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February 2007

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Recommended Citation

Nasim, S., Pirzado, P. (2007). Developing teachers' skills in Thar desert area, Sindh, Pakistan. *Quality in education: Teaching and leadership in challenging times*, 427-434.

Available at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/book_chapters/84

Developing Teachers' Skills in Thar Desert Area, Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper aims to present AKU-IED's experiences about working in the Thar Desert Area of Sindh. AKU-IED aimed to develop teachers' skills and to help them provide quality education to the children of the said underprivileged and remote area of Pakistan.

Background

Tharparkar is one of 23 districts in the Sindh province of Pakistan. Tharparkar borders with India on two sides; in the East are two districts of India i.e, Barmer and Jaisselmir, and in the South is the Indian desert of Rann Kuchh. According to the Population Census of 1998, Tharparkar is the largest Hindu populated area of Pakistan. Its share of Hindu population is approximately 24%. The co-existence of Hindu and Muslim customs in Tharparkar has created a very rich local culture. The area is mostly rural with an urban population of approximately 4%. The total population of this district is less than a million, standing at 914,291. The split between men and women is pretty close, standing at 499,859 and 414,432 respectively. Tharparkar is a desert area extremely deficient of natural resources; subsistence agriculture is dependent on rain which is not sufficient.

A day in a Thari village starts for women as early as 5.30 a.m., i.e. before the sunrise. As Tharparkar suffers from drought, one million people there rely on sporadic rainfall for their survival. The sources for getting drinking water are stagnant rain water stored in ponds or a few sweet water wells. Women are responsible for fetching drinking water, and in some cases they need to walk for an hour to fetch the water from a nearby pond or well. Therefore, normally females wake up earlier than male members. After fetching water they prepare breakfast and offer it to the males and the children. After breakfast, the male members leave for work, which includes animal grazing, collecting fodder for animals, collecting firewood etc; females, however, continue to work at home, and their tasks include cleaning the home, washing clothes, doing needlework and other such work. They then make lunch for the children, who also take the

meal to the male members in the fields. They continue the same work till sunset. At sunset they prepare dinner and take the meal together with the male members, who have returned from work by then. They usually go to bed early, as there is not any arrangement for proper lighting at night.

Government Boys Primary School Harijan Colony is a typical Thari school in a small village of District Tharparkar, commonly known as Thar. There are two small rooms for this school, which are locally known as '*Chaunra*' (small rooms in round shape with the roof made of straws). There are two teachers appointed for this school, one in each *Chaunra*, teaching students from Class 1 to 5. Like majority of the schools in Thar, this is also a multi-grade school, where one teacher is responsible for teaching the students belonging to different grades in one room.

The geographical structure of Tharparkar consists mostly of deserts and barren tracts of sand dunes covered with thorny bushes. Villages are scattered sporadically, yet there is a lack in communication facilities, as a result of which most people in the rural areas have less exposure. Like many other parts of the province, the data regarding education in Thar is also not impressive. Almost half of the children within the school going age remain out of school. A major reason why children in Thar exist in such a condition is because of an appalling standard of education. As a result, there is little incentive for parents to send their children to school. To improve the quality and access to the education, the Thardeep Rural Development Program (TRDP), in collaboration with AKU-IED, developed a Mentoring Programme for teacher development under the Child Rights Protection Project. Teacher training is the core activity of this project and is assumed to be the most critical factor in providing sustainable improvement in the quality of education.

Uttam Chand was one of the participants of the mentoring program. Before the training, Uttam's school was a traditional silent school, where children dared not to speak whenever the teacher was around. Children preferred to go to the carpet making unit (locally known as '*Khaddi*') instead of coming to school due to the strictness of the teachers and the threat of corporal punishment. But now, Uttam's school is full of children, who are able to enjoy themselves at school.

The girls' participation in terms of their numbers and their contribution to the classroom learning is also significant. Children seem comfortable with smiling faces and stay busy in different activities.

Uttam shared that before that training he was of the view that the only responsibility of the teacher was to teach children how to read and write and for

that purpose strictness is the best strategy to maintain discipline in the classroom, so that children can stay focused. But now he feels that he was wrong. Now he is of the view that children can only be made to focus when they are relaxed and involved in the teaching and learning process; and this can only be possible when a teacher uses strategies that are both interesting and enjoyable for children.

Uttam now uses a variety of activities, which include group work, drawings, experiments, and brainstorming. Now he encourages children's participation in teaching and learning by asking questions, and by encouraging them to take the lead and by appreciating them.

Training has helped Uttam a lot, and he now feels that his class is full of life. He has also helped out other teacher in the school in using the strategies that he learnt during the training. Children are also proud of being at school and they respect their teacher, and the feeling is mutual.

The state of education in rural Sindh is very alarming. Tharparkar is one of the neglected districts of Sindh regarding the provision of education for children in rural areas. There is a lack of educational facilities and high gender disparities exist. There are only 3676 primary schools for the population of 0.235 million children (4-9 years), and alarmingly more than 50% of the children are out of school. The educational facilities for girls are far lower than boys. There are only 447 primary schools for girls as compared to the 3676 total primary schools in the district. Consequently, most of the girls are restricted to staying at home, and if some of them are able to reach the boys' schools, their chances of dropout increases. The dropout rate in Tharparkar is 21% (SEMIS 2003-2004). The training mechanism is not sufficient as there are few training opportunities and teachers are poorly trained.

The Programme

A Certificate in Education Programme: Primary Education course was conducted by the AKU-IED for 25 selected Master Trainers from Thar. The emphasis of the course was on mentoring and it aimed to improve the content knowledge of teachers while introducing them to innovative teaching methodologies, curriculum development and relevant educational issues. It also attempted to assist teachers in their personal development so that they may gain a better understanding of their own and their students' roles in teaching and learning. The programme focused on the teaching and integration of Social Studies, Science, Language, Mathematics, and Health Education.

In order to help the government primary school teachers of Tharparkar, the Mentoring Programme was initiated in three cohorts. The programme aims at enabling teachers to:

- Reconceptualize their professional knowledge, beliefs roles and attitudes as reflective teachers;
- Enhance their content knowledge, including health education and pedagogical skills;
- Develop their understanding about integrated curriculum;
- Improve their professional knowledge and understanding of how children learn;
- Develop an understanding of the role of assessment in enhancing student learning;
- Adequate level of commitment towards professional development

Successes of the Programme

Re-conceptualization of Mentors' Role as Reflective Practitioners

The encouraging classroom learning environment facilitated the participants in rethinking about their prior knowledge and beliefs with regards to teaching and learning. Throughout the programme, participants were encouraged to critically examine their role as teachers and mentors, reflect on issues, discuss teaching strategies and discover alternative teaching and learning practices. A reflective dialogue between CPs and the course tutors was maintained throughout the course through the reflective journals that were maintained by the CPs. The CPs journal entries were descriptive in the beginning, but later moved towards critical description. In the beginning CPs seemed reluctant about sharing their personal views, but as the programme progressed the majority of the CPs became open and actively participated in discussions through classroom interactions and presentations. This helped them to build their confidence and presentation skills. Their action plans, discussions and presentations clearly demonstrated that they were able to challenge their own myths and personal theories of teaching and learning. As one of the participants said; "The programme helped me to realize that only meaningful education can bring about progress in our region."

Enhancement of Pedagogical Content Knowledge

CPs were able to use pedagogy as a tool for improving their content knowledge of science, maths, social studies and languages. This turned out to be quite an exciting experience for most of them. According to them, in the previous professional development programmes that they had attended, content knowledge was solely learnt through textbooks and instructional materials. However, in this programme, a wide range of instructional strategies were used in the four subject areas of language, social studies, science and mathematics teaching. The CPs were introduced to alternate methods and approaches of teaching these subjects, as well as to developing low-cost no-cost teaching and learning materials. During the classroom teaching and workshops, CPs were encouraged to choose topics that they usually find difficult to teach. They were enabled to assess and improve their own level of pedagogical content knowledge through different instructional strategies.

They were also able to analyze the curriculum and see the relationship between curriculum and textbooks. As one participant said:

My initial beliefs were that the Curriculum is a sacred document and teachers have no role in it. However, after the input of facilitators I got knowledge of curriculum and textbooks.

Sessions on health education were quite significant for the CPs as they viewed health education as an essential ingredient for quality education. The sessions helped CPs to learn more about health education practices in schools and the role of community in education. The sessions also enabled the CPs to understand the complexities of children's learning difficulties.

Developing Understanding of Alternative Pedagogical Approaches

The concept of the child-centered approach to teaching and learning was dealt with throughout this programme. Other instructional approaches such as cooperative learning, action learning, constructivism were also introduced, and the CPs were able to practice these strategies within their groups and in their respective schools. CPs were introduced to various learning activities, learning theories, principles and instructional techniques for learning; both with the children and adult learning approaches. Their understanding of andragogical and pedagogical approaches, and the importance of multiple intelligences in the teaching-learning process was enhanced. CPs also had an opportunity to develop their skills in classroom management, team teaching, observation and giving feedback.

Enhancing Understanding of Micro-teaching / Multi-grade Teaching

CPs' were engaged in micro-teaching sessions for the purpose of trying out newly learnt teaching strategies. These sessions also aimed at building the participants' confidence through the support and feedback given to them by their colleagues and tutors.

Micro-teaching sessions were often followed by reflective sessions, during which CPs discussed alternatives for improving students learning outcomes. The CPs were also introduced to effective ways of conducting multi-grade teaching.

The general problems of curriculum integration, classroom management and material development were also discussed. Lesson plans that had been used in the micro-teaching sessions were developed further and used by the CPs for multi-grade teaching in schools. This enabled the CPs to sharpen their multi-grade teaching skills.

Improving Professional Learning

CPs' evaluation about the programme suggests that they found the programme quite exciting and challenging. As one of the CPs said; "It was the first programme of its nature and the first step as well." Learning about alternate approaches to student assessment, as an area of focus, seemed to be quite successful.

Assessment plays an essential role in improving students' learning. CPs were exposed to different types and techniques of assessment. They were introduced to the notion of the formative and summative assessment practices.

The participants analyzed their current assessment practices and implications of these for the students' learning. They were involved in discussions and debates about the alternative assessment practices that can be used for enriching students' learning. The CPs were able to differentiate between assessment and evaluation. Teachers' self evaluation was also discussed.

Sharpening Lesson-Planning Skills

Throughout the programme the CPs were engaged in developing lesson plans for teaching in their respective classrooms. This enabled them to develop their confidence in developing and modifying their lesson plans.

As a result, the objectives and activities of their lesson plans showed careful, systematic and appropriate explanation of the concepts and procedures, with an added emphasis on the development of understanding, rather than learning by memorization.

Phase I of the programme enabled the participants to understand the role of a teacher, the notion of mentoring and the roles and responsibilities of mentor. As one of the participants said that:

Now I realized the roles of teacher and mentor. I was able to learn different approaches and at the same time I was able to enhance my content knowledge. The most important thing about this training is that the amount of respect that I enjoyed was tremendous and this I have never experienced before.

Challenges

- Sustainability, particularly after the completion of the project;
- Regular Monitoring at classroom level;
- Training of the teachers belonging to non-carpet weaving areas schools;
- Shortage of female resource persons;
- No proper usage of LRC in clusters;

Lessons Learned

- Interactive collaboration between the three main service providers (AKU-IED, TRDP and EDOs Education Tharparkar/Mirpurkhas) helped in the smooth implementation of the programme activities;
- EDO's (Education) active involvement in the programme activities enhanced Mentors' motivation in the programme;

Conclusion

This programme has raised awareness and developed skills of spreading quality education throughout Tharparkar. All the stake holders realized their roles in this process. The Government Education Department, the NGO and the

community are now eager to achieve the goal of quality education through sustainable mentoring programmes.

The experience of working with the teachers of Thar area has verified that Government Teachers are also committed to bring about a positive change in the society through quality education. All that they need for the said are innovative ideas and encouragement.

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