

15 Perceptions of the BA (TESOL) Programme and Project by Headteachers in Muscat region, Oman

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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on an investigation carried out in 2004-2005 into how Headteachers in Muscat Region who had BA participants or graduates on their teaching staff perceived the impact of the BA Programme and Project in their schools. It explores the effects of the BA Programme on the professional development of teachers from their perspective. It also identifies the administrative implications of in-service teacher development courses on school management. The investigation was part of an ongoing evaluation of the BA Project.

Headteachers' views and understandings of the Programme and Project were investigated for three main reasons. Firstly, Headteachers were major stakeholders in the Project as they were directly concerned with the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. Secondly, they would be able to view the Project in relation to its effects on their schools over a long period of time. Finally, as Wedell (2005) points out, Headteachers play an important role in supporting the implementation of any change and the BA Project was no exception. Headteachers who were positive about the BA were more likely to be supportive in its implementation.

The study had three main objectives. The first was to find out what Headteachers in Muscat Region actually knew about the BA Programme and Project. The second was to assess the impact of the BA on school management and administration and to make recommendations for future courses. The third was to assess the perceived impact of the BA on learning and professional development in schools at a time when the Ministry was implementing a new curriculum and when, as Wedell (2003) points out, teachers therefore need as much support as possible.

The study also had some more general aims in line with the BA Project and Programme Impact Assessment initiative. These included:

- To assess the extent to which the BA Programme and the BA Project are meeting their goals and having the kinds of influences expected.
- To be part of the Ministry's internal processes of reviewing the BA Project and as part of the Project's more formal reporting to the Ministry.

- To promote Omani involvement in research and develop research abilities of graduates of the BA.
- To raise the profile of Oman as a leader in educational research in TESOL in the region.
- To raise the profile of the BA Project.
- To enhance impact by raising awareness of stakeholders.
- To guide professional development choices in the future.

The research was conducted by six Cohort 1 and 2 graduates of the BA Programme who were identified through their experience, their engagement in research during the BA Programme and their interest in contributing to this study:

- AbdulAziz Al-Rawahi (Private Schools English Supervisor, BA Cohort 1)
- Amna Al-Balushi (SET, Ma'abella Girl's Secondary School, BA Cohort 1)
- Hafeedha Al-Siyabi (SET, Al-Basir Basic School, BA Cohort 2)
- Nasra Al-Mahrouqi (Regional English Supervisor, BA Cohort 2)
- Salma Al-Mandhri (SET, Shati Al-Qurm Girls' Secondary School, BA Cohort 2)
- Sarah Noor Al-Balushi (Regional English Supervisor, BA Cohort 1)

The study was coordinated and supported by the then BA Regional Tutors (RTs) in Muscat (Simon Etherton and Simon Green).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions

The process of conducting this study began with a meeting where the aims of the research were identified, specific research questions formulated and time frames agreed. The research questions formulated were:

- How informed are Headteachers about the BA Programme and Project?
- How interested are Headteachers in the BA?
- What is the impact of the BA on school management and administration?
- What recommendations can be made for the implementation of the BA Programme and Project in the future, and in-service courses in general?
- What is the perceived impact of the BA Programme on learning in schools?
- What is the perceived impact of the BA Programme on the professional development of teachers in schools?

3.2 Methods

The research team then began writing the questionnaire in English and had it translated into Arabic. This was supported through the team sharing key readings on research methods and on developing valid and reliable questions collaboratively. Co-researchers agreed that this was a productive and learningful experience. The draft questionnaire was then piloted with four Headteachers. The findings from the pilot were discussed by the research team and a number of key changes were made to the questionnaire. It was decided that, rather than sending out the questionnaire to schools and risking a low return rate, all Headteachers with BA students or graduates in their schools in Muscat Region would be requested to come to a special

meeting where the aims of the study could be properly explained and any confusions or ambiguities could be clarified. Fifty Headteachers completed the questionnaire (see Appendix 1 for the English version). The research team then analysed the responses to identify themes and patterns, which were then explored in greater detail through semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of six Headteachers (see Appendix 2 for the guiding interview questions). Finally, the team went through a process of interpreting the two sets of data in relation to the initial research questions. Again, this proved to be an interesting and informative experience for the co-researchers.

4 FINDINGS

Two main themes emerged from the data; being informed and being involved. These themes are explored in relation to the specific research questions.

4.1 The extent to which Headteachers were informed and interested

By 2005 the BA Project had been running in Muscat Region for six years. Over 110 teachers had studied on the Programme, over 60 graduates of the BA were then in schools and more than 50 schools had been involved. In 2004 a booklet had been produced in Arabic and distributed to schools to inform Headteachers about the BA. Despite this, the Headteachers in our study generally felt uninformed about the BA. Only 39% of female Headteachers and 22% of male Headteachers felt that they knew a lot about the aims, length, content, and assessment of the BA and over 60% of Headteachers felt they did not know enough about the BA Programme. Interviews showed that what information they did have came mainly from teachers studying on the course.

Interviews identified some confusion related to the aims of the course, as to whether the focus was on developing methodology or language skills, or simply on upgrading qualifications. All interview respondents reported little or no knowledge of the content of the course or the assessment of the course, although some Heads mentioned that there seemed to be many assignments, which prevented teachers from doing extra work in the schools. The key finding was that Headteachers felt that they were not particularly well informed about the BA Programme, and they would have liked to be better informed.

Headteachers did appear to be interested in the BA Programme. 51% reported discussing the BA with participants on their teaching staff, while 42% reported asking teachers about their grades and progress and 31% reported discussing the BA with RTs. Some Headteachers had also demonstrated their interest by wanting to become more involved in the BA by, for example discussing teachers' progress in detail with RTs when they visit the school.

4.2 Perceived impact on schools of students studying on the BA

88% of female Headteachers and 68% of male Headteachers found that BA participants were usually or always punctual with their reports, schemes of work,

and were thought to be enthusiastic and supportive of colleagues. The most significant problem the respondents identified was timetabling issues – setting the timetable to take account of Day Release absences, although they also claimed they were usually able to overcome this problem in one way or another. Another significant problem reported was related to teachers taking extra activities. 66% of Headteachers believed teachers should be involved in some school activities, and BA participants who were unwilling to take part in school activities were perceived negatively.

4.3 Perceived impact on learning in schools

With teachers currently studying on the BA Programme, there was a mixed response from Headteachers in relation to pupils' learning. More female Headteachers than male Heads believed the BA was having a positive impact on their pupils' English, while the majority of male Headteachers believed that studying on the BA had negatively impacted on teaching and learning in the classroom. Respondents argued that teachers studying on the BA seemed to be focussing on their studies, and not on teaching. Once teachers graduated from the BA, the story was very different. Over 80% of Headteachers believed that studying on the BA Programme was resulting in some or a lot of improvement in the pupils' English language. They stated that their views were formed as a result of visiting classes on a regular basis and observing how involved and interested children were in their learning.

4.4 Perceived impact on personal and professional development of teachers

From the questionnaire, over 90% of Headteachers reported some / a lot of positive change in BA participants and graduates as a result of studying on the BA. The biggest change they identified was in the confidence of the teachers, their motivation, their ability to organize themselves and their ability to solve problems (all over 70%). From the interviews, confidence was again a key area of change, but respondents also mentioned ability to teach and adapt materials, ability to control classes and proficiency in English. However, a small minority of Headteachers believed there had been no real change in teachers' level of language or teaching methods.

Although some graduates were reported as sharing new ideas with colleagues through workshops, meetings and informal discussions, only 13% of Headteachers felt that they participated effectively in workshops and conferences. This supported the key issue from Headteachers that they wanted teachers studying on the BA and graduates to share their knowledge more.

5 DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that Headteachers were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of the BA on teachers' professional development, and about the influence these graduate teachers were having in their schools. Some more

specific key findings are:

- Headteachers felt that more teachers should be placed in schools that had teachers studying in-service to relieve them from heavy teaching loads.
- Headteachers wanted to be better informed about BA teachers' studies, to assist in timetabling.
- Headteachers wanted BA participants to be more involved in the school during the course of their studies. They wanted them to take some extra-curricular activities. They also wanted teachers to use their 'school time' for schoolwork.
- Headteachers wanted to be more informed about the BA (TESOL) Programme. They wanted to know about the content and the assessment of the course, but they also wanted to know about the progress of their teachers on the course (both in terms of academic progress and changes in teaching).
- Headteachers wanted to be more involved in the BA Programme. They wanted to discuss their BA participants' progress with RTs.
- Headteachers wanted BA participants and graduates to help other teachers become more involved in the BA Programme by sharing their new ideas and understandings through workshops, peer observation sessions and meetings.

Overwhelmingly, Headteachers wanted the benefits of the BA Programme to be spread as widely as possible.

These findings are significant in a number of ways. The very process of investigating what Headteachers knew and thought in itself raised the profile of the BA and encouraged Heads to engage with the impact and implications of this very large teacher development Programme. It also acknowledged the importance and significance of the perspective and role of Headteachers in any teacher development Programme, a message appreciated by those Heads involved in this study. The investigation highlighted a number of key issues that were already starting to be addressed. One key issue was encouraging students on the BA Programme to share new understandings with colleagues in schools through workshops, meetings and peer observation programmes. The University of Leeds was considering ways of encouraging more of this through module materials and assessments. The BA Project was also considering formal and informal ways of informing Headteachers more effectively about the Programme, through graduates, students and tutors in the hope that, if Headteachers were more aware of the aims, structure and demands of studying on this BA programme, they might be more sympathetic to the pleas of teachers participating in the Programme not to be overloaded with schoolwork. Finally, this study emphasised the importance of Headteachers having a positive attitude to the benefits of the BA Programme on teaching and learning in their schools. Where Heads were positive, they provided constructive and enthusiastic support to those teachers studying on the Programme.

6 CONCLUSION

This investigation achieved many of the general aims identified for the Impact Assessment initiative. As described above, it raised awareness of the BA Programme and Project amongst Headteachers, who were major stakeholders in the Project. It

also contributed to the further professional development of those graduates involved in conducting the research, through the decision-making process of formulating appropriate research questions and methods, to collecting data and analysing and interpreting it, to writing it up and to presenting it at national and international forums. Participants engaged in the study in a wholehearted and enthusiastic way, for no extrinsic reward or motivation. Discussions with these researchers revealed a real interest and desire to continue to utilise skills developed through the BA Programme and to engage with issues of research at a higher level, building on their dissertation studies. Co-researchers articulated how being involved in this investigation had developed their understanding of research issues and their ability to conduct it effectively. Presentations at TESOL Arabia 2005 and within the Sultanate of Oman achieved the dual purpose of disseminating the findings of this research, and of further contributing to the professional development of those co-researchers involved in presenting.

In relation to the set up of the investigation, a number of points can be made. The graduate researchers worked well as a team and their different experiences and professional responsibilities complemented each other well. We were initially concerned by the high number of co-researchers (six), but in the end this proved manageable and even advantageous in relation to collecting and analysing data. One recommendation could be to identify one of the graduate researchers to be a coordinator; to keep records, to keep the team informed and to liaise with the regional administration. Sarah Al-Balushi eventually filled this role informally, but a clearer and more formal recognition and understanding of roles may have helped. A recommendation, based on the experience of conducting this study, would be to identify one coordinator to take responsibility for the whole investigation with the support and collaboration of an Omani graduate coordinator. Finally, this investigation was very well supported by the Muscat Region ELT supervisory team and the BA Project office. We were very grateful for the efficient way co-researchers were released from schools to attend important meetings and for the considerable support provided in administering the questionnaire to so many Headteachers.

REFERENCES

- Wedell, M. (2003). Giving TESOL change a chance: Supporting key players in the curriculum change process. *System* 31, 439–56.
- Wedell, M. (2005). Cascading training down into the classroom: The need for parallel planning. *International Journal of Educational Development* 25 (6), 637-51.

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE (ENGLISH VERSION)

Dear Headteacher,

The Ministry of Education and the University of Leeds are carrying out this small-scale research into the "Perceptions of the BA project by Headteachers in Muscat Region". Headteachers fulfil an essential role in the education process and are major stakeholders in the BA Project. We kindly ask you to complete this questionnaire (it should take no more than 20 minutes). The questionnaire has 4 sections, The first is to find out what you know about the BA, the second is if you have a teacher who is currently studying on the BA, the third is if you have a teacher who has finished the BA and is now a graduate of this programme, the fourth section is to get your recommendations for running effective in-service courses. We value your considered answers in all questions that you answer.

Finally, you can be assured that this questionnaire will be treated in all confidence and that your identity will not be revealed through this research.

Section 1

(Please answer this section)

1.1 How much do you know about the following aspects of the in-service BA course being studied by English teachers?

(tick the relevant box)

	A lot	A little	Nothing
The aims of the BA course			
The length of the BA course			
The content of the BA course			
The assessment of the BA course			
The amount of time the students are expected to study daily			

Section 2

(Please answer this section if you have English teachers in your school who are current BA students)

2.1 How many of your teachers are current BA students? _____

2.2 How long have you worked with each teacher?

Teacher A _____ years

Teacher B _____ years

Teacher C _____ years

2.3 We are aware that the BA may cause headteachers a number of administrative difficulties. Please rank the following administrative problems in order of their inconvenience to you. 1 = most inconvenient, 6 = least inconvenient. Use each number once only.

- _____ Timetabling (distributing classes, number of periods)
- _____ BA teachers' absence
- _____ Compression of the pupils' timetables
- _____ Requests from BA teachers for use of school facilities e.g. copying
- _____ Complaints from BA teachers about e.g. workloads
- _____ Complaints from non-BA teachers about e.g. workloads

2.4 Please list any other problems you face because of BA teachers' studies.

2.5 What support do you find it easiest to give to your BA teachers? Please rank the following according to how **easy** it is for you to provide this support. 1 = easiest, 6 = most difficult. Please use each number 1-6 once only.

- _____ Relieving BA teachers from school duties such as bus/canteen duty
- _____ Relieving them from class teacher duties
- _____ Relieving them from invigilation, marking or substitution duties
- _____ Giving BA teachers time off on assignment submission days
- _____ Permitting BA teachers to use school facilities e.g. pc, copier
- _____ Providing encouragement

2.6 Have you ever done any of the following? Please tick which.

- _____ Discussed the BA with your BA teachers
- _____ Asked your teachers about their grades or progress
- _____ Asked the Regional Tutor about the teachers' grades or progress
- _____ Visited the BA centre

2.7. Please answer the questions below by putting a tick in the relevant column.

	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always
A) Are your BA teachers punctual with their reports?				
B) Are they punctual with their work-schemes?				
C) Are they willing to participate in school activities?				
D) Are they enthusiastic teachers?				
E) Do they correct their pupils' work on time?				
F) Do they prepare properly?				
G) Do they keep proper school hours?				
H) Do they support their colleagues?				

If there are any differences between the performance of the different teachers, please comment here, but do not mention names.

2.8 Have you noticed any observable effect on performance or satisfaction among pupils taught by BA students? Please specify.

Section 3

Please answer this section if you have any English teachers in your school who have graduated from the University of Leeds BA course.

3.1 How many Leeds University BA graduates are there in your school?
Please write the total number ____

3.2 How long have you worked with each of these graduate teachers?
Teacher A ____ years
Teacher B ____ years
Teacher C ____ years

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduce yourselves, the topic of the research and relate the interview to the questionnaire. Thank the headteachers in advance for accepting the interview. Explain that the interview will be anonymous and their names will not be used in any way and they will not be able to be identified through the research. Ask permission to record the conversation. Inform them of the length of the interview. Tell them that they will be asked a few questions, but that they should feel free to add any further information or comments. Ask follow up questions if necessary.

1. What do you know about the BA Programme?
Where did you get your information from?
Ask if they received and read the booklet about the BA Programme and Project.
2. What were the most inconvenient situations for you as head-teacher towards this course? (Provide examples to explain if not clear; Timetabling, absences, extra activities.) What action did you take to overcome these situations?
3. Do you find it difficult to relieve your teachers from school duties?
(Examples: invigilation, marking)
4. What kind of information would you like to know about your teacher's studies on the BA Programme?
(Examples: progress, grades, achievement, difficulties)
5. Do you ever discuss the BA with your students?
What kind of things do you discuss?
6. Do you feel that BA students are supporting other English teachers in your school? How? Or Why not?
7. Do pupils taught by the BA teachers seem to perform better than other pupils?
How do you know?
8. Have you noticed any changes in the performance of your BA graduate teachers?
9. What changes have you noticed in the graduates?
10. What changes would you recommend for further BA cohorts and for all future in-service courses generally?

Thank the headteachers for their time and information. Assure them that their information is certainly valuable.