The Bachelor of Education (Drama and Theatre) Programme Conducted Through the Distance Mode: Problems and Solutions

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1 INTRODUCTION

Good education system demands good teachers. The importance of teachers in determining quality of education is emphasized by many international reports (UNICEF, 1999; UNESCO, 2015) and education and training of teachers was identified as one of the indicators of the quality of a school system by European Commission in 2000. Further, evidence from research suggest that teachers who are more prepared for teaching are more confident and successful with pupils than those who have little preparation (Moon and Robinson, 2003). The empirical evidence about the outcomes of different approaches to teacher preparation and recruitment also suggests that "the extent and quality of teacher education and preparation influences teacher - effectiveness" (Moon and Robinson, 2003). On the contrary, when teachers' own education and training is limited, "they lack the confidence, knowledge and skills to teach much more than they were themselves taught, or to teach in a different way" (Perraton, 1993). As a result, training of teachers has been among the top priorities of many developed as well as developing countries during the past few decades.

As estimated by UNESCO (2016) Institute for Statistics, about 69 million teachers must be recruited to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030. In order to cope with such massive demands, many countries have introduced distance education for initial training. However, in some initial teacher training programmes, the emphasis placed on subject knowledge, professional studies and practice differs from one programme to the other and they have been criticized for weak integration of theory and practice and poor quality and inadequate time for school practice (Moon and Robinson, 2003). Further, Robinson (1997) 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, t is a questionable whether those teacher training programmes have been capable in producing quality teachers to the education system.

The Open University of Sri Lanka is a pioneering institution to conduct teacher education programmes through distance mode. It had introduced an innovative teacher education programme in Drama

and Theatre through distance mode to prospective teachers in Sri Lanka in 2009. The levels three and four of the programme are conducted by the Tower Hall Theatre Foundation under the guidance of the University with a view to develop pedagogical knowledge and skills related to drama and theatre. The Faculty of Education is responsible for developing the professional competencies related to teaching of drama and theatre at levels 5 and 6. Three batches of student teachers (102) had been passed out from the University so far and two batches of students (50) are continuing the programme. The Faculty witnessed critical problems in the professional standards and moral conduct of the student teachers who had completed the programme and joined teaching profession that needed immediate attention and proper action of the Faculty. This paper analyses the experience and concerns of teachers and student teachers revealed through focus group discussions, observations and self- reflections which had provided the basis for identification of critical problems faced and fruitful interventions to be executed in the future to improve the quality of teachers produced to the school system.

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on three objectives formulated in relation to a large scale study:

1. To analyze the perceptions of student teachers and internal academics on the curriculum, instructional material, instructional process of the programme (including assessments and teaching practice) and the quality of graduates produced
2. To identify the problems and issues that would hinder the attainment of the expected outcomes of the programme
3. To make recommendations as solutions to the existing problems and issues identified

The three batches of students who had completed the programme, two batches who have been following the programme (total 134), 10 lecturers who have been playing different roles as day school academics, tutors and master teachers had been considered as the sample of the study.

Multiple methods have been used for data collection 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. Mean analyses were used to analyze quantitative data and content and thematic analyses were used for the analyses of qualitative data.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus group discussions took place among internal academics (10) who have been involved in the implementation of the programme revealed some positive and negative viewpoints on the curriculum, instructional material and instructional processes adopted. In relation to the curriculum of the programme, both categories agreed that a good combination of theory and practice has been incorporated within the limits of a distance programme. The academics emphasized the positive contribution of courses such as Educational Psychology, Education Technology and Principles of Education whereas student teachers highlighted Inclusive Education and Guidance and Counseling as the most relevant subjects for their teaching. Further, they wanted IT and English also to be incorporated in to the curriculum and expected more focus on drama and theatre courses at level 5 and 6.

With regard to lesson material, the relevance, user friendliness and readability had come out as outstanding

features. However, all the categories had pointed out the necessity of updating their contents and incorporating the recent developments in the field. Further, student teachers preferred more illustrations and elaborations and simplified versions of the modules. The academics had given a very high rating for the instructional processes followed by them and introduced the day schools as a very good platform for maintaining a friendly humane interaction with student teachers and building their self-confidence and self-regulatory behavior. Academics have expressed a positive opinion on student teachers' participation in group activities and participation in discussions (mean 4.2 and 3.9 respectively) though their attendance and punctuality had received a negative opinion (Table 1).

Table 1: Opinion of Academics on Student Teachers' Participation in the Day Schools

Aspects	Mean value
Punctuality in day schools	2.0
Attendance in day schools	3.0
Giving prompt answers	3.2
Asking questions	3.4
Readiness for day schools	3.5
Paying attention to teacher	3.5
Participation in discussions	3.9
Participation in group activities	4.2

Student teachers requested more day schools through which they would be able to maintain close interaction with staff members and gain new knowledge and skills. This shows student teachers' reluctance to accept modules as their teachers and inability to be physically apart from their teachers. All students had the opinion that the time allocated for teaching practice was not sufficient and their progress would be more satisfactory if internal academics (rather than master teachers) would provide supervision during teaching practice. Academics also

supported for expansion of TP period so as to provide more opportunities for student teachers to interact with exemplary models and develop professional skills related to TL process.

Teaching Practice as a specific strategy incorporated in to the programme has been contributing significantly for the professional development of student teachers though the necessity for further strengthening it to meet the requirements of the programme was highlighted by all categories. However, internal academics and student teachers had contradictory views on the quality of teachers produced. According to academics, the "actors role" emphasized at level 3 and 4 overshadowed their "teaching role" and hindered the accomplishment of professional standards of a teacher. However, student teachers expressed their confidence about their performance during Teaching practice period and assured that they could have done better if more time for TP and support from the institution and schools 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 school. Need opportunities to be familiarize with the school set up*'

'*More model teaching should be provided and TP to be continued from level 5*'.

As solutions to the problems in the curriculum, academics suggested to

introduced a course on "Introduction to Teaching Profession" and Optional courses on "Methods of Teaching Dancing" / "Methods of Teaching Art" "Methods of Teaching Music" etc. Student teachers needed integration education courses at level 3 and 4 and drama and theatre courses at level 5 and 6 and opportunity to study English and ICT at the Open University. Revisions of materials to incorporate new knowledge as well as illustrations and AV components came out as solutions from both parties. Increasing interactive sessions with senior academics who are familiar with innovative and challenging teaching-learning methods and techniques making interactive sessions compulsory would further facilitate the empowerment of professional capabilities of student teachers.

The need for developing a supportive culture in the prospective schools for student teachers with the support of school mentors while extending the teaching practice period has emerged as one of the main priorities of the programme. Further, the transference of actor's role to teacher's role to be done very smoothly in a systemic manner so that it would not have much interference to their self -esteem, self -confidence and professional conduct.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Both academics and prospective teachers have requested for a balanced, integrated curriculum with a blend of education and drama and theatre courses. The purpose of using lesson material is lost as prospective teachers prefer day schools to self - learning material. Further, a good combination of human contact and technology is required to improve professional capabilities of prospective teachers. The length of the TP period to be expanded in order to provide more opportunities to practice what they have learned under the close supervision of a school mentor and more emphasis should be placed on the teachers' role rather than actors' role. Finally the study shows the need for developing a framework to assure standards of teachers produced through different training programmes.

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