The elephant in the room that we refuse to acknowledge

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For several decades now most in-service teacher training initiatives have focused on subject-knowledge – euphemistically called hard spots. This phenomenon dates back to the DPEP days (1994 onwards) when there was a massive push through of the project to strengthen in-service teacher training. As a result, state project offices hired experts to design training modules for teachers. What was interesting is that even during the DPEP days no one really cared to find out what is it that teachers need, what is it that they want and what is the best method to deliver it.

Way back in 1998 I was asked to work on a module on gender sensitisation of teachers. This was to be done as a part of the gender mainstreaming exercise that was pro-moted by the donors who supported DPEP programme. In order to do that, I decided to meet with groups of primary school teachers in a few states – namely Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. What I heard and saw was not only an eye-opener for an outsider like me, but was the invisible elephant in the room that no one wanted to see. Teacher educators, experts and administrators were aware of the ground situation, but strangely it was never factored into training content or training design. Surprisingly, sitting though an expert committee on the same subject in 2016, I note that not much has changed and we continue to look the other way.

In 1998 I asked a group of teachers what the barriers were to effective teaching and learning? We decided to sit in small groups and list out the barriers. This is what we talked about.

One elderly teacher who was in the verge of retirement explained that it was his confidence in children that motivated him to work. He was known as a highly effective and committed mathematics teacher and the DPEP programme had identified him as a resource person. He also opined that many teachers he knew believed ‘these children cannot learn…’, or that ‘girls cannot pick up mathematics’ or, even worse, ‘children of a particular community are dull’… He explained that the first barrier that teachers have to cross is their own limitation, their attitudes and prejudices. Yet, in-service teacher training rarely addressed deep-rooted values and prejudices. The first step – he explained – is to ensure that our teachers believe children can learn regardless of their gender, economic situation, parental occupation, caste or community.

Discussing values and beliefs, some participants argued that textbooks and teaching -learning materials reinforce stereotypes and prejudices. Traditional notions of what is masculine and feminine and caste - specific occupations persist and peep out from illustrations, phrases and examples in our textbooks. Rural urban stereotypes are not only promoted, but urban is given precedence over rural, and non-tribal over the tribal. Educators pointed out examples across subjects of people and situations that are urban centric.

Heroes and leaders are invariably men and caregivers and homemakers are always women. These stereotypes and prejudices are neither discussed nor challenged in training programmes – because the focus is on specific topics in mathematics or science or language.

“In my textbooks I learned that only men
are kings and soldiers.
Till I read a book in which famous
queens ruled and fought against enemies.
In my textbooks I learned that only men
Are doctors.
When I went to a doctor I saw that she
was a woman.
In my textbook I learned that only men
do farming in my country,
until, on a train journey I saw women
working in the fields.
I have learned that I have a lit to learn by
seeing”

(Pooja, Ramya, Anuj, Utkarsh students of class VII, Baroda, quoted in NCF 2005 Focus group on Gender Issues in Education. NCERT, 2005)

The third, obvious, topic of discussion was on government primary schools. An overwhelming majority of primary schools in 1998 were multi-grade and even today the percentage remains significant. They are multi-grade either officially (when schools have fewer that five teachers for five classes) or unofficially (when teachers take turns to absent themselves). Yet, both pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher training assume one teacher for each class. This was tragically the case even when states like Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan opened thousands of single teacher schools (EGS Centres, Rajiv Gandhi Pathashala, Shiksha Karmi School) in the mid-1990s. A few teachers explained that they did not know how to manage a multi-grade classroom and were left to fend for themselves. This was particularly disheartening because India has been home to innovations in this field – be it the Rishi Valley experiment or the work done by Montessori schools. As a result, a lot of the pedagogic initiatives like joyful learning, child-centric classrooms fell on deaf ears – because most teachers were trying to cope with a situation that our trainers refused to acknowledge.

Groups of teachers erupted in laughter and jokes when 'hard spots' were mentioned. There were many jokes about pre-WhatsApp days and it took some time to persuade teachers to seriously discuss the problem with the 'hard spots' approach. Theoretically teacher-educators and subject experts identity academic hard spots encountered by teachers in the classroom and prepare modules to address them. Rigorous analysis of answer papers of students is supposed to enable experts to identify hard spots. Interestingly teachers argued that many of them have weak conceptual understanding and a training programme that focuses on specific topics (for example, fractions or place value in mathematics) does not help them re-learn the concepts that they are fuzzy about. A more holistic approach to subject-specific in-service training – one that goes over fundamental concepts – would be important in the beginning.

Another interesting revelation was that teachers were often chosen at random to attend training and there is no guarantee that those teaching mathematics would be in one group and those with difficulties in language teaching would be another. Some teachers said that there are a group of 'training teachers' – meaning those who attend all training programmes and there are those who do not attend any training workshops. There is no system to keep track of those who have attended training, the kind of training they participated in and what more needs to be done to build their capabilities. This situation continues to-date. In a recent study on how we manage our teacher workforce in India (Vimala Ramachandran et al, NUEPA, 2015) we found that there is no Management Information System (MIS) that tracks participation of teachers in in-service training. Equally shocking is that most states do not match subject-specific training to teacher requirements. As a result, most teachers we met in 2014 and 2015 said that they were tired of in-service training and that it was not of much use to them in the classroom.

None of the nine states covered in the study had an effective policy for in-service training of teachers. Training is carried out in an ad hoc manner, almost exclusively funded by two Centrally Sponsored Schemes (SSA and RMSA); and is, therefore, subject to availability of these funds and the associated modalities and priorities. The incidence of training varied significantly across states. Most importantly, there is also no database that records not only the number of training programmes conducted, but also the issues / topic covered in the training.

It is well known that states receive significant resources for in-service training of teachers under two Centrally Sponsored Schemes (SSA and RMSA). For example, in FY 2012-13, Rs. 1273 Crores was approved for states under SSA, though only about half that (Rs.619 Crores) was actually spent.[1] The figures for RMSA were much lower – only Rs.18 Crores was allocated for teacher training, though this still constituted the bulk of state spending on this item.[2] Very little progress was made on absolute number of elementary teachers across India receiving training between 2005-06 and 2012-13, even though the numbers did pick up markedly first in 2007-08 and then again in 2011-12 (Table 1). And making the picture grimmer is the significant decline over this period in the percentage coverage of in-service training – from a mere 36.4 percent of all teachers across India in 2005-06, and 34.2 percent in 2011-12, the pro-portion in 2012-13 fell to 25.8 percent.

[1]*Source: data collated from audit reports from SSA as posted on MHRD website.*
[2]*Source: Authors' calculations from data reported to the 4th Joint Review Mission of the RMSA Programme.*

Table 1: Number and percentage of elementary teachers receiving training in previous year (all-India)

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
No. of trained teachers	1706214	1688255	2072961	2010873	2035106	1892474	2285050	1893841
% of trained teachers	36.4%	32.3%	36.8%	34.7%	35.0%	29.6%	34.2%	25.8%

(Source: Vimala Ramachandran et al, NUEPA, 2015)

Sensitisation of teachers to gender issues, social equity, the impact of poverty of children's schooling and the alarming tendency whereby families with some means opt to pull their children out of government schools – have always remained a challenge. Equally, enabling teachers to unlearn what they learnt as students and re-learn concepts is no mean task. Countries like Poland worked very hard and for many years before they were able to make a breakthrough.

One of the main reasons for the ineffectiveness of in-service teacher training today is the overarching architecture of training programmes. The continued use of didactic, topic-wise lectures as the preferred mode of training has come in the way of addressing attitudes, practices as well as the challenges teachers face inside the classroom. Sensitisation involves change in attitudes, work culture, school level priorities, resource availability and monitoring. Therefore, the word training does not adequately capture the range of issues that need to be tackled simultaneously. This process may begin with training but has to go on to tackling problems and issues that teachers face on a day-to-day basis. Teachers who were trained in Shiksha Karmi, Rajasthan talked about the power of experiential training and how it changed them as people and made them good teachers. Similarly, Mahila Samalhya's ability to nurture a pro-poor approach has a lot to do with the holistic approach was adopted.

Reflecting on the common features of different experiential training programmes, it is possible to list some generic principles[3]:

- The first step in most experiential or transformative training programmes involves creating an atmosphere where the trainees talk about their work, reflect on their experience and begin to feel confident to discuss without fear of censure or evaluation, thus creating a climate for genuine exploration and mutual learning.
- In conventional training programmes, the trainer takes on the task of giving information. However, when we deal with attitudes, information transfer is not adequate and could lead to hostility. Information has to be gently encouraged from the group, giving the participants an opportunity to talk about their school, their students, their family, and their community. The role of the facilitator (trainer) is to list the information, classify it, and involve the group in separating the 'facts' from value loaded statements – and exploring each gently and honestly. In most situations eliciting information from the group throws up almost all the issues that need to be covered.
- Once the information has been generated from the group, the next step is to involve the entire group in analysis. This prevents the most common reaction, i.e. 'what you say does not apply to my region, my community, my work place'. Such reactions invariably put the facilitators in a defensive position, and often lead to indifference or apathy in the group. Analysing the information generated by the group leads to a high degree of involvement and also enables the trainee to connect with his/her own school and children.
- At the end of this process, the facilitator shares information, ideas, alternative pedagogies – depending upon the situation. When the trainees themselves work in small team to generate what

[3]*A much longer discussion on this was published in 1998, see Vimala Ramachandran: En-gendering Development: Lessons from the Social Sector programmes in India. Indian Journal of Gender Studies Vol 5, Number 1, pp 49 to 63*

they need as teachers – the power of that process will motivate them. At this stage, information or concepts or even 'hard spots' would assume an entirely new meaning. It is not what the trainer says to the trainees, but what the trainees wish to say to each other and ask specific support from the trainers or facilitators.

- Transaction of information / knowledge / ideas thus become a creative exercise, where the trainees' knowledge base is tapped enhancing their sense of self worth. It also enables them to identify with the training process and feel that they have shaped it. In short, the facilitator has to draw upon the collective knowledge of the group, give it an opportunity to articulate its opinions, and build upon this in subsequent sessions.

An experiential learning process (or experiential training) involves both the mind and the heart. When the heart is convinced, the information, knowledge or strategies are internalised immediately. For the heart to be convinced, the information must not only be authentic in the eyes of the trainee, but must be like a mirror that reflects the 'truth' as perceived by the trainees. This is important in training programmes that seek to bring about attitudinal change as well as in teaching learning processes.

Another oft -forgotten issue is the importance of reaffirming the value of common sense - one that enables us to relate our daily experience as teachers to educational processes. Teachers have the ability to critically reflect on society, dominant prejudices, the school, curriculum and pedagogies. Training programmes that ask trainees not to mix a professional approach and common sense fragments the experiential reality. Building bridges between these two worlds invariably yields valuable insights.

A new architecture of in-service teacher training needs to adhere to the above principles. A group of facilitators needs to live and work with the group through the duration of the training, weaving in exercises that enable teachers to link pedagogies with classroom environment. Inclusion of all students will be possible when trainers ensure inclusion of all teachers participating in the training. Similarly, teachers will make sure they have been able to reach every child in their class if the teacher-educators consciously do that in the training, demonstrative ways to ascertain everyone in the room are on board. All this involves using participatory research tools creatively, encouraging teachers to actively contribute towards achieving not only the 'subject' goals of the training programmes but, more importantly, the pedagogic goals.

Exposure to new ideas, a different vision of the world and encouragement to put new insights into practice, all need to go hand-in-hand with a conscious effort to unlearn. We as 'experts' or 'teacher educators' or 'educational administrators' need first to unlearn what we have been doing mindlessly and start a genuine exploration of alternative approaches and architectures to in-service teacher education.

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