

The Training Game that Teachers are Expected to Join in

Abstract

This article explores the interlinkages between orientation of teachers after they are recruited, their working conditions and in-service teacher capacity building and how the three together influence the day to day practice of teachers in school. Bringing about change demands a multipronged strategy that addresses the needs and concerns of teachers from the ground up.

During the course of six teacher-focused studies that I was part of, we interacted with teachers and administrators across several states of India. One of the issues that invariably cropped up was the post-1995 in-service teacher training regime adopted by District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and then SSA. Teachers everywhere complained about how it was conducted and that the donors who were pushing it in DPEP and MHRD, GOI that was designing it had a warped notion of training and capacity building. The first study was on teacher motivation and this was done in Rajasthan (2005)¹. This was quickly followed by a qualitative study on the everyday practice of primary school teachers (2008)². Soon I was part of another in-depth study on the elementary education system in India – where we not only interacted with administrators and teachers, but we observed classroom and spoke to

children (2009)³. This was followed by a study on school management (2013)⁴ and one on women teachers in Rajasthan (2014)⁵. Subsequently I led a 9-state study on the working conditions of primary and secondary school teachers – one that was anchored in NUEPA (2015-16)⁶. While the last and most recent study focused on the working conditions of teachers, it became quite evident that there is a very close relationship between the conditions under which teachers are expected to work and the way they

1 This section of the paper draws on Vimala Ramachandran, Suman Bhattacharjea and K M Seshagiri monograph titled Primary teachers in India – The twists and turns of everyday practice. 2009.

2 Ramachandran, Vimala, Suman Bhattacharjea and K M Sheshagiri. 2009. Primary teachers in India – The twists and turns of everyday practice. Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore. Available at <http://azimpremjifoundation.org/Education-Readings>

3 Rashmi Sharma and Vimala Ramachandran (2009): The Elementary Education System in India: Exploring institutional structures, processes and dynamics. Routledge New Delhi

4 Ramachandran, Vimala and ERU Research Team. School Management for Quality Inclusive Education and Decentralised School Governance. European Union, NUEPA and Save The Children (India)

5 Kameshwari Jandhyala and Vimala Ramachandran. Women Teachers Matter in Secondary Education. Economic and Political weekly. Volume L, Number 32, August 8, 2015

6 Ramachandran, Vimala; Béteille, Tara; Linden, Toby; Dey, Sangeeta; Goyal, Sangeeta; Goel Chatterjee, Prerna. 2018. Getting the Right Teachers into the Right Schools: Managing India's Teacher Workforce. World Bank Studies;. Washington, DC: World Bank. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28618>

interact with and work with children in the classroom. Most often these two dimensions of the life of teachers are rarely correlated. In this short paper I seek to see the interconnections between the two.

How teachers are recruited, the kind of orientation they receive, the physical working conditions, the service conditions of teachers, the duties and responsibilities assigned to them and most importantly in-service training and capacity building regime influenced the day to day practice of teachers. The classroom experience of teachers and the students is moulded and framed in the larger environment in which teachers work and children study.

Let us start with the positives. At the outset teachers across the country agree that there have been positive changes in the last eighteen years (since 2000) – pupil teacher ratios have come down (with the exception of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh), there has been a steady increase in the educational qualifications of fresh appointees and the practice of appointing contract teachers with lower than stipulated education qualifications have steadily come down (Jharkhand being a notable exception with 49% contract teachers). Many years of centrally supported projects like DPEP and SSA resulted in better infrastructure, drinking water and toilets in all schools. The Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 has led to greater participation of children in the schooling system. This is where the list of positives tapers off.

In-service teacher training, since the DPEP days has evoked mixed responses from teachers. In all states that I went to in the last twenty years - in-service training continues to utilise the 'cascade model'. This is despite the fact that there are reported transmission loss at each successive

level of training. Teacher training packages were designed at upper levels of the educational administration and in many cases people with little or no personal experience of teaching at the elementary level. The DIET and other block and cluster level structures managed the logistics – with almost no role in the training process itself. Teachers and the trainers we met over the years said that the training was poorly designed, implemented in an ad hoc manner and has little connection with the real needs of teachers with respect to content or instructional strategies. No follow-up is conducted to evaluate the effectiveness or relevance of training content to teachers' practice. Pedagogical underpinnings of these training programmes tend to be highly superficial and poorly understood even by the trainers themselves (Vimala Ramachandran et al 2008). Several studies (Sararangapani and Vasavi 2003, Dhankar 2002, Dyer and Choksi 2004 etc.) pointed out that the teachers and trainers used new jargns like 'activity-based learning' and 'child centred learning', but these new words had almost no bearing on classroom practice. In one of my field visits one teacher pointed out that they were taught new pedagogies in the same old didactic top-down lecture mode – with almost no hands-on practice. They were asked to use a lot of teaching material (charts, pictures) and as a result activity-based learning has become synonymous with cards and ladders and a lot of colourful material in the classroom.

Way back in 1996, when DPEP had barely started, Caroline Dyer, who has done a lot of in-depth work with teachers and in DIETs succinctly captures the situation - *Teachers felt that their trainers were not sufficiently aware of the realities of small schools with single rooms and no facilities, and*

hence did not offer strategies for working in such conditions. (...) The pedagogical problems of the teachers in Gujarat's rural schools are not primarily related to infrastructure, but to the absence of skills to cope with either teaching several classes simultaneously, or the needs of first generation learners, compounded by heavy and often irrelevant curriculum. The type of pre-service training they receive does not equip them with adequate classroom management strategies, or the confidence to adapt the curriculum, and is an important factor in low teacher motivation (Dyer 1996). Notwithstanding similar feedback over the last twenty years—the administration continued as if they had discovered a magical technique to enhance the capabilities of teachers. This approach continued into SSA which was launched in 2001 and was supposed to have been designed keeping in mind the lessons of DPEP.

Summing up the tragic situation H K Dewan points out: '*Crucial issues regarding the duration, content and process of training are decided by an arbitrary process. Speediness, rather than quality is the criterion for deciding who will train, the argument being that unhurried training did not guarantee quality. Moreover, the process was highly centralized—field-level personnel had no input into the pace of the training. Our discussions showed that while they were not sure of the areas that should be chosen for interaction or the content of training sessions, they were convinced that the current modules were not appropriate. One could sense the constant conflict between cynicism and resignation towards status quo and the hope that the structure would allow honest choice, review and reflection*' (H K Dewan in Sharma and Ramachandran, 2008 pp).

Why are we in such a Mess⁷?

What is a school? Were we to pose this question to teachers they start by listing building, boundary wall, mid-day meal and finally children. Yes, the overall environment in which a school is located is important but – as we all know – a school is a web of relationships between a group of teachers and children. And, tragically, this fact that gets lost in teacher- training programmes.

Teachers tell us that poor quality and irrelevant training has little impact on the effectiveness of teacher or on the learning outcomes of students. The fundamental question is not *whether* teachers should be trained; rather it is *what* training should consist of and *how* and *by whom* should it be imparted in order to fulfil the real needs of teachers.

Policies and projects, national and state interventions notwithstanding, the root of the problem can thus be traced to two assumptions: **one**, that children are homogeneous and learn at the same pace and in the same way; and **two**, that teachers are homogeneous and need the same inputs regardless of who and where they are. The data clearly reveal that neither assumption is valid. Diversity in the classroom has increased: children of different ages, different social backgrounds and speaking different languages study together. Equally, diversity among teachers has increased: they have different educational levels, service conditions, places of residence, social and community backgrounds and of course gender. But we do not have a teacher development programme that takes this diversity as the point of departure.

We need teachers with courage as

7 This section of the paper draws on Vimala Ramachandran, Suman Bhattacharjea and K M Seshagiri monograph titled Primary teachers in India – The twists and turns of everyday practice. 2009.

well as with experience. We cannot expect all new entrants to be free from social, gender and regional prejudices—after all teachers are a part of our society and they reflect its texture as much as anybody else. Yet there is no systematic process to address prejudices or deeply entrenched attitudes and belief systems. This has resulted in the persistent problem of discrimination and exclusion inside the schools and in the classrooms. Children from extremely deprived communities, those who among the poorest, young boys and girls with disabilities, those speaking different languages at home – all these children not only experience subtle and blatant discrimination in school (from teachers and fellow-students), but many of them drop out. We have also heard of teachers who are discriminated against for their caste / community and gender. While we all know schools are a microcosm of the society we live in – it is important to strive to make it an inclusive and happy space.

Teachers are a community of people who, given the opportunity, can give very sound advise on how we could break out of the impasse we seem to be caught in. Teachers agree that there are no mechanisms to select those who show talent for and interest in teaching, nor to prepare them to engage with the ground realities of school teaching. The recruitment process privileges marks and qualifications and in order to avoid nepotism in recruitment examinations have been introduced to select on merit. While this is not a problem in itself – the second step of ascertaining the aptitude of the candidates have not been introduced. Teacher candidates spend a year or two receiving and being tested on a vast amount of theoretical knowledge that is of little help in real classroom situations. Given the burgeoning of poor quality teacher

education institutions, the certificate is nothing but a piece of paper required in many for appointment. Most importantly, teachers tend to teach as they themselves were taught, unless they are provided with opportunities and incentives to analyse and question their own experience and thereby construct a different conception of what classroom processes should aim to achieve. Teachers tell us that they are expected to ‘follow orders’, ‘cover the syllabus’, ‘fill out formats’, and so on – and the actual learning outcomes of children is rarely taken into the equation. As we had concluded in the 2009 teacher study “It is hard to think of a more damning indictment of the education system than this single fact: teachers do not even conceive of their work in terms of creating an environment where all children can learn...” (Vimala Ramachandran, et al. 2009).

Above and beyond what teachers bring to the job, the education system acts in a number of ways to shape what teachers do in the classroom. These include the nature and amount of in-service training they are provided, the kind of supervision and support they receive and the encouragement/ incentives the system offers for dedicating more or less effort to teaching. The degree and nature of teachers’ accountability— to their administrative superiors, to their students, or to parents — affects what they are willing to attempt. Equally the amount of real autonomy they have in the classroom impacts their ability to adapt content and methods to local needs.

Teachers are rarely asked what kind of training would be useful to them. Despite the huge emphasis on in-service training in recent years under DPEP and SSA, teachers for the most part view these courses as formalities

that have to be completed, rather than as important resources to help them do their job better. It is therefore not surprising to find that student learning outcomes appear to be not much affected by whether the teacher is 'trained' or not.

An important reason for the continued distance between intentions and practice with respect to teacher-training relates to the suitability of those responsible for designing and imparting this training. Those with advanced degrees and administrative seniority are the ones who call the shots and real experience in teaching in the school is not factored in. While the BRCs and CRCs were established to provide academic support to teachers, in practice they essentially fulfil routine administrative functions. The primary school teacher has no source of academic support. Given that training programmes provide little help to teachers in the classroom they are left to their own devices and end up muddling through as best as they possibly can. We then turn around and blame the teachers when assessment surveys find poor learning levels.

Teachers report that they are actively discouraged from adopting creative practices – they are expected to follow what they are asked to follow. Both pre-service and in-service teaching methodologies discourage questioning, discussion and analysis by teachers. They are expected to adhere to the content exactly as they received it. To top it all, the supervisory system focuses on collection of administrative data and on ensuring that schools and school personnel conform to standards and procedures. Teachers are caught in between – they do not have the autonomy, they have to follow instructions and they are expected to finish the syllabus.

Another powerful disincentive is the informal system of patronage and

rent-seeking that operates in many areas of the country. Given the close nexus between the cadre of teachers and the electoral system in India – many teachers, willingly or unwillingly, dedicate time and effort to keep local politicians and elites happy, given that they control the limited rewards obtainable within the system—in particular, transfers to desired locations.

School heads (where these exist) exert limited authority over teachers, since promotions, transfers and other decisions are taken elsewhere. Supervisory personnel are confined primarily to administrative inspections and are known to exert a negative influence on innovative teaching practice. Local communities do not have the skills to undertake this kind of professional evaluation of teachers. District education authorities often operate on the basis of political or administrative, rather than educational, criteria. If this is the overall scenario – to whom then are school teachers accountable for the quality of learning outcomes? Who within the system has the authority and the ability to define what constitutes good teaching practice, evaluate whether teachers are doing a good job, reward those who are, and sanction those who are not? The short answer to this question is: nobody.

Today, the overall educational experience of children is reduced to the marks they obtain in examinations. Other dimensions of child development is rarely discussed. Do our schools equip our children to face the world with confidence? Do we try to develop a discerning mind? Can our children critically reflect on their situation? Do they have the confidence to explore and reach out to knowledge and skills that they may need to prepare them for the future?

Education is not just another sector of the economy like transport or agriculture. It is perhaps the *only* sector where outcomes depend at least as much on processes as on inputs. In other words, the best textbooks in the world will be of limited use in the hands of an incompetent teacher, whereas a talented and sensitive teacher always finds ways to catalyse students' learning even under the most difficult of working conditions.

However, if teachers do not view students' learning—however defined—as part of, let alone central to, their professional responsibilities, then clearly the situation cannot be remedied by tweaking quantitative targets or by establishing additional administrative layers.

In order to promote competence and nurture talent among teachers, the education system needs to prioritise these aspects and operationalise them throughout the system. This means, for example, that teachers should be chosen on the basis of aptitude and interest, not only on the basis of marks. Promotions and salary increments should be awarded for effective teaching, not only on the basis of seniority. Supervision should encourage innovative practices, not punish them. And training programmes should aim to help teachers think for themselves about what they are doing, not merely to do as they are told. Most of all, these different areas of educational policy must be coordinated so that they all push teachers in the same direction, towards better teaching practices.

What this means, in short, is that educational criteria need to take precedence over administrative logic. But this can only begin to happen if those providing leadership in educational departments and institutions are themselves educators

rather than administrators.

In India, elementary school teaching experience is of little value *even within the primary education sub-sector*. Academic and administrative staff alike are selected for higher-level positions within the sector on the basis of the professional distance that they have travelled *away* from primary school teaching, rather than experience and demonstrated expertise within it. Advanced degrees (like M.Ed.) is often *required* for senior level posts in the the education sector, even if (as is often the case) the holder of the degree has never set foot in a primary school since he graduated from one. Not only does this increase the likelihood that the wrong people will be in charge of the sector, in many states it also means that talented primary school teachers are unable to apply for leadership positions. Do these criteria make any sense? Is it not more important that those responsible for primary education should have first-hand knowledge of the issues and constraints that primary schools face on the ground?

Teachers across the country ask these hard questions and many of them we met in the course of the last 15 to 20 years thought deeply about their own experience as teachers. It is indeed tragic that we rarely listen to them. More disturbing is that we paint all teachers as unmotivated shirkers who are marking time. Why can't we start a serious dialogue with teachers and redesign our policies and rules/procedures from scratch? We have been tinkering with the colonial system that has been handed down – we need to break out and think afresh – with teachers in the frontline of reflection and formulation of new policies, administrative structures and financial allocations.

The time is now...

References

- Batra, P. (2005). 'Voice and Agency of Teachers: Missing Link in National Curriculum Framework 2005', *Economic and Political Weekly* XL (40): 4347-4356
- Bennell, Paul and Kwame Akyeampong. (2007). *Teacher Motivation in Sub Sahara Africa and South Asia*. London: DFID Education Paper
- Clarke, P. (2001). *Teaching and learning—the culture of pedagogy*. New Delhi: Sage Publications
- Dhankar, Rohit. 2002. *Seeking Quality Education: An Area of Fun and Rhetoric*. New Delhi: The European Commission, Occasional Paper
- Dyer, C. and A. Choksi. (2004). *District Institutes of Education and Training: a Comparative Study in Three Indian States*. London: DFID Policy Division (Education Papers)
- Dyer, C. (1996). *The Improvement of Primary School Quality in India: Successes and Failures of Operation Blackboard*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies No. 4)
- Jandhyala, Kameshwari and Vimala Ramachandran. (2015). *Women Teachers Matter in Secondary Education*. *Economic and Political weekly*. Volume L, Number 32, August 8, 2015
- Ramachandran, Vimala and ERU Research Team. (2013). *School Management for Quality Inclusive Education and Decentralised School Governance*. European Union, NUEPA and Save The Children (India)
- Ramachandran, Vimala, Madhumita Pal, Sharada Jain. (2005). *Teacher Motivation in India and a case study of Rajasthan; Research report contributed to a multi-country study on Teacher Motivation coordinated by IDS Susses (UK) and Knowledge and Skills for development (UK)*
- Ramachandran, Vimala, Suman Bhattacharjea and K M Sheshagiri. (2009). *Primary teachers in India – The twists and turns of everyday practice*. Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore. Available at <http://azimpremjifoundation.org/Education-Readings>
- Ramachandran, Vimala; Bêteille, Tara; Linden, Toby; Dey, Sangeeta; Goyal, Sangeeta; Goel Chatterjee, Prerna. (2018). *Getting the Right Teachers into the Right Schools: Managing India's Teacher Workforce*. World Bank Studies;. Washington, DC: World Bank. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28618>
- Rashmi Sharma and Vimala Ramachandran. (2009). *The Elementary Education System in India: Exploring institutional structures, processes and dynamics*. Routledge New Delh
- Sarangapani, Padma and A. R. Vasavi. (2003). 'Aided programmes or guided policies?: DPEP in Karnataka', *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(32): 3401-3408.