Exploring Strategies to Minimize Dropouts from Teacher Development Programs

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Abstract: This study investigates the factors contributing to dropout rates in teacher development programs at a private teacher training academy in Sri Lanka. With a focus on the last five years, the research highlights language competency, economic challenges, mode of study, and personal commitments as significant barriers. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, including questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, to gather comprehensive data from 150 participants. The findings emphasize the need for tailored strategies, such as language preparatory courses, financial assistance, hybrid learning models, and individualized academic support, to enhance program retention. These recommendations aim to improve the overall effectiveness of teacher development programs, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of advancing educational quality in Sri Lanka.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Quality education is fundamental to the development of any nation, with teachers at the heart of this process. The effectiveness of teachers directly impacts students' academic success and overall educational outcomes. However, the global shortage of qualified teachers with adequate pedagogical knowledge remains a significant barrier to achieving quality education for all (UNICEF, 2014). The provision of effective teacher development programs is therefore critical in addressing this gap and ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to meet the challenges of modern classrooms.

Despite the recognized importance of these programs, many teacher development initiatives face the challenge of high dropout rates, which undermine their effectiveness and contribute to the persistent shortage of qualified teachers. In the context of Sri Lanka, the situation is particularly concerning given the recent economic challenges and the increasing demand for qualified educators. This paper explores the factors contributing to dropout rates in teacher development programs offered by a private teacher training academy in Sri Lanka over the past five years. It also seeks to propose strategies to minimize these dropouts, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of teacher education in the country.

The study is motivated by the need to understand the underlying reasons for the sudden and drastic increase in dropout rates within these programs and to identify practical solutions that can be implemented to improve retention. By addressing these challenges, the paper aims to contribute to the broader goal of improving the quality of education through effective teacher development.

➢ *Objectives*
    The specific objectives of this study are as follows:
- To identify the primary reasons for dropout among participants in the teacher development programs conducted by the private teacher training academy.
- To explore the impact of various factors such as language competency, economic conditions, mode of study, and personal commitments on dropout rates.
- To collect and analyze participants' suggestions for improving the teacher development programs.
- To propose practical strategies for minimizing dropout rates and improving the overall effectiveness of teacher development programs.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher development is widely regarded as a cornerstone of educational improvement. As Darling-Hammond (2017) points out, the quality of teacher preparation has a profound impact on students' learning outcomes, making it essential for teacher development programs to be both accessible and effective. However, the literature reveals several challenges associated with sustaining participation in these programs, particularly in contexts where participants face significant barriers such as

language difficulties, economic constraints, and the demands of balancing work and study.

➢ *Teacher Development and Educational Quality:*
Research consistently shows that the quality of education is closely linked to the quality of teaching (Schleicher, 2018). Teachers who are well-prepared and continuously engaged in professional development are more likely to implement effective teaching practices that enhance student learning. The importance of ongoing teacher education is further emphasized by Ingersoll and Strong (2011), who argue that professional development is critical to maintaining high teaching standards and addressing the evolving needs of students.

➢ *Challenges in Retention:*
The issue of retention in teacher development programs is a common concern. Knight (2012) identifies several factors that contribute to dropout rates, including the lack of support systems, the rigidity of program structures, and the pressure of academic requirements. Feng (2014) highlights the additional challenge of language barriers, particularly in programs delivered in English to participants who may not be proficient in the language. This can lead to feelings of frustration and inadequacy, ultimately resulting in withdrawal from the program.

➢ *Support Systems and Flexibility:*
To address these challenges, the literature suggests the need for robust support systems and greater flexibility in program delivery. Mentorship programs, as discussed by Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), provide participants with the guidance and encouragement necessary to persist in their studies. Similarly, the adoption of hybrid learning models, which combine online and face-to-face instruction, has been shown to improve retention by accommodating the diverse needs of participants (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

➢ *Economic Barriers:*
Economic factors also play a significant role in dropout rates. Schleicher (2018) notes that financial pressures can deter participants from completing their studies, particularly in contexts where teachers are underpaid and overburdened. Providing financial assistance, whether through scholarships, loans, or other means, can help alleviate these pressures and encourage continued participation in teacher development programs.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data on the factors contributing to dropout rates in teacher development programs and to collect suggestions for improvement.

➢ *Sample and Participants:*
The research was conducted with a sample of 150 participants who had withdrawn from teacher development programs offered by a private teacher training academy in Sri Lanka. The sample was selected to represent a diverse group of individuals from nine different branches of the academy, ensuring that the findings would be relevant across different contexts.

➢ *Data Collection:*

• *Questionnaire*
A structured questionnaire was administered to all participants to gather quantitative data on the reasons for their withdrawal. The questionnaire included a mix of multiple-choice questions, Likert scale items, and open-ended questions to capture a range of responses.

• *Interviews*
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 30 participants to gain deeper insights into their personal experiences and challenges. The interviews provided qualitative data on the specific factors that influenced their decision to withdraw and their suggestions for improving the programs.

• *Focus Group Discussions*
Three online focus group discussions were held with 8-10 participants each. These discussions facilitated the exchange of ideas and experiences among participants, helping to identify common themes and issues related to dropout rates.

➢ *Data Analysis:*
The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, to identify the most common reasons for dropout. The qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to participants' experiences and suggestions.

IV. FINDINGS

The study revealed several key factors contributing to the high dropout rates in the teacher development programs:

➢ *Language Competency:*
A significant proportion of participants (45%) cited their lack of proficiency in English as a major barrier to continuing in the program. Despite their strong motivation for professional development, they struggled to comprehend course materials and participate in discussions, leading to frustration and eventual withdrawal.

➢ *Economic Challenges:*
Approximately 30% of participants identified financial difficulties as a primary reason for their withdrawal. The prevailing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, coupled with the costs associated with the program, made it challenging for many participants to continue their studies.

➢ *Mode of Study:*
The transition to a self-study mode and the reliance on online learning posed significant challenges for participants. Nearly 40% of respondents reported difficulties in adjusting to the self-directed learning environment and the lack of

face-to-face interaction, which led to feelings of isolation and disengagement from the program.

➤ *Personal Commitments:*

Many participants (35%) found it difficult to balance the demands of the program with other personal and professional commitments. The inflexibility of the program's schedule exacerbated this issue, making it challenging for participants to keep up with their studies.

➤ *Online Learning Environment:*

The shift to online learning, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, was another significant factor contributing to dropout rates. Participants expressed difficulty in navigating the digital platforms, maintaining motivation, and managing the increased workload associated with online learning.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of factors contributing to dropout rates in teacher development programs. The challenges identified—such as language barriers, economic constraints, and the demands of online learning—reflect broader issues that are likely to be encountered in similar contexts globally.

➤ *Addressing Language Barriers:*

Language competency emerged as a significant barrier to participation, suggesting the need for additional support for non-native English speakers. The provision of an English language preparatory course, as suggested by participants, could help bridge this gap and enable more participants to succeed in the program.

➤ *Economic Support:*

The economic challenges faced by participants underscore the need for financial assistance mechanisms. Providing access to bank loans, scholarships, or other forms of financial aid could help alleviate the economic pressures that lead to dropout and support participants in completing their studies.

➤ *Flexibility and Support Systems:*

The difficulties associated with the self-study mode and online learning highlight the need for more flexible program structures. A hybrid learning model, which combines online and face-to-face instruction, could offer the necessary flexibility while also providing the support and interaction that participants need to stay engaged. Additionally, implementing strong student counseling services and an individualized academic support system could help address participants' diverse needs and provide them with the tools necessary to succeed.

➤ *Engagement and Motivation:*

The importance of maintaining motivation and engagement among participants cannot be overstated. Providing opportunities for peer interaction, mentorship, and collaborative learning can help create a sense of community and reduce the feelings of isolation that often accompany online learning. Furthermore, offering flexible deadlines and personalized feedback can help participants manage their workload and stay on track with their studies.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed to minimize dropout rates in teacher development programs:

➤ *English Language Preparatory Course:*

Implement an English language preparatory course for participants who need additional support in language proficiency. This course could be offered as a prerequisite or concurrently with the teacher development program.

➤ *Financial Assistance Programs:*

Establish financial assistance programs, such as scholarships or low-interest loans, to support participants who face economic challenges. This can help alleviate the financial burden and encourage continued participation in the program.

➤ *Hybrid Learning Model:*

Adopt a hybrid learning model that combines online and face-to-face instruction. This approach can provide the flexibility needed to accommodate participants' diverse needs while maintaining the benefits of in-person interaction and support.

➤ *Individualized Academic Support:*

Develop an individualized academic support system that includes regular check-ins with participants, personalized feedback, and tailored resources to address specific challenges. This system can help participants stay engaged and on track with their studies.

➤ *Student Counseling Services:*

Strengthen student counseling services to provide emotional and psychological support to participants. Counseling can help address issues related to stress, motivation, and personal commitments, which are often contributing factors to dropout.

➤ *Flexible Program Structure:*

Consider offering a more flexible program structure that allows participants to complete assignments and studies at their own pace. This flexibility can help accommodate participants' personal and professional commitments, reducing the likelihood of dropout.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has identified several key factors contributing to dropout rates in teacher development programs, including language barriers, economic challenges, mode of study, and personal commitments. The recommendations proposed aim to address these challenges and enhance the overall effectiveness of teacher development programs. By implementing these strategies, institutions can improve retention rates, support participants

in their professional development, and ultimately contribute to the broader goal of improving the quality of education through effective teacher preparation.

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