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School Based Teacher Preparation- Possibilities and Challenges

Abstract

This article discusses the school-based teacher preparation model run by a not-for profit organisation called I Am A Teacher (IAAT), Gurgaon. This is a one-year Post-Graduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching (PGDLT) programme. This course prepares teachers through a model where Student-Teachers spend minimum three days practicing in a host-school. This article describes the mentoring model and highlights how teachers are prepared through a blend of theory and practice. The voices of the Student- Teachers are presented through reflections and narration of their learning experiences. It briefly highlights the challenges of such a school-based model.

Introduction

Teaching is a complex profession. Teachers are expected to foster learning environment in the class, identify learning goals in synchronisation with national standards, plan and deliver lessons that help children achieve these goals through experiential learning, observe children, assess learning, maintain records and be responsible for each child's physical and emotional well being.

Learning to teach requires the Student-Teachers (STs) to learn about and understand how children learn and the relationship between teaching and learning. While learning to teach, STs need to reflect on one's own assumptions and beliefs about children, teaching and learning, their own self and so on. Certain skills and dispositions such as willingness to learn and being open to feedback need to be developed among teachers. Every teacher who is given independent charge of a class is expected to be "profession-ready" and equipped with skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed for effective

classroom practice from day one. Thus, an effective teacher education program should be well thought through, should encompass the above-mentioned knowledge, skills and dispositions and help develop professional, humane and reflective practitioners. A teacher education program needs to be a good blend of theory and practice in order to build the knowledge and skills and help novice teachers reflect on their practices.

There has been lot of deliberation in the Indian context on developing effective teacher education programs and the need to improve the quality of teacher preparation. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, NCFTE (2009) has pointed out the larger systemic concerns of the education system and how teaching as a profession is viewed. The Kothari Commission as well as the Verma Commission has identified problems and issues of the curriculum and pedagogy of the teacher education programs. These policy documents

and NCFTE have also suggested alternatives and reform agenda for teacher preparation. It is time that some of these are implemented and practiced. One of the key reforms and suggestion is to strengthen the practice teaching and helping teachers spend longer duration in schools through internships. Hammond suggests that,

“Good teacher education programs have students in the classroom working constantly with expert master teachers while they are also teaching students about how students learn, about how to assess their learning, about effective teaching strategies that will allow them to build a repertoire” (Hammond, 2001).

A practice-based model for teacher preparation will provide STs with opportunities to apply the pedagogical constructs and practice skills in authentic contexts. Theoretical ideas on education and its implications for classroom can be explored well. Similarly, classroom experiences can inform theory. This back and forth model of the theory and the practice would help STs develop deeper understanding of classrooms and children and gain professional knowledge base. According to Hammond (2001), this is to be done under the guidance of an expert teacher who mentors the STs. This will ensure that STs receive focussed feedback from experienced teacher mentors.

The practice teaching in schools through a partnership model would help developing teachers by providing opportunities to,

- Observe children and classroom practices
- Co-plan and co-teach
- Experience teaching and reflecting on teaching
- Make connections between theory and practice
- Conceptualize what good practice might look like

The need for such a practice-model based has been recognised by NCFTE and been tried across many countries such as Finland, United States and many European countries. Just as medical school has attached hospitals, teacher education institutes being attached to a school could serve as a site for practice.

The Practice Based model provided a vision for Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning¹ (PGDLT) offered by ‘I Am A Teacher’ (IAAT), Gurgaon, a not for profit organisation. The Heritage Experiential Learning school, Gurgaon and the American School of Bombay, Mumbai are the host schools where experienced teachers already working in these schools’ mentor STs intensively. The model and the structure of this one -year teacher preparation course is shared in the next section. This model has prepared 75 teachers over the last three years and is intaking 60 student teachers this year across both the centres.

School Practice Based Model for Teacher Preparation- The PGDLT Programme

Taking cue from the medical residency model, the PGDLT programme is designed to ensure a seamless blend between educational theories and principles, and teaching practiced inside the classroom. A ST may observe and experience how children learn to communicate, express their thoughts in the classroom and then share these experiences in the theory sessions with expert pedagogics. This then becomes a springboard for examining the theories of language acquisition. On the other hand, a ST may have explored and discussed contemporary issues such as gender and inclusion in education; during practice she/he will have the opportunity to examine it in the context of classrooms.

¹ It is not recognised by NCTE

The three key principles that inform the design, principles and processes of the PGDLT are:

1. Programme is rooted in **practice** and provides a strong connection between **theory and practice**.
2. Conscious attempt at helping student teachers build a **reflective disposition**. The STs are encouraged to deeply introspect about their notions about themselves, life and education. As a result, they would question their existing ideas about teaching and learning, become curious about children and their learning and gain key insights about themselves and others.
3. Providing extensive support to student teachers through close **mentoring** by experienced, practicing teachers in the field.

School Based Mentoring System

Each ST is placed in one class for an academic year where she/he works closely with an experienced teacher. The experienced teacher, referred to as the Collaborating Teacher (CT), demonstrates best practices inside the real classroom for ST to learn from. ST practices inside the classroom for 3-4 days per week while also participating in classroom teaching, planning, reflection, assessments, interaction with parent, school events, etc. Through a yearlong collaboration, the CT helps the ST placed in her/his classroom learn about effective teaching through modelling, supporting, challenging, having critical conversations based in observations of practice and analysis of data around student engagement and learning.

Beyond the classroom, the school acts as an ecosystem for STs to get acquainted with routines and procedures and understand the width and depth of a teacher's roles

and responsibilities. Furthermore, this mentoring framework provides opportunity for the host school to develop their CTs as mentors and institutionalize a culture of learning and mentoring.

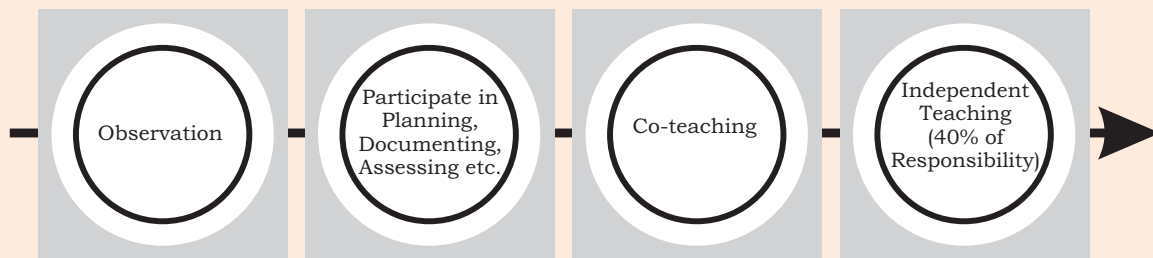
A Teacher Educator (TE) is attached to a group of STs and closely monitors their learning. The CTs and TEs work together as a team to drive significant learning of each ST. The TE supports and guides STs by helping them reflect on their practice; in analysing and making sense of student data, thereby ensuring that they experience a coherent, robust and a focused teaching and learning programme.

The ST-CT-TE triad work towards:

- building relationship with adults and children
- providing access to content and learning together with children
- setting norms and practices for a better learning environment.
- critically examining the practice
- reflecting on the plan and practice, and learning from it

Gradual Release of Teaching Responsibilities (GRTR)* Model

The PGDLT mentoring model is based on the concept of gradual release of teaching responsibilities for STs through the school year. They begin by observing the classroom teaching and then go on to participating in planning, documentation, and assessments, etc., start co-teaching along with the CTs and then take up independent teaching responsibility. Collaborating teachers support STs as they move towards the goal of assuming approximately 20-40 % of the teaching load by the end of the school year. The TE and CT together monitor the residents' graduated responsibility trajectory.



*-Adapted from Boston Teacher Residency Model

Coaching Cycle

The coaching cycle is a three-step process. As a first step, the lesson plan prepared by the ST is discussed before the actual teaching. This is done to help the ST understand and map the objectives of the lesson to the assessment goals. The resources used in the plan and the approaches to teaching are discussed during this process. This might give the opportunity to ST to rethink and re plan if need be. This is done by the CT and TE together.

The actual lesson is then observed by the CT and TE, and flow of the lesson is captured. In the final step, the lesson taught by the ST is discussed which would provide opportunity for the ST to reflect on the plan, the actual process of teaching and learning, whether the resources and the chosen approaches were effective, the responses of the students and the engagement in learning. During the GRTR, a minimum of six such cycles are encouraged. The debriefing is also done together by the CT and TE. After the debriefing, the ST is encouraged to write a reflective note which would help her/him understand what did and didn't work during the lesson and steps to improve the teaching practice.

Possibilities of a School-based Model

Experiential learning involves learning by exploring, experimenting, observing,

constructing and deconstructing through collaboration and interaction. Meaningful learning can happen in an environment where students feel safe to take intellectual risks and make mistakes. They also need to feel valued and accepted by the teacher as well as their peers. This section discusses the examples, narratives/voices of a few STs on how school-based model/practice teaching has helped them learn and develop their practice. This is discussed under five elements: **Rigour, Relevance, Responsiveness, Reflection and Relationship** in teaching.

Rigour in Teaching

Rigour in classrooms help students think deeply as lessons planned are challenging and develop higher order thinking skills. This requires that teachers are well prepared, have deep understanding of content, pedagogy as well as children and are passionate about the subject. Unlike the common paradigm that 'teaching is easy' and 'anyone can teach with little or no preparation'; a truly child centred classroom requires enormous commitment and work from the teacher. The real challenge is to prepare teachers who would find it meaningful to put that kind of an effort. Teachers need to experience the joy in this rigour and only then they can transmit it to

their children. The practice teaching model helps STs of IAAT to establish a culture for learning. One of them, Sunita² of the batch 2017-2018, shared the process of unit planning during the lead teach week said,

“I was preparing a unit plan on ‘Forms of Government’ for grade 7. I shared the third draft with my collaborating teacher and mentor. After her feedback I revised it multiple times. I would say this lesson plan was approved after seven drafts. To choose a case study I would take like 4 hours... It has to be appropriate for grade 7, it has to be relevant to our context. I found many case studies and new paper articles, but some of them are not appropriate for students of grade 7. So, I had to rewrite or adapt them. I had to add glossary in some materials that I adapted. It was a struggle. I think I would have slept for four hours in a day while preparing that unit plan. I am also unfamiliar with the topic so I had to read and prepare myself first. I used to do lot of research on the internet and read them up. The process was painful. When my mentor would ask a question or give a suggestion, I would be like.... I can’t revisit my lesson plan any more. My mentor’s classrooms are highly engaging, so I was sure I need to keep that going. I would accept the changes that needs to be made. However, I am happy I did that. The students were really engaged with the lesson. I made a mini-lesson plan for myself based on everyday tasks. I would make a list of a few questions, I would plan a transition, I would teach it to my daughter or ask her to go through the resources and try out everything with her. I would make a list of possible questions that students might ask. Now, I have sense of fulfilment, I am happy and confident that I can prepare a highly engaging lesson plan”.

² Pseudonyms have been used

Relevance in Teaching

Teaching has to be relevant to students at different levels. It has to be relevant and age appropriate and it has to be located in the context of the students. Teaching and planning has to consider how and whether it relates to students’ cultural experiences, dreams as well as larger socio-political context. Varadh of the batch 2016-2017, shares how learning at IAAT and his experiences of classroom has helped him to think about the context of his students seriously. He now teaches at a South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) school, “In my classroom, there are mix of children from native villages of Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Sometimes, as a teacher I am really worried whether I would be able to create a classroom for them, where they feel belonged, they can relate and have opportunities to showcase their natural, organic talent without any inhibition. This corresponds to the principle of Sri Aurobindo’s “Near to Far” in education. Only in such environment, the child’s engagement and learning is possible. As a teacher, I need to look more into it and try to utilize it for better learning environment”. He shares how he made an attempt to understand their context, “In SDMC, when I first interacted with children, it seemed to me that they felt alienated in school environment. While working with them, I found that when they got opportunities and encouragement to speak out their experiences and stories of their life, then they felt connection with the school and school became part of their life. I learnt that only way to teach and learn with them is to be organic, contextual to their emotions, needs, family and life. Any activity in the school - play, literacy or numeracy or hands on, it must link or relate with their surroundings. Where it reminds them of something which is familiar,

meaningful and they can extrapolate it to their own learning. Regular visits to their families, communities and celebrating the local festivals helped us to make the connection, bonding stronger and trustable. While providing different types of opportunities and exposures, I learnt that new experiences may or may not extrapolate into learning because that kind of experiences are sometimes stand alone. It could be due to early years deficit and sometimes it does not relate to their previous knowledge”.

Responsiveness in Teaching

Responsiveness involves promoting respectful interactions and adapting the learning programme to accommodate the diverse skills, experiences, interests and learning styles that students bring to the classroom so as to maximize student learning. The teachers need to be aware of the cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom, the development levels and different learning styles of the students in order to respond effectively. Smita of the batch 2016-17, was teaching a lesson on National Symbols in Grade 2. This anecdote highlights the challenges of teaching abstract concepts such as nationalism and how she dealt with one such challenge.

Smita had planned to introduce the children to the National Flag, the National Emblem and the National Anthem. However, the discussion suddenly veered to the symbolic representation of ‘Bharat Mata’ which a child insisted was a national symbol as it was a goddess that represented India. This was indeed a tricky situation that emerged out of classroom discussion and the ST had not planned for or even anticipated this. During the post lesson debrief, Smita shared that for a moment she was taken aback as she wanted to be sensitive to the child’s religious

sentiments yet she wanted address the misconception.

Smita responded to the situation by appreciating the child for sharing. She then posed the following question to her class “In IPL we support different teams. Yet, when India plays a match with Australia we all come together and support India; and we recognise our team by their uniform. Similarly, in our country different people believe in different Gods; but what is it that we respect and how do we recognise or represent our country?”

Reflection in Teaching

Reflection is the key to learning. It helps to examine one’s own beliefs and assumption about students, their learning and as well as the approaches to teaching and learning. Reflection can be promoted while in-action and on-action of teaching according to Schon (1983). During Practice STs are encouraged to reflect on action after the actual event of teaching. Amita of the batch 2017-2018, reflects on ‘managing and engaging’ children,

One of the key learnings for me during the first semester of practice days would definitely be handling the kids in the classroom. I lost a lot of sleep over this issue initially, what if the kids don’t listen? And I realise now, it’s never teachers *versus* the kids. It’s always teachers *and* the kids. They listen to you if you listen to them. It’s important to understand that they are just kids and will behave so. There’s no need to get so agitated about them fidgeting, or chatting, or raising a ruckus in class. It’s perfectly normal. And once I gave up this insane need to control, I felt a better sense of connect. The class need not be hushed all the time. What really needs to be hushed is my own ego. The rest will follow. And I also feel that this is really the first and the most important step before I can

even think about my lesson plans, and my teaching techniques”.

Relationship in Teaching

The PGDLT programme recognises that having a sense of community in the workplace is essential for ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity and support to grow and flourish. Therefore, relationship is the fifth core element of the programme and it encompasses relationship with self, with peers, with children and with the society. To help STs develop the disposition and skills for this, they are guided to tune inwards and connect with their inner self. They are encouraged to deeply introspect on their notions about self, people, education and purpose of their life. As STs re-visit their key life experiences, they become aware of their conditioning and patterns of behaviour, question their existing assumptions and beliefs, become curious about the world outside and develop fresh perspectives about work, life, self and others. This understanding helps to them recognise and appreciate their own strengths as well as those of the others thereby building a community where everyone feels empowered and responsible towards realizing the desired goals. This will help them evolve into teacher leaders and lead change effectively in classrooms and schools.

This is how Sonia of the batch 2015-2016, captures her journey of becoming a more mindful person with a greater understanding of essential principles of group learning.

“A very precious take-away from the program is that it has put me on a path of self-reflection. The journey inwards has been a tumultuous journey which I resisted initially. I remember that, there were many reflections that I was unable to do to my satisfaction because subconsciously I was closing myself

out. There were walls that I had built around myself and I wasn't yet aware of them.

At that juncture what inspired me were some of my fellow IAATians who shared their stories of courage, hardships and determination. These were people who were trusting me with their stories and I felt the need to reciprocate. This is how I took the first step of breaking the walls around me and this was just a baby-step. I have been able to take many courageous steps since then with the help of this community. Today as we all move forward on our own respective paths, I hope that each one of us is able to make such small communities around us where we not only continue to break barriers for ourselves but help others around us to reach this level of self-realization”.

Another aspect of the element of relationship is about building STs' relationship with the society at large so as to understand the social, economic and cultural perspectives that influence education. Apart from theory sessions, this is done through field visits to schools that provide alternative education or those that are for children from marginalised background. As a part of one such visit, the STs spend time observing children in the classroom and then visit the community the children belong to. They interact with the parents and community members to understand the social and economic background as well as their hopes and aspirations. The purpose of this community interface is two pronged- to help STs reflect on their privilege and learn the process of an inquiry-based approach.

For many STs, it is a rare opportunity to examine their notions of 'we' versus 'they' and reflect on how this impacts their interactions with children who come from a socio-

economic background that is different from theirs.

Huma of the batch (2015-16) shared on how visit to an urban village and her interactions with the community forced her to examine the assumptions that she had.

“I had always imagined villagers to be loud, rash and uneducated. I was intimidated when I was asked to converse with them. But as we started visiting one household after another I realised how wrong I had been. The villagers were so warm and welcoming. I was deeply touched by their hospitality. We were welcomed with smiles and served ‘welcome drinks’- aerated drinks/ chaach/ chai, in almost every house we visited. The women were really friendly and answered most of our questions frankly and patiently after seating us comfortably on charpais or chairs. I really wondered if I deserved the love and respect I got from each one of them after what I had believed them to be. Today I am embarrassed about how I had perceived the villagers. I have thought hard but I am still unable to trace how and why I had developed this perception”.

Challenges of a School-based Model

This model requires the mentors to open their classrooms, be vulnerable and critical of their own practice. This presents few challenges as well,

- Being open to learning, allowing the other person to sit and observe the

classroom

- Time availability of mentors, as the CTs have a full teaching responsibility
- Working as a team and collaboration
- Feasibility of replication of this model, as many schools do not facilitate structures for collaboration and mentoring.

Trust and relationship is at the centre of this model and practicing teachers and mentors take time to build a relationship and trust each other. A culture of learning has to be created and systems and structures for collaboration and feedback are required in a school.

This being the fourth year of this PGDLT, it appears that this model is feasible though it presents some challenges. If one were to ask, can practice based model be an answer for reform in classrooms, we would say with some conviction that it works. Can it fill the gap between teacher preparation and school reform? Teachers prepared can be placed in schools and be a critical mass in few years to reform school and classroom practice. Then these schools/classrooms can be used for new teachers where they can learn from. This can help reform both school and teacher preparation and bring in positive changes in the education system and serve as a model for change and transformation.

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