

**IMPACT OF SCHOOL-BASED PROJECTS IMPLEMENTED BY STUDENT
TEACHERS OF THE POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION PROGRAMME**

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education of OUSL introduced a School-based Project in the Teaching Practice component of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) Programme, from the academic year 2009/2010, with the aim of further supporting the improvement of teaching-learning competencies among the student teachers. Student teachers were directed to identify a current issue or a current need in the school, plan and implement a small-scale project. The student teachers were required to prepare a project proposal, maintain a reflective journal during the implementation and submit a project report. School Mentors were appointed to support these student teachers throughout the process.

Project method is a practical outcome of John Dewey's (1859-1952) philosophy. According to Dewey, the combination of theory and the practice in the school can be achieved through occupation in a project. Gantt (1861-1919) defined a project as a temporary endeavor, having a defined beginning and end, undertaken to meet particular goals and objectives, usually to meet particular goals and objectives and bring about beneficial change or added value. As Thomas (2009) explained, at a school, an educational institute or a university, a project is a research assignment given to a student which generally requires a larger amount of effort and more independent work than is involved in a normal essay assignment.

There can be different types of projects. Karunasena (2004) stated there may be four types of projects, namely, educational projects, creative projects, problem solving projects and projects that are designed to get economic benefits. By doing any kind of project, a project worker can gain several benefits. According to Jayathilake (1998), by doing projects people can acquire the capacity to face challenges in life, improve practical competencies, develop self esteem, attitudes and discipline, identify self skills, social problems, build up better social relationships, improve communication skills and through projects people can participate in the development process. Karunasinghe (2000) explains that engaging in project work would help to develop and sharpen latent skills. It also helps to develop creative abilities while taking correct decisions which are required for leaders with independent thinking. As such, it is seen that a project is an organized commitment of effort to produce a defined outcome, within defined constraints of scope, time, budget and quality, which is also a beneficial task.

This paper focuses on a study conducted to investigate the impact of the school-based project component in Teaching Practice Stage 1 of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme.

The objectives of the study are to:

1. examine the impact of the school-based project component on the student teachers
2. examine the impact of the school-based project component on the school community
3. identify the problems faced by student teachers and the remedial measures adopted by them, and
4. identify best practices in the process of planning and implementing the project

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METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using the survey method. The population is 1850 student teachers registered in the Post Graduate Diploma in Education Programme in 2009/2010, and the sample is 548 student teachers who have submitted their project reports. Multiple data collection methods were adopted such as content analysis of project reports, reflective journals and self evaluation reports of students as well as project evaluation reports of school mentors. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used for data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since analysis of data is still on-going, some preliminary findings are presented and discussed.

It was revealed that engagement in the school-based project has resulted in developing various competencies among the student teachers. According to mentors' reports, planning activities were at a very satisfactory level among a majority (71%-80%). This indicated development of their skills related to identification of problems, formulation of clear objectives, planning relevant activities according to the time-frame, and identifying available resources. During implementation, organizing and management skills were rated as very satisfactory among 80%. Obtaining support from others in the school community was rated as satisfactory in 69%, implying building of social relationships and communication skills.

Analysis of project reports demonstrated that student teachers' participation in co-curricular activities in the school had improved by engagement in school-based projects. Among various types of projects implemented, there were some innovative projects such as, a dancing camp, setting up an Internet resources library, initiating an English medium news paper, maintaining a school nature conservation area, planting "Atavisi" Bo trees, a dental camp, garbage management project, creating an outdoor learning environment for Mathematics, creating and displaying the school map etc., that clearly indicated enhancement of creativity and innovative skills of student teachers. In their reflective journals, a majority (85%) had claimed that they have developed practical skills and improved self-confidence in conducting a minor project. Further, development of positive attitudes among the student teachers was evident by their interest, commitment and involvement in implementing a project to benefit their schools.

Despite the fact that they were required to maintain a reflective journal, only 66 (12%) student teachers had maintained the journal according to the instructions given. This is a matter of concern, since it implies inadequacy of reflective practice among teachers. It was noticed from the journals that reflective thinking and writing skills needed improvement.

On the other hand, it was revealed that the school community had immensely benefited from the school-based projects. For instance, 74% of the projects had benefited the school community including students, teachers, school management, parents, and community in school vicinity. In 76% of projects the resources already available in the school had been used. Even though a small majority (62%) had contributed towards the improvement of the teaching-learning process in school, only 39% had contributed towards improving students' achievement levels, while 47% had contributed to improve the school environment. It was evident that the student teachers' contributions were appreciated by school management, Educational officers and other associations.

Student teachers had faced a number of constraints during the process, specifically in the implementation stage. Some of the most common problems identified were, lack of time (89%), lack of physical resources (61%), lack of assistance given by other staff members (46%), lack of assistance given by students (41%) and lack of assistance given by the school management (35%). However, they have taken some remedial measures to overcome these problems, such as

working after school and during holidays, getting the support from the school community and well wishers, discussing with the principal, other staff members and support staff to make them aware of the project and its benefits, conducting workshops for students to relate the project to their learning experiences.

Some selected projects are being analyzed in depth to identify the best practices in the process. It was evident that those who selected projects relevant to the school in consultation with the principal, the staff, as well as the school work plan, were able to successfully implement their projects. Further, those who had clear objectives and a feasible work-plan with a realistic time-frame, adhered to the given guidelines and obtained the mentor's support and took leadership, were also able to complete their school-based projects in a very successful manner.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusion of the school-based project in the teaching practice component of the PGDE programme had had many impacts on the student teachers as well as on the school community. Engagement in planning and implementing a small-scale project had provided an opportunity for the student teachers to develop various competencies related to organization, time-management, resource-management and communication. In addition, they developed social skills, problem-solving and reflective thinking skills, involvement and participation in co-curricular activities, positive attitudes on contributing to the school as well as a sense of responsibility and accountability as a member in the school community. This will certainly have an impact on their professional development and become competent and efficient teachers.

In addition, this activity had also influenced the school community as a whole, mainly by improving the teaching-learning process and school environment, developing awareness, skills and a positive attitude as well as enhancement of collaboration and cooperation among various groups within the school community.

Preparing comprehensive guidelines for the proper implementation of the school-based projects, conducting training programmes to develop basic project-management skills, incorporating strategies to improve reflective practice among student teachers, and taking measures towards recognition, appreciation and sharing of best practices would be useful to further improve the school-based project component in the PGDE programme.

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