



Ashok Kumar Pandey

It was late 2016. Ashok Kumar Pandey, principal, Ahlcon International School (AIS), was sitting in his office. He was analysing teachers' feedback on various activities the school had undertaken for their overall development (see Exhibit 1). Pandey had specifically asked teachers whether they noticed any tangible changes in themselves that they could ascribe to various activities in the school, what major hurdles they faced in pursuing professional development and whether they had any suggestions. Going through the feedback, Pandey contemplated what the best way to move forward was.

BACKGROUND

After two decades as an educator in India and abroad, Pandey joined AIS as a principal in October 2003. He had the experience of working as a teacher, a section head and a principal in various settings. He read the works of educational thinkers and listened to the stories of legendary principals. All these made a lasting impression on him and shaped his thinking on the functioning of a school and a principal's role in the process.

Pandey realised that the teachers' quality fashioned the quality of educational experiences, inside the classroom or outside. But where would one find these *high*-quality teachers? Not many aspired to pursue teaching. Only a handful of high-calibre institutions granted professional teaching degrees. Pandey also felt that school principals acted more like administrators and not "pedagogical leaders". They had ceased to grow or explore new things and were insecure. Therefore, many schools had stopped "growing", and students missed the joy of learning.

In the next decade and a half, Pandey instituted several practices—formal and informal—at AIS, making it a unique place to be an educator. The school also made rapid progress in terms of enrolments, students' performance in the board exams and external awards received by teachers (see Exhibit 2).

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AT AIS

According to Pandey, maintaining a teacher's dignity was paramount. He stated that dignity had three aspects—human, economic and intellectual. Many AIS teachers felt they were treated in a dignified and professional way.

This focus on teacher dignity was evident right from a teacher's recruitment. The school ensured that a newly recruited teacher understood the values and work processes (see Exhibit 3). Teachers' salaries were as per government directives. Their wards studied at AIS and were

Prepared by Professor Ambrish Dongre, Ravi J Matthai Centre for Education Innovation at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad.

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charged fees at concessional rates, per the government policy. Good food was provided whenever teachers had to come to the school for some additional work or stay back. They were allowed to attend programmes at outside venues. In many instances, AIS took care of the conveyance and other needs. The school often sponsored its teachers to attend workshops and conferences. Pandey had a good sense of his teachers' strengths and weaknesses and did not hesitate from nominating teachers to attend specific workshops (see Exhibit 4). Given the difference in the timings of the primary and pre-primary sections, the school made crèche facilities available for pre-primary age-group children of the primary school teachers for an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon.

Pandey believed that if done transparently, within-organisation promotions made employees feel that their performance was being rewarded. An additional benefit of this strategy was that the school was not dependent on a few individuals. If a teacher retired or left the school, some people from the school could always fill that position. At AIS, a teacher joined the primary, middle or senior section as an assistant class teacher or class teacher, depending on their educational and professional qualifications. The school monitored their performance and gave them feedback. Once they settled into their roles, the management gave them additional responsibilities, such as a substitution, examination, class, assembly, or club coordinator and house in-charge. They could become a section coordinator (academic or extracurricular) and then a section head. Moreover, a teacher could move from the primary section to the middle section and then to the senior section if there were vacancies and the teacher possessed appropriate qualifications and experience (see Exhibit 5). In the 10 years between 2003 and 2013, 12 teachers were assigned senior leadership roles (i.e., section heads, academic coordinators and HoDs) or moved vertically within the organisation (i.e., from one section to another).

AIS developed its programme for in-house teacher development, INSET (In-Service Education and Training), which the teachers designed after considering their needs and constraints (see Exhibit 6). AIS had a policy of making its teachers undergo five to seven days of in-service training every year. It collaborated with many national and international organisations for this purpose. As a teacher mentioned, "Teacher investment is Ahlcon's USP".

Pandey believed that creating avenues for professional growth beyond in-service professional development programmes and within-organisation promotions was important. Experienced teachers were encouraged to become resource persons for programmes carried out by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and other organisations. Pandey's another important initiative was developing textbooks for pre-primary and primary classes. The books were customised for AIS students and were colourful and interactive. Pandey mentioned that these books, developed thematically instead of a sequence of chapters, were inspired by the National Curriculum Framework. The framework recommended "the softening of subject boundaries so that children can get a taste of integrated knowledge and the joy of understanding" (NCF 2005). Pandey felt that since the teachers wrote the books, their sense of responsibility and satisfaction while teaching increased. More importantly, reading books written by their teachers was an exhilarating experience for the students.

Pandey collaborated with Arijit Ghosh, who headed school programmes at the British Council, to develop the teachers' action research skills. Thirteen AIS teachers across sections came up with questions that were relevant and important to them and conducted research with Ghosh's help over six months. Some of the research questions were as follows: (a) Why are boys not keen to participate in dance? (b) How can logical reasoning be improved through

homework? (c) How can language comprehension improve mathematical comprehension? (d) Can stress management activities and workshops help reduce academic and peer pressure among students?

Pandey noted that digital technology was becoming important in education. He also realised that “learners are *digital natives*, while teachers are *digital migrants* who have not yet mastered various available tools or grasped fully how these tools can be leveraged”. AIS partnered with Microsoft, a leading technology provider, in 2015. Microsoft had come up with training modules for various tools available in Microsoft aimed specifically at teachers, free of cost. Initially, 20 teachers signed up for these courses. But then the numbers increased quickly, leading to more points, more badges and more certifications from Microsoft. Pandey encouraged and motivated teachers further through within-section and across-section competitions to earn points and badges. By March 2019, almost all AIS teachers had earned Microsoft credentials. The school became a Microsoft Showcase School (see Exhibit 7).

The school also encouraged its teachers to seek certification from the Centre for Teacher Accreditation (CENTA) right from the time CENTA came to India. Thirty AIS teachers took part in CENTA’s first Teaching Professionals’ Olympiad in December 2015. One of the teachers topped the category of primary section teachers and secured the top-ten rank at an all-India level. This achievement opened the door for her to attend a conference in Dubai in March 2016.

Twenty teachers from various sections also completed a rigorous programme on Global Career Counselling offered by the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Extension. The school not only played an essential role in negotiating with the agency to make the course more affordable for the teachers but also paid the lump sum amount on behalf of the teachers, while teachers paid in instalments. In addition, the topper’s fee was completely waived off by the school.

Pandey developed several ways in which teacher performance could be recognised and appreciated. If a teacher did something commendable, their name was announced in the school assembly. AIS also instituted awards for its teachers under various categories to cover as many teachers as possible: (1) Best Class Teacher award, (2) Best Co-Scholastic Teacher award, (3) Best Teacher award, (4) Exemplary Contribution award, (5) Rising Star award, (6) Voracious Reader award and (7) You are Noticed award.

The Best Co-Scholastic Teacher award was meant for teachers of the subjects not usually regarded as mainstream, such as sports, music and dance. The Rising Star award was meant for teachers who had joined in the previous five years. To apply for the Best Class Teacher award, one should have been a class teacher for at least three years. The criteria used to decide the winners generally covered excellence, professional recognition, improvement in pedagogy, other innovations and student outcomes (cognitive and noncognitive). However, the criteria varied by the type of award. As Pandey explained, they could also indicate to the teachers what was expected of them. For example, technological enhancement was a criterion for all the award categories.

In addition to material or tangible growth, Pandey emphasised “inner growth” – the feeling of being better or doing better than yesterday. Pandey often asked his teachers, “What are you doing other than teaching?” (see Exhibit 8). He encouraged his teachers to read and write, by suggesting titles to be read and asking them for their opinions about the books. Many teachers

wrote for newspapers and magazines. Pandey himself was a regular contributor to educational affairs in print and digital media.

Anybody who attended a workshop outside the school had to present the learning to their colleagues. Many teachers felt this practice helped them improve their communication and public speaking skills. The school had been active in establishing exchange programmes with schools abroad and utilised them well to send many students and teachers abroad. Some teachers had also represented AIS at international conferences

To share knowledge, experiences and best practices, all the section heads and their academic and extracurricular coordinators met once a month to discuss innovative practices and their results. Section-wise newsletters were started, and Saturdays were reserved for section-wise “weekly workshops” where teachers took the lead in deliberating on topics that mattered to them professionally. A new teacher was carefully groomed in lesson planning, classroom management and student notebook correction. Teachers showing some initiatives were encouraged and supported. For instance, one teacher often used his laptop and school projector to teach at a time when such an approach was a novelty. AIS installed a projector in his classroom and facilitated a loan for a better laptop. Pandey also encouraged his teachers to join social media and various online *communities of practice*.

Pandey often gave additional responsibilities to certain teachers to help them understand the interdependencies in a school and develop their administration, time and personnel management, coordination, and communication skills. He also encouraged selected teachers to obtain higher education, apply for prestigious scholarships for further studies or visits abroad or undergo a relevant course. Many teachers noted that obtaining permission for pursuing higher academic qualifications was relatively easy. The teacher, however, had to plan well so that children’s learning did not suffer. Pandey himself attended some massive open online courses (MOOCs), and almost everybody at AIS had done MOOCs for either professional or personal development. Many teachers were on Twitter and various other social media platforms.

How did the school raise resources for various teacher development activities? It adopted several ways. The management set aside a 3–5% share of school revenues for such activities. For some activities, teachers contributed upfront. For other activities, the school invested initially, while teachers repaid in multiple instalments over time. Sometimes, external organisations (such as foundations, trusts, universities and embassies) also sponsored AIS teachers.

Sceptics may ask, *what if we invest in teachers and they leave?* According to Pandey, the cost of not investing in teachers because of the fear that some of them might leave and thus waste the investment is higher than investing in teachers; retention rates were probably lower in the organisations that encouraged their employees to learn and grow. “The extent of fulfilment, personal growth and self-worth are the new norms of employee motivation”. Moreover, as he noted, the reputation of an institution that cared for its employees and encouraged them to grow was likely to attract new teachers, creating a virtuous cycle.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Reflecting on the feedback, Pandey contemplated what the best way to move forward was. Should he continue what he had been doing so far? Or was any change needed? If yes, what would that change be?

Exhibit 1
Summary of Feedback From Teachers on Various Initiatives Undertaken by Ahlcon International School for Teacher Development

Question 1: Please describe any tangible personal and professional changes in you due to various professional development programmes conducted at Ahlcon International School (AIS).

Most of the teachers responded in the affirmative and mentioned the following:

- My knowledge of innovative pedagogic strategies has improved, and I can use them in the classroom.
- I have acquired the knowledge of various technological tools and can use them in the teaching–learning process.
- I have a better understanding of students' problems, and I am confident that I can solve them.
- My confidence and communication, collaboration and time management skills have improved.
- From an ordinary teacher, I have become a passionate professional.
- I do not fear responsibilities and leadership.
- I have realised that I am responsible for my growth.

Table 1
Changes Due to Professional Development Programmes As Reported by the Teachers

Parameter	Percentage of teachers reporting
Teaching practices have improved	
Considerably	65
Noticeably	34
Personal and professional development has happened	
Considerably	65
Noticeably	33
Communication with parents has improved	
Considerably	68
Noticeably	28
Teachers have developed leadership qualities	
Considerably	38
Noticeably	57
Teachers appreciate the culture of learning	
Considerably	73
Noticeably	25

Note: Considerable = 5 on a scale of 1 to 5; Noticeable = 4 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Question 2: What significant hurdles have you faced in pursuing your professional development?

Table 2
Hurdles Faced in Pursuing Professional Development As Reported by the Teachers

Hurdle	Percentage of teachers reporting it as a significant hurdle
Time constraint (work–life balance)	87
Financial constraint (whenever some investment is required)	16
Lack of incentives	16
Support from management and leadership	NIL

Question 3: What suggestions do you have to make professional development programmes (PDPs) better?

- The school is already doing so much for teachers' professional and personal growth, but since we are lifelong learners, the school should continue with its practice and make it more flexible.
- I am looking forward to attending workshops for improving my intrapersonal skills.
- The school should distribute international-level projects evenly to give equal opportunities to everyone.
- Teachers must devote a 1-hour session to professional development. Management must plan weekly sessions for apprising teachers of the latest developments in education.
- Meditation, well-being and self-care sessions should be included.
- Learning is a lifelong process. PDP should be continued as regular feedback and reflection to help teachers meet their professional needs more effectively.
- More PDPs should be on inclusive education and how to handle differently abled students.
- Professional development and goal setting go hand in hand. It can seem complicated to schedule the time to devote to courses and seminars, but the extra time is worth it to become the best teacher we can be.
- My school is already working very hard to enhance teachers' professional development, and it must continue with its endeavour.
- Instead of suggestions, I would like to put forth a request—Kindly keep on motivating us by raising the bars of your expectations.
- More PDPs may be organised especially for activity and sports teachers.
- In my opinion, we can collaborate with the teachers of all the other departments, i.e., primary, middle and senior. We can then get an idea about our student's development more holistically.
- Though I have done many courses and attended workshops, I feel what I lack is a perfect plan. Till now, whatever came my way, I kept on doing, but nothing structured or planned like modules or courses. I feel that I need to reflect on this planning, as a time restriction is always there. We always have minimal time because of many commitments.
- I believe PDP has gone a long way in evolving the teachers and transforming the education process. It has encompassed all the stakeholders and helped them identify the meaning and crux of education for desired societal changes. It can further strengthen how to better manage time and energy and develop a growth mindset in everyone.

Source: Documents shared by Ashok Kumar Pandey

Exhibit 2
AIS Over the Years

Year	Total no. of students	Pass percentage	School average (%)
2008	62	100	73.89
2009	84	98.81	80.36
2010	129	100	80.71
2011	113	100	80.46
2012	124	100	81.28
2013	136	100	84.21
2014	135	100	85.51
2015	158	100	87.42
2016	180	100	86.21

Number of awards (national level) received = 8

Source: School documents

Exhibit 3
Experiences of a New Teacher at AIS

T1 was a social science teacher. She joined AIS primarily to avoid a two-hour commute to her previous school and because of AIS's reputation for its focus on teacher development. First, a subject expert interviewed her, and then she was shortlisted for a written exam. The written exam was focused on the specific subject, pedagogy-related aspects and her understanding of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It was followed by a test on her information and communication technology skills and a demo lesson. Then, the section head and finally the principal interviewed her. She was selected.

The first week of her joining was mostly the induction process. The head of the department (HoD) familiarised her with the processes and work culture. The HoD also instructed her on correcting notebooks and developing and implementing lesson plans. Initially, she was given substitution classes, but she was slowly transitioned toward her classes. She said that a lot of work went into figuring out what activities to conduct and how to implement them in the classroom. Her colleagues helped her think through these activities and directed her to consider the activities from a student's point of view. The summer homework they gave the students had taken them a one-and-half month of discussions.

She was also nominated to be part of the "Technology Cohort". As part of the cohort, she had to explore online communities of practice and then make a presentation to other cohort members. She was encouraged to take courses from Microsoft. She also joined and became active on Twitter. She had been given additional responsibilities as well.

The first few months made her realise that there was so much to learn. This experience was dramatically different from her previous stints—well-thought-out plans, execution, focus on making learning exciting for students, emphasis on technology and focus on academic and other aspects of student personality. She started enjoying her work. To put in her own words, "Maybe I am a perfect fit for this profession".

Source: Interviews conducted with the teachers

Exhibit 4

Improving Question Papers Through Item Design

T3 joined AIS as a math teacher in the middle section (grades 6 to 8). Soon, she was given an examination coordinator's responsibility, which primarily involved overseeing the process of setting the question papers for grades 6 to 8. T3 observed that the quality of the question paper should be improved, and she communicated it to her section in-charge, T4. But it was unclear how it could be done systematically. After a few days, she was informed that a reputed testing company was organising an intense 12-week weekend-only course on item design. T3 and another teacher, T5, attended the course. It was pretty exhaustive. They worked in school on weekdays and then attended the course on weekends. There were assignments as well. T3, in fact, was adjudged one of the best performers in the course. Once the course was completed, T3 and T5 conducted a full-day workshop on item design for other AIS teachers, a typical AIS practice. Thus, other teachers also became familiar with some of the key concepts of item design. Those 12–13 weeks were very stressful for both teachers—They had to manage schoolwork and the household and also this course on weekends. But now, looking back at those days, they were happy and had a sense of achievement. It motivated them further. From the school's point of view, changes in line with item design were incorporated in question papers set for internal school exams.

Source: Interviews conducted with the teachers

Exhibit 5

Within-Organisation Promotions

T2 joined AIS as a primary teacher in 2001. After working for eight years and managing various responsibilities (science coordinator, exam coordinator, academic coordinator, to name a few), she was promoted to the middle section in 2009 as a trained graduate teacher. She became a class teacher in 2010. In 2011, she became the Environment Club coordinator. She, along with other teachers and students, executed many projects. These projects, aimed at raising awareness about the environment, involved collaborations with reputed research and nongovernmental organisations, government departments and embassies, and were widely recognised. These activities translated into a visit to Cologne, Germany, on a Teacher Exchange programme in 2016 and a fellowship to visit the United States for six weeks.

She enrolled in a master's (correspondence) programme in 2014. She intended to improve her subject knowledge and obtain a promotion. The journey was difficult. In addition to the coursework, she had to stay away from home for a one-and-half months to complete the required number of contact classes and practical sessions. Moreover, her daughter was in the 10th grade. But her planning and hard work, a supportive family and support from school ensured that she secured her master's degree. She used her earned leaves, and the school obtained the services of a substitute teacher to take care of her work in the school. She planned to apply to the higher secondary section when a vacancy arises.

Source: Interviews conducted with the teachers

Exhibit 6

INSET Programme—In-Service Education and Training

AIS always emphasised investment in teachers. Teachers' continuous professional development, therefore, was paramount. AIS's middle section developed a robust, relevant, realistic and scalable professional development programme for teachers. Eventually, the programme encompassed all the sections.

The first step was *needs analysis*. A questionnaire was administered to the teachers to have their opinion on the training required for different competencies, classified under (a) core competencies, (b) basic skills and (c) integration of technology. Once teachers' responses were received and analysed and the needs identified, the next step was to decide the scope, objectives, outcomes and outputs. The outcomes were divided into three levels: (a) *Level 1* included training programmes that focused on teachers' personalised growth and development (self-improvement or SELF). (b) *Level 2* included programmes focusing on innovation, leadership and communication skills (SELF+). (c) *Level 3* focused on training modules including collaboration, identifying learning styles, etc. (BEYOND). The next step was to figure out who would deliver these programmes. Teachers could take the lead in delivering some programmes, and parents could also be approached for some programmes. Finally, external persons were invited to a consultation with Pandey. Then, the other details of logistics were worked out.

Source: Interviews conducted with the teachers

Exhibit 7

Technology for All Through “Technology Cohort”

A reputed institution in the city had organised a workshop on the use of technology in education. Pandey sent two AIS teachers for this workshop. He also asked each section head to identify three or four technologically savvy teachers from their respective sections. Once back from the workshop, the two teachers gave a presentation on various technological tools that could be used for this “technology cohort”. Pandey requested each teacher in the cohort to select one tool of their choice, explore it in detail and make a presentation on that tool after a week. This process would ensure that one teacher was pretty good at that tool. The next plan was to take these tools to all the teachers and then incorporate them into teaching–learning processes. Thus, in a short time, AIS's entire body of teachers and students would be comfortable with a wide array of technological tools for teaching, learning, sharing and collaboration.

Source: Interviews conducted with the teachers

Exhibit 8
From a Teacher to a Professor via Fulbright Scholarship

T6 joined AIS a couple of years after Pandey. T6 had a postgraduate degree in Physics and had worked as a teacher for over five years before joining AIS. His AIS experience was quite different from the previous ones. His background, teaching skills and experience coincided with what AIS was looking for, and AIS appointed him Physics HoD in the first year itself. On Pandey's advice, he enrolled in a B.Ed programme in 2007. It was a lot of hard work, but his dedication and support from school helped him obtain this important professional qualification.

He was also given various other responsibilities in the school. Given T6's interest in science and technology, Pandey urged him to apply for Fulbright Scholarship, a prestigious scholarship that allowed outstanding students, academicians and professionals in India to study, research and teach in the United States. Even though he was selected that year, he could not go. Pandey encouraged and guided him to apply the next year again. He was successful and spent one year in the United States. The time was spent writing a monograph detailing how traditional Indian games could be used to teach Physics, the seeds of which were sown during his stint at AIS. He also spent a semester at the University of Maryland. He was full of enthusiasm. Within a few months after coming back, Pandey informed him about a two-year master's course in educational technology offered by a private university. Pandey also managed to provide some sponsorship through the school to help T6 enrol and complete the programme. These endeavours made T6 aware of various possibilities. He sat Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), joined a doctoral programme in 2015 and obtained a doctoral degree in educational psychology in 2020. As of 2022, he was a faculty at one of the renowned universities in North India.

Source: Interviews conducted with the teachers