

Government Initiatives Towards the 'Training' of Teachers: Principles and Implementation

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Context

The teacher is central to all educational reform – this is the underlying principle of change in educational processes. Hence, an initiative to capacitate teachers is generally an adjunct to most government initiatives in education. The word adjunct is chosen with care – while the intent is to capacitate teachers to create change, somehow the teacher becomes a supplementary rather than a key player. A case in point is the implementation of continuous and comprehensive evaluation across States. A reinforcement of good pedagogy became a 'programme' with fixed templates and close monitoring in most states. From trust in the teacher and autonomy for her to help her students learn, we moved to what was resented as additional paperwork.

While the reasons for a lack of trust in the teacher are many, ranging from systematic downgrading of the status of the teacher through top-down percolation of curricula, materials and processes, to the lack of facilitation within the ecosystem in which the teacher works, one manifestation is the perpetuation of outdated practices in our classrooms with ever worsening learning outcomes.

The situation becomes even more ironical when one considers the multiple initiatives the government has created for the professional development of teachers, including the setting up of decentralised structures devoted entirely to this purpose. While these structures are meant to facilitate both pre- and in-service professional development of teachers, this article will restrict itself to initiatives related to in-service professional development or 'training', the term commonly used for formal activities involving learning in teachers.

The question that first needs to be addressed – what kind of support do teachers need to be able to change their classrooms? Once this question is answered, actual on-the-ground implementation of initiatives towards teacher professional development will be reviewed using this lens.

A framework for capacity building

Principles

A review of literature and a distillation of learnings across the years reveals certain principles related to how teachers learn while in service. These principles, in turn, provide the basis for designing a framework for the capacity building in teachers.

The **first** principle is that teacher participation in professional development activities is a precondition to effecting any changes in classroom teaching and student learning. This is but natural, since teachers have very few opportunities to examine their own practices in the light of current policy and discourse around education.

However, the operationalisation of this principle needs care. Any change in practice requires a change in the teachers' personal theories about learners, curriculum, teaching-learning, assessment and also about their own capabilities. For this, an in-depth engagement is necessary in order to help teachers engage with the additional or different perspectives and/or information and to integrate these within their existing theories. Besides the fact that teaching is a complex activity, with wide diversity and uniqueness of teaching-learning situations which no training can prepare teachers to deal with, teachers also need time to apply these learnings into their practice, and to review the impact of this application. It follows that they need to share these experiences with a more experienced peer and seek solutions for any challenges they may have faced. In short, they may need time and support before they develop the confidence to effect change in their engagement with the various aspects of their practice.

In this scenario, short-term face-to-face trainings are perceived by teachers as opportunities to acquire relatively discrete pieces of knowledge and new skills that can be easily translated into practice – the result is viewing any attempt at reform as a new 'programme' which is to be implemented by doing these three or four things. No deep change is affected in understanding; change in practice is

therefore either not sustainable or stops short of any real change which can lead to improvement. Therefore, for any real change to occur, teachers require a long-term engagement with professional development activities.

The **second** principle flows from the first. Change takes time, especially since the demands of the everyday tasks of teachers compete with their new learning. In this scenario, they need more than theoretical conviction that the change is necessary and meaningful – they need demonstration, exemplars and dialogue. Most significantly, teachers need specific individualised feedback related to the application of their learnings. Therefore, frequent dialogue and intervention are important for implementation of learnings from professional development activities.

The **third** and final principle is that, to order for the above two principles to be actualised, teachers need to be able to influence school policy and processes while having a supportive ecosystem that is enabling rather than focused on monitoring tangibles like records and learners' scores on tests. They need a platform to articulate their successes, concerns and challenges in an accepting environment, thus contributing to the planning and rollout of programmes. At the same time, they need customised help tailored to their own experiences.

Most important of all, they need trust.

Components

Based on these three principles, the framework for building capacity of teachers that emerges contains some key components which are universal across programmes.

The **first** is the need for an enabling ecosystem which allows teachers to be take charge of their learning. In the current scenario of teacher professional development, this needs a comprehensive review and reform of practices around teachers. While appropriate pre-service teacher education is important for this to happen, the critical components are working conditions and culture, and mechanisms and support, designed specifically for continuing professional development of in-service teachers. Along with this individual effort, a culture of self and peer learning is also needed.

The approach to professional development activities must include multiple modes of learning, for example workshops, reading, discussions, exposure visits, learning communities, in-class

support and so on, while ensuring integration of and coherence across activities. A review of relevant literature reveals that activities which promote teacher learning include: listening to discussions around classroom practice, observing peers, being observed and receiving feedback, access to supplemental materials and exemplars of student activities, engaging with professional readings, discussing practice with someone more expert, authentic experience of learning the subject, discussing personal theories of practice and their implications, examining student understandings and outcomes, analysis of current practice and planning for change, and discussing issues which have been identified mutually or individually with peers. Therefore, restricting these activities to face-to-face trainings can be counterproductive.

Another component is of the teacher's choice – her choice of which activity to participate in, to recommend content, to seek help and from whom to seek help, thereby retaining autonomy over her own development. The focus should not be fulfilling objectives through 'feeding' the teacher content and perspectives, but to help the teacher establish habits of reflection and self-learning. Professional development activities should also help shape the teachers' belief systems while improving practice – space must be provided for questioning beliefs about customs, traditions and practices through engaging in a meaningful process of critical enquiry.

The next sections examine some of the larger National initiatives towards teacher professional development through this lens.

Government initiatives to support teacher professional development

Among the many initiatives around teacher professional development at the National and State levels, two stand out. The first is the Centrally Sponsored Scheme for Restructuring and Reorganisation of Teacher Education, initiated in 1987, pursuant to the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986, modified 1992), which was further strengthened in 2012. The second are the initiatives associated with the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA), launched in 2001, and the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyaan (RMSA), launched in 2009.

These initiatives have resulted in structures for academic support to teachers at multiple levels. At the national level are the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and National University of Educational Planning and

Administration (NUEPA) while at the state level are the State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERT). In some states, the nomenclature may be different, for example, in Meghalaya the functions of SCERT are performed by the Directorate of Educational Research and Training, while in Karnataka the same is done by the Department of State Educational Research and Training. At the District level are the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs).

In addition, Institutes of Advanced Studies in Education (IASEs) and Colleges of Teacher Education have been identified among existing institutes of teacher education as state level resource institutions for teacher professional development. Further, Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) at the block and cluster levels, respectively, are additional layers closer to the teacher. At its most simplistic, at various levels, these institutions are meant to determine what would be meaningful towards building teacher capacity, including building the capacity of teacher educators and planning programmes and activities around these needs. While most of the institutions within this structure were initially set up for elementary education, their mandate is now expanding to include secondary education.

This article will confine itself to a brief summary of the role of each of the state level institutions, beginning with the SCERT, which has been notified as the 'academic authority' for elementary education by most states post the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. Broadly, the SCERT is required to be involved in policy formulation, perspective planning, curriculum and material development and the review of teacher as well as school education, facilitating school improvement through multiple approaches and supporting in-service teacher professional development. The SCERT is also required to undertake the necessary research as well as documentation and dissemination, including maintenance of databases, required to fulfil these expectations. Specific to professional development of in-service teachers, the SCERT is required to undertake studies for needs identification through engaging with classroom processes and stakeholders, plan and implement/ support implementation of in-service professional development activities in various modes through identification of resource persons and development of related materials, and provide follow up and continuing support. It follows

that the SCERT is required to maintain strong institutional linkages (e.g. with RMSA, SSA, DIET, CTE, IASE, NGOs working in the space of teacher education, etc) to ensure convergence of all similar efforts in the state.

The IASE is expected to support and implement preparation and continuing professional development of teacher educators for elementary and secondary school, develop materials and support curriculum implementation, conduct and mentor research to improve the quality of education across all levels of school and teacher education. The CTE has a similar function, with particular focus on secondary education.

DIETs were proposed with the intent to add a district-level tier. It was envisaged that this would ensure wider coverage as well as qualitatively better support on account of their being geographically closer to schools, and therefore more attuned to the needs and problems of the particular district. At its core, the idea was decentralised academic and resource support to the education system. The DIETs are expected to anchor district specific planning, provide pre- and in-service teacher education, conduct and mentor relevant research and engage in direct field intervention and school improvement.

At the block level, the BRCs function as a repository of academic resources, including preschool material and material for children with special needs. They are required to maintain and update databases, including related to activities intended for professional development of teachers, and of Resource Persons for different subject areas and themes. They are required to visit schools to provide on-site academic support to address pedagogic issues and other issues related to school development, and for follow up of programmes. They are also required to support other resource institutions in addition to organising in-service teacher training based on teacher needs as observed during school visits and interactions with stakeholders. It is but obvious that, to do so, they must undertake regular school visits – they are thus required to be closely associated with the work of teachers and school processes. In addition, they must participate in monthly teacher meetings organised at the CRCs to discuss academic issues and to design strategies for better school performance, including involvement in the design, implementation and review of the school

development plan. Finally, they must design a comprehensive quality improvement plan for the block/cluster and implement it in a time bound manner in consultation with relevant bodies, including the School Management Committee (SMC).

The CRCs, which are closest to the teacher, are central to implementation of policy and programmes. Typically, a cluster would have 8-10 schools – this offers opportunities for focused, customised and sustained support for teachers. Like the BRCs, the CRCs function as academic resource centres with adequate resource/reference materials for teachers, but in a much more proximate manner. Coordinators are required to undertake regular school visits and provide onsite academic support to teachers. Another important aspect is the organisation of monthly meetings to discuss academic issues and design strategies for better school performance. An important outcome of these meetings is expected to be the formation of formal and informal learning communities. In addition, they are required to coordinate with the SMC and other local bodies for school improvement, including development and monitoring of the school development plan. Thanks to their engagement with various schools in the cluster, CRC coordinators can play an important role in forging linkages across schools. Another interesting aspect is that in most states, BRC and CRC coordinators have been teachers themselves – who would understand the needs and requirements of teachers better than their peers?

If one looks at the structure within states as a comprehensive whole, the scope for professional development of teachers is tremendous. It ranges from state level programmes for capacity building of teachers to block or even cluster specific programmes. Opportunities like cluster level meetings can become opportunities for sharing of challenges and good practices across school and teachers, providing for contextualised support in a unique manner.

School visits can become opportunities for onsite support related to challenges specific to teachers in individual schools, review of effectiveness of programme implementation, identification of needs of teachers, and so on. From broad programmes at the state level, which will help build coherence and cohesiveness among educational processes in the state, to very specific programmes

tailored to the needs and context of teachers at the district, block and cluster, or even school, level are possible. Teachers have a voice through interaction with the BRC and CRC coordinators, through cluster level meetings and even the DIETs through both geographical proximity and the very nature of the role of the latter. This voice can translate into contribution to policy formulation and the design of programmes and activities. Teachers can also seek support from a variety of Resource Persons and have access to a variety of teaching-learning resources – eventually, they are expected to function as Resource Persons themselves and, given their understanding of the context and their proximity to classrooms, contribute to the development of teaching-learning resources,

Thus, the principles discussed above are met by these initiatives: institutional structures are in place for teachers to participate in professional development activities beyond trainings, both mandated by the state and its arms and driven by personal need. Teachers have time to engage with learnings and seek support whenever they feel a challenge in implementation. And, as mentioned earlier, they have a voice and wherever they are unable to articulate their needs, processes for systematic needs identification are expected to be in place. However, the reality is different.

The reality of implementation

A review of reports concerning the status of the resource institutions for teacher education within the state reveals certain common observations. The first is that all institutions, from the SCERT to the CRC are plagued by vacancies. Very often, where posts are filled, the appointment may be contractual and for a short period – even three months at a time – which creates a sense of insecurity and hampers long term planning. Professional development activities for members of these institutions are far and few between.

Infrastructure is poor, learning resources are left wanting – libraries and laboratories are either absent or of a poor quality. Linkages within institutions are poor and in most states, a coherent plan for teacher professional development is not in place.

The focus of institutions like the IASE, CTE and DIET has remained pre-service teacher education in most states, with in-service professional development activities being conducted as mandated as opposed to contextual need, generally in cascade mode,

across states. Research remains a highly neglected area, with resultant perpetuation of existing practices and lack of development of contextual theories. Curriculum development takes place as mandated, but material development is largely limited to textbook development for schools. Some States have institutionalised cluster meeting where teachers can interact with each other and with functionaries, but these are few and far between.

More alarmingly, the percentage of teachers who have received in-service training appears to be decreasing. The Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) data reveals that in 2010-11, 40.21% of teachers received in-service training; this percentage was reduced to 14.9% in 2015-16. A comparison of UDISE data for 2014-15 and 2015-16 reveals that the overall percentage of teachers who received in-service training went down from 18.34% to 14.90%. The percentage of government school teachers who received in-service training was 27.90% and 23.17% in 2014-15 and 2015-16, respectively. The percentage of teachers from aided schools who received in-service training was 15.55% and 13.21%, respectively. And the percentage of teachers from unaided schools who received in-service training was reported to be 1.82% and 1.11%, respectively.

A review of the content and processes of in-service training reveals that the focus of training is highly subject-oriented and pedagogical in focus: areas such as inclusive education, life skills and leadership, etc. do not find a place. Needs assessment to inform training development remains a concern in most states, and teachers generally play only a limited role in terms of contribution to design. Teachers reported that they were satisfied with the training programmes, despite widespread use of conventional instructional methods such as lecture, whole group discussion, etc, and appreciated the efforts of Resource Persons while acknowledging the

limitations posed by large number of participants, nature of venue, etc. They reported acquisition of skills and attitudes, ideas, and new knowledge along with consolidation of prior knowledge. However, transfer of learnings to teacher practice was reported to be limited due to factors such as quality of training, lack of motivation, pre-existing attitudes, limitations posed by large class size, lack of facilities and learning resources in schools and limited follow up and support. A positive outcome reported by teachers was the development of networks of colleagues with similar interests, involvement of headmasters, and the use of innovative strategies and resources. Interestingly, BRC were seen primarily as the 'venue' of trainings.

One observation that comes through is the need for a paradigm shift from one-shot trainings to continuous professional development not only of teachers but also teacher educators. Ironically, the structures to facilitate this paradigm shift are in place. Thus, in India, meaningful and sustainable professional development of teachers remains a lost opportunity.

Conclusion

While the overall picture may appear dismal, pockets of innovation driven by a few States, individuals and some NGOs exist. Voluntary teacher forums, teacher learning centres, innovative programmes run by some DIETs and individual efforts by teachers – these offer models for in-service professional development which can be integrated into the existing structures. The need is for a paradigm shift – for resource institutions to view professional development activities of teachers as more than trainings, and for governments to genuinely view teachers as critical to the achievement of the goals of education policy and programmes, as opposed to ciphers in the completion of schedules of implementation and bearers of accountability.

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