

# Quality Performance in Academic Programs

**Khush Funer Murtaza**

## **Abstract**

Growth and change are fundamental processes in human development. Recent trends especially in education and other fields like psychology and medicine have stimulated renewed interest in methods of measuring development, growth and change. Researchers, educators and international agencies have recently placed greater emphasis on the importance of growth in education as foundational to students' learning.

The experiences emanating from professional development initiatives of the Aga Khan University-Professional Development Centre North (AKU-PDCN) particularly those coming from the professional development programs such as the Whole School Improvement Program (WSIP), Advanced Diploma in Education: Primary Education (ADE: PE) and Certificate in Education: Educational Leadership and Management (CE: ELM) help not only in the establishment of continuous teacher professional development mechanisms and processes, but also provide opportunities for various stakeholders to work together with high quality performance through sharing their experiences of implementing the school improvement initiatives.

Moreover, the field -based nature and the two years follow-up mechanism of the programs provide further professional support with high quality performance to the project schools. This ongoing quality professional support is intensive and regular and aims to encourage the teacher community 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, ADE: PE and CE: ELM programs and how it provides high quality professional development opportunities for the teachers of Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan through AKU-PDCN. The paper also highlights the lessons learnt and challenges faced in the process, and concludes with a suggestion for a possible and preferable way forward.

### **Introduction**

Strengthening the quality of education has become a global agenda at all educational levels and more so at the academic programs. The quality of education is important not only for preparing individuals for the subsequent educational levels but also to equip them with the requisite basic life skills. Quality education also ensures increased access and equality and it is mainly due to these reasons that various international Forums and Declarations have pledged improvements in quality of education. National commitment towards quality education has become significantly visible since the late eighties. From then onwards, the government has experimented with a number of initiatives and interventions for improving quality with national and foreign funding. Despite taking the above initiatives education is still a far from the deserved standards. There is a variety of reasons for the poor quality of education but the main cause as experienced by us is the teachers' poor knowledge of pedagogical content.

In Pakistan, where the primary education system ranks among the world's least effective, improving primary teacher education has become a top priority.

Munawar Mirza and Abdul Hameed (1995) elaborated the system of education in three categories of input, process and output whereas input means resources allocated and used, process denotes contents, methods of teaching, learning and

organization, and output implies the quality of pupils who leave school and get absorbed in different sectors of society.

### **The major programs of AKU-PDCN**

Some of the main programs of AKU-PDCN since its inception are as following:

#### **a) Whole School Improvement Program (WSIP)**

WSIP is a three years field based program consisting of a first year intensive school based support and two years follow up. It is an approach to enhance the quality of teaching, learning and students' outcomes, which enables the external motivator- faculty in this instance – to focus on a school as a learning organization and a community of practice. This approach helps the faculty members to be involved in all aspects of school life, which impinge on students learning. Various research studies have also shown that the interrelationships among different aspects of school improvement have a critical role in enhancing or constraining students learning and outcomes (Hopkins, 1996, Stoll and Fink, 1995). The main aspects of school improvement which should be addressed concurrently are as follows:

- a) Quality of teaching and learning; (b) Curriculum and staff development; (c) Leadership and management; (d) Community involvement; (e) Students' behavior and emotional development, and health education; (f) Accommodation and resource for supporting learning (WSIP Field-Based Report 2010).

These factors together create the culture of a school, which is so instrumental in enhancing or constraining students' learning (Hargreaves, D. 1995, Fullan et. al. 1990. Stoll and Fink, 1995). Another major factor in improving a school

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.

**a) Certificate in Education: Educational leadership and Management  
(CE: ELM)**

CE: ELM is a six month field-based modular program (A major need identified by the stakeholders was leadership development). This program targets heads of schools participating in the WSIP.

The aim of this course is to develop course participants' capacity for improved leadership and management in their schools. It builds on the knowledge and skills that they need to become a 'pedagogical leader' in order to facilitate their teachers' and students' learning within a collaborative school culture.

Specifically, the course assists the Course Participants (CPs) to develop knowledge and skills for successful planning and implementation of school improvement initiatives for enhancing students' learning outcomes.

**b) Advanced Diploma in Education: Primary Education (ADE: PE)**

The Advanced Diploma Program is a field-based program comprising five phases spread over one year. This framework is in accordance with research insights of (Joyce & Showers, 1980) that school improvement programs can be effective if their designs enhance theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and coaching. The Advanced Diploma Program, therefore, integrates theory with practice in such a way that CPs are able to participate in the program and implement their new insights and learning in their own classrooms.

The overall aim of the program is to develop the course participants' professional skills, knowledge, and attitudes, enabling them to become effective academic leaders.

Keeping in mind the importance of quality, AKU-PDCN always emphasizes quality assurance in its academic programs. Before going into further details let's define the term quality.

The Dakar Framework of Action 2000 defined quality of education in terms of recognized and measureable learning outcomes especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. Article 42 of the Expanded Commentary on the Dakar Framework of Action further elaborates that 'a quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living.'

Moreover, the major long term academic programs (Certificate and Advanced Diploma level) of the Aga Khan University-Professional Development Centre North (AKU-PDCN) have the following special quality assurance mechanism:

**i) Selection of teachers on merit basis**

The importance of teachers as key figure in the education process has always been recognized. The most recent National Education Policy 1998-2010 also recognizes that the teacher is considered the most crucial factor in implementing all educational reforms at the grass root level.

The World Declaration on Education for All UNESCO (1990) emphasized the role of teachers as under:

The pre-eminent role of teachers as well as of other educational personnel in providing quality education needs to be recognized and developed to optimize their contribution .....improving their working conditions and

status notably in respect to the recruitment, initial and in-service training, remuneration and career development possibilities.” (Article 1.6 para 3, p. 58).

AKU-PDCN also considers teachers the most significant asset in quality assurance. Therefore, the most significant aspect of PDCN’s programs is selection of teachers on merit basis for various professional development programs because when teachers’ selection takes place properly, they can benefit from classrooms and implement their learning with children.

At initial stage many teachers apply for especially certificate and diploma level courses but after going through the formal test/ interview process the academic review committee short lists the candidates on merit basis. This way we usually find very strong potential teachers and teacher educators who perform very well in the schools. During the test interview the PDCN faculty members try to gauge their dedication, willingness and interest to work in their respective schools after completing the training program.

#### **ii) Proper assessment system**

Assessment is another key component of the teaching and learning process. Teachers are involved in assessment of one form or another in their routine classroom practices. Different teachers assess students for different reasons but usually students’ achievement scores are eventually what matter to teachers, students and their parents. Therefore, teachers prepare their students for exams and students try to achieve the best percentages and high ranks as that is the only measure of their success or failure. The current assessment practices (summative mode) in schools have several drawbacks which have been identified in the literature (Black & William, 1998). Firstly, it is summative in nature; it is assessment *of* learning and not assessment *for* learning. It happens after the learning process has finished and not during the learning process.

Secondly, only marks are given on test and exam papers, which help to classify students but do not help them since they do not inform them about their problems. Thirdly, the nature of assessment is such that it tries to catch students on what they haven't learnt rather than celebrating what they have learnt. It creates fear and anxiety among students, promotes cheating and encourages rote learning and selective study. Moreover, it develops an environment of negative competition where students are compared against each other and there is a great pressure on them to succeed or they will be branded as failures. Furthermore, assessment has become a managerial task where collection of marks to fill in records is given higher priority than the analysis of students' work to identify gaps in teaching and learning. Black and William (1998) have developed strong argument on the basis of extensive research review for formative assessment. They assert:

“There is a body of firm evidence that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement. We know of no other way of raising standards for which such a strong prima facie case can be made” (p. 148).

Because of the above reasons AKU-PDCN is always alert about assessment policy and procedures. Therefore, in its academic programs, on-going formative and summative assessment is done through reflective journals, pre-session collaborative instructional planning, meetings, post session, formal and informal reflective dialogues with CPs.

### **iii) On the job professional support**

AKU-PDCN project schools try to make professional development as a school norm. Under various professional development programs, teachers have not only received much needed support in developing their pedagogical content knowledge but the schools have also developed a deep appreciation for

continuous professional development. Teachers now participate in monthly sessions for sharing knowledge and experiences with each other, and whenever a teacher returns from a professional development course, s/he is expected to share her/his learning with others. More importantly, professional development continues to be one of the top priorities of the school development plan even though all teachers have been professionally trained.

Most of the school head teachers have learned that their role is broader than that of managing the smooth operation of their schools, rather it includes providing academic leadership to their teaching staff. Such leadership includes identifying the professional development needs of their teachers, and ensuring that these needs are fulfilled, monitoring school and classroom processes to ensure that the inputs are being appropriately utilized. Leadership in PDCN project schools is not confined to formal positions; it is encompassing, distributed across roles and based on expertise and experience. Ahmad, a dedicated teacher who is a source of inspiration for other teachers at schools, has been recognized as a teacher, leader, receiving the Best Teacher Award for 2010 in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Apart from these inputs, there are two additional layers of support for the daily affairs of the project schools. The Government Education Department provides professional support and monitoring to all teachers through observation and constructive feedback after the program ends. Thus, ensuring continuity of such support, the Village Education Committee (VEC) works with the schools in a variety of ways, hiring teachers for vacant positions, keeping an eye on teacher regularity and punctuality, and acting as a bridge between school and community. The latter has now become a pillar of support for the schools.

**iv) Professional development and teaching**

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 in 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 effect on students' learning in terms of skills, knowledge, confidence or classroom behaviors than the personal and professional development of their teachers. But unfortunately in most of the schools these practices are lacking. Therefore, AKU-PDCN always emphasize teachers' professional development and its implementation in students' learning.

**v) Careful planning**

Planning is bringing the future into the present so that people can do something about it now. There is truth in the meaning of the sentence, for planning simply involves converting tomorrow to today. That's why planning can help us build better or the best out of our professional and personal lives.

The purpose of the planning process is to get a clear mental picture of what people need to do. A planning process can be considered effective only if it provides people with a clear picture, because people cannot act without a picture. Keeping in mind the importance of planning, AKU-PDCN always emphasizes the planning of academic programs. Hence, from very early stages of any program, PDCN faculty carries out a need analysis survey and on the basis of that survey the faculty coordinates with system representatives for

further planning. We usually give more time for planning for the betterment of the programs where we select the content, design relevant activities and materials and then execute the programs. Because of our rigorous planning processes we can claim that most of our programs are successful.

The CPs are encouraged to share their daily reflections in morning sessions from 9: 00 a.m. to 9: 30 a.m. to get feedback from the tutors and colleagues. The daily debriefing sessions allow the CPs to become more conscious of the various sources of knowledge and learning integrated into each day theme.

#### **vi) Constructive Feedback**

Feedback is a process of providing information to students about their performance (Wiggins, 1998). Similarly McMillan (2004) defines feedback a process of confirming the answer of students. According to Raj (1996), feedback is provided by another person or by environment. While Hattie and Temperley (2007) argue that feedback, “is an information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parents, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance and understanding” (p. 81). They further state that feedback is consequence of performance.

Various research studies emphasis that feedback is not only information for students about their learning level but also information for the teachers about the students. It is a two-way process. It could be feedback to students as well as feedback to teachers (Ovando, 1994). He further explains that when it is provided to students, it is known as feedback for learning; and when it is provided for teachers, it is known as feedback for teaching. This shows that feedback is information to students about their learning level and to teachers about students. However, according to my experience, for the improvement of students’ learning just an exchange of information is not enough.

Literature also shows that the purpose of feedback is not only to provide information to students about their performance but also to provide information about ways of improving their performance. Discussing the ways of improving student performance, Guskey (1997) argues that in order to improve student performance, just providing information about their learning is not enough. It must be paired with activities, which help students in solving their learning difficulties. He has used the term 'correctives' for those activities. He has also mentioned some correctives for example, re-teaching, individual tutoring, peer coaching and cooperative teams. According to him, these correctives are important for making feedback purposeful. In the light of the above mentioned literature it is clear that feedback could prove helpful for learning when it is not confined just to the provision of information. To be effective it needs to be followed by some correctives and the learners are trained to use the feedback.

Feedback is an integral part of AKU-PDCN's academic programs for improvement purpose and we have seen various evidences in the past in this regard. For instance, some of the CPs mentioned in their reflective papers, "The timely feedback which we get from our faculty members supports us to move ahead. At initial stage of the program we could not able to prepare lesson plans with relevant and interesting activities. But gradually because of continuous feedback we understand how to do it (Translation from Urdu reflections on June 2010).

**vii) Record keeping**

Keeping accurate and up-to-date records is vital to the success of any academic institution. The institution must realize that records kept will be one of the most important management tools it possesses and, therefore, it should be allocated due importance. Many academic institutions owners invest a lot of time and efforts in the running of various academic programs and yet fail to realize the importance of maintaining good documentation. Therefore, they lose many things at institutional level which they have done in the past. The people of the institution are looking for maximum return from their investment and the maintaining of good records is part of that equation.

Keeping in mind the importance of record keeping PDCN always prefer proper record keeping in its academic programs from its inception. These records are very accurate, reliable, easy to follow, consistent as to the basis used and very simple, for example, portfolios, checklist and classroom observation tools.

**viii) Monitoring and Supervision Mechanism**

Effective monitoring and supervision mechanism is part of PDCN's academic programs. On-going evaluation of school improvement initiatives are done through both formal and informal ways of assessment. Faculty members are responsible for giving timely feedback and support to heads and teachers who have attended the program. They meet regularly to discuss and reflect on day plans, activities and course participants' progress. The head PDCN visits schools on various occasions to provide support to the teachers / faculty in the field. There are also opportunities for the said faculty to evaluate the progress of the program.

**ix) Reflective sessions with faculty at PDCN**

Faculty members are backbones of AKU-PDCN and they play a vital role in bringing quality to it. Therefore, it always supports them to develop professionally because once the faculty members are developed, they perform very well and bring quality in its academic programs. Hence, PDCN arranges reflective sessions for its faculty members on monthly basis. During these sessions they openly share their field experiences as well as their achievements and challenges in the schools. This process helps PDCN identify successes as well as issues and challenges in the schools to determine further plans of action.

The second follow up year is based on the same pattern but the frequency of school visits and numbers of workshops are decreased. It is expected that schools will have developed their capacity to take greater responsibility in institutionalizing the programs.

**x) Follow up procedure**

Developing a viable, sustainable and on-going follow up mechanism of the academic long term programs is a significant challenge for PDCN. In this regard PDCN discusses the possibilities of working with its partner organizations for the best results. The following strategies are used:

The stakeholders from the partner organizations are sensitized to, and familiarized with, the academic programs philosophy, structure and expectations through workshop sessions at PDCN. Most importantly, two sessions (one in the middle of the program and the other at the end of the program) on the topic of 'feedback' are conducted for the persons identified by the stakeholders to team up with PDCN faculty for follow up during the field-based phase and for two years after the completion of the program.

Relevant information is shared with the people involved at appropriate time in order to keep all parties informed and to assist the graduates.

Each faculty member together with the person from the partner organizations makes school visits at least twice each during the field-based phase. While in the field these persons will work closely with the faculty (e.g. classroom observation, feedback) to become exposed to and familiar with the program expectations and the evolving needs of the CPs.

We propose that further follow up takes place for two years immediately after the completion of the academic programs. For this, PDCN faculty member together with the representatives of the partner organizations make one school visit per month for the first year, and one school visit every two months for the second year to monitor the CPs' progress. Thus, when after two years PDCN withdraws its follow up support, the partner organizations have the capacity to continue doing so.

The graduates of the program are invited to a two-day seminar at PDCN. This provides a platform for the graduates to share and acquire further insights and motivation. In their reflections some of them have mentioned, "The two-day seminar at PDCN is very useful where we can share our field experiences and get feedback from faculty members and course mates (Translated from Urdu reflections of teachers on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2010).

Keeping in mind above all the factors in certificate and diploma level courses teachers improve their pedagogical content knowledge day by day. They also go through the rigorous process of action research where they identify any burning area and research on it. This way they gradually try to solve mini issues which they face at classroom or school level. They experience their centre-based learning in real classroom situation during their face to face

mode. Whatever challenges they face in the field, they get a chance to discuss them with their course mates as well as with faculty members and they collectively find alternative ways to solve the issues.

### **Challenges**

Academic programs are never problem free. To maintain quality PDCN faces the following challenges:

#### **i) Influence from system**

A significant challenge which we face in terms of quality is that sometimes systems, particularly the Government Education Department pressurizes PDCN to nominate teachers on quota system instead of merit. In some cases they prefer to select teachers on political basis but it is very difficult for PDCN to follow that quota system. Because of it, quality component suffers. Therefore, PDCN always tries to follow quality and the teachers who qualify test and interviews, come to attend the program, particularly in diploma and certificate level courses.

#### **ii) Huge demand for professional development programs in Gilgit-Baltistan and beyond**

Another significant challenge which affects quality is the great demand from Gilgit-Baltistan and from outside of it. Sometimes PDCN has to go beyond its plans because suddenly if any organization requests, it is difficult to reject it. Thus, we have to accept their requests; as a result we face difficulties. For instance, are not able to do proper planning such as designing interesting activities and relevant materials which we want to do in realities.

**iii) Merit based recruitment of teachers**

Merit based recruitment of teachers is another burning issue in academic programs which ensures quality in teachers' selection. Most of the teachers join teaching profession on unplanned basis without regards to their qualification and qualities they become teachers. On the other side the people who are competent, confident and well qualified, do not get a chance to enter this noble profession. Because of that the whole system suffers and the quality which should be in schools does not exist. Those selected teachers lack pedagogical content knowledge and never bring quality and improvement in their respective schools. Thus, it is very important to have a certain criteria to select well qualified teachers.

**iv) Pre-service and in-service training of teachers**

Another significant challenge which we face in terms of quality is that in our education system the concept of pre-service training is lacking. Anybody who wants to join the teaching profession can join easily. There is no special criteria or any professional training before entering this profession. But fortunately for the last couple of years the Government of Pakistan is emphasizing to induct teachers to induct teachers who have gone through pre-service training e.g. Certificate in Teaching (CT) and Bachelor in teaching (B. Ed). courses etc. Although some initiatives have been taken in this regard by starting those courses in Education Colleges they do not fulfill the needs of the people. They need to expand and introduce quality pre-service programs, which could help in maintaining quality education in our institutions.

**v) Sustainability**

The transfer of teachers is another significant issue. Most of the teachers are transferred any time from their schools whenever they want. Although at the initial level 'Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is signed between the system and PDCN for forbidding the transfer of teachers but most of the time the Government Education Department authorities do not follow on their promises for various reasons.

Therefore, quality is not maintain because most of the teachers who have gone through the training program, do not serve at the same school for a sufficient period of time for quality assurance.

**vi) Lack of training opportunities and teacher education standards**

The most prominent challenges faced by teachers today in Pakistan are lack of training opportunities and teacher education standards. It is also concluded that the quality of teachers and their pedagogical skills are the most critical aspects of schooling and that they have a direct impact on student learning. The changes that are made to the education system as a whole need to support and encourage the commitment of the teachers. According to Safdar Rehman Ghazi, Riasat Ali and Umar Ali Khan (2010) there are five critical key areas for a quality education system:

- Teacher education policies and practices,
- Well defined role, structure and function of teacher education institutes,
- Recognized role of teacher educators as leaders and managers,
- Open dialogue on issues and challenges in teacher education, and
- Innovative practices and interventions in teacher education (p. 277).

**vii) Lack of implementation**

In-service Teacher Training Programs are prepared to enable teachers to create a conducive environment for the child and carry out child oriented and activity based learning. Instructional materials e.g. textbooks, workbooks, teaching manuals and teacher guides have been prepared for different subjects. The materials have been designed for activity based learning but practically due to lack of teachers' interest and efficiency this type of learning is not implemented. No child-centered and activity-based teaching-learning approach can be observed in almost all the schools.

### **Recommendations**

What is quality? How can we effectively measure it? How can we achieve and improve it? How much does it cost? What results should we expect if we spend the money? What is happening in the school and classroom, specifically teaching and learning processes? To answer these questions it is the need of the hour to establish a permanent teacher/quality education system with a clear vision.

- The criteria for identification and selection of teachers has to be meaningful and the process has to be transparent.
- On-going professional development of teachers is very important for quality assurance. Teachers should be connected with each other and with their mentors.
- PDCN should arrange educational conferences with Professional Development Centers (PDCs) and other educational institutions where people can share their experiences and good practices of quality education. They also need to document and disseminate these practices at a broader level.

## References

- Barth, R. (1999). *Improving school from within: Teachers, parents and principals can make the difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-bass
- Black, P., & William, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. Retrieved May 18, 2002, from <http://www.pdintl.org/kappan/kbla.9810html>
- Connor, J. D. O. (1991). *Phonetics*: Penguin Books
- Falk, B. (2001). *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Fullan, M. et. al. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. New yark: Teachers College press.
- Ghazi, S.R and et al. (2010). Quality of Primary Education in Pakistan: UNESCO Office Islamabad.
- Guskey, T. R. (1997). Implementing mastery learning. Belmont, C A: Wadsworth.
- Government of Pakistan. (1998). *National Education Policy 1998-2010*. Islamabad: Ministry of Education.
- Hargreaves, David H. (1995). School Culture, school effectiveness, and school improvement. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 6 (1), 23-46.
- Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback: Review of Educational Research, 77 (1), 81-112.
- Hopkins, D. (1996). Towards a theory for school improvement. In Gray, J. et al. (Eds.) *Merging Traditions*. London: Cassell.

Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (1980). Improving in-service training: The message of research. *Educational Leadership*, 27(5), 379-385.

McMillian, J. R. (2004). Classroom assessment. New York: Pearson Education.

Ments, M. V. (1999). The Effective use of Role-play: Practical Techniques for Improving Learning, (Second Edition). Kogan Page.

Mirza, M, S., and Hameed A. (1995). Teacher competency, the curriculum and Student Achievement. Lahore: IER. (Research Report).

Ovando, M. N. (1994). Constructive feedback: A key to successful Teaching and Learning. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 8 (6) , 19-22.

Raj, M. (1996). Encyclopedia dictionary of psychology and Education. New Dheli Anmol Publications Stoll L & Fink, D. (1995). *Changing our Schools*. OUP.

UNESCO. (1990). *The World Declaration on Education for All*.

UNESCO. (2000). World Education Forum: Dakar Framework for Action 2000. Paris: UNESCO

UNESCO. (2003). Preparatory Document for the Ministerial Meeting of South Asia EFA Forum 21-23 May, 2003. Islamabad: UNESCO Office.

Wiggins, G. (1998). Educational assessment . Jossey Brass, SF: Jossey -Bass.