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# **A STUDY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME: THE TRANSLATION OF THEORY INTO PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS**

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## **Abstract**

Professional development programmes are criticized for not meeting the practical needs of teachers and teachers are blamed for going to their comfort zones despite their participations in professional development programmes. This qualitative case study explored effectiveness of the program of primary education certificate course looking into participant teachers' new knowledge, skills and attitude gained from the programme and the implementation of their new learning into their respective classrooms. Nine teachers and 27 students participated in the study. Data was collected through semi-structured and open-ended interviews, classroom observations, documents analysis and focused group discussions with students.

The study reports a shift in teachers' non-reflective attitudes to more reflective attitudes. The quality of their reflections however found to be technical in nature showing their inability to detect limitations of their teaching. The study also found graduate teachers using more learner-centered pedagogies but required more content specific trainings to teach some concepts. The findings also suggest that the graduate teachers developed skills in pedagogy and the utility of those pedagogical skills in their classrooms reshaped their beliefs of teaching, learning and learner. The positive experiences in turn reconstructed teachers' conception of classroom environment vital in fostering learning of students.

**Key Words:** professional development program, teacher learning, teacher change, reconceptualization, pedagogy

## **Introduction**

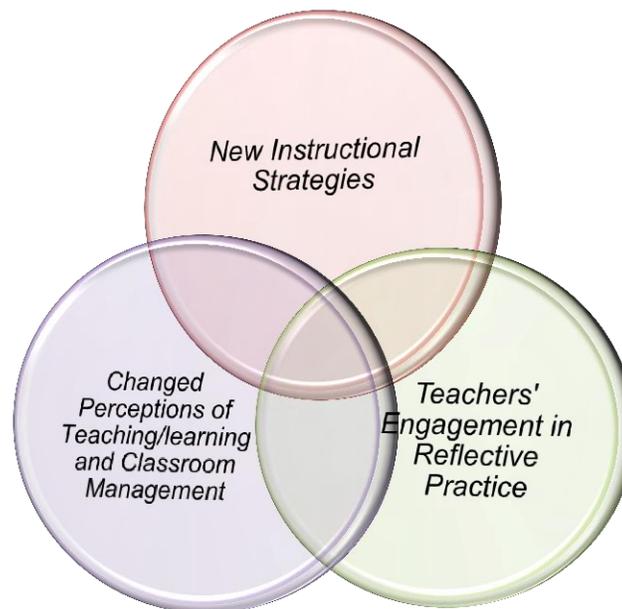
Professional Development Centre Chitral (PDCC) as a subunit of Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) Karachi Pakistan aims to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools through professional development of teachers, headteachers and other stakeholders. PDCC offers a number of courses under the auspices of AKU-IED since its establishment in 2003. Certificate in Education: Primary Education (CEPE) comprised of face-to-face and workplace components being offered each year for primary school teachers to bring improvement in the teaching and learning processes in primary schools through enhancing content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge of primary schools teachers. This paper reports the impact of CEPE programs on teachers' changed perceptions of teaching and learning and their pedagogical knowledge.

## Literature Review

Professional development programmes are considered important in enhancing teachers' understanding of content knowledge and pedagogy and impact on teachers' practice; impact on students' learning outcomes; and, impact on teacher efficacy (Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005; Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 1999& Supovitz and Turner, 2000). Guskey (2010) argues that significant change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs occurs primarily after they gain evidence of improvements in students' learning which results changes in teachers classroom practices. For Martha and Pennington (1995) change in the behavior of teachers occurs as a result of trying something new, reflecting on its consequences, and then trying it again with alterations as needed or desired. Halai (2003) suggests to see the impact of any intervention in social setting as a change process and Rizivi (2007) suggests that professional development opportunities must help teachers to critically reflect on their practice, knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy and learners. Thus, focus on reflective practice, on pedagogy, on subject matter and attitudinal and behavioural changes of teachers are some of the important aspects of professional development programmes.

## Conceptual Framework of the Study

The teacher change model of Guskey (2010) provided insight as a theoretical guideline for this study. We explored the programme effectiveness looking into teachers' new knowledge and skills in three areas e.g., (a) teachers' reconceptualization of teaching and learning and reflectivity (b) instructional strategies, and (c) change in teachers' attitudes towards students and classroom environment and increased ability to manage their classrooms more effectively. Thus the following conceptual framework was developed for the study.



## Methodology

A qualitative case study method was used for its appropriateness to explore perceptions and practices (Merriam 1998) of primary programme graduates. Since case study method being the

study of specific and particular case (Stake 2006) was appropriate to investigate the effectiveness of a specific (CEPE) program. Keeping in mind the appropriateness of case study for the exploration of a bounded system (Simons 2009) we investigated the program graduate teachers' changed practices and perceptions of teaching and learning in real schools contexts where graduate teachers were in-action.

This study was conducted in 9 participating schools and nine primary teachers and 27 students were selected through purposive sampling (Merriam 1998). Data was collected through semi-structured and open-ended interviews, classroom observations, documents analysis and conducting focused group discussions with students. In order to avoid of getting socially acceptable responses as Shamim (2003) suggests we assigned the responsibility of fieldwork to the researcher who had less interaction with the graduates during face-to-face sessions and used multiple tools for data collection. This study mainly relied on teachers self-reports before and after the programme.

## **Findings**

### **The Glimpses of technical Nature of Reflective Practice**

The findings indicate superficial change in graduate teachers' reflective practice. One of the research participants said that reflection helped her to be suspicious of her own practices and in knowing what went well and what did not go well? During post observation conference a teacher reflected on his classroom action in terms of objectives. He expressed his satisfaction of doing a good job because he thought his students were able to discuss and identify different means of transportation and shared advantages of transportations. He could not discuss the misconception he had developed ignoring the disadvantages of the modern means of transportations. Majority of participants had difficulty in reflecting on their new classrooms practices. More often their reflections on their lessons appeared to be simple description of what they had done in their respective classrooms and what they thought were the strength of their lessons. They rarely identified their limitations nor suggested any other strategies to teach the lessons differently. The teachers found to be reluctant to detect their own assumptions of teaching and learning and approaches which informed their classroom actions.

### **Learner-Centered Instructional Strategies**

The study reports graduate teachers shifting from traditional way of teaching to activity based teaching engaging students in various types of meaningful activities. Before the courses the teachers used chalk and talk and translation methods of teaching as one of the course-participants remarked:

“Before attending this course I used old methods to teach the students. I would read a paragraph while the students would listen and then repeat the sentences. I used to tell them the meanings of difficult words. Often I asked the students to memorize the taught lessons by heart” (Teacher interview).

Another participant teacher specifically referred to the use of group works, group discussions, presentation, role plays, picture reading and holding quiz programmes also validated during classroom observation. Students also termed the new teaching and learning strategies interesting and productive in comprehending the concepts. A graduate teacher described his new teaching approaches by saying, “now display students work, ask higher order questions, and involve my

students in practical activities”. A teacher reported her difficulty in teaching English due to her own poor content knowledge. Some teachers also referred to difficulty in teaching concepts such as teaching about time and using the globe in Social Studies.

### **Effective Classroom Management**

The findings reveal one aspect of teacher change in their increased abilities in managing their respective classrooms. A graduate teacher shared that:

“Before attending the program managing my classroom was a headache for me. But after course I learnt how to involve students. I grouped the weaker students with the good ones and assigned them different roles and responsibilities as group members. Now classroom management is not an issue for me as it was before” (Teacher Interview).

In six schools the teachers termed the techniques taught during the course effective in managing classrooms. They said that the ways of involving children in classroom activities, development of friendly relationships with students and developing classroom rules proved to be very successful in managing their classrooms. However in three schools no obvious change in teacher classroom management was reported.

### **Teachers’ Pedagogical Creeds**

The findings of the study reveal somewhat success of the programme in terms of changing teachers’ beliefs of teaching and learning. One of the programme graduates shared her perceptual change as below:

“Before [attending the course] I thought that students learn best when there is more talk from teacher on any topic or concept. That is why I always attached importance to lecture method. But after doing the course I learnt that students learn not only from the teacher but also by interacting with each other while working in groups. Students learn by doing. They learn when they are asked to solve a problem by themselves” (Teacher Interview).

Another teacher referred to the change in his conception thus:

“Now I realize that learning takes place when students are engaged and active in the process of learning. So, I constantly keep them busy by giving them various tasks relevant to their interest and level. These strategies help students learn things in their own styles” (Teacher Interview).

A similar reflection of a teacher goes like this:

I was very tough with my students and always maintained distance and never tried to establish any friendly relations with them. Now develop good relationship with students. I considered maintaining strict discipline necessary for learning but now I believe friendly environment necessary for learning (Teacher Interview).

### **Discussions of the Findings**

This study brings forth some important insights which have implications both for academicians and practitioners. The study confirms suggests that it takes time for the teachers to develop reflective skills and teachers need continuous workplace support in enhancing their reflectivity. Unless support is not provided in real classroom setting, teachers’ level of reflection remains to be technical in nature rather than practical or critical. The study found teachers giving superficial explanations of their teaching and unable to identify the limitation in their teaching. They could not detect their own practices which led to misconceptions as in the case of modern means of transportations referred to above. The insight lies for teacher educators is that developing teachers as reflective practitioners is contextual as well as practical enterprise. Teachers become reflective when scaffolded to reflect on their own classroom actions.

The impact of the course on teachers' classroom practices is visible in the form of the adoption of new practices or improvements in their prior teaching practices. These new techniques appear to be more responsive to multiple learning styles of students. The role of teacher as the transmitter of knowledge as an authority has been replaced with learner-centered approach where teachers' role is to facilitate the learning of students as evident from various learner-centered pedagogies mentioned above. However, this shift must not be assumed as indicator of absolute deconstruction of prior concept of teaching and learning.

Their willingness and commitment to further improve their instructional strategies is somehow similar to the sequence of teacher change presented in the alternative model (Guskey 2010). The research findings illustrate that the teachers felt themselves more capable due to their participation in professional development programme and changed their beliefs about learner-centered instructional strategies when observed the effectiveness of such activities in their classrooms.

The learner-centered pedagogical strategies seem to be less productive as ought to be due to teachers' superficial content knowledge. The findings show teachers improved practices and changed attitudes in their respective classrooms but the support needed by participant teachers in content knowledge emerged as an area where participant teachers could not show better performance. Rather they always felt the need for an external support to teach content. This is congruent with Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) who highlights that the strongest criticism of many professional development programs has been the lack of support for teachers in their classrooms as they apply new ideas and skills. Therefore, teachers must be provided on the spot support so that they could use the instructional strategies and techniques effectively, otherwise this problem is likely to prevail despite teachers' training in pedagogy.

Some important insights emerge from the findings in terms of assessment practices of teachers. The programme graduates elucidated that as a result of going through the understudy programme a considerable change in the way the learners are assessed has taken place. Teachers demonstrated recognition of the importance of formative assessment taking it as a tool for improving teaching and learning. The participant teachers found questioning their assessment practices for measuring rote learning and encouraging memorization and reproduction. Their appreciation of aesthetic nature of learning and their shifting focus on assessing students' presentation skills, quality of their art work and their life skills demonstrates their new learning of assessment responsive to multiple intelligences of students. However, teachers still required support in preparing tools useful for formative purpose of assessment. Findings of the study reveal somewhat success of the programme in terms of changing teachers' beliefs of teaching and learning. The data suggests that as a result of the course, teachers view teaching as responsible and informed facilitation rather than a rationale activity controlled by teachers.

Likewise, they see learning as a process of constructing knowledge through active participation and problem solving. This conception of learning can be linked with the notion of constructivist learning theory in which learning is an active process of knowledge construction. The reconceptualization of teaching and learning seems changing teachers' outlook and image of learner as an active individual as compared to passive receiver of knowledge.

Almost all the research participants acknowledged that as a result of attending the course, now they have started to bridge the gape between them and their students. Therefore, the abolishment of corporal punishment and establishment of enabling learning environment seem driving

teachers' pedagogical decisions. The participant students also validated this change referring to teachers changed attitude who were amusing them with funny jokes, making them laugh and encouraging them. Almost all the students being interviewed were of the opinion that after their teachers have attended the course they are no harsher with them and do not punish them in the classroom. The findings not only show the decreasing gap between teachers and students but they also reveal graduate teachers' recognition of possible implications of the establishment of conducive learning environment in the classrooms.

Teachers changed perceptions of effective classrooms management is another aspect of the changes in their pedagogical creeds. Teachers found trying out the tips of using variety of instructional strategies, developing classroom rules to empower and to make students responsible and assigning responsibilities to different students. Teachers believe that doing so they can make students responsible and make them feel empowered. These activities have helped the teachers become more efficient and skillful in managing their classrooms. The insight is that variety in teaching strategies, developing good relationship with students and developing ground rules for students are helpful techniques for teachers in managing their classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion the findings suggest some perceptual as well as cognitive changes which drive the classroom practices of participant teachers as a result of their participation in the primary course. This study reports various changes in the classroom practices, skills, and attitude of participant teachers. The course has helped the teachers in reconstructing their ideas and restructuring their classroom teaching practices by replacing their traditional teaching method with learner-centered pedagogies. The better results of the new instructional strategies in their respective classrooms have further contributed in changing teachers' conceptions of teaching, learning, learner and the conception of what kind of teacher-student relationship and learning environment fosters students learning.

The participant teachers reflect though in some cases superficially on their teaching practices as well as classroom environment. They have somehow adopted some innovative instructional strategies which can be seen as a departure from text-book oriented teaching mode. This shift has helped them manage their classrooms successfully in most participating schools although classroom management seems still a concern for some teachers. The graduate teachers are no more autocratic in their attitudes towards students rather viewing collegial classroom culture and friendly environment as a stimulus for deeper learning of students.

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