

## **Providing Student Support to Distance Learners: A Teacher Training Institution Experience**

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### **Abstract**

In 1992 Belize launched the Primary Education project to improve the quality and effectiveness of primary education. A major component of this project was teacher training. Innovations in this area aimed to increase the number of trained teachers from 47 percent to 80 percent. In an effort to meet the goals of the teacher training component of the project, the Belize Teachers' College restructured its programme to include an option to study Level 1 of the Certificate programme by distance. This paper describes the Level 1 distance programme, examines the support being offered to student teachers in this programme, and provides some recommendations for the improvement of the existing support system.

### **Introduction**

In 1992 Belize took a giant step towards improving the quality and effectiveness of primary education. With a grant from the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) now DIFID (Department for International Development) and a loan from the World Bank Belize launched the Primary Education project. Through these funds major changes were made to the education system, particularly primary education. Teacher training, one of the main components of this project, went through some rapid innovations. The main objectives for these changes were to increase the number of trained teachers from 47 percent to 80 percent and "improve the quality of instruction by paying greater emphasis on the development of teachers pedagogical skills" (Belize Teachers' College, 1994, 5).

In an effort to meet the goals of the teacher-training component of the project, the Belize Teachers' College restructured its programme

from a two plus one system to a three-year certificate with school experience. In the two plus one system the student teachers spent two years at the college in a face-to-face mode and one year of teaching practice in their classrooms. The latter system divided the certificate training into two levels with a one-year teaching practice sandwiched between the two levels. After one year of full-time studies at the college student teachers returned to their classrooms for one year to practise the methodologies learnt. A certificate is awarded to those who successfully complete the Level 1 programme. Upon completion of the Level 1 programme teachers remain in their classrooms for another one to two years before pursuing the Level 2 programme. After successful completion of the Level 2 programme teachers are awarded a certificate that is equivalent to the former two plus one certificate.

This paper describes the Level 1 Distance Programme, examines the support being offered

to student teachers in this programme and provides some recommendations for the improvement of the present support system.

### **Rationale for Distance Mode of Level 1**

In 1994 the government decided to pilot the delivery of the Level 1 programme by distance. Teachers now had the option to either study at a distance or by the face-to-face mode. This mode of delivery also provided the opportunity for more teachers to be trained. Teachers who did not want to leave their locales to come to Belize Teachers' College could now remain in their districts and receive their training.

The intention of the first distance pilot was for the programme to run a full cycle and be evaluated before expanding to the other districts. This pilot was carried out in three districts, namely Stann Creek, Toledo and Cayo. However, in 1996, one year before the completion of the pilot, the government made a decision to extend the Level 1 Distance Programme to all student teachers entering the Level 1 programme. By 1996 all student teachers entering the Level 1 programme had to study through a distance mode. The distance mode is currently the only option for Level 1 student teachers.

### **Structure of the Distance Programme**

The Level 1 distance education programme is spanned over a two and a half year period with students pursuing eight courses at a distance and five face-to-face courses. Students begin the programme during the summer when they receive an orientation to distance education and take a course in English and Study Skills. After the orientation student teachers return to their classrooms, where they study two courses at a distance the first semester and two more courses the second semester. Upon completion of the first

year, teachers return to the Belize Teachers' College for three more face-to-face courses. In the second year teachers study four more courses over two semesters before returning to the college for their final summer session. They then have one semester left to complete their course work. The final exercise in this programme is the assessment of the student teachers' teaching. This is done only after they have completed all course work.

### **Elements of Student Support**

Many people are of the opinion that the only requirement of a distance programme is to provide the learner with the modules. Consequently, more emphasis is being placed on the development of modules and very little on the support being offered. As Robinson (1981) pointed out "It is sometimes argued that if the learning materials were perfectly designed, there would be no need for additional support services" (p. 145). However, support systems are not as transferable as course materials and, therefore, must be constructed within the context of a country's resources and the clients' needs (Robinson, 1981; Stewart, 1993). The support system is vital to the success of a distance programme. "It is the interface between the institution and its students" (Stewart, 1993, 11). Since its inception in 1994 the support services of the Belize Teachers' College distance education programme has taken several shapes. Currently, support is offered to students through:

- Study group
- Study sessions
- Monthly workshops
- Supervisory visits
- Supervisors' roles
- Tutors' roles

### ***Study Groups***

Study groups are usually groups of students who come together at their convenience to support each other as they study. Some of the factors that student teachers consider when forming study groups are location, personality and interest. Study groups are usually very small and range from two to sometimes five or six members. Students usually use their study groups to help them get through the assignments.

### ***Study Sessions***

Study sessions are usually larger groups and are sessions initiated by the supervisors and/or course tutors. The supervisors and/or course tutors usually decide on what matters will be addressed at the study sessions. These sessions can focus on anything related to the modules content, classroom practice, and/or assignments. These sessions are held at various locations that are within close reach of student teachers and have met with varying measures of success.

### ***Monthly Workshops***

The main purpose of workshops is to focus on the content of the modules. Monthly workshops are being offered at the District Education Centers that are located in the town of each district. Student teachers are given permission from their schools to attend these workshops. Some teachers have to travel from the previous day or very early in the morning to get to the District centers. Monthly workshops have changed from a very centralized planning to a more decentralized planning where supervisors' plans are based on the needs of their students.

In the past supervisors tried to cram as much of the content of the modules as possible during the five or six hours allotted to each workshop. As a result a 45-hour course or a 60-hour course many times is packaged into six hours. There is, therefore,

very little time to deal with individual needs of students or to fully explain the concepts outlined in the modules. This year a conscious effort was made to try to address the individual needs of student teachers and to get students to be more involved in their learning.

The main advantage of district planning is that it provides the opportunity for supervisors to meet the particular needs of their district. However, this approach is risky for supervisors because they are afraid that they may not address what the course tutor considers are the most salient areas of the modules. To alleviate this fear course tutors are a part of the district planning and they provide guidance and support to supervisors as they plan for their monthly workshops. Workshop planning is done at the beginning of each semester but supervisors have the flexibility to change their plans during the course of the semester.

While there is a need for direct teaching one of our greatest challenges is to use our workshop time to facilitate the learning process of our students and to help them to critically reflect on the content of the modules. Over the past year we have been making an effort to facilitate the learning process and meet the individual needs of student teachers rather than providing lectures on the content of modules. From the district reports it seems that there are mixed feelings with regard to this new workshop format.

In their evaluations, students felt that enough time was not spent on the workshop topics . . . Supervisors are pondering the effectiveness of the new workshop approach. (February 2000 monthly report of one district)

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Both workshops this month went well. Both students and supervisors like the new format . . . The focus on doing rather than so much lecture seems to be appreciated. In the evaluations

almost all the participants mentioned that they appreciated the meeting time. [Here they are referring to the meeting with their supervisors in their small groups.] (February 2000 monthly report of another district)

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Today's workshop was interesting because group work was done by all teachers. The gathering with our supervisor was superb as she explained on . . . Teachers input was excellent and the rapport with other colleagues was also good. (A student's evaluation of the new approach at their February workshop)

### ***Monthly Supervisory Visits***

In order to provide additional support and guidance to classroom practice, student teachers should receive at least one full day visit per month at their work sites. While both supervisors and students would prefer more classroom visits this is not possible due to budgetary constraints. The number of visits received by students is not standard, for several reasons:

1. Students in very remote areas can only receive a day's visit or one half day because of the financial constraints.
2. Because of accessibility students in town schools and nearby villages receive sometimes as much as three half days visits for the month.
3. Periodically some supervisors are assigned more than their expected number of students and as a result cannot provide the usual whole day visit.

Currently many of the course assignments are linked to classroom practice and this puts an added responsibility on supervisors during their classroom visits. Many supervisors complain that they spend more time marking course assignments than observing and providing feedback to the student teachers' pedagogy.

In the past, course assignments were not as focused on classroom practice and supervisors had more time to provide assistance to teachers in the area of pedagogy. There is definitely a need to create a balance between the number of practical assignments that can be given in a course and provision of time for the observation and mentoring of students' teaching.

The problem faced in providing support to student teachers through supervision is twofold. On one hand, there are the challenges of providing support to students through a distance mode. On the other hand, there are the challenges of supervising teachers as they practice the pedagogical skills learnt. Perraton (1997) has sited this as a dilemma for many distance teacher education programmes. "And a high proportion of them have grappled, with varying success, with the logistical problems of yoking distance-education methods with supervised classroom practice" (p. 7).

### ***Supervisors' Roles***

The supervisors are extremely essential to the distance programme. They are a direct link between the student teacher and the college. They are responsible for the planning and implementation of these plans at the monthly workshops. Supervisors also provide support through monthly supervisory visits to the classroom, the marking of assignments and study sessions. Supervisors also provide moral and other psychological support and add a human touch to the programme.

Each supervisor is assigned an average of twelve to fifteen students per semester. While this may seem like a small number of students compared to face-to-face courses, the multiple functions of the supervisors make this job very challenging.

### ***Challenges of Supervisors***

1. Providing academic guidance in all subject areas;
2. Providing professional guidance in a school climate that is not practising many of the current methodologies of instruction;
3. Managing time to include marking, supervision, workshop preparation and implementation and in some cases providing staff development in the schools where student teachers are employed;
4. Adapting to a distance mode of delivery where they are regarded as facilitators of learning, rather than the course of learning.

### ***Tutors' Roles***

Prior to 1997 the involvement of course tutors in provision of support to the distance learners was either minimal or nonexistent. Today course tutors provide support to both supervisors and student teachers in the delivery of course content. Course tutors are responsible for the development of assignments and the monitoring of the course.

Planning workshops are held at the beginning of each semester to discuss course requirements and for course tutors to address the concerns of supervisors with regard to course content. The success of the course delivery is dependent on the entire team. Consequently, all team members are involved in the planning workshops and delivery strategies.

The involvement of the course tutors in the support system is a new one that was not envisaged in the initial planning of the distance programme. However, it is very important and necessary in narrowing the distance between the learner and the tutor. Many students have expressed their appreciation for the course tutors' visits to their sites.

### **Proposed Support Services**

Support services are definitely not stagnant. Rather, they are a dynamic component of any distance programme. "It may equally be argued that it is only as the institution develops that support needs will emerge from students' and course writers' experiences" (Robinson, 1981, 145). The Belize Teachers' College Level 1 distance team met and discussed the trends, difficulties and challenges presently being encountered and together we formulated the following strategic thrusts.

#### ***1. Defining and Creating an Awareness of the Level 1 Distance Programme***

If we are to develop a support system that will benefit our clients, all stakeholders must be familiar with the concept of distance education and how it operates in the Level 1 programme. It is now time for us to address the general public and those in the field of education on how the distance education programme operates and the advantages and limitations. To many stakeholders outside the distance team, distance education is usually viewed with skepticism and compared to the 25-year traditional face-to-face mode of teacher training.

There is also the need for us as a faculty to define first for ourselves how much independence or interaction Level 1 student teachers should receive. Presently, the views of supervisors, administrators and course tutors can be placed on a continuum, with one end of the continuum having the view that students should be solely responsible for their learning and the other end of the continuum with the view that learners must be provided with a lot of interaction and supervisors who should be there every step of the way. Daniels and Marquis (1973) argued that a critical issue for distance learning systems is getting the right balance between interaction and independence. As a team we need to create a

balance between providing interactive support for students that will lead to independence.

### ***2. Maximizing Available Human Resources***

Earlier in this paper it was mentioned that teacher training at a distance posed two challenges – the logistics of the delivery mode and supervision of classroom practice. Limited human and financial resources make it difficult for the supervisors to provide the number of visits required for the supervision of classroom practice. Several of my colleagues and I have proposed that the latter is done in partnership with the schools where teachers in training are located. Principals and senior teachers can assist with the supervision of teachers. In turn supervisors can provide staff development and professional guidance to the schools with regard to the college's current methodologies.

### ***3. Examining our Practice***

As stated earlier Belize Teachers' College has a 25-year-old tradition of face-to-face delivery. Many trainers have been trained through this mode. Other teacher trainers have also not studied through the distance mode. Distance education is therefore a new mode of teaching for our entire team. There is a need for us to update ourselves in this new mode of delivery and examine our *modus operandi* and make the necessary change to accommodate the distance delivery mode. Perraton (1997) proposed that in distance training teacher trainers may need training in how to work with teachers in their classrooms, to support what is being taught.

### **Conclusion**

Is there a place for distance education in a country as small as Belize? Distance education, like the conventional mode, has its strengths and weaknesses. The Level 1 distance education programme has exposed teacher trainers to the daily realities of the classrooms and helped the

Belize Teachers' College to streamline its curriculum to meet some of these classroom realities. Being in the classroom with the trainees has also helped teacher trainers to realize that teacher training cannot exist in a vacuum but rather the entire school culture has to change for the training to be effective. Some supervisors have already started the process of working along with principals in developing a climate that synchronizes with the college's current methods of teaching. Distance education also has the advantage of providing on-the-job training.

While we have been making strides in some areas we are still lagging behind in providing the kinds of support that teachers in the programme need. It is, therefore, imperative that a small state such as Belize maximizes the limited resources. As I have proposed, a partnership between the school and the college will make use of the country's limited human resources that will benefit both parties. Because teacher training is partly responsible for the learning that occurs in the classroom, Belize Teachers' College must integrate with the rest of the education community. To accomplish this the Level 1 distance education programme must be clearly articulated to other educators and the general public.

Teacher training is at the threshold of yet another change in its history. On August 1, 2000 Belize Teachers' College will amalgamate with four other institutions to form the University of Belize. Distance education has the potential to provide in-service training to teachers aspiring to further training. However, for this to be achieved distance education must not be placed on the periphery but rather remain the nucleus of the Faculty of Education. Gajaraj Dhanarajan, President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning, commented in the foreword of *Higher Education Through Open and Distance Learning*, "First, distance education seems to have moved into the center

stage in this sector more than in any other and second, the clamour for more higher education, especially in developing economies, is getting louder each day even while the cost of providing it is on the increase. The use of distance education under these circumstances seems more an imperative than an option.”

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