

Best Practices of a School-based Pre-service Teacher Education Programme

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Abstract

This paper reports the documentation of best practices from the case study of a programme run by Mukhtangan Education Trust, a Mumbai-based NGO. First, the article enlists the core practices of the programme that were valued by the key stakeholders, including teacher educators, teacher trainees and the school management. It illustrates how these practices were spread across the three years. These practices are deliberated upon in the light of literature that vouches for more practice-based teacher education that gives teachers early exposure to school cultures while simultaneously learning from theoretical inputs as well as personal experience. The paper then accounts for some of the challenges faced by teacher education programmes.

Keywords: teacher education, best practices and school-based teacher education, pre-service teacher education

Introduction

National Curriculum Framework 2005 has asserted the need for teacher education (TE) to become more sensitive towards the needs of the students and their contexts. It imagines a teacher who is a capable facilitator of the teaching-learning situation; participates in curriculum renewal; believes in the construction of knowledge in collaborative spaces; understands children's social, cultural and political contexts and is attentive to their own personal and professional growth.

Teacher preparation is a complex and time-consuming process. It requires teachers' cognitive and emotional involvement, exposure to well-formed theoretical ideas and the experiences of others, review of own beliefs and mindsets, and a search for alternatives collectively and cooperatively. Teacher preparation is also influenced by school culture and national policy discourse. There are ongoing debates (Whitty, 2014;

Avalos, 2011; Zeichner, 2012) about making teacher preparation more practice-based where teachers are given early exposure to school cultures while simultaneously learning from theoretical inputs as well as personal experience. Such a teacher education programme is physically and work-wise located in the school as its primary site. From day one, teachers get exposure to the school culture. The idea is that teaching practice is to be learnt within the space of the school while the teacher negotiates her daily work. The inputs in school-based TE programmes are also influenced and shaped by the vision and administrative arrangements of the school.

This paper discusses the practices of a school-based teacher education programme in the light of this literature. This paper is based on a report which was conducted in 2018 as a part of the documentation of best practices in initial teacher education. The report was submitted to the Ministry of Human Resource and Development. The

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paper finds that in its attempts to create a more dynamic and rigorous teacher education programme the organisation deals with key challenges faced by the teacher education sector in the country. These challenges include lack of good reading material, teacher trainees' lack of content knowledge, and struggle to balance between exposing students to theoretical ideas and practical experience at the same time.

Literature Review

Practice-based TE is not a new idea; it has been practised and researched in the UK and the US. Teachers' learning in practice-based TE emerges from the teacher's work culture, mentoring, observation of their own practice and reflection on and development of a broader understanding of socio-cultural contexts as necessary in actually being able to learn from practice.

Workplace learning is learning within teacher culture, and school culture is the most productive condition for informal workplace learning (James & McCormick, 2009; Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2010; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). It calls for a teacher culture that encourages and values collaborative learning. It asserts that novice teachers learn by observing older teachers and the established culture among the older teachers' group. Teacher culture and school culture highly influence how teachers perceive their work and interact among themselves professionally. Teacher exchanges could be limited to teaching materials or extend to knowledge ideas or researching and reflective practice.

Lesson study and teacher research are significant to teacher development (Avalos, 2011). In these processes, teacher trainees have repeated opportunities to see specific core teaching practices being modelled and rehearse, practice, and receive detailed feedback in the setting where they will be using them in the future. This must also be complemented with participation in inquiry-based communities to learn habits and

skills. The organisational support structure (James & McCormick, 2009) is significant in creating a conducive environment for learning based on assessments, making learning explicit, and promoting learners' autonomy. Collaboration and learning among teachers can be enhanced by a supportive organisational structure and leadership.

Avalos (2011) quotes a study (by María del Pilar Unda) in which teachers observed and were involved in personal questioning of their knowledge and teaching. This aimed to reconsider existing practices, undertake school-based research, develop alternative strategies, and work with students and communities. This allowed the practical knowledge to emerge and be conceptualised and communicated. This study highlighted the construction of pedagogical knowledge based on teachers' personal experiences and those of others. This learning was complemented by improvements in thinking through the writing of journals and discussions.

Ruth Kane (as cited in Avalos, 2011) argues that teaching is not to be viewed as a set of activities that prepare people to manage a curriculum to produce specific learning results and teachers as performers of these specific skills rather than as professionals who can engage in reflective inquiry and action. O Sullivan's article (2002) elaborates on the development of reflective skills among underqualified teachers. Since all trainees in the study were from an education system based on rote learning, activities like brainstorming and sharing ideas did not come naturally to them. The researcher provided alternative experiences to the trainees for asking questions and group or pair discussion, and that increased their confidence and participation. Trainees were also not accustomed to unstructured observation. Therefore, semi-structured observations, containing both factual and reflective types of leading questions, were designed. This helped in increasing teachers' reflective analysis and involvement. Similarly, reflections were to be adapted to the context.

Teachers were given loosely prepared materials to identify problems in them in order to gradually increase their analytical skills. By doing so, student-teachers began to engage in structured reflections. In this manner, teachers reached the first stage of reflection —technical rationality. Teachers could identify the problems in their practice; however, they could not yet devise solutions to them. This study also emphasised the importance of monitoring as key to their learning process.

Mentoring and coaching are crucial in the practice-based TE programme (Marion Johns, 2001). This paper discusses the findings of a comparative study of the role of mentors in school-based TE in England and Germany. It focuses on the mentor's role in terms of 'adviser', 'trainer', 'partner', 'friend' and 'assessor' and examines the extent to which these aspects of mentoring influence the development of beginner teachers. It points out the need to carefully and systematically observe one's practice and be constructively critical of it. TE needs to build inquisitiveness and the ability to take risk and question one's own beliefs.

Ross and Bruce (2007) proposed a model of teacher change through a process of self-assessment, including self-observation, self-judgment and self-reaction. These processes involve aspects of judgement considered relevant to success, meeting or not meeting the proposed goals and interpretation of the extent to which the goal has been achieved, respectively. These were related to self-efficacy and influenced the future decision-making of teachers. These were also followed up by peer observations, analysis of data and input of teaching mathematics in a way different from the traditional method based on rules and procedures.

The organisation uses an amalgamation of such critical practices and others that have organically emerged within the community-based teacher education programme. This paper attempts to consolidate these practices.

Objectives

The aim of this study was to explore the perspective of the key stakeholders involved in this school-based teacher training programme. It aimed at identifying the practices that teacher educators and teacher trainees valued in the formation of a teacher.

Methodology

Data was collected through interviews, observation of teacher staff meetings and a detailed review of teacher training modules and other curricular material. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher trainees (4), faculty members (5), alumni (2) and programme director (2). Interviews with the teacher trainees and the faculty members focused on their perspective about the programme, the curriculum material, pedagogy and assessments. Probing was done to explore the justification and rationality given by participants. Questions were open-ended. Interviews were conducted in the Muktangan schools. In addition to that, the curriculum design meetings and lessons plan meetings were observed. Curricular documents, including course materials, training modules, assignments and feedback given to students, were also studied. A desk review of the previous reports published on Muktangan (TISS 2013, L & T 2015) was also conducted. These reports helped in understanding the journey of the organisation and the viewpoints of the other researchers.

About Muktangan

Muktangan is a registered NGO based in Mumbai, India. It has been working with Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) schools and on teacher professional development (TPD) of community-based teachers through an integrated, school-based programme since 2003. The organisation works in a public-private partnership with BMC in seven schools and has trained more than 700 teachers since 2003. At the time of

this study, the TE programme is not affiliated to or recognised by any government body.

The organisation's schools are popular in the community. Its schools and the TE programme have been studied and reviewed at various levels. Its work is related to students' learning, classroom processes, English teaching and learning (TISS, 2013), perception of students and teachers (Nirmala Niketan, 2010) and the impact of its teacher training programme (Larsen & Toubro, 2015) have been documented earlier. The organisation has made an impact on the performance levels of children (SSC results), empowered women from the community and as a result, developed the community (TISS, 2013).

The organisation's model of teacher development is an integrated model organised in three academic years, during which trainee teachers receive extensive opportunities to work in schools and be mentored. This model focuses on developing teachers from the community through a pre-service programme that is merged with a regular internship at a Mukhtangan school. It allows trainee teachers to construct their knowledge based on theoretical foundations as well as their own observations and classroom experiences. It is believed that since the teachers are from the same community as the students, they are better able to understand the learning context and educational aspirations of the students coming to the schools.

The organisation's schools and teacher development programme is supported by subject departments, including Education, Holistic Development, Socio-emotional, Inclusion, ICT, English, Marathi, Hindi, Mathematics, Science, Social Science and Library. Each department has a department leader, lead faculty and subject faculties. The organisation is committed to demonstrating the effectiveness of alternative approaches to school and teacher education. It aspires to demonstrate how school learning can be a process of growth for students as well as teachers. It intends to create well-rounded educationists creating a work culture of

co-learning, trust, collaboration and open communication. There is a policy of inclusion and all students are viewed as potential beneficiaries regardless of their different learning needs.

Rather than focusing on the product, there is a strong belief in continuous curriculum development and improvement of processes. The teacher is believed to be the most important resource for the class. A good teacher is identified as one who is a reflective thinker, an effective communicator and a responsible planner and organiser. It aims to create a 'child-friendly' atmosphere where students learn through appropriately designed activities with the freedom to access the resources, participation in learning by doing and a low teacher-student ratio. The organisation has ongoing assessments for students as well as for teacher trainees. It also strengthens its learning by regular sharing in forums across the education community.

The organisation's school education and its teacher development programme run parallel to and inform each other. For teacher preparation, high priority is given to 'experience of teaching' rather than 'theory-based' TE. In practice-based TE, there is a high level of coherence between the work (how the classes should be conducted) and the teacher's learning. It is definitely a shift from standard TE programmes in the country in terms of its physical location in the school, structures, processes and ideas. The organisation started as a TDP within the community for candidates between the age of 18 to 45 years. Earlier, candidates with even an SSC or any other medium were accepted as teacher trainees, but with the increasing popularity of the programme within the community and increasing organisational realisation of the challenges of learning English, HSC (12th) in any medium was made the minimum criterion for enrolment in the TE programme. Though not a substantial number, but some of the trainees who come to these schools have already acquired teacher qualification, D. Ed

or B. Ed. A handful of them also come with graduate and post graduate degrees. Those who enter without a professional teacher qualification have to eventually attain a formal degree, because the Mukhtangan Programme is not yet certified by NCTE. The organisation is empowering teachers from the community and many teachers who have been with the organisation speak of personal transformation, gaining respect in the family or community and resuming their formal education through the distance mode. The organisation continuously works to keep the impetus up with ongoing professional development or else trainees and teachers tend to slide back to traditional ways, as feared by the teacher educators. Discussions and follow-ups are done on a regular basis to keep teachers' motivation high. It must be acknowledged that the organisation works within the constraints of limited infrastructure and financial resources and examination and documentation systems prescribed by the Municipal Corporation.

The organisation is credited with providing English medium education to underprivileged teachers and students. Great importance is given to the development of English language proficiency by providing teachers with multiple exposure and opportunities to practice speaking in English. English is a language of power, and the demand for it has come from the community. English also gains primacy in the TE programme due to it being the medium of instruction.

Valuable Practices at the organisation

NCF 2005 and the Right to Education Act (RTE 2009) imagine a teacher who is professionally qualified, socially sensitive and motivated. The organisation model seems to be developing such teachers. Several innovative practices of pre-service TE have emerged as part of its work in the community. These practices are worth documenting. There is a need to document these practices from their context so that their key elements can be systematically

documented, discussed and shared with a wider audience. Given below is an account of the practices that are considered valuable and that have emerged from within the organisation.

1. Content and pedagogy at pre service stage

The organisation's TE curriculum broadly maps to the recommendations of the NCFTE, including the domain of foundations of education, curriculum and pedagogy and school internship. Teacher trainees come from the traditional learning system, having had very little exposure to the internet and to modes of self-learning. The TE classes are exposure for these teachers to new ways of learning and knowing. It is an opportunity for them to move out of traditional modes of learning and experience the pedagogy that is expected of them when teaching in class. Examples of such pedagogy are role-playing, discussions, giving analogies and sharing of ideas. Teachers get to engage meaningfully with these ideas and do things that they have probably never done in the past; they get to experience a different kind of teacher-student relationship and expectations as learners. This enables them to become more confident and willing to try new things.

Exposure visits to other innovative schools are mandatory and are found to be of great value by teacher educators and the student-teachers themselves. This is an alternative learning resource that adds to the teacher's imagination of teaching-learning spaces.

Educational beliefs and understanding self: A teacher's prior beliefs and cultural values are critical in defining her pedagogy in class. In the organisation's pre-service curriculum, it is the first thing to be dealt with in the course Educational Beliefs. Here, teachers are guided to think deeply about their personal beliefs about knowledge, schooling, learning, parenting, educability, and beliefs about self and society. These reflections are important for enabling the student-teachers to observe their own beliefs

and see how they may shape their practice and interaction with students. They develop a deeper understanding of self as a person and as a teacher, thus strengthening their inner self and professional identity.

2. Case study

The practice of writing a case study was put in place in order to enable teachers to move beyond the mere delivery of textbooks to understand the nature of learning by observing a child closely while he/she is completely engrossed in a task. During the course Child Development or Internship, under the close supervision of a faculty member, the pre-service teacher trainees are expected to do an 8-month long case study of two children. The trainee teachers have to observe the children weekly, regularly record their observations in consultation with the supervisor and present a detailed report at the end of the year. Efforts are being made to enable the trainee teachers to effectively make observations of children through regular tutorial meetings. Components of the report include physical appearance, grooming, cleanliness, food habits, toilet habits, areas of development (cognitive, science, history, geography, spellings, speaking and listening, reading writing, library, computer, independent writing, personal socio-emotional development, quality circle time, physical education). Also noted are holistic development; work and experience; singing, drama, dance in zero period; suggestions to parents and faculty feedback. This study provides an opportunity to take a closer look at the life of the child and his/her educational context. It includes observing the child in the classroom and looking into his academic as well as co-curricular activities. There is also a component of visiting the children's homes. It is attached to a tutorial lesson conducted weekly by the pre-service faculty. These small group tutorials are for discussing observations of children and mapping their progress.

3. Individual reading time

The organisation values the culture of reading and attempts to inculcate the habit of reading among teacher trainees. Specific time is allocated in the pre-service timetable during which teachers are expected to do independent reading and writing. Independent reading and writing are at the core of a teacher's practice. At present, the Centre for Learning Resources' series of English language development is being used. There are two main objectives: one is to develop the teachers' English language skills and the second is to enhance their general knowledge as these modules are considered to be a good source for gaining general knowledge. Depending on the level of their English competence, teachers undergo a series of prescribed modules.

The initial idea for the reading time was to let the teacher freely explore reading material and choose what to read for herself, to form the habit of reading to enable her to read and think independently. This is the time when teachers can possibly engage with literature that other courses do not encompass, for example, reading biographies of teachers or children's literature. During this time, teachers exercise judgement and learn to choose the readings they would want to pick up as teachers. Through this process, they can explore the space of education literature and shape their own ideas. In this manner, they can gradually develop a critical view of the text they read and the ability to observe one's thinking while reading. Since it is the time for self-study, it has to allow teachers to read in their language of thought.

4. Curriculum Understanding and Design Meetings

The organisation recognises the value of bringing teachers together and also that of collaboration. The structures of Curriculum Understanding and Design (CUD) and Lesson Design Meetings (LDM) are put in place to facilitate these. CUD meetings are

conducted weekly by the lead faculties under the supervision of department leaders. Every week, teachers from all seven schools come together to dwell on the conceptual knowledge of their particular subjects. The structure is put in place for promoting regular interaction and sharing of knowledge. It is expected to be a platform for interaction across schools and deliberation on practical experience. Two of the observed meetings (Hindi and science) began with a recounting of how much has been covered in each school and where they will be going in the coming days. Another observed meeting was also a deliberation on the concepts of geometry. The teacher educators felt that trainee teachers lag in content knowledge and therefore, it needs to be taken up with them repeatedly. Much of an organisation's energy goes into that. It is important to assess the trainee teachers with regard to requisite content knowledge because only when they have adequate knowledge will they know how to interpret it for teaching and how to present it to students.

Classroom transactions are at the centre of TE at the organisation. The organisation's classrooms must be conducted in a certain way (active constructivist manner as it is known among the Mukhtangan team), and this becomes an overriding idea for the CUD meetings at times (as also realised by the Mukhtangan team). Many times, teacher educators become heavily oriented to providing readymade lesson plans because at the end they are the ones responsible for what happens in the student-teachers' classes. In such a scenario, situated learning takes a back seat and trainee teachers do not have enough time to deliberate on their practice.

This is a useful structure where student-teachers can regularly meet people of their own profession to reflect and discuss curricular processes. In the absence of such a structure, teachers might fall back on traditional modes of teaching-learning. The CUD meeting structure is under revision at present. At the time of this study (2018),

subject faculty meeting across schools was being planned. It was envisioned that each school would have its own subject faculties who will assemble at the central point for a weekly subject orientation by leading faculty and they take the learning back to the teachers in their schools. The learning will be shared with student-teachers during school meetings.

5. Lesson Design Meetings

The LDMs are supposed to be for the development of specific lessons and planning and resourcing for class. Planning for the class is an important dimension of the teacher's work. Skills of planning for a class can be learnt while practising under appropriate mentorship. NCF 2005 has recommended daily planning time for teachers to plan the class and review the day. The primary school teachers get daily time to plan for their class. This is the time during which teachers specifically think about class. In the LDM, they plan for their class, but the senior teacher or subject faculty leads the discussion. During this activity, teachers get time to enter the other person's pedagogical framework, and this enables them to experience something that they have not arrived at on their own. It may enable the novice teacher to experience the pedagogical features of the other person's teaching. There were discussions about combining the CUD and LDM meetings in order to facilitate understanding of the curricular topic that will be implemented in the class with students of mixed abilities.

6. Mentoring

Internally trained and developed subject faculties train novice teachers during classroom observations. Each department has an observation tool. Regular meetings and interactions with individual trainee teachers are conducted after class observations. Trainee teachers have the opportunity to speak to someone more knowledgeable and discuss their experiences. Mentoring is the key to practice-based teacher development.

It requires skilful mentoring by faculty members and senior teachers who can help the trainee teacher navigate the situation at hand rather than providing solutions right away. It is through these interactions that trainee teachers can challenge their tacit beliefs and learn to engage with the shared knowledge of the teaching community. They can learn by adopting the other person's pedagogical framework and learning from it. Experience of similar mentorship roles in other contexts can be referred to and learnt from.

7. Reading circle

Reading circles, also known as professional development meetings, are conducted by senior faculty on a fortnightly basis. During these meetings, a reading or topic is discussed; the topics are introduced by the programme director but can also be introduced by the department leaders or faculty members. Topics could be related to a course practice or maybe about a general understanding of the field of education. It is a space for intellectual deliberation on relevant or emerging issues and gives teachers a sense of belonging to a professional community. Faculty members follow up these discussions with their respective department members and then with the teachers. Sometimes, the issues are also identified by student-teachers or from observations made in the classrooms. The communication of the issues to be discussed is believed to be two-way and appropriate time is allotted for these discussions. For example, the issue of homework was discussed recently. The organisation believes that understanding the space of education is a gradual process, and reading circles are an effort to create a learning community. Besides this, most organisational faculties are also engaging in research or other projects of their own.

8. Teacher assessment

The organisation strongly believes in assessment for learning and not merely assessment of learning. The pre-service

programme has formative and summative assessment components. At times, the formative assessment is a written exercise having recall-based or application-based questions or could also be in the form of an assignment, project, group work, observation report, demonstration, etc. For some courses, assessment is more flexible and it is up to the faculty to define ways to assess students.

Self-assessment: There is a component of self-assessment in the pre-service programme, it includes 10 points each of critical attributes and key performance attributes. The critical attributes are general skills of being a professional, including regularity, punctuality, teamwork and responsiveness. The key performance indicators are related to the organisation's parameters of a good teacher, including the teacher as a thinker, effective communicator and responsible planner. Thrice during the year, the teacher gets this opportunity to think about herself and make an assessment of her progress.

This self-assessment is shared with teacher trainees at the beginning of the academic year, and they are expected to work with a teacher educator on these attributes throughout the year. There is also a midline and year-end assessment. Self-assessment is very significant as through this, the teacher begins to understand that her work is subject to professional standards and expectations. It is a framework of expectation that enables the teacher to aspire, to set standard for herself and meet them. This practice goes well with the organisation's core belief in creating a culture of collaboration, trust and mutuality. It is not accountability regulation but a culture of building and meeting expectations.

9. Film festival

Every year during the summer vacation training, a film festival is organised. All teachers attend it. Relevant movies are screened to enable teachers to reflect on societal issues. Screenings are followed by a discussion and movie review. This gives

teachers exposure to alternative learning resources and expands their sociological imagination. The movies are chosen by faculty members. This is exposure in nature and not related to any subject; no assessment is attached to it.

Conclusion

Learning to teach is a complex process that involves not only learning specific skills and mindsets but also developing the practice of reflective inquiry. A good teacher education (TE) programme develops teachers' knowledge, skills, attitude and ability to reflect on their work. It enables the teacher to collaborate and work with colleagues, develops the skill of questioning pedagogic knowledge, manages challenges in diverse contexts, understands the field and develops the habit of self-regulation and evaluation. It must also allow the teacher to judge and act in different situations and engage with discussions of diversity.

Organising an effective teacher training programme is full of challenges. One of the biggest challenges is to find appropriate reading material that is relevant, context-specific and yet easy to consume. On one hand, there is literature that is highly theoretical and academic that is hard to penetrate and on the other, there are over-simplistic versions of popular theories available that are primarily used for reproducing information during B. Ed and other popular exams. The task of a community-based teacher education programme is even tougher because they have to take up the uphill task of training teachers from vernacular medium. There is a dire need of the sector to have good reading material available that allows for deep engagement and critical reflections. Education-related literature in Indian languages needs to be made available and accessible. There is a need to have literature based on teacher's experiences and observations that can be useful for various courses during the first year of the programme.

When we talk about the busy lives of teachers, reading time sounds like a luxury, but as emphasised by the organisation's practices, this is one habit that needs to be diligently followed and inculcated among the teachers. This allows the teacher trainees to develop educational imagination as well as linguistic capabilities. In addition to this, reflective journaling also needs to be made part of teacher's everyday lives. As recommended by National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, the reflective journal is a really useful tool for learning from experience in a practice-based teacher education programme. A formal structure for reflecting on one's practice and writing about it has to be put in place in the timetable so that teachers have designated time for this.

Today, one is witnessing an increasing number of experiments and interventions related to school teachers, from teacher training to teacher assessments. There is a narrowing and micromanagement of her role and an imagination for her work as being limited to the development of specific skills among students. In such a scenario, the organisation is making consistent and thoughtful efforts to develop a teacher's ability to understand the context of her work and plan her pedagogy most effectively. The practices described above contribute immensely to developing the teacher's intellect and professional self. Being based in the school, this teacher education is complete in many senses and offers a great deal to learn from.

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