Doubling up to Support Online and On-Site In-Service Teacher Training in Secondary Education

Issue at-hand

It is common knowledge that in-service teacher training (INSET) from pre-primary to upper secondary education is a major challenge in Africa (Junaid and Maka, 2015). More often than not, comprehensive and integrated INSET policies are lacking. When they do exist, their implementation is problematic. The documented practices show serious levels of ineffectiveness and are costly. They range from the one-off training of trainers at a particular site for a more or less short duration and with a view to cascading the knowledge thus acquired to other teachers, to a school-based training provided by experienced and better qualified teachers, principals or inspectors visiting classrooms to observe and mentor teachers, and to a full or part-time university-based training of 2 to 3 years.

The ineffectiveness of INSET in most African countries has serious implications for quality as most teachers are being hired with minimal pre-service training. In secondary education where mastery of specific subject matters such as mathematics, physics and languages (English, French, Portuguese, etc.) is required, INSET to upgrade teachers’ knowledge and competencies becomes a very serious quality and relevance issue.

A few African countries are now experimenting with Open, Distance and eLearning (ODeL) and other modalities to address the inability of ministries of education (MoE) to reach a critical number of teachers with quality INSET. Therefore, it is important to study closely the current practices of ODeL-based INSET as they too have some weaknesses that need to be identified and corrected.
**Policy Recommendation: Combining Online Tutoring and Classroom Observations by Tutors Drawn from the Ranks of Pedagogical Advisors and Inspectors to Provide Adequate and Effective Training for Secondary Education Teachers**

In a paper presented at the 2015 2nd International Conference of the AVU entitled “What innovations in double tutoring strategies for improving distance training of secondary teachers: the case of Senegal”, Mamadou Sarr reported on the findings of a study he carried out in Senegal to analyze an INSET program put in place by the Faculty of Science and Technological Education and Training (FESTAF) of the University Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) to provide online and on-site in-service academic and pedagogical training to secondary education teachers of mathematics, physics and chemistry.

The study set out to (i) identify gaps/weaknesses in both the online and the face-to-face tutoring used and (ii) recommend solutions/measures to address them.

The distance education and training program (FAD) designed by FESTAF is underpinned by a two-pronged approach to training whereby the trainees, in-service secondary teachers, are supported pedagogically by specialty inspectors (SI), school life inspectors (SLI), mobile pedagogical advisors (MPA) who intervene on-site (classrooms and schools) and then academically through online tutoring provided by FESTAF faculty and the online course developers. FESTAF has created a portal/platform (http://fastef-fad.org) to provide the academic support and tutoring to trainees in completing their theses.

The methodology of Sarr’s study consisted of desk literature review, a survey of trainees and analysis of tutoring reports and interviews with tutors. The survey was administered to sixty trainees taking (i) a Bachelor degree in mathematics / physics and chemistry and (ii) mathematics / Life and Earth Sciences. This survey only covered the tutoring in the completion of theses as a key requirement for the fulfillment of the degree. The thesis is under the supervision of the mathematics department.

Sarr focused on three units of analysis: (i) the means of interaction/communication between trainees and tutors (portal/platform, mobile phones, on-site face-to-face, postal services); (ii) contact time with tutors; (iii) reaction time of tutor to trainees’ requests for support; and (iv) the types of support provided by tutors (pedagogical, academic, moral, etc.).

With regard to the means of communication/interaction, Sarr found out that the most used means are email and mobile and/or fixed phones. The platform/portal came in third. Trainees faced many difficulties to connect because all areas of the country are not covered by wireless
phone networks and when these exist only a few teachers have internet mobile modems. Some had to wait until they arrive in a big town in order to log in to the portal and this costs a lot of money. Hence, the preference of trainees to log in to download documents and use e-mail to send or receive documents.

In interviews, a few tutors indicated that they encourage trainers to use the Internet and mobile or landlines because they have difficulty working directly on the platform. Others prefer to work with trainees from the Dakar region (capital city), because they are not computer literate. Suddenly, the-face-to-face meetings and mobile or telephone are the most used means of communication.

Concerning contact time with tutors, the frequency of contact between tutors and trainees was satisfactory. 93.5% of the trainees indicated that contacts with their tutors is very to fairly common. With respect to the reaction time or responsiveness of the tutors, the trainees indicated that just over 50% of the tutors take less than a week to respond.

As for the types of services, pedagogical support came well ahead of the academic support. Another finding is that with the exception of the two types of support mentioned, no other type of support (moral, guidance, mentoring ...) was identified by the trainees.

In interviews with tutors, the following difficulties were highlighted: (i) travel, behavior management of some trainees who might be refractory to observation and criticism and the low turnout at the very inadequate supervision meetings and other online activities. For travel, a recurring problem is the long distances (on average 150 Km) to visit trainees on-site and sometimes at their own expense. This leads some tutors to feel as if they are financing the system. Some even say they refused the offer made by trainees to fund their travel at regular visits or inspections. In many cases, regional focal points organize group tutorial sessions in the regional capitals in lieu of traveling during inspection times.

Recommendations

This study is an important contribution to our understanding of INSET using a dual mode ODeL and face-to-face of a different nature as it involves travelling to support trainees on-site and not in lecture hall. As illustrated by the findings, this a good approach in the current African context in spite of the weaknesses that were revealed by Sarr. Therefore, major policy implications of this type of approach to INSET in an African context need to be highlighted. Governments and the universities delivering the training ought to do the following:
• Supporting the basic telecommunications infrastructure to ensure a nationwide coverage of wireless telephony through partnerships with private providers as this will address the current geographical inequities.
• Working with public and private transportation networks that exist in Africa to facilitate the movement of on-site tutors and trainees.
• Universities and the concerned faculties should strive to design Online and On-Site INSET that take into account the infrastructural limitations of the country. Revisiting or developing correspondence course packages using older technologies and materials (CD-ROM, textbooks, etc.) to be used in tandem with ODeL needs to be envisaged and integrated into current strategies.

References


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