

Pre-service Teacher Education Rethinking the Engagement with Schools in the Two-year B.Ed. Programme

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Abstract

This paper is a reflective piece on enhancing the pre-service teachers' engagement with schools, which, it is argued, will help them arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the school system while developing connections between theory and practice. It is proposed that this requires the pre-service teacher education institutions to re-envision the school observation and school internship programmes spread over two years of the B.Ed. curriculum in order to ensure that teachers entering the school system are ready for the myriad demands they are likely to face in schools.

INTRODUCTION

The teacher education programme is currently in the process of transformation. The two-year B.Ed. curriculum forwarded by National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) is designed with the objective of grooming teachers as reflective practitioners, premised on the hope that these

teachers will be instrumental in leading quality enhancement at the school level. The school' is central to this scheme of things—both as the final sphere of transaction for the pre-service teachers once they have successfully completed the B.Ed. programme, and more significantly because the engagement with schools ought to form the

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basis of understanding that the pre-service teachers acquire as part of the B.Ed. curriculum. Therefore, it is imperative that the interface with schools, as part of the two-year B.Ed. programme is optimised. The switch from one-year B.Ed. programme to a two-year mode calls for re-envisioning the B.Ed. curriculum including the interface with schools. The two-year window offers enough scope for utilising this interface for theory building, while establishing the much-needed connect between theory and practice. This paper is an endeavour to examine the need for modification and suggest possible processes that can help in sending out teachers who are better geared to engage with the challenges of the contemporary education system.

EXPECTATIONS FROM IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Teachers are called upon to access a variety of knowledge in the various roles that they assume at school. As teachers are responsible for negotiating the discipline-based understanding with their learners, they need the content knowledge from the discipline of their choice, the knowledge related to the pedagogy of the disciplinary areas to arrive at the appropriate method of engaging the learners with each new topic/theme being transacted, knowledge of the principles of psychology to address motivational/reinforcement issues, along with factoring in individual differences. An understanding and

application of this knowledge would optimise the learning environment in the class. Along with this, teachers need to access knowledge pertaining to philosophical basis of education to negotiate the working of the school curriculum, relevance of the methods adopted, nature of discipline being negotiated, and its implications for the pedagogic choices being made. Teachers while transacting in a classroom need to constantly engage with the sociological underpinnings and implications of contexts in order to situate the learners in their respective contexts while striving to make them more equitable and neutral as individuals. Further, the teacher needs to situate the processes related to school education in a larger socio-historical context in order to identify the actual goals that need to be met.

This tall order is made even more complex by the multiple roles that the teacher is called upon to assume—this includes the roles of the subject expert, a facilitator of knowledge construction for each learner present in the class, a role model, who is human, yet comes across as an ‘ideal’, a guide, a counsellor, a surrogate parent who would look out for each learner as an individual, analyse their strengths and weaknesses and help them facilitate the process of self-actualisation in the best possible manner, to the best of their individual abilities. All these roles call upon the teacher to access knowledge pertaining to a variety of disciplines,

and need to be undertaken within the ambit of the school system—a system which is constant, and yet fluid.

The 'constant' aspects of the school system are those, which are a part and parcel of every school (i.e., constant across schools)—principal, department heads, timetable in charge, administrative staff, parents, co-curricular activities and other such processes that are synonymous with the school system. The aspects which add fluidity to this are usually related to the nature and type of organisation, the school philosophy, the larger goals that define its working, the work ethics being followed and reinforced, the processes being adopted and fostered, the nature of such processes, the working styles of the individuals at the helm along with the organisational ethos that has emerged and is being nurtured.

Teacher education institutions have their task cut out as teacher preparation almost calls for a magic wand that would bring about this almost magical transformation in those seeking to become teachers.

SCOPE OF ROLE PREPAREDNESS IN THE TWO-YEAR B.ED. PROGRAMME

The first year of the two-year B.Ed. programme engages the pre-service teachers with a range of foundation courses *viz.* Education in Contemporary India, Human Development, Diversity and Learning, Conceptual Foundations of Education, Gender, School and Society, and Knowledge, Disciplines and School Subjects, along with

detailed pedagogy courses. Therefore, theoretical preparedness in terms of what must be 'known' to a teacher before entering the classroom is a definite possibility.

However, the readiness of teachers to utilise this knowledge instantly in the class is dependent on the connections they are able to draw between theory and practice, along with the internalisation of the concepts learnt. Therefore, mere familiarity with the educational implications of theories and concepts may only be the first step in acquiring the much-needed efficacy as a teacher. The above discussion calls for devising means to ensure that the pre-service teachers develop a nuanced understanding of the variegated school contexts and juxtapose theory-based learning with this. Though most teacher educators refer to the context when negotiating theory, it misses the target audience, who seem to view it, at best, from the lens of their own personal experience. This gap could possibly be bridged through a careful negotiation of the interface with schools.

It is expected that the in-service teachers would need to develop an insight into the functioning of 'school as a system' in order to function effectively. For this, one cannot rely only on the pre-service teachers' own experiential reality as a learner during the school years. It is surprising that the organisational aspect of schools does not find a mention in the NCTE curriculum framework for the two-year

B.Ed.—especially in terms of course work and scheme of examinations, thereby indicating that the school-based intervention (observation and internship) perforce must lead to an understanding of the school system, as it would be extremely difficult to function as a teacher without this understanding. In the light of this, it is imperative that the interface with schools is structured and undertaken in a manner to facilitate a nuanced understanding of the school system.

As per the NCTE curriculum framework, the pre-service teachers are to engage in—

- School observation programme for a period of at least four weeks in the first year.
- School experience programme for a period of 16 weeks, where the pre-service teachers need to visit the schools for four days each week and engage in different school activities, including teaching.

It follows then, that this component spread over two years needs to provide enough scope to the pre-service teachers to derive an understanding of the school system, which at one level is constant and yet incorporates variations/modifications in different set-ups. This interface with schools can prove to be the bedrock of the pre-service teachers' entry into the field of education and it needs to be undertaken in a cohesive and comprehensive manner so as to feed into the process of theory-building/theorisation as well as the praxis thereof. This paper posits that

there is a need for scheduling the school observation and the school experience programmes with the objective of qualitatively improving and maximising the output for the pre-service teachers while weaving in components of the foundational and pedagogic aspects of the two-year B.Ed. curriculum. It is contended that this experience would facilitate a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the school system along with a conscious effort to recognise and pragmatically analyse the various roles that teachers are called upon to play.

POSSIBILITIES FOR THE SCHOOL OBSERVATION PROGRAMME

It is my contention, in the light of the above discussion, that the school observation programme, to be undertaken in the first year of B.Ed. as outlined by NCTE may be organised in two parts. The first segment comprising four to six days could essentially engage the pre-service teachers in comprehending the school as a system. This could gradually lead to their engagement with interactions within the realm of the school (comprehending the tiers within the school/nature of leadership and possible means of exercising authority; ways of disseminating information, home-school continuum and other such aspects of a school) and finally, the pre-service teachers need to engage with the transactions within the classroom and their implications.

As mentioned earlier, teachers are called upon to access knowledge from different realms at any given point, therefore it is imperative that the school observation programme guides the pre-service teachers in drawing the needed connections. This may be undertaken by getting them to initially observe classes guided by either open-ended questions or checklists that orient them to nuances of the discipline being studied by them. The observations based on these are likely to precipitate discussions in classes and lead pre-service teachers to the theoretical concepts being undertaken. The second part of this can be negotiated during the staggered/deferred part of the school observation programme, where the pre-service teachers assimilate the reality in the light of the principles/concepts that have already been negotiated in the class.

This can be achieved through thoughtful planning and execution of the school observation and internship programme. A few considered suggestions follow.

- Teacher education institutions usually orient the pre-service teachers on the anvil of the school observation programme and then leave them to their own or the school's resources to negotiate their understanding of the school system. The practice of leaving pre-service teachers to observe on their own needs to give way to juxtaposition of guided observation with the process

of critical reflection in order to facilitate their understanding of the school system. An illustrative example of the pre-service teachers' understanding regarding the functioning of the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) body of a school is given here.

If left to their own devices, only a fraction of the pre-service teachers are likely to arrive at this nuanced understanding on their own. Therefore, a shared understanding among teacher educators needs to be arrived at about the constant components of the school system; a study of the variation of these will yield an understanding of the fluidity inherent in the system.

- Pre-service teachers can be asked to draw the general profile of learners coming to the two schools from a sociological perspective. This can be drawn on the basis of an observation schedule, along with structured/unstructured interviews of the learners from different classes. This could be honed to develop an understanding of the issues faced by the school learners on an everyday basis, and could be further utilised in the teacher education classrooms to develop a perspective on the multiplicity of learner profiles of urban Indian school learners. An insight into their day-to-day travails could yield information on efficacy of current policies, schemes, epistemological and pedagogic assumptions and a range of such issues.

Respondent: _____
 Schools you have been to _____

Given below are certain aspects of the Parent Teacher Association of a school. Answer the following based on your interactions with the school coordinator, teachers and students with respect to the two schools you visit as part of the school observation programme.

1. Is the PTA body nominated or elected?
2. What is the composition of the PTA body?
3. How frequently does it meet?
4. What spheres of school does it have a bearing on?
5. Scope of interface with:
 - The school management
 - School teachers
 - School children
 - Other parents
6. What role does it play?
7. How does it function?
8. How is it different from the PTA body of the school that you studied in?
9. How is it different from the other school visited by you as part of the school observation programme?

- Detailed discussions and focussed interviews of teachers could lead them to comprehend the diversity of each school context, as also the possible processes adopted by teachers to address these. This could pave the way to a critical understanding of the school system.
- Pre-service teachers can be asked to observe the conduct of teachers *vis-à-vis* the different groups represented in the class—boys, girls, EWS (economically weaker section), learners from different socio-cultural groups and so on—and observe exactly what are the underlying messages being given and how do these affect the personality of individual learners. These observations can become the take-off point for the discussions when negotiating gender, socialisation and allied

phenomena and even individual differences.

- In order to understand boys and girls as learners, the pre-service teachers could be given a set of open-ended questions, the answers to which would facilitate an understanding of the gender differences and the attitude of significant others when responding to everyday issues. This may also facilitate an understanding of the possible role played by the school in reinforcing/neutralising views regarding stereotypes.
- In order to help them appreciate the differences in the nature of disciplines, checklists could be developed, the responses to which would also help them arrive at the appropriateness of the pedagogic choices made.
- Usually the peer observation schedules engage the learners with relatively surface-level observations, without focusing on the underlying assumptions behind the choice of pedagogy and the nature of the discipline. It is imperative that these, along with other intricacies, are aspects that get the attention of the pre-service teachers.

Therefore, the school observation programme can be used to initiate reflection as well as to consolidate debates initiated in the class. This would ensure internalisation of concepts on the basis of

critical observations. Unstructured observation towards the beginning of the course may leave their vision blinkered to perceive beyond the limitations of their own context and experiences.

This first phase of guided observation ought to prepare them for the prevalent discourses on education, which may lead to several questions, some of which may be negotiated in different classes, while some may require a more concerted effort once they come back to school, in the shape of projects—integrated or otherwise. A few sample projects could be:

- Based on your observation of the practices in the two schools that you were a part of, what understanding have you been able to develop *vis-à-vis* issues related to equity/work education as being taken up in the schools. What suggestions would you give in order to improve the situation?
- Observing and interacting with school learners and teachers to identify barriers to inclusion in all respects; suggesting ways to improve the situation.
- Develop a profile of girls as learners based on your observations and interactions with them. Try to identify if there is a difference in the profiles of girl learners studying in single gender and co-educational schools.
- Based on your understanding of NCF–2005, identify processes

and practices adopted by schools that were informed by the recommendations of the NCF. How effectively are these being practiced?

- What were the underlying assumptions in the grammar plans observed by you? Discuss on the basis of the ESL (English as a Second Language) theory negotiated by you.
- List your observations regarding the teaching of English as practiced in the two schools you went to. What suggestions would you give to each one in order to optimise language learning? Cite reasons situated in ESL theory for each of your suggestions.
- Develop a detailed profile of an ideal teacher on the basis of the theory negotiated by you. Critically analyse through a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of your personality, exactly what modifications do you need to effect in order to be effective in the current scenario.

A glance at these sample projects indicates that an engagement with these would enhance the understanding, giving greater scope for internalisation and integration of concepts. At times, such projects and even guided observation may give rise to a sense of dissonance between reality as it should be and as it is, thereby egging the pre-service teachers to find solutions to such issues. At other times, it may

lead to insights that strengthen the negotiated concepts. This would yield greater scope for critical reflection of processes and phenomena within a theory-based frame of reference.

RECONCEPTUALISING THE SCHOOL INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

The school observation programme leads to the school internship programme in the second year, which is of a duration of 16 weeks approximately, where the pre-service teacher has the scope of engaging with all the aforementioned roles that teachers often are called upon to flow into almost indeterminately. This needs to be conceptualised afresh, with a re-negotiation of the role of the school as well as that of the pre-service teacher. For this, there needs to be a closer liaison with schools that are a part of the internship programme, with greater sense of trust and a much more responsible attitude on part of the pre-service teacher. The previous understanding of engagement of the pre-service teacher functioning in limited capacities needs to give way to a much more dedicated and involved engagement, where their role calls upon for much more than the negotiation of discipline-based knowledge through adoption of the 'right' pedagogic means. They can be attached to at least one subject teacher and a coordinator in order to comprehend and practice the intricate roles. The current status of the pre-service teachers is that of

an interloper who is being tolerated because of the compulsions of the B.Ed. curriculum. At times, the regular subject teachers renegotiate even the concepts transacted by them. The pre-service teachers need to be given more holistic roles and be held accountable for the processes they are mediating. They need to arrive at a critical understanding of the multiple roles that each teacher is performing; beginning with the responsibilities of a class teacher of preparing learners for competitions to organising events in the school, to sharing the conflicts that teachers are often faced with when trying to modify learner attitudes and so on. At the same time, they need to engage with the intricacies involved in engaging with learners as a group/class and engaging with them at an individual level, without rocking the boat. They must be given a taste of interacting with the parents in order to get a nuanced understanding of their future roles as teachers. This could be facilitated by being attached to a specific teacher so that the pre-service teachers are able to identify the multiple roles associated with each individual functioning as a teacher. This experience, on the part of the pre-service teachers, needs to be further augmented by their association with the school counsellor, examination incharge, resource room coordinator and activities/sports coordinators to help them arrive at a more complete picture of school as an organisation and the possible roles they can be

called upon to assume. In fact, they ought to feel as significant a part of the school as the regular teacher is.

Examining closely the responsibilities of subject teachers, one realises that effective teaching incorporates the completion of the learning cycle, which would comprise pedagogic planning in the light of the complexity of the subject matter and the status of their learners' understanding *vis-à-vis* the subject, facilitating an understanding of the concept, providing enough scope to learners for internalisation and application of the concept, assessing through multiple means the extent of their knowledge, identifying learning gaps, building bridges in order to help them arrive at a fuller understanding and integrating that segment of knowledge with other concepts and disciplines. It is this completeness of experience that all pre-service teachers must engage with. This process is likely to bring to the fore their own limitations—pedagogic and otherwise. This, when viewed through the prism of reflection, would take them in the direction of self-improvement.

The pre-service teachers' perception of their role may be further reinforced through the creation of a portfolio of their own as teachers, which includes a record of all that they have been called upon to do, their perceptions of the assumed roles along with a critical self-assessment of these. There could be segments where they come up with suggestions

for the self and a record of efforts made by them in this regard. This could lead to the pre-service teachers becoming more responsible and accountable.

CONCLUSION

Modifying our perspective to view pre-service teacher education programmes in sync with the demands posed on the in-service teachers can lead to the evolution of teachers who are prepared for the multiple roles that the contemporary school education system seeks of them. One way of achieving this could be developing the pre-service teachers' comprehension of school as a system through

juxtaposing guided observation and critical reflection during the school observation programme. A thoughtfully organised intervention with the schools can pave the way for improved connections between theory and practice. Therefore, this component of the two-year B.Ed. programme can prove to be the bedrock of experiences, resulting in maximising the learning that pre-service teachers accrue and can go a long way in transforming them into sensitive and reflective professionals, who are the future hope of a country that needs to harness the human resource optimally.

REFERENCE

NCTE. 2014. Curriculum Framework: Two-year B.Ed. Programme. Retrieved from ncte-india.org/Curriculum Framework/B.Ed. Curriculum.pdf