THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

eCommons@AKU

Book Chapters

February 2006

Reforming public education in developing countries: Turning challenges into opportunities

Rana Hussain

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

Sajid Ali

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/book_chapters

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, and the Elementary Education and Teaching Commons

Reforming Public Education in Developing Countries: Turning Challenges into Opportunities

Rana Hussain, AKU-IED, Pakistan
Sajid Ali, AKU-IED, Pakistan

Abstract

This paper tries to respond to a basic question: "Can public education (or some aspects of it) be reformed?" The authors' response to this question is, "Yes, public education can be reformed, if contextual possibilities are exploited efficiently."

Although a straight forward and simplistic response to the question, this was felt necessary to counter an unfavourable bias towards public education sector without recognizing the challenges that it faces, and without recognizing the potential of many of the public teachers who continuously strive to change these negative perceptions. This paper recognizes the potential of public sector education and shares a relatively successful example of improving competencies among public teachers to support the response.

Introduction

Pakistan's primary education system is ranked as one of the world's least effective. Pakistan spends less than 2% of its GNP on education and this stands amongst the world's 12 lowest education budgets. The World Bank reports that the average Pakistani boy receives only five years of schooling, while the average girl receives just 2.5 years. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) claims that only 2/3rds of Pakistani children aged 5-9 years are ever enrolled in school and only 1/3rd among them complete the third grade. The studies conducted on students' competency (BRIDGES, 1989; Mirza & Hameed, 1995; and Pervez, 1995 cited in Mirza, 2003) indicate a low level of competency among students. Students' outputs are dependent on the type of inputs received. Unfortunately there is a dismal situation on almost every aspect of input towards students' learning, About 11% of schools are located in rural areas, nearly 1/6th of the primary schools are shelter-less, average number of teachers is 2.35, copies of curriculum are not provided at schools and to add further difficulties resource materials are not available. In addition to low availability of teachers, the quality of teachers' is also questionable. Generally Matriculates, Higher Secondary Certificate holders, along with the professional qualifications of PTC

or CT are appointed as teachers in public sector schools. The teachers hardly have any opportunity for systematic and continuous professional development.

The importance of teachers as the focal point in the improvement of the education process has always been recognized (Cochran-Smith, 2001), and therefore the professional development of these teachers is crucial to the overall improvement of education. Recognising the importance of the quality of professional development for improving education, the countries of the world vowed to 'enhance the status, morale and professionalism of teachers' (The Dakar framework for Action, 26-28 April, 2000, Article 8-ix). The current education policy of Pakistan also stresses upon the quality of teachers as the crucial factor in implementing educational reforms at the grassroots level (Pakistan Ministry of Education, 1998).

Several inputs through various donor-driven projects have been made available to try to address the above-mentioned issues; yet, there is very little improvement observed. Against this backdrop a recent initiative is the launch of Education Sector Reform in Pakistan that is assisted by USAID. This involves a five year, $100 million bilateral agreement signed in August 2002 to increase access to quality education throughout Pakistan, with an emphasis on Sindh and Balochistan provinces.

The ESRA Project

To respond to educational needs, Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) initiated a program to train the government school teachers in selected districts of Sindh and Balochistan, with technical assistance from the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and funding support from USAID. In this endeavour Aga Khan University–Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) has been called upon as one of the national partners to implement RTI-ESRA initiatives. AKU-IED has conceived this as a field-based teacher development program, based on its previous experiences of a similar program launched in Balochistan during 1997-1999, which has been referred to as Balochistan Mentoring Model. The program intends to develop mentoring capacities at nine selected districts of Sindh and Balochistan, which will benefit 8100 teachers. A critical mass of 320 mentors drawn from the nine districts is trained at AKU-IED through a 10 weeks' training program called *Certificate in Primary Education (Mentoring Focus)*. After completion, these teachers are awarded a certificate in mentoring that qualifies them to mentor teachers in their clusters. The cluster-based mentoring program draws 20-25 teachers from nearby schools. The model of the cluster-based mentoring program consists of 4 workshops along with 9 hours of

field follow up in a month. Through this model, teachers complete 300 contact hours of which 192 hours are taught through workshops, while 108 hours are covered through follow up activities like co-planning, observations conferencing, meetings and observing students' work.

This paper is developed to share the successes of the professional development activities conducted for the Public sector in Pakistan and the reasons for them. The paper will also highlight some of the challenges faced while implementing the program, and will raise questions for sustainability and replication of the model of training used. The paper draws upon the rich experiences gathered during the implementation of a teacher development program to argue that reforms in public sector education system are challenging but possible.

In order to get the message across in a swift way, the paper is structured into four major sections. The first section mainly describes the processes employed prior to the commencement of the course; it explains the selection process of the teachers and looks at the reasons for which these teachers chose an AKU-IED course compared to other options. The second section represents the bulk of the paper; it elaborates the training program and its uniqueness in terms of contents and processes of teaching and learning. The third section describes the post-training support provided to the mentors and its importance in the fruitfulness of the program. The last section discusses the basic question highlighted in the paper, such as whether public sector education itself or some aspects of it can be reformed.

Prior to Training

The success of any training program depends on the quality of both trainers and trainees. The biggest challenge in dealing with the public sector is to ensure that deserving and enthusiastic candidates are selected for the training, rather than non-willing people. This section tries to explain the selection process and the reasons why the candidates opted for AKU-IED's course rather than the other options available to them.

Selection Process of the Trainees

A major key to success for any professional development program for teacher education is the competence of the trainees who are selected to go through the process of developing their own expertise; along with their existing commitment and willingness to develop others later. The professional development model under discussion is a *Cluster-Based Mentoring Program Model*. The selection and

training of individuals to serve as Mentors is crucial to the model; the mentor-in-making must possess willingness to nurture another person; and should be people-oriented, open-minded, flexible, empathetic and collaborative. A team from the teaching faculty interviewed the nominated candidates and checked their content and pedagogical knowledge through questioning and quizzes. While the trainees were being developed as teachers and teacher educators, the training program demanded from them the learning of communication skills, active listening techniques, effective teaching, supervision and coaching, problem-solving and conflict resolution; along with skills of reflection and learning how to learn. Therefore, only those candidates were carefully selected who showed a promise for the tall order mentioned above. It was quite a surprise for those teachers who had qualifications and a number of years of experience and still could not make it to specific trainings. It was very challenging for the selection team to convince the education department and other teachers about selection criteria, and such situations had to be handled very carefully.

Raised Self Esteem for being inducted in a Higher Education Institution

Being students of the university raised the self esteem of selected teachers. Teaching is usually seen as the least popular professional choice in Pakistan, and teaching primary children is further looked down upon by the teaching force. The current program raised the teachers' status, as they were selected to study at an institution of international standard, and were getting education amidst MEd and PhD students. This aspect boosted their morale and raised expectations for them to perform. Although students encountered adjustment problems like interacting with international students in a new social area, living in a hotel with the general public for 8 weeks and meeting the set norms of time and work commitments; yet all students appreciated the residential nature of the program. Students opted to join AKU-IED program because of this enriching contextual change and social learning. They forego the Travel Allowance and Daily Allowance (TA/DA) which was an option available to them through receiving training from the other partner training institutions along with AKU-IED. This decision made by the learners contradicts a popular stigma on public teachers that they only come to training for TA/DA.

During Training

The success of training depends on the content and technique of the teaching learning processes employed by the trainers. Selection of the appropriate

content, which is required for being a good primary teacher as well as a teacher educator, and proper training processes such as learning by doing and preparing materials for teaching other teachers, were a few necessary ingredients for attaining the desired outputs. Traditionally teacher learning processes are imbedded in delivery modes and are teacher centred, hence lecturing and information giving through talks and texts are some common processes. The model for professional development being discussed emphasised on learning how to learn. Different subjects of the primary curriculum were explored by the course participants through workshop planning, micro teaching, and inquiry approach. We will describe briefly about the content of the program and elaborate in detail the teaching and learning processes followed during the training program.

Content of the Program

Professional development programs are generally designed on generic themes like developing new and innovative teaching methods, managing classrooms and curriculum designs and practices. However, the most effective programs place the content of the core subjects at the centre. The mentoring focus program was built around the content and teaching of languages, maths, science and social studies. Contents were presented for reflection rather than retention.

Broader aspects like questioning, cooperative learning, inquiry assessment and classroom organization were covered in the context of content learning. This approach to teacher learning addressed two major concerns with regards to the quality of teaching: lack of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, as well as the collaborative nature of learning from peers. The real credibility of any mentor can best be established through his/her expertise and knowledge in specific content areas and the contextually relevant pedagogical expertise. Hence this focus helped mentors achieve that edge.

In addition to revisiting the subjects and pedagogy, teachers were also engaged in understating the concept of adult learning, peer coaching, mentoring, and designing instructional materials for their fellow colleagues in the identified clusters. This section of the program empowered teachers as they were aided in the setting of their goals and expectations for and from the cluster-based mentoring program. In each group, the course participants developed a one year plan for activities, timelines, the administration and the financial details of a weekly session with their cluster teachers.

Processes of Teaching and Learning for Teachers' Development

Relating Information to Prior Knowledge

The ability to relate new information with prior knowledge was critical for learning. The tutors would begin a topic with reviewing the participants' previous understanding about it. All information shared by the learners was treated as an alternative framework rather than a misconception. Activation of prior knowledge helped the Course Participants (CPs) in understanding and learning new concepts. The safe and non threatening environment created in the classroom allowed the CPs to share honestly what they knew and admit safely to what they didn't know. The confidence building was shared by one of the CPs in his reflective journal, *'I have become aware, that I don't know the answer to this problem, but more important for me is to be able to now understand how to learn'*.

Learning Requires the Active, Constructive Involvement of Learner

Course participants were provided hands on activities such as experiments, project work and making low cost material. They were encouraged to partake in discussions and they also went outside the classroom for learning in the field. This active and constructive mode of learning helped the CPs to grow immensely.

Motivation to Learn

At the time of selection, course participants were made to realise the expectations of their work pre-program and post-program. The biggest motivation for teachers was to have an immediate role, which was different from their existing role. This role was also provided with support structures, in the form of follow-up field visits by tutors, professional allowances and resource centres. This complete package of putting theories into practice was a novel experience, and the CPs were highly motivated and excited to be a part of the Mentoring Focus Certificate program. They wanted to ensure that a cluster comprising of nearby schools with teachers is identified, so that they can be selected for that cluster. They would also go and talk to the nearby schools' teachers about their mentoring roles, and commit them to be present at the said schools for professional learning. In addition, they would work towards getting all administrative tasks completed; such as getting approval from the district officers to help conduct programs in their clusters, getting relieve letters to come to Karachi for a period of eight weeks and also negotiate a venue in a central school to convert it into a Learning Resource Centre (LRC).

Engaging in Self-Regulations and being Reflective

CPs were encouraged to monitor their own learning and to understand when they lack certain skills, knowledge and attitudes. They were also asked to gain an understanding into how to acquire the said. Self-regulation requires reflection, which were developed through discussions in the classrooms, by expressing ones opinion in writing and through sharing a closely related situation to the one being discussed.

Effective Domain Captivated along with Cognitive Domain

Most teacher education programs are conceived around content knowledge, skills and educational theories. Emphasis on cognitive aspects is deemed important for developing knowledge and skills; and hence is necessary. However, despite all the emphasis, the required results are not very visible in the outcome of the courses. Therefore, it is felt necessary that the emotional and attitudnal aspects, which have long been neglected in teacher education program, should be attended to seriously. The course at AKU-IED was designed not only to look at the cognitive aspects, but also to take care of the effective and emotional domains, so that a comprehensive change can be brought in the attitudes of the future mentors. Teachers in the current model appreciated these aspects and almost all of them recognized the observable change within themselves and their colleagues. Some of these changes occurred due to the residential nature of the training program, whereby for eight weeks participants were experiencing group living and were also observing a culture of collaboration, togetherness and a family-like setting at the university. Almost all of them admitted to learning from the role models of the AKU-IED family, which helped them to alter their attitudes towards their responsibilities.

Multiple Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Teacher centred approaches like teacher talk, lectures and teacher questioning were accompanied by student centred learning approaches such as group interaction and discussion, peer tutoring, project works, inquiry methods, field excursions and problem based learning. These multiple approaches were employed as they helped the learners develop necessary skills needed for good and independent learning. These included study skills, thinking and problem solving skills, co-operative learning skills and other most vital skills of mentoring.

Conducive and Social Learning Environment

At AKU-IED, when the CPs were exposed to a humane culture, they became inspired by the uniqueness as well as by the social environment that they found around them. In all their reflections they spoke very highly of how the conducive learning surroundings had transformed them as individuals; observing queues without distinction of hierarchies, every person engaged in their own tasks and willing to respond to queries and above all punctuality, attendance, cleanliness and promptness were some values that they had experienced at the institution which in turn encouraged them to comply with. All participants turned out to be punctual, followed the set rules and fulfilled the expectations of the course. The establishment of a fruitful collaborative and cooperative atmosphere boosted the CPs' achievement. Though they represented diverse settings and genders, it was an amazing social collaboration that encouraged learning and happy living. Course participants also brought some of their task to their hotels; and the hotel management subsequently reported their late sittings in each other's rooms, corridors and their enjoying collaborative learning.

After Training

As mentioned earlier, the training program required the trainees to go back into the field and be mentor teachers for their cluster schools' teachers. Thus during the last week of the program, trainees were helped in the planning of instructional material for a one year cluster-based mentoring program, along with the necessary details of administrative and financial records. After the training the mentors met the District Coordinators[1] and the government officials in their respective districts, and shared the laid out plans with them, ensuring that teachers from their clusters are relieved to attend a weekly workshop in the central schools. They also negotiated with the school head teacher to use a room in the central school, and use it as Learning Resource Centre (LRC). All this work was accomplished voluntarily and gave mentors an opportunity to take a leadership role.

---

[1] An AKU-IED appointed tutor based in the district to provide academic and logistical support to the mentors during the cluster based program.

Field Support

As mentioned earlier, each mentor is required to work with a group of teachers in the clusters and conduct 48 workshops, as well as to carry out follow up activities. These mentors were supported by the two District Coordinators placed in each District (one AKU-IED employed and the other government employed). At times the co-coordinators would visit mentors' work place (LRCs or their schools), and at times mentors visited the Coordinators' offices. The Mentors were performing multiple tasks, such as sharing of their weekly plans, getting academic support and collecting finances; as well as distributing the finances and managing the accounts with the support from the coordinators. All of these tasks actually provided an opportunity to the teacher mentors to put their leadership potentials into practice, and many of them grew immensely as a result of these trainings.

Discussion

We began this paper describing the condition of the education in the public sector. We shared some successful and some not so successful studies of donor driven initiatives followed by another initiative to support a locally originated proposal of reforming primary education, that is the ESRA. In this context, we described the model of reforming public schools which was used by AKU-IED and highlighted the content, context and processes involved in developing teachers. The current section would now ask the difficult question of how such efforts and successes are retained. The section will also raise an important question about the political will of donors, and the public systems of education in Pakistan and will try to ascertain why there is constant resource deployment towards the chronic problem of the said failing system. Is this a resultof not knowing the cause or is it a matter of maintaining the status quo?

As the co-ordinator of the ESRA program who has been involved in various activities, such as teaching and writing about the Reform of Professional Development in ESRA, I am convinced that the reform has brought positive changes in both professional development and school improvement. However, to make the reform sustainable, greater attention must be put on the continuity; and especially on the follow-up of the mentoring activities and on the utilization of resources made available in Learning Resource Centres (LRCs) and Tehsil Resource Centres (TRCs). The District education should regularize the position of the newly developed critical mass in the districts, namely the mentors, educational leaders and teacher educators. An effective monitoring system through the district officials is a must in this case. The district budgets should

be re-planned in a manner where in-service education becomes a regular feature, so that the teachers can be continuously developed as life long learners.

It is also important to understand the role of teacher mentors and appreciate their transformation. In the words of Paulo Friere, these teachers were constantly engaged in a process of Praxis. Their training at AKU-IED helped them think about themselves as critical and conscious human beings. They were constantly reminded about and made to change their behaviours from passivity and compliance, to active and self determined. They were trained not to find excuses for things not happening, but to make things happen. A few examples may illuminate: when the release of teachers requires paper work, the mentors ensured that they prepared letters, met the teachers, went to the concerned authorities and got the letters signed; they also helped the teachers understand the value of professional growth. Another observable behaviour was their well defined intentions for the tasks, for example when the monitoring team would visit them in the field and ask them about their plans, they could explain as to why they were teaching in a certain manner, and how they think that the use of a certain strategy is better in a given situation. They could also explain their follow up model with alternate examples.

In many cases it was observed that mentors were creatively designing activities and were not willing to go with a straight jacket approach. For example, in a tehsil where children had no place to stock or display their work, the mentors used the trunk of tree as a display board, and hung their resources on strings tied to the adjoining tree trunks. In another learning resource centre when the parents wanted their children to continue teaching on the teachers' day, the mentors brought senior people from the community to work as semi-professionals.

In conclusion, ESRA professional development component is a success case study with lessons to learn for replication in other districts of the provinces. The key is proper selection of teacher educators, appreciating contextual realities and preparing materials with relevant content. Teachers are valuable and key resources in education, and high quality performance in teaching is an essential ingredient of any reform or educational improvement. There is a need to recognise teachers as potential learners, who when provided with the right context, relevant content and research based learning processes, can transform themselves as intellectuals (Giroux, 1988). Some conditions are necessary for them to continue as Transformational leaders. How the model ensured those conditions are mentioned here

- Teachers were provided a continuous time for learning, which was not during long summer or winter holidays, rather it was during weekly workshops. This was criticised by many at the outset but proved more effective later. Our experience during ESRA training attests to and recommends this alternative.

- A supportive structure was built around the training program. Hence it is recommended that the structures and human resources that have been developed during the project should be regularised and further nourished. It is also the responsibility of the graduates of mentoring programs to effect policies for their professional and continuous growth. The networking among the like-minded is very crucial for such improvements.

- Deep learning depends on three elements: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical expertise and reflective thinking. The AKU-IED program focused on all these aspects, and it is recommended that any training program should focus on all of these aspects together.

References

Cochran-Smith, M. (2001). *Teachers caught in the action: professional development that matters*. Teachers College Press

Giroux, H. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

Mirza, M. S. (2003). *Quality of primary education in Pakistan - preparatory document for the Ministerial Meeting of South Asia EFA Forum 21-23 May 2003*. Islamabad: Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan and UNESCO Office Islamabad.

World BANK Group, Pakistan Country Report, September, 2004; USAID Grant Agreement No-391-004-01;UNDP Human Development Report 2004 accessed at http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/) on 05-01-2006.

Contact

rana.husain@aku.edu