

Teachers' Professional Development through Whole School Improvement Program (WSIP)

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Abstract

A school system's significant asset is its teaching force. The most important investment a school board, administration, and parents can make in a school system is to ensure that teachers continue to learn. The growing literature on teacher learning and professional growth of teachers reveals that if standards are to be achieved particularly in raising student achievement, there will have to be a massive change in the way we do the business. Good schools, therefore, should aim at making every member of the institution a professional to achieve its goals. The experiences emanating from professional development initiatives of the Aga Khan University-Professional Development Centre North (AKU-PDCN) particularly those coming from the Whole School Improvement Program (WSIP) help not only in the establishment of continuous teacher professional development mechanisms and processes, but also provide opportunities for various stakeholders to work together and share their experiences in the process of implementing the school improvement initiatives. Moreover, the field-based nature and the two years follow-up mechanism of the programme provide further professional support to the project schools. This ongoing professional support is intensive and regular and aims to encourage the participants to reflect on new practices as well as on developing positive professional development culture in schools. This paper attempts to illustrate the background and purpose of WSIP, and how it provides professional development opportunities for the teachers of Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan through AKU-PDCN. The paper also highlights the challenges faced and the lesson learnt in the process, and concludes with some suggestions for a possible and preferable way forward.

Introduction

Majority of the community of learners and school leaders in today's world consider professional development as an ongoing and dynamic process that demands continuous learning opportunities for teachers. Such approach to professional development acknowledges the fact that teachers learn over time and allows teachers to relate prior knowledge to new experiences continuously. Moreover, research findings e.g. Barth, 1999; & Falk, 2001 on the growing literature of teachers' professional development also indicate that the ultimate purpose of the professional development is improving the quality of students' learning.

They argue that nothing has more effects on students' learning in terms of skills, knowledge, confidence or classroom behaviors than the personal and professional development of their teachers. Keeping in mind the importance of teachers' professional development in recent years AKU-PDCN has launched Whole School Improvement Program for the teachers of Gilgit-Baltistan in 1999.

This paper attempts to illustrate the background and purpose of WSIP, and how it provides professional development opportunities for the teachers of Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan through AKU-PDCN. The paper also highlights the challenges faced and the lesson learnt in the process, and concludes with some suggestions for a possible and preferable way forward.

Contextually relevant teachers' professional development models

Due to Gilgit-Baltistan's geographical tough environment, the population is generally thinly spread across the mountain valleys. Limited transportation and harsh weather challenge the mobility of the residents. Furthermore, social norms of women's limited mobility and their familiar responsibilities generally do not allow them to the training opportunities offered in the institutions located in the city centers. This situation, in past, had necessitated contextually relevant teachers' professional models. Here, a brief description of these models is presented to extend the later discussion on teachers professional development model developed and promoted through Whole School Improvement Programme of PDCN. The Field based teacher development programme was innovative as it worked on the conventional teacher training programme offered by AKESP. The model integrated a field based component which was offered in the school cluster which provided opportunity to large number of teachers, particularly women to partake professional development.

Similarly Language Enhancement and Achievement Program (LEAP) was another unique program to develop individual teachers professionally but the major concern with it was that after going through professional programs individual teachers go to their respective schools where they could not get the support from head and other teachers because all teachers were not involved in that particular program. As a result it created various problems and this model could not able to fulfill the needs of the context and could not sustain further. Similarly, School Leadership and Training Program (SLTP) was conducted for head teachers to develop them professionally. This was also center based program addressed the needs of individual head teachers from individual schools and was offered at Education Colleges or other centrally located places. Very few head teachers implemented their learning in schools but most of them could not able to apply. Therefore, this model also could not sustain for a long time.

In addition, the Government Education Department had also been providing teachers and head teachers long-term professional development programs such as the Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC), Certificate in Teaching (CT), and Bachelor in Education (B.Ed) in Gilgit-Baltistan. These courses were offered outside of real school context at Education Colleges or other centrally located places which were examination oriented and failed to address the specific professional development needs of school teachers and head teachers. In addition, it did not strive to include the major stakeholders (e.g. parents and system representatives) in the process of school development.

Several evaluation reports reflected the fact that the models were useful producing short-term results but the sustainability of the change initiatives could not be ascertained. These findings were also endorsed by the reflections of the communities and other stakeholders that the impact of those programs on students' academic achievement was dismal. Hargreaves (1994) claims that there is little teacher development without school development. The center-based courses can be productive if both the schools and the newly trained individuals are enabled to move forward simultaneously.

Although centre-based and individually focused training in Gilgit-Baltistan over the past decade has changed the traditional practices in schools to a certain extent but not raised standards significantly. What is evident is that a trained individual, who returns to his own school, is engulfed into the very powerful current of the existing ethos, attitudes and beliefs of the organization.

As a result, the newly gained skills are quickly eroded and the status quo is reestablished albeit with some minor changes in individual classrooms in most cases. Hargreaves also claims that there is little teacher development without school development (1994). This is not to say that all centre based and individually focused training is fruitless. Rather, it could be very productive if schools were somehow enabled to move forward at the same time as the newly trained individual. This may be the heart of the matter.

Therefore, considering the long-term school improvement needs in Gilgit-Baltistan, the first initiative of PDCN was to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis of school improvement in Gilgit-Baltistan in 1999. The findings of this need analysis and the founding Head of PDCN, Ms. Gulzar Kanji's experience of school improvement in East Africa indicated that the impact of training on the quality of teaching and learning is greater and more sustainable when the whole school is taken as a unit of educational change. Research studies also endorse the fact that the interrelationships among different aspects of school improvement have a critical role in enhancing or constraining students' learning and outcomes (Hopkins, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1995).

In addition, WSIP model is more contextually relevant because the faculty members (teaching staff) are based at school and work very closely with teachers in real classroom situation. As a result, this model encourages all teachers to develop professionally in an ongoing basis where they can share their ideas with each other and learn from each other.

Moreover, in the process of bringing change and improvement in schools, PDCN emphasizes holistic approach to enable students develop their physical, social, emotional, moral and intellectual dimensions of their personalities. The following framework reflects the six important elements for WSIP:

- Quality of teaching and learning;
- Curriculum and staff development;
- Leadership and management;
- Community development;
- Students' behavior and emotional development and health education;
- Accommodation and resources for supporting learning

These factors together create the culture of a school, which is instrumental in enhancing or constraining students' learning (Hargreaves, D. 1995. Fullan et. al 1990. Stoll and Fink,1995). Another major factor in improving schools is the quality of support and monitoring provided by various educational systems. This has a profound effect on the quality of schools as learning organizations.

Teachers' professional development as a main component of school improvement

WSIP is a three-year, field-based training program, designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning and develop the school as a learning organization through developing its teachers professionally. It aims to devise, test, and refine models that will enhance children's learning and achievements; embody the maximum amount of collaboration and partnership with the schools and with the systems and focus more closely on monitoring and extracting lessons from the project. In this program, during Year One, project school heads and teachers are encouraged to go through different centre based and field based professional programs e.g. orientation program, weekly Friday sessions and content re-enforcement program to develop themselves professionally. They are also facilitated to develop school development plans for their schools, so that they have the ownership of school improvement process right from the beginning of the project.

The intensive, subsequent PDCN input during the first year of WSIP includes faculty's facilitating weekly professional development workshops (the target is to conduct 25 professional development workshops during Year One), observing lessons, giving teachers constructive feedback, demonstrate lessons, assisting teachers in their planning and classroom teaching, and developing low- and no-cost instructional resources.

In view of PDCN's integrated approach to school improvement, faculty members work with diverse groups of people including teachers, heads, students, non-academic staff of schools, parents (particularly mothers), community members, and the village education committees.

Faculty members spend four working days in WSIP schools and spend the remaining two days planning and developing resources for the following week. They spend the last week of the month at PDCN, recharging, sharing their ideas with other faculty and attending different committee meetings. During Year One, besides their leading role in WSIP, school heads also avail the opportunity of Certificate in Education: Educational Leadership and Management (CE: ELM) Course, which aims to enhance their leadership and management skills.

During WSIP, project school teachers are provided support on regular basis. For instance, head teacher and teachers get the opportunity to go through more than 25 professional development sessions during Year One. In addition, they get continuous support from PDCN faculty members for teachers' professional development. For instance, observing lessons, giving teachers constructive feedback, demonstrate lessons, assisting teachers in their planning and classroom teaching, and developing low- and no-cost instructional resources. In view of PDCN's integrated approach to school improvement, professional support is given to diverse groups of people including teachers, heads, students, non-academic staff of schools, parents (particularly mothers), community members, and the village education committees. During the academic year most of the time is spent for teachers' professional development, planning and developing resources for the following week. In Year One, besides their leading role in WSIP, school heads also avail the opportunity of Certificate in Education: Educational Leadership and Management (CE: ELM) Course, which aims to enhance their leadership and management skills.

During the subsequent two years faculty members continue providing field-based (follow up) support to project school teachers and heads and addressing other emerging issues related to sustained school improvement.

Progressing Process of WSIP Models

Different contexts in which schools operate and of which they are a part, have their peculiar realities which require adaptations and modifications in the standardized school improvement models. Thus, as a *thinking organization*, PDCN continually reviews its school improvement programs, including WSIP. Since its first implementation as a school improvement model in 1999 in Gilgit-Baltistan, WSIP has been re-looked at, adapted and modified on an ongoing basis to improve its impact. A brief description of how it has evolved over the last years follows:

PDCN has been offering WSIP in various models since its existence. In initial years during 2000-2003 the number of project schools varied from 14 to 9, 12 and 14 during the subsequent three years respectively. During the week on going support is provided to teachers in terms of planning and preparing resources for teachers' professional development.

During 2002 WSIP schools were selected in the districts of Ghizer, Skardu and Ganche, therefore, it was decided that faculty members should work closely with teachers and would remain in WSIP schools for three weeks. Last week is spent for the next months planning. In 2002 and 2003 an experiment was initiated to pair-up some potential teachers as master trainers with faculty members in WSIP schools. These potential teachers worked side by side with PDCN faculty members. The goal of inducting master trainers was to develop them professionally to ultimately take leading roles and help the change process continue after the project came to an end.

On the basis of the last three years experiences the number of WSIP schools during 2004 was eight whereas during the subsequent four years (i.e. 2005-2008) 08, 08, 06 and 03 schools were selected respectively. After careful reflections on initial years' models the approach of selecting schools was changed from supply-driven to demand-driven. Hence, schools were asked to apply and justify their case for WSIP.

Another step which was taken is an intensive week-long orientation for project school heads and deputy heads for their professional development. In addition, a mechanism was introduced to involve all stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, system representatives, village education committees etc.) in the process of school improvement. PDCN faculty members worked with teachers very closely in WSIP schools for four days and on Fridays sessions had arranged for teachers' professional development. Moreover, follow-up of WSIP 2002 and 2003 schools also continued where faculty members supported teachers in classroom teaching, giving feedback, writing reflections, generating resources and their proper utilization in classrooms.

To continue the teachers' professional development Mobile Library Services were also extended to the project schools during this time. Another significant action was taken in the form of content reinforcement workshops during summer and winter vacations to enhance the content specific knowledge and pedagogy of the subject teachers.

Building on the insights gained from our past experiences and specifically drawing lessons from the research conducted to investigate the impact of WSIP 2000-2002, and Faculty Reflective Sessions during the month of August 2009, WSIP 2009-10 was adopted. These models also reflected more on teachers' professional development and school improvement.

In addition, in WSIP 2009-2010 model, its framework is focused very carefully and tried to work thoroughly on the six pillars of WSIP where faculty members worked on quality of teaching and learning e.g. preparing lesson plans, generating relevant resources and their effective utilization at classroom levels. The framework also encouraged on staff development where particularly teacher development is prioritized. These professionals enriched curriculum and made it contextually relevant and appropriate. Moreover, another significant achievement in this model was that teachers planned professional sessions for their colleague teachers one by one within the presence of PDCN faculty. As a result schools achieved better students' learning outcomes. Furthermore, the framework focused on head teachers leadership and management skills because head teachers have a vital role in school improvement. The six pillars are very integrated and interlinked with each other and in each pillar there are huge opportunities for teachers' professional development and school improvement.

Teachers' Professional Development through WSIP

The scope of the concept 'professional development' can be gauged through the explanation offered by eminent scholars (Barth, 1999; Falk, 2001; Guskey, 2002) who consider professional development encompassing all the in-service processes and activities inside or outside of a school provided to teachers for developing their knowledge, skills and learning about a positive change in behavior in term of improved teaching and learning practices in the classroom.

According to Connors (1991) professional development is the sum of all activities both, formal and in formal, carried out by individuals or systems to promote staff growth and renewal. Majority of the community of learners and school leaders in today's world consider professional development as an ongoing and dynamic process demanding continuous learning opportunities. It is not a workshop or any one time event focusing specific knowledge and skills. It acknowledges the fact that teachers learn over time and it allows teachers to relate prior acknowledge to new experiences continuously (Cohen, 1990; Ganser, 2000).

Moreover, research findings from different studies also indicate that the ultimate purpose of the professional development is improving the quality of students' learning. They argue that nothing has more effects on students' learning in terms of skill, knowledge, confidence or classroom behavior than the personal and professional development of their teacher (Barth, 1999; and Falk, 2001). The same notion and believes PDCN has regarding teachers' professional development that it is not an event it's an ongoing process which needs lots of efforts and time. Moreover, learning never stops in any stage of life. Teachers require to update their knowledge and skills to fulfill students' learning needs as well as their better learning outcomes which is the primarily goal of WSIP.

The steps which have been taken for teachers' professional development

i) Needs Assessment

WSIP is the program which provides huge opportunities for the teachers' professional development of its project school. The program has a meticulous process through which the school community has to go. Before the intervention stage faculty members start collecting data from the applying schools in each year.

This process has two main goals of (i) identifying the school improvement and staff development needs of school, and (ii) documenting the currently prevailing physical condition and social situation of school with reference to the frame work of WSIP in order to be able to have a good comparison at the end of WSIP.

The data collection process includes structured and semi –structured interviews of the head teachers, teachers, and the Village Education Committee (VEC) and School Management Committee (SMC) members, classroom observations, document analysis, and videos of the physical facilities in the school. The analyses of data is ongoing basis to identify teachers' individual and collective professional development, and school improvement needs. By the end of each academic year the faculty members complete writing the school histories, specifically highlighting the contextual realities which uninterruptedly influence what goes on in project schools.

(ii) Head teachers / Teachers' Orientation Program

An Orientation Workshop is organized for the head teachers and teachers of the selected school at PDCN before the intervention stage. This program helps head teacher and teachers understand thoroughly about PDCN's activities, their role in their own professional development as well as in students' learning. After going through orientation program head teachers and teachers are motivated to act as change facilitators in the entire school improvement process.

(iii) Certificate in Education: Educational Leadership and Management

To develop head teachers and deputy heads professionally, management programmers are conducted in collaboration with the AKU-IED. These include a Certificate in Education: Educational Leadership and Management (CE: ELM) a six month field based modular program. The major aim of the program is to develop the understanding of head teachers as pedagogical leaders so that they would be able to contribute meaningfully for the overall development of their schools.

This program has also its own significance in terms of head teachers' contribution in school improvement. For instance, they provide professional development opportunities for their teachers inside and outside of the school premises. In addition, they display a visible change in their attitudes in terms of sharing ideas with teachers and listening to them.

(iv) Classroom based teaching and learning support

In order to improve the quality of teaching and learning, a comprehensive classroom based approach is followed to cater the needs of various subject teachers ranging from Early Childhood Education and Development to class 10th. Demonstration lessons are delivered in the actual classroom set up by PDCN faculty members on various subject areas like Mathematics, Science, English, Urdu and Social Studies, in the presence of concerned teachers and sometimes a group of teachers interested in the particular subject area. Based on this demo lesson the teachers are supported in planning their lessons, designing interesting activities, making resources out of no cost materials and their usage in classroom and procedures of formative evaluation. Furthermore, a conscious is made to address the particular issues faces by the schools at large. The formal and informal reflective discussions with head teacher and teachers reveal the general concern for student writing skills in English and Urdu. For that reason, content based workshops in different subjects such as Urdu, English, Mathematics, Islamiyat, Home Economics and Social Studies are conducted to develop teachers' professionally. Another teacher Samina states in this regard,

“Four workshops on teaching Social Studies were carried on by the PDCN faculty. We learned how to use the maps and globe in the classroom. We also learned about directions, place identification, time line and uses of line of latitude and longitudes” (translated from an Urdu Reflection, 10/06/2010).

In addition, teachers are provided support in various teaching methodologies such as project based teaching, analogies in Science, learning by doing, inquiry based teaching and usage of maximum resources in classroom teaching remained one of the focal areas.

The raised level of motivation and interest among the teachers for these newly acquired methodologies are evident in their professional portfolios and resources they develop at home preparation for their classroom lesson. A teacher Yasmeen reflects on her learning in the following ways,

“When I teach by using same strategies and same methods every day children get bored and take less interest.... The PDCN faculty members taught us many interesting methods and strategies which were quite new for me. I taught in ECED classes where PDCN faculty member observed my classes and then taught and asked me to observe her. She taught with the help of models, flash cards and real things. She used all low cost no cost materials which are less expensive and children learn with high interest and easily understand the concept” (Translated an Urdu Reflection, 25/03/2010).

Moreover, theories play a requisite role to streamline the practice in the process of teaching and learning. WSIP does not only emphasize practice but also emphasizes the current learning theories with the teachers through conducting weekly professional sessions focusing on the content from different subject areas and of course pedagogy. Teachers are encouraged to critique on content and delivery of the sessions involving them in planning and in conducting process, which seems to help them understand the learning theories and find the relevance to their day to day classroom practices. They are also supposed to see the impact of the learning from the professional sessions through close observations of the teaching in the classroom when teachers try to put a general conception in a specific situation. Overall, this helps the faculty members to find out what theory works in our context and also pinpoints the misconceptions of the teachers. Such misconceptions are addressed in groups or individual interactions among faculty members and teachers. The head teacher and deputy head maintain general and individual files of workshop plans and materials as sources of WSIP activities for future support. Moreover, a fascinating point is that in most of the schools head and teachers gradually come forward to conduct professional sessions for colleague teachers in our presence.

(v) Teachers' Professional Portfolios

In order to keep track record of the professional development of the teachers individual professional portfolios are initiated and maintained throughout the year. The teachers actively maintain their portfolios by including various handouts on different teaching strategic, variety of activities, newspaper cutting and their own prepared subject based attractive written materials and reflection on their own practices. Retallic (2003) argues.” A portfolio must be more than a collection of document.....it must include reflection on those document and experience to show evidence of professional learning. ‘’ (p.3). similarly, these portfolios not only served the purpose of keeping the professional record of the teachers but also remarkably contributed towards the enhancement of their professional commitment and motivation. They voluntarily started preparing and gathering materials for their portfolios at their home and at times stayed back in groups to work on their portfolios in the after school hours. Their sense of achievement and ownership of their accomplishment in the shape of the professional portfolios was quite evident in their professional discussions. A group of teachers from WSIP maintain,

“One good thing that we have learned is to maintain our portfolios. It is the complete record of a teacher. It is not only collection of materials but it also provides us the opportunity of reflection on our practices. We have even introduced it to our students. They are also taking interest in developing their portfolios” (Translated from their Urdu Reflections, 20/12/2009).

The overall school improvement initiatives in general, and the professional portfolios in particular remarkably contributes towards the enhancement of professional attitude, commitment and motivation of the teachers.

A noteworthy positive change is explicit in the school culture such as in the formal interaction at tea time, corridors and other classroom occasions. Majority of the teachers were found discussing various professional issues and were taking and giving alternative solutions to and from each other. Sergiovanni, (1998) maintains that, “inquiry in classroom is not likely to flourish where inquiry among teachers is discouraged...Where there is little discourse among teachers discourse among students will be harder to promote and maintain” (p.40).

(vi) Mobile library service

Evidences reveal that the mobile library system has developed a reading culture among teachers in schools. AKU-PDCN provides reading materials for students and teachers through its mobile library service. Through this service, each project school is given 100 books for a month and exchange of books is continued during three years of the project. Teachers use these books as reference materials in their classrooms. The head teacher and some other teachers expressed their views in the following ways,

“WSIP has changed our school culture, especially PDCN’s mobile library has developed our teachers and students reading habit. Teachers use library books as reference materials. As a result they prepare interesting activities for classroom teaching which enhance students’ interest and learning. Now our students are involved more in classroom activities than before WSIP” (Reflection 30/03/2010).

Teaching as a reflective practice

It is a common practice during WSIP intervention that head teacher and teachers were encouraged to write their reflections. This has proven to be a very powerful and successful part of the program. Many teachers first time maintain their reflective journals, record their reflections on daily basis and share them with faculty members once in a month. In this regard Halima mentions in her reflection,

“In my fifteen years’ teaching period, first time I was introduced about reflection through PDCN’s Whole School Improvement Program. I never knew about reflection and reflective journal. Now I feel that it is a useful tool to bring improvement in myself as well as in my classroom teaching. I will continue it in future too.” (Translated from their Urdu Reflections, 25/06/2010).

It is our usual practice that before asking the head teachers and teachers to write reflections, we (faculty members) conduct a one day workshop to orient the teachers on the philosophy, nature and procedure of writing reflection. Heads and teachers are informed on their progress and areas for improvement.

Challenges and Constraints

Our working experience reveals that the WSIP activities of the PDCN have a profound impact but the journey and process of school improvement is not free of constraints. Some of the challenges I encounter, are briefly mentioned as follows:

- Teachers have high expectations from faculty members and expect to have answers for every situation. Having limited subject expertise and without having any administrative authority and pressure it is difficult for faculty to deal with every situation.
- An insufficient teaching staff, dependence on volunteer teachers and untimely transfer of employees and head teachers create big gaps in the WSIP schools.
- English has been introduced at primary level in the government system but the teachers’ content knowledge is so weak that teaching English is a big issue in schools. It is even more challenging for those teachers who have moved to upper classes without learning English from the start and the content of such teachers is beyond their way of working.
- Most of the teachers attend professional development courses; among them some teachers do not change their mentality and their way of working.

Recommendations for WSIP

Looking at the scenario of school improvement in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, I recommend the following.

- To ensure sustainability the partner institutions must understand the philosophy of WSIP and encourage it in their respective systems to practice it honestly and professionally.
- Teachers as well as head teachers of the WSIP Project Schools should not be transferred for a certain period so as to sustain the initiatives taken in schools.

Lesson Learnt

After experiencing in WSIP schools the following lessons I have learnt:

- To develop professional culture in schools, every individual has to reflect on her/his actions and being a role model is a powerful instrument to enhance professional development culture at schools.
- Change is a slow process which requires lots of patience and energy. To bring change in schools, patience and persistence are highly recommendable ingredients. Without them it is difficult to continue school improvement initiatives.
- It is very crucial to build the internal capacity (capacity of the teachers) for the school to push them to understand their role to implement the improvement programs independently. This can be achieved by developing head teacher and teachers' leadership roles as internal change agents, who will work to facilitate continuous professional development sessions for teacher development and school improvement.
- System plays a critical role in school improvement process. Hence, to sustain school improvement initiatives establishing professional working relationship with respective systems is imperative.

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