

A Study on the Professional Development of Newly Inducted Teachers through Teachers' Talk and Narratives

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Abstract

The pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes should be considered as inseparable components of any teacher preparation programme and viewed in totality in the context of schooling of children in variety of situations. These programmes are not an end for developing professional competency among teachers rather teacher preparation is a continuous life long learning process. This is also viewed as a two-way mutual exercise as teachers and trainers both learn from each other.

OVERVIEW

The professional growth and development of a teacher influences quality of education to a great extent. With a constant flux of change in all spheres of life, the knowledge of today becomes obsolete tomorrow, thus the role of teachers and teacher preparation programmes in such a scenario is very crucial. Apart from teachers' in-service and pre-service inputs, many more programmes have been evolved at various levels to enhance the professional growth of teachers.

The National Policy on Education, 1986, (revised in 1992) has emphasised

teacher education as an ongoing, continuous process and its pre-service and in-service components as inseparable.

The professional preparation of teachers through pre-service training has been recognised to be crucial for the qualitative improvement of education since the 1960s (Kothari Commission, 1964-66), but very few concrete steps have been taken in the last four decades to operationalise this. Many committees and commissions observed that "...what obtained in the majority of our Training Colleges and Training Institutes is woefully

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inadequate...” The Chattopadhyaya Commission recommended a four-year integrated course for the secondary as well as the elementary teacher. The Yashpal Committee Report (1993) on Learning without Burden noted “...inadequate programmes of teacher preparation lead to unsatisfactory quality of learning in schools...” “The contents of the programme should be designed to ensure its relevance to the changing needs of school education. The emphasis in these programmes should be on enabling the trainees to acquire the ability for self-learning and independent thinking.” (Position Paper, National Focus group on Teacher Education Curriculum Renewal, 2005.)

The major indicator of quality of training is its relevance to the needs of teachers. However, most of the training programmes are not organised according to the needs of the teachers and the resources are not utilised properly. Ironically, a number of important areas like activity-based learning, joyful learning, classroom management for large sized classes and multigrade situations, team teaching, cooperative and collaborative learning which require demonstration and participatory training are generally neglected and in most of the cases training is taken up through the lecture method only.

The Report of the National Commission on Teachers (1983-85) recommended that strategies used for in-service education must be

imaginative, bold and varied. The commission mooted the idea of Teachers' Centres that could function as “...a meeting place for teachers, located in a school that has resources that it would like to share with others... it is a forum where workshops of very practical nature are organised for teachers of all facilities and of all levels; it pools in the talent of all teachers of various schools who act as resource personnel for workshops and it arranges book fairs.”

The Acharya Ramamurthi Review Committee (1990) explicitly stated that “in-service and refresher courses should be related to the specific needs of the teachers. In-service education should take due care of the future needs of teacher growth; evaluation and follow-up should be part of the scheme.”

Most teacher education programmes fail to empower the teacher as an agent of change as they do not provide space for student teachers to reflect on their own experiences and assumptions as part of classroom discourse and enquiry. This is a fundamental change that can be facilitated through the NCERT curriculum renewal exercises. Learning is a divergent process that occurs through a variety of exposures and not necessarily through a common, singular exposure predecided by the teacher. It is essentially a participative process in which the

learner constructs her/his knowledge in her/his own ways through absorption, interaction, observation and reflection. In the process, the learner goes back and forth. The process, therefore, is not linear, it is rather spiral and thus complex in nature.

Teachers' professional development is a two-way process. Teachers who have the right to grow professionally at one end also have equal responsibility at the other end to utilise their experiences for teaching children and developing a sense of ownership for their profession. In a broader sense, professional development is a continuous lifelong process which never ends as long as the teacher is in the teaching profession.

What emerges from the above discussion is that the professional growth of teachers is not a sum of pre-service and in-service experiences but should be need-based, in which she/he acquires from own talks, narratives, sharing of experiences, lessons learnt from the successful experiments of peer groups. In a broader sense, professional development implies strengthening, sharpening and updating professional competencies of teaching.

What do we mean by teachers' talk and narratives?

With the shifting of focus of elementary education from access, enrolment and retention to achieving quality

education, the role of schools, Block Resource Centres (BRCs), Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) is more proactive in developing professional growth of newly-inducted teachers. To realise this, various strategies are used by educationists. Narrative inquiry has become an increasingly more popular strategy in the field of education in the past few decades (1980-2000). 'Narrative skills' in the form of story (verbal, self-expression) have been prevalent in various spheres of Educational Psychology and Anthropology. They have also been adopted as a useful methodology to study teachers' knowledge. The narratives in education have been applied both as a research tool as well as a strategy in the professional development of teachers. Broadly, narrative is a way of understanding teachers' experiences. It is also viewed as 'study of making meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves', that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future.' (Connelly and Clandinin 1988). It is highlighted that through narrative inquiry, teachers would engage in a self-reflexive, reflective and dialectical process which contributes in the professional development of teachers at two levels. Firstly, it gives opportunities to teachers to learn through their own experiences (meta-learning) and secondly, it provides more scope for peer learning. In the field of educational research

narratives, teachers' talk, narrative inquiry and stories are used synonymously and interchangeably. A study entitled 'Role of story as an anecdote in constructing professional knowledge for beginning teachers', demonstrated that use of narratives helped the teachers to describe/elaborate the complex duties of their first year of teaching. A distinctive feature of their discussion was that they used narratives to organise and give meaning to their novice experiences and thus explored the possibilities of narrative inquiry for professional development and educational research.

The research studies recommended that research on teachers' work to be included more systematically in pre-service plan for the professional development of teachers. The major implications emerged from the study that teachers' own work and innovative experiences should be included in pre-service programmes so that teachers would not go into the profession blindly. On site support by experienced teachers to new teachers is absolutely essential. New teachers had no idea what type of mental and physical stress they had to face when they began teaching.

Rust, Frances O' Connel (1988) in qualitative analysis of teacher's professional conversations produced a rich picture of the complex learning at the heart of teaching. The study entitled 'Professional Conversations' highlighted that new teachers explore teaching

through conversations, stories and narratives. The findings showed that the new teachers after interacting with peers and experienced teachers showed considerable change in behaviour such as stopped yelling, asking solution of the problem than doing wrong answers, interacting more with students rather than calling them wrong, stopped blaming parents and children for failure, began to take interest in 'field trips', moved from asking 'what did you do' when students got into trouble, transforming energy from classroom management to students' learning. In conclusion, the answer lies in teachers' own stories in the ways that they have shaped themselves and the images of teaching-learning that they carry within themselves. Teacher educators' understanding of their work showed a successful gain in training experiences through conversations. They mentioned that "these stories show us whether our students are entering the teaching profession as competent teachers or as an advanced beginner or even a novice."

In the present research paper, the narratives and teachers' talk have been viewed both as a research tool in order to understand the teachers' professional knowledge (new teachers) and as a strategy or methodology to understand how these could help teachers to develop professional skills, particularly at the early stage of teaching.

The Study

The teachers' role in the entire cycle of teaching-learning is very crucial, it is imperative to understand the

'professional functioning' of a teacher while assessing the quality outputs. In the present scenario, it seems that the majority of teachers are not well prepared for their job as they are supposed to. Through trainings, both in-service and pre-service courses, they acquire theoretical information and get aligned to actual field situation. Various educational activities such as curriculum renewal, development of teaching-learning material, study visits, etc. which provide professional efficiency to teachers and enable them to attend to the task meaningfully are lacking in the teacher preparation courses. There is neither any interest on the part of the teachers nor any opportunities provided by the system to improve the professional abilities/efficiency among them.

Considering the above background and recognising the need for professional growth of teachers, data were collected from two groups of teachers, one who had just joined the profession (having one to two years experience) and other from the teachers who had a long successful experience in this profession.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the reasons for mismatch between teacher education programme and actual field situation of practising teacher.
- To judge how teachers' own stories/narratives/parallel stories improve their professional growth in the beginning years.

- To derive some lucid and viable lessons from narratives of successful teachers for further improvement of teacher education programmes.

Research Design

The research study was essentially a field study. The conversational methodology, i.e., structured and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with teachers were used to address the issues. In the present study, the purpose was to look closely at a particular case (teacher) and the focus was on selecting an information-rich case for in-depth study.

The sample consisted of three categories of the elementary schools, i.e., government, government-aided schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) of Delhi city in all nine schools; three in each category were included in the sample. In the study, the first group of teachers (fifteen) included were recently appointed teachers who had teaching experience of 0-2 years. The second group of teachers (fifteen) included were of those having more than 15 years successful experience of teaching and who undertook teaching profession as a challenge. Both the groups of teachers were identified and thus the sampling was purposive stratified as it covered all the three categories of schools, i.e., government, private and Kendriya Vidyalayas. All the teachers were interviewed, two sets of interview tools were developed both for the beginners and experienced teachers. The focus

group discussions were also conducted for both categories of teachers separately to give them opportunity to address weak and strong points of their job.

Findings of the study

The major findings of the study were based on the discussions with teachers keeping in view the objectives of the study.

1. What are the reasons of mismatch between teacher education programme and actual field situation of practising teachers?

The teachers, who were interviewed, reported that they were not prepared adequately to attend tasks meaningfully. Almost all the new teachers reported that they had no idea how difficult teaching would be when they actually would enter the field. The qualitative data compiled from teachers' interview and focus group discussion suggested a number of reasons for the mismatch. The teachers who received training during pre-service period and later taught in schools found that the working conditions were totally different. For example, most of the teachers received pre-service training in monograde classrooms, while 80 per cent teachers had to teach in multigrade classrooms. Similarly, they had taught during practice teaching in the classroom where Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) is below 40. While in their job they had to manage larged sized classroom where sometimes children's

number is more than 70-80. Thus, organising and keeping track of learning activities of a large number of children is very difficult. The multiple role places them in paradoxical circumstances.

The teachers' response also suggested that the focus of their practice teaching programme was centred around completing the prescribed number of lessons instead of providing proper feedback. Space for replicability of learnt experiences in pre-service course was also lacking as reported by them. The various transactional methods and approaches such as problem-solving method, child-centred activity method, project method, role-play which were part of curriculum of pre-service course in theory found no scope to apply these in practice as no hands-on experiences were provided. The prominent reason reported by the teachers was *rigidity of the school system*. The role of head teachers, supervisors in this endeavour was reported to be more on coverage of course. The set pattern of time-table would also not enable them to replicate their learnt experiences. The sustainability of other pre-service learnt experiences, for example, lesson planning before teaching, time allocation for each specific task for teaching-learning cycle, use of learning aids, going beyond the textbooks, etc. had no scope to apply in the real teaching situation. Teachers' own queries further raise number of issues: whether their supervisors/administrators are

aware of their 'actual role' or not, whether teachers should be given freedom in their academic work or not, whether the education system is discriminating between teachers who work or who do not work. All these issues need discussions in order to evolve some workable strategies.

The analysis of teachers' interviews had also pointed out that their principals and supervisors do not consider them effective if they are more friendly with children, flexible and democratic. This shows that teachers' role in the system is ambiguous and ill-defined. This role-conflict creates uncertainty, inconsistency to be able to use 'learnt experiences'.

Several other reasons which contributed negatively in utilising training experiences in the school set up by the teachers are chronic and persistent work load of non-academic work, lack of time for preparation/library consultation, no time for sharing of experiences (if they get, then administration perceives it as a gossip), working in non-conducive environment (high pupil-teacher ratio, lack of facilities), poor academic support (on-site), and no extrinsic reward.

2. Do narratives, sharing of experiences help to develop professional experiences?

Based on the arguments that the new teachers gave, the pre-service and in-service courses were found helpful in providing theoretical understanding of teaching as a profession. The

teachers also expressed that during these courses the time provided for practical experience was inadequate. The argument given by the experienced teachers regarding participation of all teachers in workshops/seminars on curriculum and material development is that they would not only widen their vision for educational activities but also develop practical understanding on the subject. They remarked that professional growth is a two-way exercise and should be viewed symbiotically. They expressed that the interactions among teachers of both the categories, new and experienced ones, would bring about many advantages, which are central to professional growth.

Teachers learn better from their peer group : The underlying idea which evolved from the discussion clearly suggested that the peer group (colleagues) interactions helped in understanding the techniques, terminology, teaching style, and transactional approaches used by successful teachers (mutual learning).

Novice teachers learn more from sharing of experiences : The sharing of experiences of successful teachers not only provides clues or hints for 'know' but also for 'do how'. The experienced teachers' role in the school premises was found to be more useful than the role of teacher educators, who provide inputs more of prescriptive nature and that too, only in the training programme (group learning).

Teachers learn better through own experiences in actual field situation:

The new knowledge has always been an outcome of the learning process, i.e. the way you acquire knowledge. The more you do, the more you make errors, the more you solve errors or problems of your own, the more you learn. The premise of teachers' discussion clearly indicated that learning would be more meaningful if it would be self-experienced *learning through errors*.

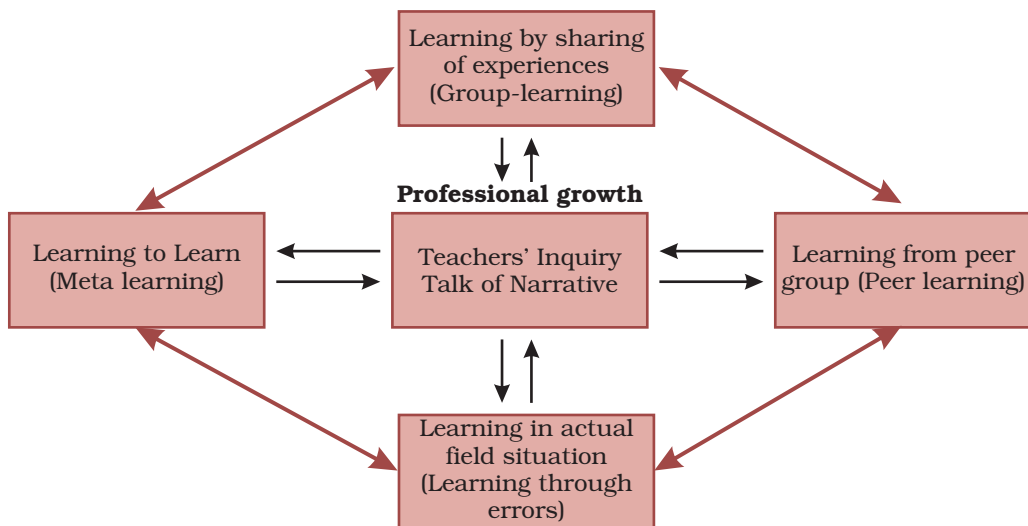
Teachers' sharing provides more scope for learning to learn (meta-learning): Learning is not a one-time activity. It is a continuous and on-going exercise. The pre-service and in-service programmes provide teachers the exposure and experience for a limited period of time. The issue emerges how to sustain or replicate

these experiences in the actual field situations. The ultimate outcome of any training programme is to create scope for teachers for self-learning.

The pre-service, in-service and various types of field level experiences of teacher constitute the trio which makes a teacher 'empowered' in teaching profession. Teacher-trainees and practicing teachers should not be prepared simply to perform certain skills in a prescribed way. They must be given the mental tools needed for them to meet their professional tasks that are adaptive, questioning, critical, inventive, creative and self-reviewing.

3. What are the implications for the Teachers' Education Programme?

Some of the broad implications which emerged from teachers' discussion are:



Pre-service Preparation: In many cases, one can find successful teachers without having any adequate training and qualification while on the other hand there are many unsuccessful teachers, who are well qualified and trained. The above observation highlighted a number of issues on pre-service courses. The findings of the study also suggested that pre-service programmes were found to be more 'lopsided' and ill-fitted in the present structure. The studies recommended that research on *Teacher Work* be included more systematically in pre-service teacher preparation programmes. These courses must introduce the *teachers' real world of their profession*. The practice teaching in the pre-service course should not be viewed in narrower sense. This should be two-way exercise. The practising teachers should also be given full freedom to express their point of view as well. Thus the entire practice teaching exercise needs metamorphosis in terms of its ideology. The scope for peer learning should be expanded in the curriculum. The curriculum of primary and upper primary teachers' training with reference to pedagogy and content needs to be viewed comprehensively.

In-service Preparation: The in-service teacher preparation programme must be viewed as a continuum of professional development of teachers. Relevance of training curriculum in terms of 'trainee's need' is pre-condition

for launching any training programme. The field level discussions with teachers in terms of outcomes of existing in-service programmes clearly brought out the fact that these programmes had no relevance for practising teachers. The *prescriptive policy* of in-service training needs changes. The programme needs to be viewed more as a mutual exercise between recipients and the trainers. The entire training cycle should be considered as a two-way activity. Trainees' participation in training cycle not only provides content to teacher educators but also provides scope for their learning. Thus while planning in-service training courses, the scope for sharing of experiences of teachers (successful or novice teachers) should be viewed in a broader perspective as a *means* and not as an *end* itself.

Role of Administrators and Supervisors : No doubt different situations prevail across national boundaries, regional or local level, schools and even in classrooms. Teachers who teach in these situations have different backgrounds and ideologies. But the role of administrators or teacher educators has always been viewed in a very limited and routine way. The learnt experiences of teachers from pre-service and in-service courses have not matched with the administrators' thinking. This created a gap in terms of execution of task at one hand and management on the other. To bridge the

gap, there is a need to understand teaching in a holistic way rather than in compartmentalised sequential manner. There is a need to redefine the role of supervisors/administrators if we perceive teaching in a broader perspective. The teachers' talk, stories, narratives sharing of experiences, (success and failure) should be an inbuilt component of school level programmes. The teachers' conversations and stories are sound methodologies or strategies to develop professional skills. It is also a very successful tool to understand teacher's knowledge.

Summing Up

The pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes should be considered as inseparable components of teacher preparation programmes and viewed in totality. Knowledge and skills of teachers are necessary conditions for their professional growth. The strategies which are most effective in both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes are: learning by sharing of experiences, learning from peer group; teacher's inquiry, talk or narrative; learning in actual field situation; and self-learning. Teaching should be viewed as an individual exercise which needs autonomy and flexibility in action.

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