



Pre- service teacher preparation - curriculum, practice and reality

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The teacher has become crucial to strengthening of the educational process and development. There has been ample research to show that the nature, motivation and the capability of the teacher to engage and involve children is critical to learning. Their being key to education requires emphasis on their preparation, further disposition and constant learning with experience and self correction based on the exposure and opportunities available. It is in this context that we will explore pre-service teacher preparation. We will begin by looking at and analysing the structure and organisation of teacher preparation and then go on to look at the critical elements and challenges as well the possible content and broad mechanisms for it.

Teacher preparation is multi-faceted, here we will hint at some and raise currently relevant and crucial concerns. Recent decades have seen many missions to retrain teachers due to two-pronged reasons. One the thought that teachers need to be able to refresh themselves, share experiences and learn: the other is that ideas that they learnt during pre-service are not current and hence they need to be exposed to newer principles and ideas. Both are valid and also pose important questions about pre service preparation. One important question is the currentness of the programs today and the other about the period, manner and of pacing of teacher preparation. We will first look at the second question and that is about the period, timing, pacing and location of the preparation programmes.

What should be the structure of teacher preparation?

The time and organisation of the program can be divided in three strategic ways. One is doing almost all of it before becoming a teacher and starting only when certified to be able to do so. The major messages of this are select the person properly and then 'prepare' and fully equip her and give the license for her to teach. This front loaded program is what we use in India today and the recent decisions are towards further increasing this front loading.

The second is to virtually no initial preparation and throwing the would be teacher in to the school

after a short crisp induction and then working with her as a part of a small group of trainees with a coach or a mentor or other mechanisms of periodic interaction largely in the school. The interactions may include various tasks and reflections that the student teacher undertakes shares and reports on. This could continue for some years after the teacher is posted to a school and may slowly become less frequent and of shorter duration. The idea being that it gives a greater opportunity for the teacher to share and learn from those who are struggling like her and also get opportunities to repeatedly reflect on what she has been doing along with others.

The third would be a blend of these in various proportions. This would emphasise that pre-service needs to be supplemented by other ways for preparing teachers. So you would have a longish pre-service program followed by internship in a school and then back again for interaction and some more courses. Besides this she maybe offered a basket of courses that she may choose to take of her own volition and from the course she chooses.

The second has a large component of time in the school and classroom for the student-teacher. It is not that the first has no school experience but it is lesser and also with a different purpose and process. The models pose the question whether a long period of initial teacher preparation is better and necessary or her development in to a teacher is much more a continuously reflective process? Should we have a small initial institution based interaction and then leave almost the entire time as attached to one school with intermittent interactions. What should be the main purpose and nature of the school experience or immersion or whatever else we call it?

Can pre-service teacher preparation stand on its own?

There has been considerable discussion and research on all this and there is much criticism of the 'front loaded program'. With the process essentially prior to certification with nothing after that period leaves the teacher with no reflective opportunity after experience of teaching. Experience has shown that such current program do not stand on their

own and fail the purpose. It has been argued that without adequate experience of classroom and teaching the lectures or the reading materials do not make sense to student-teachers, while others argue that it is the quality and nature of content that is at fault. It is also said that school experience is not the way it should be and its linkage with the lectures is not proper. What everyone agrees is teachers need to share and reflect on their experiences and buffer their reflection with reading or engaging otherwise with theoretical ideas as well. The need for refreshing periodic interaction is also recognised thus the need for comprehensive teacher preparation, assessment, certification and continued learning (if needed assessment, re certification).

Another axis for categorising teacher preparation programs may be on balancing classroom experience and conceptual thinking and engaging in questions often described as theoretical.

School experience and teacher preparation:

The increased emphasis on school experience is welcome, there is also some new ideas about this being voiced. Some of these are meaningful others contrary to many principles including of success possibility. What for example is good is the recognition that teacher must become more embedded in the school and make teaching a profession and hence increase exposure to real situations as in medical colleges. This sounds very persuasive but is fraught with dangers and implementation impossibilities due to the nature of the task and perhaps does not even go as far as a reasonable simile. There have been efforts to think of ways for more exposure in schools and shifting a larger part of the training to the school itself. The experiments with in service trainings have also thrown up many models of this kind for pre service but none of them has been fully developed or tried out. The bottle-necks are in the numbers of student-teachers and good mentors. Suffice to say the period of internship in the new teacher training pre service programs been made longer and also redefined in words. This is forced by discussions on teacher preparation, but the design leaves out the essential spirit of the arguments.

The role and responsibility while on practice in school, based on what she is expected to learn has not been thought through. This has a major impact on the way the program is structured and the relationship it has with the school. It also has

implications for the DIET, teachers colleges and other institutions' relationship with the schools and the knowledge hierarchy dominance that is so pervasive. It is to be expected that the period of school internship is for the teacher-student as well as her college to learn from the school situation and absorb the experience but instead the attitude with which the faculty and even the students go to the school is of telling the teachers what to do and trying on what they think is already known and correct. The hierarchy of knowledge makes the school experience both pre-determined and mechanical with very little benefit to either the school or the college. There is no attempt by the student teachers or the faculty to understand the difficulty of the school and help them with it. The dialogic relationship between the institutions is conspicuously absent.

In principle the increased school exposure and observing children and teachers in a school can be good. The concern is how do we get enough schools and have the schools to agree to this host of students descending upon them at arbitrary times and all of them wanting to be in the school and the classrooms at the same time as per the common dictated calendar. It is however, not clear why the calendar has to be commonly directed so that all student-teachers reach the schools in the same period. The preparation of the mentor teachers and the head teachers is almost if not totally absent and most of the time there is no interaction with them prior to deciding dates and areas they need to get student-teachers in.

The problem of school availability and the usefulness of the exercise for the school are linked but not entirely overlapping. In spite of the fact that the schools may not find these useful they are willing to stretch and allow the would be teacher-students but the sheer number of colleges and hence of those needed to be placed in the urban classes defeats their best intent.

Constructing the elements of the curriculum:

The elements of what may be considered to be important for the pre service preparation must perhaps include some essentials whatever be the period and way of structuring. This requires delineation of the preparation and capability a teacher needs for the classroom. These elements remain essentially the same at all levels of school education but their proportion and nature changes for different classes. We shall first look at the

characteristic elements and then think about their practice.

The most important requirement is that the teacher understands and respects the students; in terms of their background, aspirations, beliefs, culture and dispositions, know their language and use it and have respect for them and their community knowledge. To recognise their role models and help them create more.

That naturally means understanding the role and meaning of education in their lives. Also understand what it means to all of us and to some extent its role in a democratic human society. Realising the commitment in the preamble of the Constitution in Indian context and hence attempting to include these in to the school. Being aware of need for providing equal space and opportunity with the tremendous difference in nature and extent of exposure and opportunity.

The third element is to understand how humans learn and in particular children of that age group learn and behave. This includes the understanding about what learning means. For example learning does not only mean the ability to recall or the ability to mainly follow procedures. It also does not mean the ability to answer questions that are given in the book or performing at the time of the test and according to it. So having a sense of what is to be learnt and knowing how to judge if that engagement and learning is taking place in their classroom. There has been a lot said about this including in the policy and curricular documents but it is easier said than conceptualised and concretised and even more difficult to put in to practice.

The fourth is knowing the subject to be transacted that is knowing why it is relevant to learn, its nature, be confident of the concepts that form the basic framework of the subject and their nuances. The attitude must be of felicity and curiosity with respect to the subject and not of fear and anxiety overburdened with the arrogant prestige of knowing the subject. There must be the ability to trace the journey children follow to learn the concepts and the nuances of the subject with understanding and compassion. The current teacher prepared by the current system is far from this. It is a difficult proposition to try and do all this during the period of the preparation particularly for many stages the teachers teach many subjects in the classroom. How do we build in them a sense of exploration, joy and get rid of the fear and boredom in the subjects.

Using all this to help children learn:

The last but the critical step is then to use all this in the classrooms with children. This requires ability to present knowledge, interest and engage children and using their propensities be able to organise meaningful interaction among them. Keep balance between treating them like innocent flowering buds or mouldable clay and thinking of them as rogues and vicious entities out to create trouble and indiscipline. Make the classroom a place of dialogue and help evolve right and wrong notions in a non-oppressive way. Notions and value systems that they can stand up for with rational reasons.

This seems comprehensive and is often underlined and talked about but is extremely difficult, if not impossible to even partially put in to practice. Teachers are and would perhaps always remain the essential element to help build meaningful learning dialogue among learners and with themselves. The abilities described are not needed for a few but for all teachers being able to do it for most children.

The notion of the teacher as a learner and her expected role:

The battle for teacher preparation has always been at one level a zero one game. There is the desire to load everything on to the teacher and expect to prepare her for that or to claim that not much be maybe expected. Sceptics claiming pointlessness of teacher preparation and training are arguing to cut costs on this even more. For them money should be spent on the children directly. They argue that no matter what the teachers would not be transformed and be expected to devise their own teaching learning program and actively construct their classroom along with the inputs from the learners. Therefore, all they need are a few tips and then clear directions. And the dreamers claim the opposite yet both agree that the present situation is terrible and the blame is on the teachers. Any nuanced analysis is cramped by the inability to struggle with the current system. The entire teacher preparation and in that, particularly pre service hinges on the question of how we understand teachers and what we think of them as persons suitable for teaching children. This would also affect what we think needs to be done to build their capacity and how to do it.

The schizophrenic view of teacher needing to be a 'god like' capable person and the attitude of disdain and disrespect for them as a category and as individuals makes the teacher engagement with

the system confused. Their preparation program needs to be clear on the perspective and the focus. Do we base it on the assumption that teachers (and hence also teacher educators) can be learners and while they may follow different procedures and strategies but they need to be developed by the teacher herself based on her understanding of life, society, learning and education as listed above. Or on the decision to give a detailed program to follow and just follow them with little or no lee way or effort at adaptation.

It is this that also brings us to the nature of transaction in the teacher training institutions. If teaching is not a mere algorithm to be followed and education is a dialogic process and the learners learn only when the teacher is also engaged and learning, then this must reflect in the processes. The teachers would reflect the same attitude as they cognised as learners. It is not that they do not need to be told anything or that they do not need to learn through interacting with those better learnt. We are here not talking about a 'constructivist' or a self development teacher preparation plan. What we are talking about is the balance between all this, the need for the teacher to be thinking, creating new strategies and tasks/ situations/methods / activities each moment and in everything and on the other side be seen as not willing to learn, put in effort, think on her own and non curious. This also requires a balance between developing theoretical framework of teaching and learning as well as the aspects of practice with schools and children to experience and understand. The argument that teachers do not need theory as it does not help and what teachers need is precise ways of dealing with a variety of children and a list of things that they can do in different situations as per directions. This is reflective of the incorrect and incongruous understanding of theory and equating it with merely knowing everything as facts to be recounted. The pre-service course and its implementation has to keep in mind that it needs to conform to the principles it purports to believe in and not display but actually use them in every element of practice as well.

Do we need so many colleges?

Another issue of importance is the purpose and the meaning of the pre-service certificate. The reason this is important to think about is because the certificate affects all that happens or does not happen in teachers' colleges and the assessment

of what has been taught and learnt. It also effects the assessment and the extent to which the performance in the course is of value to the student. It has now become common to hear students and teacher educators talking about the absence of classes in some particular college and the fact that the college does not have a faculty that is remotely equivalent to the prescribed strength. The efforts of the NCTE (National Council of Teacher Education) to regulate and control the colleges that open and the faculty placements through carefully designed committees and inspections has been anything but counterproductive.

There is no coherence between the need for colleges and the permissions given and many of the State Governments feel by passed in the decision of allowing new colleges. The universities as well as the State Government are statedly not able to act on the errant private teachers colleges as much as they would like to due the role of the NCTE. While the NCTE has the responsibility of sanctioning permissions as well as lay down guidelines of various kinds including both institutional infrastructure and faculty needs, duration and nature of the program expectations and evaluation, as well as curricular considerations depend on many of these considerations.

Is the evaluation meaningful?

The reduction of the pre-service training to passing the examinations and getting the necessary certificate has had frightening consequences. It does seem the more attempt to regulate the quality of teachers by mechanical and supervisory inspectorial roles the worse has been the actual effort by the would be teachers to learn. The university examinations for these courses like all other courses are not designed to assess the actual learning and understanding of the examinee. The nature of questions indeed the questions themselves are often pre-determined and the answers devoid of any requirement of thinking. The assessment is also to ensure that most are able to pass the paper. In the process of selection given the nature of the course there is very little actually expected from the candidate about her B.Ed. experience and score. Many candidates get through with both firsts (for the theory and the so called classroom teaching) in the examinations. But even if they did not it carries for little in the actual selection process. There is almost a certainty that if you were to get admission in to the B.Ed. program

you would pass and get the certificate no matter what you or the college does. The university and its procedures notwithstanding. In this context the recent decision to make the B.Ed. course a two year course has many interesting ramifications. These will play out over the next few decades and then it would be clear what advantages if any have accrued from this mammoth decision.

Summarising:

The question about pre service preparation and indeed for any interaction with would be teachers or working teachers that is of concern is the preparation of an attitude, a propensity and also a commitment and an agency. Clearly the attitude is multi-dimensional and has elements of attitude to the social, political, cultural structure and the need for implementing the constitution. Its other aspects are the attitude to the learners and the community given the fact that there is diversity of all kinds and these diversities are affected by passionate divisions among people and sometime even rancour, indifference, disdain, derision and sometime positive hostility. How do we make teachers forget their cultural development process their particular way of understanding the nature, reasons and present construction of diversity and imbue them with a sense of respect for the other and ways of bringing them in to their strategies? How do we make them feel committed to struggle

with learners who are from very different social, cultural, linguistic, economic and life styles than them and help them with empathy while they struggle? Why should they make the effort? The question thus is how do we prepare teachers with a proper attitude, purpose and commitment to follow this through in alignment with the Constitutional principles emerging from the preamble and be able to see the long term contribution of their role. Does it simultaneously require a re look at the way the society and the administrative system looks at the teachers?

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