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A fundamental partnership: Outcomes and issues of the MAEPA school-based experience

Lew Moi Mooi, Ong Siow Kim
Specialist Teacher Training Institute, 56000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract

This article presents the perceptions of MAEPA participants on the outcomes of the three-day School-Based Experience (SBE) programme. It also examines their views on the extent the SBE has benefitted and met their expectations. Attempt was also made to show the future direction of SBE in the MAEPA programme. Survey questionnaires were administered to 28 MAEPA participants and the findings showed that they highly valued the SBE. They perceive that they have gained subject and pedagogic knowledge, awareness of innovative teaching methods and personal as well professional development.

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1. Introduction

Malaysia Australia Education Project for Afghanistan (MAEPA) was originated through concerted effort made by the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Australia in improving teacher training quality and boosting literacy in Afghanistan. The initiative was announced in Kuala Lumpur on 10 July 2008 by the Prime Ministers at that time, the Hon Kevin Rudd of Australia and the Most Honourable Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia. MAEPA is the first trilateral project between Afghanistan, Malaysia and Australia. It is also the first aid project to be jointly funded by Malaysia and Australia. This project is a concrete example of the goodwill which exists among the three countries and their mutual desire to contribute to education reform in Afghanistan (MAEPA 3 Design and Implementation Plan, 2011). The MAEPA programme consists of four stages. In Stage 1, the participants were introduced to their learning ‘journey’; both physical and intellectual, through discussion of the MAEPA Information Kit during an Initial Briefing in Kabul. Their Learner Profiles and ICT Skills Survey forms completed at that time were used to gather data about individual needs to further inform planning of training provision including English Language Training (ELT) and ICT Training. MAEPA Learner Profiles seek information such as level of education, number of years of experience as master teacher trainers (MTTs), current role, Afghanistan languages spoken, English language skills and specific learning priorities. In stage 2, teacher training institutes in Malaysia are mandated to conduct a 14-week training programme which includes classroom training in eleven of the twelve Curriculum Frameworks, a three-day School-Based Experience (SBE) programme visiting religious schools in a regional location, a three-day visit to the historical state of Melaka and
the surrounding region, and various other shorter educational and social excursions. There was also a social programme and guest lectures, activities and events on campus. One of the objectives in stage 2 is to develop participants’ knowledge of new approaches in pedagogy so as to improve classroom teaching practices (MAEPA 3 Design and Implementation Plan, 2011). Subsequently, Stages 3 and 4 were structured through the development of Action Plans to link knowledge and skills gained from the intensive training (Stage 2) and their workplace in Afghanistan. In other words, the Action Plans serve as a bridge from the training environment to their real world. It is hoped that by regularly considering how learning might be applied; the participants could better plan how to apply what they have learned to their own workplace (MAEPA 3 Design and Implementation Plan, 2011).

2. Background information about the School Based Experience Programme (SBE)

The three-day SBE programme is an important and integral component in the MAEPA training framework which includes visits to some religious schools. SBE is designed to expose participants to the roles of teacher in the real teaching and learning process in Malaysian schools. In addition, it allows participants to interact with practising teachers to learn about the teaching experiences in different school environment. Additionally, the SBE is task-based to provide a scope for reflecting on issues. It also serves as a platform to discuss the theories of teaching and learning within the context of real classroom practices as well as promotes a deeper understanding of the administration and management of the school. Zeichner (1996) contended that SBE is educative if it helps those involved to understand the full scope of a teaching in order to accomplish the central purpose of teaching. Therefore, during this three-day SBE programme, participants were able to discuss the theories of teaching and learning in the real classroom environment, observe and retell good classroom practices orally and in writing and were also able to collect and compile sample teaching materials and resources. At the end of the SBE, each participant was required to prepare a portfolio which includes participant’s biography data, learning tasks and other teaching materials and resources. In view of that, the three-day SBE programme is inevitably crucial in providing participants some meaningful experiences about some teaching strategies used in the local context and reflect on ways to disseminate the input to their teacher trainees. More importantly, the school visit experience may generate ideas on ways to enhance their students’ learning (Watson et al., 2008). As such, during SBE, participants should be able to observe how teachers apply professional knowledge based on the curriculum and how teaching can be adapted to the changing context of the learning environment to promote student learning (Tuli & File, 2009). Besides, SBE should be able to expose the participants to some new teaching methods that would take their teaching excellence to a new level as well as enhance their professional and personal well-being (Furlong, 2000). Time spent in school should provide opportunities to engage with student learning, drawing on theoretical knowledge about teaching and learning, and reflecting on how theory can inform future classroom practice (Watson et al., 2008). In view of that, it is important to ensure that the SBE programme has met the intended objectives outlined in the MAEPA 3 Design and Development Plan. Monitoring measures such as programme evaluation has to be conducted to examine the outcomes and to identify issues that need to be investigated in further research. As such, for the benefit of stakeholders and other interested parties, this study will document the outcomes of the SBE in the MAEPA training programme based on the perceptions of the MTTs. The study will also determine whether the SBE has met their expectations.
2. Objectives of the study

This study is aimed to find out the perception of MAEPA participants towards the outcomes of the SBE programme. It also serves to examine their views on the extent the design of the SBE programme has benefitted them as MTTs. Subsequently, two research questions are developed to guide the study. They are as follows:

i. What participants perceive about the outcomes of the SBE programme?

ii. How has the SBE benefitted the participants who are MTTs in Afghanistan?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

In this study, the researchers employed mixed methods research design to gather evidence for stronger inference (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Cross-sectional survey was used and data were collected at just one point in time in order to describe what existed at that point of time. A survey questionnaire was used to collect perceptual data on what the participants feel they have learned in the SBE programme.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 28 MTTs from various districts in Afghanistan who are pursuing the MAEPA programme at the Specialist Teacher Training Institute Campus, Kuala Lumpur.

3.3 Data collection

At the beginning of the data collection stage, a brainstorming session was conducted among the researchers to design a questionnaire related to the topic. The data collection instrument was subsequently finetuned and reviewed with the help of experts. After that, the questionnaire was translated into Afghanistan languages, Pashto and Dari. The translated questionnaire was administered by the researchers themselves in April 2012 in a sit-in session which lasted 30 minutes. The purpose of the study and the method of answering were explained to the participants before the administration of the instrument. Following that, an interview was conducted with three participants selected at random to further explore their views about the outcomes and issues arising from the SBE.

3.4 Instrument

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: (i) demographic data which include age, gender, academic qualification, programme undertaking, number of years working in the institution and others; (ii) outcomes of the SBE programme which comprises 17 items on a scale ranging from 1 (nothing) to 4 (a lot), an example of the items is “Ways to motivate teachers to improve learning outcomes” and (iii) two-opened questions to elicit participants’ reflection on the SBE and how SBE has met their expectation as well as benefitted them as MTTs.

3.5 Data analysis

The data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 18). Descriptive statistics of frequency, percentages, mean and standard deviation were used to sort the scores attained by the participants based on various sections in the questionnaire. The items in section (ii) were then organised into three constructs for data analysis purposes; namely subject matter and pedagogical knowledge, teaching strategies and personal and professional development. Likewise, comments from the open-ended questions were analysed for emerging themes. In examining the qualitative data, we adapted an approach recommended by
Bogdan and Biklen (1998). We read the responses and independently generated coding categories, based on our sense of the categories that emerged from the data. We discussed the results in order to develop meaningful categories for the data. We reread the responses and adapted the categories accordingly. We established a high rate of inter-rater reliability (over 80%), resulting in an acceptable degree of confidence (Carmine & Zeller, 1991) that the classification system effectively summarised the participants’ responses.

4. Discussion of the findings

The purpose of the study was to find out the perceptions of MAEPA participants towards the outcomes and issues of the SBE programme. It also examined their views on the extent the SBE has benefitted them as MTTs. The responses to statements about how much they learnt from the programme were analysed using mean and standard deviation. Quantitative data provide a general picture on how the participants perceived the outcomes of being engaged in the SBE project.

4.1 Participant’s biography data

The participants are 28 MTTs who participated in the MAEPA programme in the Specialist Teacher Training Institute Campus, Kuala Lumpur. Of these, 23 (82%) are males and 5 (18%) are females. The distribution of participants according to their department is as follows: Language (14), Science (1), History (1) and Islamic Education (12). Besides, the majority of them (57%) are young MTTs aged 30-40 years. Also, the majority of them (89.3%) are bachelor degree holders and have 1-5 years of teaching experience in teacher training institutes in Afghanistan.

4.2 How did the participants perceive the outcomes of the SBE?

Based on the survey data, the participants generally felt that they have learnt ‘quite a lot’ in these three aspects as outlined in the objectives of the SBE, namely, subject matter and pedagogic knowledge, teaching strategies and personal and professional development. The participants agreed that they learnt ‘quite a lot’ for almost all the items except item 15. They felt that they just learnt ‘a little’ about theories of teaching and learning in the context of real classroom practices ($mean = 2.90, SD = .70$). The survey data is further analysed according to three constructs; namely, subject matter and pedagogical knowledge, teaching strategies and personal and professional development. Overall, participants felt that the content of the SBE programme is effective in providing them the necessary subject matter and pedagogical knowledge ($mean = 3.61, SD = .49$); understanding about how learners learn ($mean = 3.33, SD = .62$); awareness of issues related to learning ($mean = 3.18, SD = .72$); pedagogical knowledge ($mean = 3.50, SD = .50$); ways to strengthen subject content knowledge ($mean = 3.36, SD = .77$) and experience of teaching in real classroom ($mean = 3.58, SD = .49$).

Additionally, the participants felt that the content of the SBE programme has exposed them to some teaching strategies in the real classroom (item 2, 8, 9, 10 and 13). They learnt ‘quite a lot’ in aspects such as ‘teaching strategies for various learning environment’ ($mean = 3.33, SD = .74$); ‘teaching materials and resources’ ($mean = 3.42, SD = .49$); ‘ways to motivate teachers to improve learning outcomes’ ($mean = 3.58, SD = .49$); ‘techniques diversification in teaching and learning’ ($mean = 3.54, SD = .49$); and teaching skills that can be used internationally ($mean = 3.33, SD = .62$). With regards to personal and professional development, the participants felt that the content of the SBE programme is meaningful. They learnt ‘quite a lot’ on how to do reflection on the current situations ($mean = 3.67, SD = .47$); being open in handling problem ($mean = 3.67, SD = .62$); the administration and management of the school ($mean = 3.33, SD = .62$); the roles of teacher in the real teaching and learning process in the schools ($mean = 3.18, SD = .57$) and ways to be creative and proactive in teaching and learning ($mean = 3.41, SD = .64$). However, they felt that they just learnt ‘a little’ about the theories of
teaching and learning within the context of real classroom practices \( (\text{mean} = 2.90, \ SD = .64) \). In sum, the majority of this cohort of MTTs agreed that participating in the SBE could bring some positive outcomes to themselves as master teacher trainers. Almost all the items obtained (mean > 3) imply that they felt they have learnt 'quite a lot' from the SBE, particularly in aspects related to subject matter and pedagogical knowledge, teaching strategies and personal and professional development.

4.3 How has the SBE benefitted them as MTTs?

It is indeed interesting to explore further their feedback qualitatively so as to substantiate the quantitative data. In other words, the qualitative data additionally delved into the participants’ views on the impact of the SBE programme by analysing the responses to the following two questions, “How does your perception of School-based Experience (concept and objective) differ before going to the school and after experiencing SBE? and “How can School-based Experience contribute positively to you as a Master Teacher Trainer in Afghanistan?”. The open-ended questions have generated a wide variety of responses that can further elaborate the quantitative results. After analyzing these responses, we identified three principal themes that emerged from the data. They are discussed in the following section.

4.3.1 Subject matter and pedagogical knowledge

Some participants (18%) expressed that the SBE programme has helped in enhancing their subject matter and pedagogical knowledge. For instance, a male Language Department master teacher trainer commended the programme by saying “it has increased the knowledge of teaching” (ID 1002, Islamic Department). Another master teacher trainer asserted that the SBE has helped him to understand teaching and learning better (ID1007, Science Department). The findings are consistent with past researches such as Zeichner (1996) and Watson et al (2008). For instance, Zeichner (1996) opined that through SBE, teachers are able to accomplish the central purpose of teaching which includes effective use of subject matter and pedagogic knowledge to enhance students’ learning. Similarly, Watson and colleagues (2008) concluded that SBE could provide opportunities for participants to bridge theoretical knowledge with classroom practice. The insights gained from this kind of experience are important components in the development of participants’ personal, professional and practical knowledge. In view of that, the SBE has increased participants’ awareness to become more effective reflective practitioners. This goes beyond subject matter knowledge to include an awareness of the teaching context that can be an issue in students’ learning (Sockett, 1993).

4.3.2 Teaching strategies

One of the most significant themes that emerged from this study is that the majority of the participants focused on the teaching methods and teaching strategies employed by the teachers during the SBE. They expressed that they have increased awareness of some innovative teaching methods that were used by teachers in Malaysia and they would adopt them in their own Afghanistan classroom. For example, a male MTT said, ‘I gained experience, learnt real methods in classroom and I will implement this in Afghanistan’ (ID 1002, Islamic Department). Another male MTT claimed that he has learnt different effective teaching methods such as conducting group activities during the teaching and learning process (ID 1014, Language Department). The results are in tandem with past researches (e.g., Furlong, 2000; Sockett, 1993; Tuli & File, 2009). It is evident that the SBE has motivated them to carefully reflect on teaching methods that can be used in Afghanistan. The classroom observation has exposed them to instructional activities that employ different teaching strategies to overcome students’ learning problems. The exposure is meaningful to them as it would take their teaching experience to a new level as well as enhance their professional and personal well-being (Furlong, 2000). In other words, in SBE, participants should be able to observe how teachers promote students’ learning of professional
knowledge as well as adapt teaching methods to the changing context of the learning environment (Tuli & File, 2009).

4.3.3 Personal and professional development

Some participants perceived that the SBE has met their expectation in terms of their personal and professional development. The responses affirmed that the SBE is important for teachers to gain more knowledge about teaching (ID 1010) and understand the management of the school (ID 1008, ID 1009 and ID 1013). The findings complement the qualitative data that participants have learnt ‘quite a lot’ in the 3-day SBE programme, particularly in terms of their personal and professional development. The findings are in line with past researches such as Furlong (2000) and Tuli and File (2009). Both research findings concurred that SBE enhances personal and professional development especially in increasing creativity and pro-activity in the teaching and learning process.

5. Conclusion

We conclude with three main points. First, the MTTs are satisfied with the SBE in enhancing their subject matter and pedagogical knowledge. Besides offering them a better understanding of content knowledge and the teaching learning process, the SBE has also enhanced their pedagogical knowledge so that they are sensitised to the way learners learn. Second, the MAEPA participants appreciated the exposure to the repertoire of teaching strategies and innovations which they could adapt to their own classroom in Afghanistan. The SBE has been a meaningful and practical experience for them. Finally, the MTTs viewed the SBE as an important opportunity for growth and learning; it has helped them to understand the full scope of a teacher’s role and developed their capacity to learn from other teachers’ experiences. The three-day school-based experience has prompted them to examine their own and other teachers’ practices. Consequently, they opined that they have achieved personal and professional development. The issue of MTTs learning just ‘a little’ about theories of teaching and learning in the context of real classroom practices in item 15 of the survey data (mean = 2.90, SD =.70), may be addressed by considering their recommendation to observe lessons during SBE in smaller groups according to subject matter. It would also enable more meaningful classroom observations followed by intellectual discourse between the Malaysian subject teachers and MTTs concerned as well as interaction with the local students about the teaching and learning process of the subject. To further aid and guide meaningful classroom observations, the MTTs could be equipped with an SBE Folio in which they document information gathered from the SBE pertaining to areas like background on the schools visited, the curriculum, general lesson observation, seating and interaction, teacher-pupil interaction, motivation, checking learning, the learner and the environment, power in the classroom and specific lesson observation schedule. This folio would make useful source of learning and reference for the MTTs, besides serving as a springboard for followup intellectual discourse and contributing towards their professional development. Since the MAEPA teaching team is committed to ensuring that SBE is undertaken as an integral part of the curriculum, it may be beneficial to put the MTTs through experiential learning. This entails giving them the opportunity to consolidate their new knowledge and skills gained in Malaysia and apply it by conducting a mini lesson (perhaps in groups) in the local classroom. To add value to the SBE, MTTs may also be given exposure to urban and rural schools so that they gain better insights into teaching-learning processes in varied situations and subsequently adapt the knowledge and skills in their own contexts. The SBE is significant in preparing the MTTs for their own practicum in Afghanistan upon completion of their course in Malaysia. Hence, the MAEPA programme must give MTTs adequate school based practical experience. Perhaps the SBE could be extended to a week instead of only three days. This is also recommended by the MTTs. The extended period of SBE would facilitate MTTs’ direct involvement in the teaching and learning process in the local classroom, better reflection on the changes in their teaching philosophy or behaviour, a written report on the SBE which could take the form of ‘the teacher’s diary’, followed by a seminar in the local schools concerned to share their learning experiences. Such a consistent and robust manner of
implementing the SBE would be useful for all stakeholders like the Malaysian, Australian and Afghanistan government as well as the local schools to make informed decisions for continuous development and improvement.

References


