

REACHING THE UNREACHED: CASE STUDY OF THREE VANNI DISTRICTS IN SRI LANKA UNDER THE POST-WAR CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

After a period of almost three decades, the war-ravaged *Vanni* districts namely *Mannar*, *Kilinochchi* and *Mullaitivu* are slowly but steadily moving forward with a hope to regain their past glory. However much has to be done particularly in the education sector. The professional needs and aspirations of teachers who form the second most important segment in any education system, have to be seriously considered if any meaningful progress in the educational achievement level of the students in these districts has to be achieved. This study is an attempt to identify and assess the professional needs and aspirations of graduate teachers in these districts with the major objective to generate and disseminate relevant and much needed information to the national and regional educational policy makers and planners so that they will be able to develop programmes and projects to professionally support the teachers in these areas.

Teachers have a variety of professional development requirements which may be at different levels. The environments in which teachers work, and the demands placed upon them by society are increasingly complex. Annual Presidential Address of the American Education Research Association (2004), suggests that teacher professional development must remain a top priority within this era of 'No Child Left Behind'. Borko and others (2004) support the same idea by highlighting the inadequacies of typical learning opportunities for teachers (Wilson & Berne, 1999).

Teacher quality is significantly and positively correlated with pupil attainment (Darling Hammond et al., 2005; Greenwald, Hedges and Laine, 1996; Rockoff, 2004) that it is the most important within-school explanation of student performance and its effects are much larger than the effects of school organization, leadership or financial conditions (Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain, 2005). Further, there is a positive correlation between in-service teacher training and student achievement (Angrist and Lavy, 2001; Bressoux, 1996).

The Tracer Study of Graduates/Postgraduates of 2009, Open University of Sri Lanka (Gunawardena & Ekanayake, 2010) indicated that geographical distribution was a matter for concern. Geographical distribution of respondents in various programmes of study shows that the Faculty of Education draws students from a large number of districts. The findings of this survey indicated that this objective has not been totally achieved yet, as the number of students from disadvantaged locations, gaining higher qualifications is as yet relatively small. The Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka realizes the importance of quality teachers for quality education which is reflected in its vision that states that the Faculty wants to be the leader of the advancement of knowledge and professional practice in education as a fundamental human endeavour through open and distance learning in Sri Lanka and in the region.

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To attain this vision, during last three decades the Faculty has been constantly striving to introduce several teacher education programmes and expand these programmes throughout

the country. Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) is one of such programmes which is also the most popular and demanding programme among the graduate teachers who need to update their professional capabilities for their career development. This programme is offered through the ODL mode which effectively reaches even the most remote and disadvantaged areas of Sri Lanka which may otherwise remain unreached forever.

However the Faculty could not successfully reach the three *Vanni* districts which remained unreached for more than three decades of civil unrest. This study attempts to probe the professional needs, available opportunities for the teachers for their professional development, the problems and issues they face in making such opportunities with a view to make appropriate suggestions and recommendations to the national and regional policy makers and planners as well as to give necessary information to the Faculty to take necessary actions to effectively encompass these districts in its teacher development activities.

The specific objectives of this research are as follows:

1. Identify the professional needs of graduate teachers in the three *Vanni* districts of *Mannar*, *Killinochchi* and *Mullaattivu*;
2. Identify the professional development opportunities available to graduate teachers in these districts ;
3. Evaluate the problems and issues they face in effectively accessing those opportunities available to them; and
4. Make appropriate suggestions and recommendations for the Faculty and other relevant authorities to design effective strategies to enhance professional development opportunities of graduate teachers in these districts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in this study within a framework of a survey research design.

Population and the Sample

The target population consisted of graduate teachers in the three *Vanni* districts out of which five hundred were included in the sample. In addition three Zonal Directors of Education, 15 Principals and 18 In-service Advisers were also incorporated to the sample.

Instruments of Data Collection

Two types of instruments were used for data collection namely (a) a questionnaire and (b) interview schedules. The questionnaire was of the structured type and focused on collecting data on five identified key areas: the background information of graduate teachers, the professional needs, professional development opportunities, problems and issues related to professional development and problem faced by the graduate teachers living in the three *Vanni* districts. Interview schedule was aimed at collecting more comprehensive data relevant to selected items of the questionnaire and identify the need for opening study centres in the three *Vanni* districts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The majority (92%) of the graduate teachers in the three districts expressed that professional training is needed for their professional development. Only 53% of the graduate teachers

mentioned that they received pre-service training before the appointment. The rest mentioned that they did not receive any pre-service training. Between 30% to 40% of graduate teachers mentioned that, before the appointment they received the training only on classroom management, methods of teaching, preparing teaching aids, lesson plan, assessment and evaluation out of the 20 types of trainings which help to develop professional competencies among the graduate teachers.

Forty six percent of the graduate teachers have not upgraded their professional qualifications while they were engaged in the teaching profession. They expressed various reasons such as personal problems, official bottlenecks, transport difficulties, no higher education institution in the districts and lack of motivation due to civil unrest situation etc. Under the post war circumstances the majority (65%) of the graduate teachers conveyed that, they prefer to upgrade their professional competencies to cope with the present national and international standard of professionalism. Therefore the majority of the graduate teachers expressed their first preference as having computer training. Forty percent of the graduate teachers expressed that they need a career guidance centre for their professional development, and at the same time 22% and 20% of the graduate teachers requested a district centre for teacher development and mentoring services respectively for their professional development. It clearly shows that, in the *Vanni* districts most of the graduate teachers need guidance and support for their professional development.

Sixty four percent of the graduate teachers pointed out that, they don't have enough opportunities for their professional development in their districts. They realised that, the opportunities for their professional development should be improved in their district.

Regarding personal problems, the majority of the graduate teachers expressed that, stressfulness and displacement affect their professional development to a great extent. Graduate teachers rated lack of resources for teaching-learning processes, infrastructural facilities in the schools, professional development institutions in the district, electricity facilities, transport facilities, library facilities and technological resources as problems which affect their professional development to a grade extent.

It is noted that the majority of the graduate teachers feel the past civil unrest situation in their area has influenced their professional development and 52% of the graduate teachers stated opening up an OUSL study centre is an urgent need for expanding the opportunities for their professional development.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that under the post-war context;

1. Graduate teachers have aspired to develop their professional standards.
2. A substantial proportion of graduate teachers have not received any pre-service training before the appointment.
3. Due to unrest situation of the district, nearly half of the graduate teachers in the sample have not upgraded their professional competencies.
4. Majority of the graduate teachers need guidance and support for their professional development and more opportunities for professional development need than before.
5. Lack of resources and infrastructural facilities as well as stressfulness and displacement affected their professional development badly.
6. Open up study centres in *vanni* districts is an urgent need for professional development of graduate teachers.

Overall, the analysis appears to suggest that in the last three decades due to unrest situation graduate teachers of *vanni* districts were not in a position to consider their professional development. But now, under the post-war context they raise up their voices that they prefer

to upgrade their professional status. Graduate teachers of *vanni* districts expect the relevant institutions which facilitate the professional development of graduate teachers, should strongly consider their professional needs. Especially they expect the Open University of Sri Lanka to reach them in order to expand their horizons.

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