

Analysis of the Problems of and the Suitable Solutions for an Initial Teacher Training Programme Conducted through the Distance Mode

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Abstract

Good teachers must be made. Many countries have adopted different models of Distance Education to provide initial training to unqualified teachers, expand opportunities for professional development of in-service teachers and increase awareness of teachers on educational reforms. Whatever the models used, all Distance Education providers are faced with challenging tasks in co-ordinating partners and agents in teacher education programmes where practical teaching and its assessment is involved (Robinson and Latchem, 2003:40). The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), as a pioneering institution to introduce teacher training programmes through the Distance Mode, also has confronted problems in line with an initial training programme aimed at producing drama and theatre teachers to the school system. Thus, a comprehensive study has been carried out with a view to obtain an insight into the problems faced by different stakeholders, their root causes, and to uncover workable solutions

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within the context of Distance Education. Data was collected from three batches of student-teachers who have completed the programme, lecturers, co-ordinators, master teachers and some experts in the field and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The study sheds light on meaningful solutions to be applied for improving the quality of the programme concerned.

Keywords: Distance Mode, Initial Training, Problems and solutions

Introduction

Good education demands good teachers. Good teachers are not born but must be made. The importance of teachers in determining the quality of education is emphasized by many international reports (UNICEF, 1999; UNESCO, 2000a; OCED, 2001) and education and training of teachers was identified as one of the indicators of the quality of the school system (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2001). As estimated by UNESCO Institute of Statistics, about 69 million teachers must be recruited to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030. To cope with such demands, many countries have introduced Distance Education for initial training of unqualified teachers, continuing professional development of in-service teachers and for awareness raising of teachers about curricula and other reforms. The research studies conducted elsewhere on training prospective teachers through the Distance Mode have reported mixed findings. The present study is directed to identify the strengths and limitations of an initial teacher training programme conducted through the Distance Mode and to make recommendations on possible interventions for improving quality.

Pertinent Literature

Initial teacher education and training is the basic or first level of qualification for a teacher. It may be taken as Pre-Service Teacher Education (PSTE: before a trainee teacher begins work as a teacher) or an in-service one (while an untrained teacher works as a teacher). The pre-service programs are also regarded as foundational building blocks for career-long professional development (Darling-Hammond,

1996). Further, the quality of training provided through PSTE programs affects teachers' practice, effectiveness, and career commitment (Eren & Tezel, 2010). The quality of teaching and learning taking place in the classroom, therefore, depends on and reflects the quality of PSTE programs.

The major use of Distance and Open Education has been for initial teacher training, especially for primary teachers, and as a means of providing unqualified serving teachers with a qualification (Moon and Robinson, 2003; 72). Three case studies reported by UNESCO (2001) show three different models followed by the countries to facilitate initial training of teachers. As per the report, Distance Education had been used as an alternative route to primary teacher qualifications by the Nigerian government, and the television had been used to reach teachers who were in distant and remote places in China. As the third case study, it was pointed out that the United Kingdom offered a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme using Information & Communication Technology (ICT) to support a school-based initial teacher education programme. In addition, Perraton (1993) reported about two pre-service and six in-service initial training programmes conducted by eight different countries, namely, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Nepal and Brazil using a variety of Distance Education methods.

However, through an in-depth analysis of those case studies, it could be revealed that the use of Open and Distance Education for initial teacher training has generated both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, those programmes were able to reach teachers in a large scale within a shorter period of time than institutional based alternatives (Robinson & Latchem, 2003). On the other hand, the completion rates and drop-out rates were high in those programmes when compared with face-to-face programmes. It was further revealed that Distance Education experiences in several countries have met with mixed success in providing either the knowledge of subject matter or development of pedagogical skills (Dove, 1986; Mahlck & Temu, 1989; Nielsen & Tatto, 1991; Taylor, 1983). While the developing countries extensively apply Distance Education for providing initial training to their teachers, the developed countries like the United Kingdom have not adapted Distance Education for

professional training due to difficulties in managing initial teacher training using the Distance Mode (Waker,2007). A comparative study conducted in Pakistan (Parveen, 2010) revealed that there was no difference in efficacy of B.Ed graduates trained using the regular mode and Distance Mode though subject knowledge, subject application, teaching strategies and classroom management skills were higher in regular graduates than distance-based graduates. The findings further revealed that regular graduates spend more time on learning, have regular contact with their teachers and clear understanding on teaching strategies applicable to their subjects than distance-based graduates. In Zimbabwe, a recent study concluded (Mubika & Bukalia, 2013) that the limitations in the delivery system of a distance-based teacher education programmes had created several issues that had implications for the quality of the teachers produced.

The emphasis placed on subject knowledge, professional studies and practice differs from one programme to another and they have been criticized for weak integration of theory and practice, poor quality and inadequate time for school practice (Moon and Robinson, 2003; 76). The case studies illustrated by Perraton (1993) supported the idea that Distance Education has been successful in reaching out to teachers who are scattered over huge distances and producing a large number of trained teachers without removing them from their work places. However, Robinson (1997:125) concluded: “Not all courses worked well or provided good quality though enough have to demonstrate the capacity of distance education for training and educating teachers and for enabling new models of training to be explored”. Therefore, it is questionable whether the Distance Education programmes have the capability to produce quality teachers to the education system.

Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in Drama and Theatre Programme of The Open University of Sri Lanka

The B. Ed in Drama & Theatre programme was initiated by the Faculty of Education of the OUSL in 2010 with a view to cater to the demand arising from the school system and it was offered in collaboration with the Tower Hall Theatre Foundation. The students who complete the Higher National Diploma of Tower Hall Theatre Foundation get the

opportunity to enroll in the B.Ed programme. The Higher National Diploma is a two-year full-time programme (Level 3-4 of B. Ed) through which the students get sufficient knowledge and skills in different areas of drama and theatre, such as performing, designing, lighting and costumes for drama, producing drama etc. However, they neither have prior knowledge on education nor experience in teaching by the time they enroll in the Level 5 of the B. Ed programme at the OUSL.

By now, two batches of students (23 + 43) have already passed out (in 2014 & 2015) and another batch (20) was at the final stage in their programme in 2016. There are two batches of students, 16 and 32 respectively, continuing at Level 5 and Level 6 of the programme. With the two batches who have already completed the programme, and with the third batch, the Faculty witnessed critical problems in meeting the standards of an initial teacher training programme conducted at undergraduate level.

In the initial Faculty-level discussions that took place among the programme team members, a concern was raised about the limited professional competencies and low ethical and moral standards exhibited by those student-teachers which would directly affect the quality of the instructional practices adopted by them in classrooms. Further, it was revealed in the discussion that the mismatch between the aims and objectives of the Higher National Diploma and the B. Ed Degree also might lead to deficiencies in their pedagogical knowledge and skills and their commitment to teaching (their priorities are different). The Faculty is very much concerned that the production of low quality graduate teachers to the system would be a critical issue which would definitely have an impact on the quality as well as the demand of the programme and on the reputation of the institution. Therefore, an investigative study was conducted to find out the problems faced by teachers (internal academics) and student-teachers in the programmes and suggest possible solutions to be implemented in the future.

Objectives of the study

To analyze the views of the student-teachers, co-ordinators, lecturers/master teachers with regard to the curriculum,

instructional material, instructional processes adopted in the programme (including assessments and teaching practice) and the quality of the teachers produced

To identify the problems and issues faced by them in relation to curriculum, instructional material and the instructional processes which would hinder the attainment of programme objectives

To make recommendations/solutions for the existing problems faced by different parties involved in the programme.

Methodology

The two batches of student teachers who had passed out from the programme (56), three batches who have been following the programme (78), 10 lecturers who have been playing different roles as course team members, day school academics, tutors and master teachers and the co-ordinators of the programme had been considered as the sample of the study. In addition, the views of two experts about the different aspects of the programme were also collected to get insights into the conducting of the programme.

Multiple methods were used for data collection in order to facilitate triangulation of data. They included, focused group discussions with student teachers, questionnaires filled by student teachers and lecturers, observations and reflective notes of master teachers about the performance of student-teachers in teaching practice and records on assignments and final examinations completed by student teachers. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were integrated to the analyses of data in this study which included percentages, mean analysis and content analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section is organized as per the objectives of the study.

(1) Views on the curriculum, instructional material and instructional processes of the programme

Almost all the teachers and student-teachers were in agreement that Level 5 and 6 curricula have a strong emphasis on education courses.

Further, the positive contribution of some courses, such as Educational Psychology, Education Technology, Principles of Education, Teaching Drama & Theatre etc was stressed by teachers (10). The student-teachers also acknowledged the teachers' views though they identified Inclusive Education and Guidance and Counseling as the most relevant subjects for their teaching and wanted to acquire knowledge and skills relating to those subjects (68%). Further, the student-teachers wanted Information Technology and English also to be incorporated in to the curriculum and expected strong concentration on drama and theatre courses at Level 5. Teachers highlighted the importance of incorporating a course to get sufficient opportunities to familiarize themselves with the teaching profession (90%).

With regard to the lesson material, the relevance, user friendliness and readability had come out as outstanding features from both parties. However, teachers themselves had pointed out that some material should be updated to include recent developments of the field (50%). From the point of view of student teachers (58%), more illustrations and elaborations should be incorporated along with simplified versions of the modules to facilitate self-learning. It was surprising to find that the suggestion of teachers to incorporate on-line components to different courses (90%) had not been welcomed by the student teachers as a fruitful strategy.

The academics gave a high rating for the instructional processes adopted by them and introduced the contact sessions (day schools in ODL terminology) as a very good platform for maintaining friendly humane interactions with student-teachers and building their self-confidence and self-regulatory behavior (100%). Both categories felt that interactive day schools and practical workshops increased the preparedness of student-teachers towards the task at hand and expanded opportunities for close interactions between the two parties.

Teachers expressed a negative opinion on student-teachers' reactions towards the Day Schools. For instance, they have given a poor rating (mean 2.0) to 'punctuality of student-teachers at day schools' out of the 10 aspects considered, and 'attendance at Day Schools' also had a moderate rating (mean 3.0) in comparison to the other aspects

(Table 1). However, promoting such aspects is somewhat contradictory to the principles followed by the Open and Distance Learning institutions. According to the academics, student- teachers' participation in group activities and in discussions are at a satisfactory level (mean 4.2 and 3.9 respectively). 'Giving prompt answers' (mean 3.2) 'maintaining interaction with other student teachers' (mean 3.3), 'maintaining interaction with the teacher'(3.4) received moderate ratings.

Table 1: Internal Academics' views on student-teachers'

Day Schools	Mean of ratings	Day Schools	Means of ratings
Attendance at Day Schools	3.0	Participation in discussions	3.9
Punctuality at Day Schools	2.0	Asking questions	3.4
Readiness for Day Schools	3.5	Giving prompt answers	3.2
Paying attention to the teacher	3.5	Maintaining one-to-one interaction with teacher	3.4
Participation in group activities	4.2	Maintaining interaction with other student-teachers	3.3

However, the student-teachers' views were different. They requested more Day Schools to facilitate their understanding of the subject matter and close interactions with teachers, the Faculty and colleagues. All student-teachers were of the opinion that the duration of Teaching Practice should be extended, and their progress would be more satisfactory if internal academics (rather than master teachers) could do the supervision during Teaching Practice (TP). Academics also agreed with the expanding of the TP period to provide more opportunities for student-teachers to develop professional skills related to the teaching-learning process. Teaching Practice as a specific strategy incorporated in to the programme had been contributing significantly for the professional development of student teachers though the need for further strengthening it to achieve the standards of the programme was highlighted.

(2) Views on the Quality of the Teachers Produced

Both the academics and student teachers expressed different views on the quality of teachers produced. As specified by the academics, the actor's role strengthened by the Tower Hall Theatre Foundation at Level 3 & 4 overshadowed the "teaching role" of the student-teachers. Those findings could be further supported by using the data gathered through a self-administered questionnaire (Table 2) from teachers.

Table 2: Views of the the teachers on the student-teachers' knowledge exhibited through Teaching Practice

Knowledge areas	Mean of rating	Knowledge Areas	Means of ratings
Knowledge of principles of learning	3.0	Knowledge of teaching Drama & Theatre	3.8
Knowledge of the development levels of students	2.8	Knowledge of the learning environment	3.0
Knowledge of student variability and exceptionality	2.5	Knowledge of using blackboard	2.9

As illustrated in table 2, 'knowledge of teaching drama and theatre' is the only area for which a high rating was received (mean- 3.8) from the teachers in the five-point scale ('poor' to 'excellent'). The reasons might be the strong emphasis placed on integrating theory of drama & theatre with the practice. 'Knowledge of the development levels of students' and 'knowledge of student variability and exceptionality' received lower ratings than the other four areas, which require urgent attention of the Department.

Table 3 depicts their skills in the teaching-learning process.

Table 3: Views of the academics on the student teachers' skills exhibited in Teaching Practice

Skill areas	Means of rating	Skills areas	Means of ratings
Skills in using blackboard	2.8	Skills in conducting group activities	3.1

Skills in using other learning aids	3.1	Skills in interacting with students	3.3
Skills in presenting lessons	3.1	Skills in promoting interactions among students	3.3
Skills in motivating students	3.1	Skills in using classroom assessments	2.6
Skills in getting attention of students	3.3	Skills in managing time	2.6

The lowest ratings were received for ‘skills in using blackboard’ (2.8) ‘skills in using classroom assessments’ (2.6) and ‘skills in managing time’ (2.6). Those skills are very important for a teacher to complete a lesson in an effective manner. Even for the other seven areas indicated in the Table 3, the ratings remained at a marginal level (3.1 to 3.3). Reflections of the academics during the TP period further confirmed the situation identified through the questionnaires.

Table 4: Summary of the reflections on preparation of lessons of the student-teachers

Aspects	Mean of ratings
Forming suitable Objectives in their lessons	3.0
Planning correct and relevant methods	3.1
Identifying and developing effective teaching aids	3.2
Preparing the classroom environment	2.7
Planning assessment methods	2.5

Table 5: Summary of the reflections on presentation of lessons of the student-teachers

Beginning of the lesson- first 5 minutes	Mean of ratings
Applying suitable techniques	3.5
Using appropriate words	3.5
Getting attention of students	3.7

Arousing motivation of students	3.3
Presenting the lesson- 5-25 minutes	
Applying suitable teaching methods	2.7
Using appropriate Teaching Aids	2.5
Promoting interaction with students	3.5
Promoting interaction among students	3.6
Maintaining student attention	3.5
Maintaining student motivation	3.8
Linking different parts of the lesson	2.5
Managing time effectively	2.5

The teachers were asked to focus on three lessons out of the five lessons they had observed and write down their assessments according to the five-point scale given and a separate column was provided in the same sheet to write down detailed reflections. The assessments of all three lessons were considered for the above calculations.

As the majority pointed out, the beginning of lessons of student-teachers were somewhat satisfactory (means varied from 3.3-3.7) and the majority applied different techniques such as songs, activities, role plays, blackboard, teaching aids, facial expressions etc through which they were able to get the attention and arouse the motivation of students. However, in the middle of the lessons their performance was poor in relation to ‘applying suitable teaching methods’ (mean 2.7) and ‘techniques’ (mean 2.5), ‘linking different parts of the lessons’ (mean 2.5) and ‘managing time effectively’ (mean 2.5).

The following open-ended answers provided by the teachers also confirm the above situation:

“Teaching is not done per the lesson plan. Language needs to be improved. Use of black board is good and singing and dancing perfect”
 “Use of technology is excellent, Student teachers have shown good teaching abilities, but need to use student-centered methods to improve effectiveness of their teaching

“Need to adjust to the lesson, need more practice. Confidence to be improved to make the teaching -learning process more effective”

“Need more training on organization and management skills. Poor time management skills were exhibited”

Overall, the teachers felt that the teaching skills of the student-teachers must be improved to provide fruitful learning experiences to their students. Further, when compared with the ratings given to the three lessons, a significant positive change was not visible. However, the viewpoints of the student-teachers were somewhat contradictory to the views of their teachers. The majority expressed high confidence about their performance during the TP period and stressed that they could have done better if more support from the institution and schools, and more time for Teaching Practice, were provided. The following are some open-ended answers given by the student teachers at the focus group discussions:

“We are new to schools and new to teaching. So, training should be gradually done to give the full responsibility at the end. We need to have a transition period”.

“Teaching Practice time is not sufficient. We need more time to familiarize with the school environment”.

“We need a longer period to adjust to a school. Need opportunities to be familiar with the school set up”

“More model teaching should be provided and TP to be continued from Level 5”.

“We need more opportunities to observe teaching-learning situations of exemplary teachers”

“Comprehensive feedback should be provided on our teaching on the spot”

“Need more experience to handle teaching learning situations individually and as a group”

The above data revealed that both teachers and student’s teachers had somewhat similar opinion about the curriculum and instructional material of the programme though their views were different with regard to the quality of the teaching-learning process.

(3) Problems highlighted and solutions proposed by the teachers and student-teachers

Some of the crucial problems which emerged from the responses of teachers and student-teachers and the solutions proposed by them could be summarized as follows. The answers are summarized under themes to produce Table 6.

Table 6: Problems highlighted and solutions proposed by teachers and student-teachers

	Problems highlighted	Solutions proposed
Curriculum	Curriculum is biased towards Education courses- Narrow focus on drama and theatre (T) Limited focus on developing 21 st century professional skills/soft skills (T) Lack of opportunities to integrate theory with practice (ST) Traditional nature of the curriculum- challenging experiences are minimal (ST)	Introduction of new courses at Level 5 and 6: Compulsory course titled “Introduction to Teaching Profession” Optional courses on “Methods of Teaching Dancing / Methods of Teaching Art /Methods of Teaching Music” etc. (T) Integrate Drama and Theatre courses in Level 5 & 6 (ST) Introduce English and ICT courses (ST)
Material	Limited use of AV material (T) Outdated information (T) Self –learning not practiced (T) Students pay limited attention to activities (T) Self-study is difficult (ST) No illustrations and elaborations (ST) Completion of activities take time (ST)	Material should be revised (T) On-line interaction to be promoted (T) More AV material to be introduced (T) Need more illustrations & simplified versions of modules (ST) Face-to-face interaction to be expanded (ST) Facilities to be provided for group learning (ST)
Day Scho	Students do not consider Day Schools as supplementary to material (T)	Interactive sessions should be increased (T)

	<p>Poor preparedness of students for Day Schools (T) Limited involvement of senior academics (ST)</p> <p>Limited number of Day Schools (ST)</p> <p>Difficulty in traveling a long distance as programme offered only in the main centre (ST)</p>	<p>New innovative teaching methods to be implemented at day schools (T)</p> <p>Participation to be made compulsory (T)</p> <p>Need exemplary models to follow (ST)</p> <p>Increase the number of day schools (ST)</p> <p>Facilities to be provided for peer interactions (ST)</p>
Teaching Practice	<p>Limited experience in applying theory (T)</p> <p>Limited understanding on student diversities (T)</p> <p>Limited understanding on the variety of Teaching Learning aids/methods (T)</p> <p>Inadequate orientation to teaching (ST)</p> <p>Duration of Teaching Practice not sufficient (ST)</p> <p>Need more support from schools/ mentors/ master teachers (ST)</p> <p>Limited monitoring and supervision (ST)</p>	<p>Teaching Practice period to be expanded (T)</p> <p>More exposure to be provided in actual classrooms under the guidance of academics (T)</p> <p>More exemplary modules to be provided (T)</p> <p>Supportive culture to be developed in schools through school mentors (T)</p> <p>Proper mechanism to monitor progress of Teaching Practice (ST)</p> <p>Internal academics should supervise teaching practice</p>
Quality of Teachers	<p>Perform actors' role but not teachers' role -Actors stimulate emotions: Teachers help students to control emotions (T)</p> <p>Expressed concern about ethical conduct of teachers (T)</p> <p>No supportive culture at schools (T)</p> <p>Lack of opportunities to develop professional competencies (ST)</p> <p>Limited exemplary models to follow (ST)</p>	<p>School mentors' role to be further improved(T)</p> <p>Internal academics should be involved in evaluating TP (T)</p> <p>More familiarization with school activities during two years (T)</p> <p>Time period of Teaching practice to be expanded (T)</p> <p>Procedures to be adopted to get maximum support from schools (ST)</p>

	Lack of support from the school mentors and master teachers (T)	More exemplary models to be provided (ST) Proper standards to be identified for teacher education programmes (T)
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Key- T- Teachers’ responses
responses

ST – Student-Teachers’

The main problem which emerged through the analyses of responses was related to the quality of teachers produced. The sub-problems relating to it could be identified as the actor’s role practiced prior to teaching (promoted in the Higher National Diploma), limitations in the programme curriculum and instructional material, duration of teaching practice, limited support provided by the school, limited interactions with internal academics and the institution etc (Table 6). The purpose of using lesson material was lost and prospective teachers preferred Day Schools to material and teacher-guided instructions to independent learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Both teachers and student teachers had somewhat similar perceptions about the curriculum, instructional material and instructional processes adopted in the programme.

Poor quality material, limited emphasis on the drama and theatre in the curriculum, limited use of technology for teaching and learning and insufficient number interactive sessions could be identified as the main problems of student-teachers. Teachers were worried about the mechanism adopted for the development of professional skills of student-teachers as well as the limited support provided for them during the Teaching Practice period.

As solutions to these problems, several recommendations could be made through the findings of this study. It is proposed that new innovative method should be applied for contact sessions to integrate theory with practice and more opportunities should be provided for close interactions between teachers and student teachers. Further,

learning about teaching requires meaningful relationships between schools, pre-service teacher education institutes, and pre-service teachers (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006). Therefore, a supportive culture within the school system and institution should be strengthened to sustain interface between teaching activities and learning behaviors of student- teachers. Further, a proper mix of human contact and technology should be provided to produce quality teachers through the programme.

Two other important recommendations would be that the expansions of the length of the Teaching Practice period and the change of the role from the “actors’ role” to real teachers’ role. Finally, it is proposed that a framework should be developed to assure standards of teachers produced through the programme. It could be concluded that the findings of the present study are somewhat different from the findings of the previous studies. As reported by Tatto & Kularathne (1993) the graduates of Distance Education programmes were as successful (and in some cases even more successful) as the graduates of the more conventional programmes - namely pre-service and traditional in-service programmes. So, there is an urgent need to introduce a complete revision to the programme with a view to strengthen the quality of teachers produced.

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