Evaluation of Teachers for the 21st Century Training Project

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Abstract

The United Arab Emirates has witnessed exponential growth while its schools have been lagging behind other areas of national development. Research studies attributed that to classroom practices that overemphasized theory and rote memorization. Education officials addressed this issue by setting up training programs about effective teaching techniques and strategies. The author participated in the *Teachers for the 21st Century* project and provided workshops to hundreds of public schools' teachers. To evaluate this teacher training project, the author followed a qualitative methodology using participant observation and data from documents, newspaper accounts, observation notes, and transcriptions of tape-recordings during the project. After each training session, the author tape recorded observations and noted participants' views and impressions. After the tapes were transcribed there emerged salient findings related to training content, trainers and translators, participants, training environment, and project management. The author found that an amalgam of organizational, professional, and cultural deficiencies had caused the three years' project to be discontinued after less than one year of its inception. Despite these shortcomings, teachers and trainers had benefitted from the training. However, these pressing issues must be seriously addressed in order to conduct sustainable professional development programs in the United Arab Emirates and Gulf region.

Keywords: teacher training, professional development, United Arab Emirates, participant observation, culture

1. Educational Issues in the United Arab Emirates

Education has been at the center of social and economic debates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the country has witnessed exponential growth while schools have been lagging far behind other areas of national development. Reports of such delay were found in many studies done in UAE and abroad (Muyskin & Noor, 2006; Bahgat, 1999; Macpherson, Kachelhoffer, & El Nemr, 2007). Among the most salient features of the delay was "educational attrition" according to the results from a longitudinal study of 5814 Emirati students from their first grade in academic year 1982/1983 to their graduation from high school in academic year 1997/1998. The study found out that there were two indicators for educational attrition: failure and dropout (Al Khayyal, 2002). The study listed some causes of education attrition in UAE such as too much emphasis on theory and rote memorization that discouraged student learning and led to students' dropping out of school; and students' dependence on the teacher's knowledge, teaching style, and personal characteristics for their learning at school. The study put forward the following recommendations to improve teachers' performance: (1) modernizing teachers' training; (2) mentoring new teachers; (3) embracing professional values and ethics; and (4) changing negative views about students (Al Khayyal, 2002).

In another study by Al Banna (1994), in which the author interviewed eighty teachers and administrators from six schools about their work experience and about pre-service and in-service training on teaching techniques, the participants described their in-service training as shallow. Only thirty teachers joined the two to three days-long workshops organized by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and only fourteen teachers with UAE nationality attended. No one joined a planned year-long training program. In sum, the researcher concluded that teachers did not receive any training worth the attention.

1.1 MoE Professional Development Policy

Growing evidence demonstrated that—among all educational resources—teachers' abilities are especially crucial contributors to students' learning (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005, p. 2) and that professional development was central to the improvement of instructional practices (Crockett, 2007). Professional

development was defined by Diaz-Maggioli (2004) as a "career-long process in which educators fine-tune their teaching to meet student needs" (p. 5).

After its independence, the UAE established a policy for MoE to provide enough local and foreign teachers for a rapidly expanding school system and to seek new and higher levels of preparation for the teaching force (Gardner, 1995). In its *Education Vision 2020* document, MoE presented its plan that included delegating training to its local educational zones, reducing costs, developing training techniques, and increasing their effectiveness. It included the following action items: (a) restructuring teacher training through planning based on individualized needs; (b) improving in-service training by using a variety of professional development techniques such as workshops, case studies, professional readings, and distance learning; and (c) securing mobile in-service training for short one-day training courses at school level (Ministry of Education, 2000).

The *Education Vision 2020* document also considered improving educational supervision as a priority because of its positive effects on teachers' performance. Thus MoE envisioned a role shift for its supervisors from that of an "inspector" to that of a "trainer" to help model the new educational practices. However, no preparation of supervisors for this new role was mentioned in the plan. In the field of special education, MoE made it mandatory on professionals to engage in continuous professional development activities that included training programs, workshops, conferences, and advanced university education (Ministry of Education, 2000).

1.2 Teachers for the 21st Century

To implement one important aspect of *Education Vision 2020,* the UAE government initiated and funded a large-scale professional development project in fall 2008 as one integral part of its reform of the nation's educational system. *Teachers for the 21st Century* aimed "to transform the educational experience in the classroom, steering away from passive learning modules to a student-centered approach that encourages creative thinking and active student involvement in the educational process" (Hamid, 2008). The National research Council (2000) earlier endorsed the student-centered perspective but added the components of knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered perspectives that could lead to an interconnected and mutually supportive learning environment.

This professional development program was named *Teachers for the 21st Century* to convey its goal of providing teachers with the knowledge, skills and practical experience that were necessary to build a 21st Century high-quality teaching force in the UAE (El Shammaa, 2008). *Teachers for the 21st Century* was financed by a 67 million US dollars' grant from the UAE Prime Minister. The project was managed by MoE and contracted with ASCD Middle East (ASCD ME) and Zayed University as academic consultants. ASCD ME (a defunct organization) focused on professional development for educators in the Middle East. Zayed University is a federal university that prepares teachers for UAE schools through its College of Education. It should be noted that, in this article, there were no resemblance and no relationship made between ASCD ME and ASCD (The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development).

The project was considered by the Minister of Higher Education as the largest teacher training program in the Middle East and North Africa. A large group of ten thousand teachers from public schools in the northern emirates (Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras al Khaimah, and Fujairah) would benefit from workshops on brain-based learning and classroom management techniques. The project included a coaching component whereby the trainers would visit teachers in their classrooms and mentor them on the standards covered in the workshops.

2. Methodology

The author was selected by Zayed University to participate in the project as a full-time trainer from January to June 2009 and consequently was released from all teaching duties during that period. The author joined other trainers from ASCD ME in providing workshops to hundreds of teachers throughout the northern emirates of UAE but, unlike them, the author was not a certified ASCD ME trainer.

The main objective of this study was to examine the *Teachers for the 21st Century* project from inside to find out if professional development for teachers in the UAE was effective in its content and cultural responsiveness. Secondary objectives were to analyze the performance of trainers who delivered the professional development and to examine the ways in which teachers responded to the training.

To achieve the study objectives, the author utilized MoE and ASCD ME documents, newspaper accounts, observation notes, and transcriptions of tape-recordings during and after project assignment, which constituted the data for this qualitative study using participant observation. After each day of training, the author recorded pertinent observations using a digital recorder. At the end of the project, the recordings totaled 143 minutes.

After the tapes were transcribed there emerged five salient themes related to training content, trainers and translators, participants, training environment, and project management. The author interpreted the themes and uncovered the major findings. For each theme the author discussed the related issues and then provided recommendations that would help educators involved in professional development in the UAE and the Gulf region, taking into particular account issues of culture.

3. Findings

3.1 Training Content

As the major academic consultant and provider of the workshops, ASCD ME built its training modules on brain-based learning literature and the following MoE standards:

Standard 1: Teachers understand how students learn

Standard 2: Teachers create a safe, respectful environment that supports learning for all students

Standard 3: Teachers understand and use a variety of modern strategies that actively engage students in learning

Standard 9: Teachers' professional knowledge and conduct

The half-day workshops were delivered using the lecture model in classrooms and multipurpose rooms where groups of 25 to 45 teachers were taught brain-based teaching techniques that took into consideration the theory of multiple intelligences, states of the mind, differentiated instruction, and the learning environment. This professional development fitted the factory model of education according to Easton (2008) because it presupposed that teachers were not acquainted with the content, and it was the trainers' role to impart its educational significance to the participants. In few sessions, trainers organized the teachers in small groups in order to read, summarize, and present articles using posters and visuals. One of the trainers used creative techniques such as teaching moments, psycho space, non-verbal language, and Kagan strategies to add more flavor to the sessions, which were well received by teachers.

ASCD ME translated the training materials and visuals from English into Arabic. The quality of translated material was below expectations and had very limited relevance to the UAE context. For example, many teachers had difficulty understanding the Arabic translations of the articles and the PowerPoint slides due to their poor Arabic content. They requested copies in English language because some of the English words were translated erroneously or literally, so the trainers chose to give them the English original copies instead. Also, the training materials were regarded by many teachers as disconnected from the actual conditions of UAE schools and insensitive to UAE culture. For example, the strategies made in USA were not modified to reflect the UAE school and culture contexts.

The workshops did not generally deviate from the traditional approach among many educators that the term "professional development day" conjured only images of coffee breaks, consultants in elegant outfits, and schools barren of kids (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). The defunct ASCD ME failed to provide a variety of training options for teachers other than the usual lecturing that was interspersed with readings from articles and group work. Such limited approach to professional development did not provide enough opportunities for teachers to see models of the best practices and imitate them later in their classrooms.

The literature on professional development abounded with many good models, but the best programs, according to Sleeter (2008), combined ongoing practice-based inquiry with classroom-based coaching. In addition, Lucas and Grinberg (2008) highlighted the importance of collaboration for practicing teachers in professional development initiatives. Hofman and Dijkstra (2010) also showed that teacher networks that focused on strong content and its application were the most promising methods of professional development.

3.2 Trainers and Translators

Five ASCD ME trainers were brought from the United States to serve as program consultants and coaches for six to eight months, but one trainer quit after one week. The training required extensive travel and the trainers' key responsibilities included facilitating workshops, and providing onsite coaching, observation, and feedback for capacity building. Additional responsibilities included initiating and participating in meetings, events, and activities with ASCD ME staff, MoE officials, Zayed University staff, school leaders, and other consultants in support of the professional development project.

At the start of the project, two trainers from ASCD ME and two from Zayed University were conducting the workshops. After one month, two more ASCD ME trainers were brought from the USA in order to allow Zayed University trainers to observe the workshops in order to get certified by ASCD ME. The trainers did not speak

Arabic except the author who was sometimes assigned to translate for other trainers when there was a shortage of translators.

Most trainers who were brought from the USA to work in the project showed a superficial knowledge of the UAE culture and its educational system. For example, their discussions with teachers lacked relevancy to UAE public schools and they could not provide practical solutions to teachers' classroom challenges. Trainers were not well inducted into the culture of the country, which sometimes caused some embarrassment. For example, teachers disapproved a trainer's donning a Christian cross in training sessions. Also, the trainers' negative assumptions about veiled female participants were due to their ignorance of UAE traditions. There were also few incidents when trainers used culturally inappropriate videos and pictures to depict certain educational practices. In spite of this, the teachers developed a good rapport with trainers and tried to alleviate their concerns regarding the culture requirements. The teachers were responsive to the training and always received the trainers with kindness. To remedy such problems in future professional development projects, foreign trainers should have several days of cultural training on site in order to understand the local traditions and be prepared for the cultural and educational diversity of UAE schools. In addition to cultural awareness, trainers should be experts in their field and well experienced in performing professional development to a diverse group of teachers.

Allocating translators to trainers was done by MoE, which provided each trainer with a number of translators in each emirate and depending on availability as translators were full-time MoE English supervisors. One trainer might have worked with ten translators during the professional development program. In one particular day, each trainer had two translators, one for each training session, who rendered the lecture into Arabic and helped with giving instructions and facilitating workshop activities.

The translators were good in general and few were outstanding in their work. The issue was that some translators acted as trainers and digressed on their own with the material. Translating was a time consuming task because every sentence had to be translated and oftentimes elaborated by the translator for the sake of clarity or mere redundancy. Trainers solved this problem by minimizing the amount to be translated. Thus, the trainer would say a sentence or two and expected the translator to render a concise Arabic version.

Translation was crucial to the professional development program and should be given much more attention to ensure success. For example, trainers and translators should be given time together before the professional development started so that they could develop a rapport with each other. They also needed to develop a cadence so that they could minimize difficulties for the audience and save time and effort for trainers, translators, and participants.

The vicissitude of translators' schedules and assignment had sometimes resulted in having no translators for some sessions. In such situations, the trainers requested English speakers from the audience to translate the concepts into Arabic. Many of the teachers said they preferred this method to using a translator. To address these shortcomings, translators should be assigned at the start of professional development and stay with the trainer. This would promote rapport and improve translation as time passed. Also, translators should have some knowledge of the subject matter to aid in word meaning.

3.3 Participants

Teachers were selected from schools having Kindergarten, cycle1 (grades 1 to 6), and cycle 2 (grades 7 to 9). Their subject specializations included Arabic, Islamic education, English, math, science, social studies, physical education, art, and music. The participants were divided into two groups of 25 to 45 teachers each, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Each training session lasted three days for each group. Attendance varied every day. Many teachers came late for various reasons: just coming late, being misinformed, informed late, or long travel. Thus, it was difficult to start the sessions on time because only few teachers showed up according to the schedule. The morning sessions always started 30 minutes late and the afternoon sessions ended 30 minutes before to accommodate the teachers driving to their remote cities. The trainers were given printed schedules with dates, times and places of the presentations, but miscommunication from MoE sometimes led to having both groups in the morning. For example, the author had 85 participants in the morning and twelve in the afternoon. In another occasion, the author had 100 teachers in one session.

Many teachers did not have a clear understanding of the purpose and objectives of this professional development and some of them did not know why they were chosen to participate in the project but they were enthusiastic to join the worksops partially because MoE officials promised the participants credits and ASCD ME certificates at the end of the training. Despite these shortcomings, the author believed that teachers had benefitted from the training in one way or another. They were attentive, polite and understanding, but some teachers held low

expectations of their students' academic abilities and showed a tendency to generalize and blame students for the problems in UAE schools.

In workshops, teachers shared with each other their classroom experiences and sought the advice of trainers in teaching and learning matters. Physical education teachers were noticeably more active in discussions and group work. Even during coffee breaks, teachers were engaged in educational discussions and comments on the training. This confirmed the findings of Mawhinney (2010) in his two-year ethnographic study conducted in the United States. He wrote that, even teachers' lounges that were often thought of as places that bred negativity were found to be places for professional knowledge sharing.

3.4 Training Environment

The training sites were well equipped and their administrators were very cooperative. However, the training witnessed disruptions caused by rain water leakage, noise, and poor cooling systems; and not all training sites accommodated the participants comfortably or provided operational presentation technology for the trainers.

It was clear that most of the professional development was organized at the last minute. ASCD ME training materials usually came at the last minute. Oftentimes the teachers would be notified of the training at the last minute, sometimes the day before. For trainers, it meant one day notice to pack and leave from one training site to another without considering the driving distance between the different cities. For some teachers, it meant driving long distances from their emirates to the training sites, even in rainy days.

A typical session, staffed by a trainer, a translator, and an attendance monitor, would begin at 9:00 a.m. for the first period. After a snack break at 10:30 a.m., there was a second period that ended at 12:00 p.m. There was no lunch provided so trainers prepared for the afternoon session from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. The afternoon session would begin at 1:30 p.m. because teachers worked in the morning. There was a snack break at 2:30 p.m. and the afternoon session ended at 4:00 p.m. The morning participants were exempted from afternoon work at their schools while the afternoon participants had to teach in the morning, which many of them considered not fair. That was why some teachers in the afternoon session would leave right after the snack break at 2:30 p.m.

Attendance monitors were MoE art and music supervisors whose job was to make sure teachers signed in when they arrived and to administer final evaluations at the closure of the training. Some monitors chose to distribute the evaluation forms at the beginning and others during break time. This was distracting for teachers and trainers, and affected the number of evaluations filled as MoE used them to evaluate the professional development project and the trainers. Teachers were very interested in signing in to make sure that they received the credits for the professional development and monitors enforced the attendance rules as best as they could.

Since the *Teachers for the 21st Century* project was a high profile national event that received wide local media coverage, many visitors showed up in the training sites to give support to teachers and display the importance of this professional development program. With each visitor there were entourage and photographers filling the rooms and leaving shortly after exchanging few words with trainers and participants. The visitors included the Minister of Education, MoE high officials, and directors of the local educational zones. Other visitors included MoE chief supervisors responsible for overseeing the work of the supervisors and the staff of ASCD ME. Both MoE and ASCD ME did not make enough visits to assess the project and address the rising issues affecting this national professional development program.

Despite these planning and logistic difficulties, the author believed that the trainers enjoyed every minute of the training and contributed to the project. MoE supervisors and administrators were very supportive and made their best efforts to make the trainers' job easy and comfortable. As a token of thankfulness, the trainers presented a bouquet to the director of a training center because of her tireless work and friendly attitude during difficult working conditions.

3.5 Project Management

As the major stakeholder in the project, MoE was responsible for most of the professional development preparations and logistics. MoE macro-managed the project at the national level and the educational zones supervised the training at the local level. MoE provided teacher participants, translators, and attendance monitors, while ASCD ME supplied the project with training materials and trainers from the United States.

Throughout the life of the project, there appeared to be a lack of coordination and collaboration between MoE, ASCD ME, and Zayed University in many aspects. For example, Zayed University believed that ASCD ME did not keep its promise of certifying Zayed University trainers and in consequence they should not conduct the training until certification was secured. ASCD ME accepted with reluctance and brought two more trainers from the United States to allow Zayed University trainers to observe ASCD ME trainers. During that time, MOE

could only provide translators for one week and entrusted Zayed University with providing the needed translators for future sessions. Instead of observing US trainers to secure the certification, the author was assigned by Zayed University as a translator to fill up vacancies caused by MoE decision, which prevented the author from acquiring the required observations for certification purposes.

MoE was also not satisfied with ASCD ME's management of the project. Complaints from teachers about the workshops and trainers were published in the local newspaper, which prompted a surprise visit by the Minister of Education to the training site to inquire about the issues vexing the teachers. In addition, MoE seemed to have trouble getting timely messages to the teachers and ASCD ME faced criticism over its training materials and the performance of its trainers. Such a combination of conflicting and divergent strategies and priorities among the stakeholders in addition to ineffective management had caused the three years' project to be discontinued after less than one year of its inception.

4. Conclusion

Teachers for the 21st Century Project was a short-lived professional development project that benefitted teachers and trainers despite the many obstacles that hindered its progress and completion. Teachers were so enthusiastic about the project mainly for its grand goal to improve teaching in the country's public schools and partially because MoE officials promised the participants credits and ASCD ME certificates. It was also a valuable learning experience for the author, full of new ideas and practices and enriching encounters with teachers and administrators from the northern emirates.

Such a large-scale and promising professional development program was a missed opportunity for UAE schools mainly because its implementation was fraught with disaccord between stakeholders from the beginning. The failure of this professional development project to deliver its expected results and to complete its timeline was also due to the following causes:

1)   Top-down decision making

2)   The idea that teachers needed to be "fixed"

3)   Lack of ownership of the professional development process and its results.

4)   The technocratic nature of professional development content.

5)   Lack of variety in the delivery modes of professional development.

6)   Little or no support in transferring professional development ideas to the classroom.

7)   Standardized approaches to professional development that disregarded the varied needs and experiences of teachers.

8)   Lack of systematic evaluation of professional development.

9)   Little or no acknowledgment of the learning characteristics of teachers among professional development planners. (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004, pp. 2-5)

In addition, the evaluation of the project showed that factors related to planning, organization, choice of trainers, and cultural awareness contributed to the premature ending of the program. These factors must be addressed systematically in order to conduct sustainable professional development programs in the UAE and Gulf region.

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