those who got outstanding academic records. These graduates are allowed to choose their school of placement.

conditions, or by providing the teachers with land plots from the village governments.

With the purpose of retaining young graduates from teacher education institutions and colleges at rural public schools, the government of Kyrgyzstan introduced a new project titled “Deposit for Young Teachers” in 2004 with the help of grants from the International Financial Institutions (Kanimetova, 2005). To execute this program, the Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic organized a competitive recruiting campaign for selecting beginning teachers. The main criteria for their selection were: a teacher education diploma, possession of cultural-ethical norms and a commitment to the teaching profession. For this program, 200 beginning teachers were to be selected, sign a contract and be credited 2000 *som* monthly in addition to their salaries, for a total of 76,000 *som* each that they can withdraw only after completing their contracts. Beginning teachers selected for this program will have undergone training and work three years at the schools to which they are assigned. The government officials believe that retaining these selected young teachers at village schools for three years will achieve its purpose, because after working in rural schools for three years the teachers will probably adapt to local conditions and continue to teach at the same schools.

Some measures and attempts have been undertaken to improve the quality of pre-service teacher education and higher education in general, by the governments and institutions. However, some of the approaches failed and some have succeeded. Even with success, the said measures have had to go through huge challenges and dilemmas, which have left a telling impact on the whole system.

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• Originally, it was announced that 40 beginning teachers would be selected for the “Deposit for Young Teacher” program. They were to be credited 3000 *som* monthly in addition to their salary, for a total of 108, 000 *som* each that they could withdraw after completing their contracts (Kyrgyzinfo, September 1, 2004).

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