

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ELEMENTARY TEACHER EDUCATORS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

It is well realised that there is a need to institutionalise mechanisms for professional development of elementary teacher educators in our country. This is because the aim is to strengthen and further develop a cadre of professionals and researchers in elementary education. The present study was undertaken with a view to understand the issues and challenges that fall within the ambit of professional development of teacher educators. The sample consisted of sixty elementary teacher educators belonging to the District Institute of Education and Training (DIETs) across India as well as a select sample of educationists and other experts. The findings are based on their perceptions gathered on the basis of a questionnaire and focussed discussions on the theme.

The needs, concerns and problems of elementary teacher educators have emerged. The findings also lend direction to the ways and means by which these concerns can be addressed.

KEYWORDS: Elementary Teacher Education, Professional Development, Teacher Educator

INTRODUCTION

It is often said that the quality of teacher educators is an important component in improving teacher education. This is because the professional quality of teacher educators will determine the quality of the training of teachers, both in-service and pre-service. The professional level at which Teachers are prepared would, in turn, determine the quality of school education. Thus, teacher educators have to be fully familiar with the school realities, social environment and community expectations to realistically perform the challenging tasks before them. On the professional side, teacher educators have to be actively associated with policy formulations, implementation strategies and monitoring of programmes. If one looks back at history, Adiseshiah (1978) had said 'Those that are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching the teachers have naturally to be men and women of high calibre whose influence would prove to be the greatest asset for prospective teachers'. Therefore, those who educate teachers must be models of exemplary practice. The need of today is teacher educators of excellence who are reflective of and responsive to the diversity of students, who have the conviction, commitment and courage to change the education system in ways that ensure the acquisition of knowledge and skills by children with diverse abilities and needs.

In the last decade or so, the professional development of teacher educators has gained an increasing attention. Although the learning process of student-teachers is fully under research, research on *learning* of teacher educators is somewhat not brought to the forefront. Thus, what is important is to focus on how teacher educators see their work and professional development. The question that arises is '*What is professional development of teacher educators?*'

There are various ways in which professional development has been defined and conceptualized by various

authors. Guskey & Huberman (1995) have conceptualized professional development as “those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students.” Going further, the author says that in some situations, professional development also involves learning to redesign the educational structures and cultures to suit the demand of a particular case.

Professional development is self directed as well as directed by others occurring both within and outside the formal spaces of institution (Osborn, 1996). According to Osborn, there are various factors which either facilitate learning or hinder the same in the course of professional development. This is dependent on the experiences, pressures and commitment at the level of both personal and professional aspects of the person. For instance, as a teacher, Cochran-Smith (2008) reflects on her personal and professional self as part of her professional development which helps her in dealing with the question of “how to see herself as an academic practitioner engaged in facilitating and participating in critical enquiry that avoids being celebratory, cathartic and confessional.” Further, the author says that professional development, in other words, could be summarised as learning to mediate the effects of policy change, i.e. the ability to feel confident enough about one’s own practice to be able to make choices and be selective in how to implement the changes. The PESLE report (2007) also asserts that we have to remember that the quality and effectiveness of persons is closely tied-up with their professional growth-with the ways in which they develop as ‘persons’ and as ‘professionals’. Therefore, teacher development must be understood as a process, which promotes the development of personal and professional identity of educators.

The significance of professional development and growth of teachers and teacher educators for overall learning of students, effective functioning of schools and the implementation of broader as well particular aims of education cannot be denied. To this, Barth says:

Nothing within an institution has more impact upon students in terms of skill development, self confidence, or classroom behaviour than the personal and professional growth of their teachers. When teachers examine, question, reflect on their ideas and develop new practices that lead towards their ideals, students are alive. When teachers stop growing, so do their students (cited in Dana & Hoppey, 2008)

Dana and Hoppey (2008) give 3 models to nourish the professional development:

- **Knowledge for Practice:** This is often reflected in traditional professional efforts. It happens when a trainer shares the information produced by education researchers, with the teachers. This kind of knowledge provides the solution for generic dilemma or learning problems.
- **Knowledge in Practice:** This recognizes the importance of teacher’s practical knowledge and its role in improving teaching practice.
- **Knowledge of Practice:** It stresses that through systematic inquiry “teachers make problematic their own knowledge and practice as well as the knowledge and practice of others”. This kind of knowledge is generated when teachers raise questions on their practice, behaviour and attitudes and systematically study and reflect their own classroom teaching.

Professional development of teacher educators can be seen in terms of learning in the workplace and is more than just taking courses on training.

The professional development of teacher educators is not restricted to an initial training programme, although, there is made a start with the development of a curriculum for beginning teacher educators (Cochran Smith, 2003).

This work-place for elementary teacher educators needs to be identified. In the Indian context, at the Elementary education level, the establishment of District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) under the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Teacher Education is a major intervention in the field, as prior to this, there did not exist facilities for continuous Teacher Education at the district level. It had been envisaged that DIETs would provide for training and resource support to Elementary Education at the grass-root level. A DIET has three main functions:

- Training - both induction as well as in-service
- Pre-service support extension/guidance, development of materials, teaching aids, evaluation tools etc.
- Action research

With the setting up of DIETs for elementary school teachers, it also became necessary to produce good quality elementary teacher educators. Initially, the system of secondary teacher education was expected to perform the following broad functions:

- Impart quality pre-service and in-service education to the secondary school teachers
- Prepare personnel for faculties of elementary teacher education institutions, and their continuing education.
- Provide general in-service support to these institutions.
- Undertake research innovation and extension work in the field of secondary and elementary teacher education.

Thus, Institutes of Advanced Studies in Education (IASEs) were set up to facilitate the training of teacher educators, including those of the DIETs. As time progressed, it was expected that a cadre of elementary teacher educators emerged for the established DIETs. And, in today's context, the need arises to look into the professional development of the teacher educators who belong to this cadre.

At the policy level, the need to review the role of teacher educators arises from the basic assumption that the quality of pedagogical inputs in teacher education programme and their effective utilisation for the purpose of preparing prospective teachers depends largely on the professional preparation of teacher educators. Sometimes, teacher educators are persons with an initial degree in teacher qualification i.e. a B.Ed. along with a Master's degree in a basic discipline with or without an additional Master's degree in education. These qualifications can equip teacher educators with the basic understanding of how to teach what they have gained through a B.Ed. and the disciplinary background in education obtained through a M.Ed.

These degrees, however, may not necessarily enhance the understanding and skills or provide guidelines as to how to educate entrants with the profession of teaching. Thus learning to become a good teacher and actually teaching effectively does not mean that one has also learnt how others can be helped or trained to be effective teachers. An effective teacher educator needs to possess knowledge about specialised and efficient ways of exposing student-teachers to varied ways of teaching and be capable of helping them to acquire a distinct style of teaching of their own. This function would need an emphasis on knowledge of different training techniques, their place in the preparation of

prospective teachers in relation to their behavioural attributes and further helping them to internalise the available techniques and act in ways that are individually suited to them.

It is in the above context that an attempt has been made to understand the perceptions of not only teacher educators, but also of experts and other educationists about their understanding of what professional development should entail, so that a sound programme of professional development can be envisioned for them.

METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken with the main objective of understanding the perceptions of teacher educators, educationists and other experts regarding professional development.

A variety of tools and techniques were used to gather data.

- A questionnaire that was constructed by the author and administered to a sample of sixty teacher educators, particularly the DIET faculty across the country.
- A seminar-cum- workshop was organised in which the participants were teacher educators, educationists and experts working actively in the field of Elementary teacher education.

The analysis of data was undertaken on the basis of the Questionnaire given to Teacher Educators. The seminar-cum-workshop titled 'Identifying Priority Areas for Professional Development of Teacher Educators' that was organised also revealed rich insights.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

An analysis of data collected on the basis of questionnaires given to teacher educators has enabled an understanding of their perceptions regarding professional development.

The first question related to the in-service programs that the respondents had attended so far. It was found that 40% respondents had attended the DOT (Design of Training) program where as 15% had attended the SOPT (Hard Spot Training Programme). 67% respondents had attended the DTS (Direct Training Skills) program which focussed on development of training skills. 20% respondents attended an Action research program in which they were given exposure to what action research was all about and how it could be conducted in a teacher education classroom. However, according to teacher educators, it did not help them to develop strategies to train prospective teachers to conduct action research. 20% respondents had attended a program on recent trends in Research Methodology in Education. 17% teacher educators had attended the adolescent education program and guidance and counselling training whereas only 3% could attend a program on Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation. 7% respondents had attended a program on Integrated Approach for Disabled Children. Almost all of them had attended at least one program enriching their subject pedagogy. 3% had also attended a Disaster Management program. 17% respondents had attended a curriculum preparation program.

The second question addressed to teacher educators enquired about the components of the various in-service programs that they had attended. Almost all of the respondents mentioned that their subject based pedagogy and subject specific awareness were the two major components of all kinds of programs. 40% respondents stated that Action Research was an important theoretical component of their in-service programs. 27% respondents cited 'motivation towards

innovative attitude' to be another significant component of the in-service programs. 20% respondents stated that AIDS and Sex Education were equally important components of some of their programs. Development of skills of a trainer (as in delivering an effective lecture or engaging student teachers in a guided group discussion) and development of curriculum construction skills were the other major components that a few teacher educators cited.

3% respondents stated that they had attended a program on gender sensitization and another 3% had attended a programme on women's empowerment to enhance their sociological understanding. 17% respondents mentioned that Inclusive and Integrated Education were also important components in the programs they had attended.

The third question pertained to the relevance and meaning of the programs that the teacher educators attended. As perceived by respondents, 80% respondents felt that only some of these programs helped them to improve their training skills which they could use in their teacher education classrooms. Thus the respondents mentioned that these in-service programs were relevant and meaningful to them as they provided an opportunity to facilitate capacity building among them. Some teacher educators also stated that these programs helped them to improve their academic and professional skills. 17% teacher educators perceived that the programs helped them to develop a few Action Research skills among them. One of the respondents stated, "these types of programs stimulate and refresh our knowledge and enrich our research based thinking." However, 20% very boldly said that all these programs were just done for the sake of organizing programs and they did not provide any specific help to them regarding quality improvement in their teaching learning skills. They strongly felt that these programs needed to be updated on a regular basis. Thus, these programs seemed relevant and meaningful to only some of the respondents.

The fourth question required the teacher educators to provide suggestions for future capacity building programs. Most of the respondents felt that these capacity building programs should be organized at regular intervals so that continuity is maintained. 33% respondents mentioned that the construction of teaching learning material (TLM) and its usage should be one of the very important components of all in-service programs. They also felt that a positive attitude towards this should be developed among teacher educators. A close and frequent monitoring of the same should be pursued. This would actually help them improve the quality of teacher education programs. 17% respondents stated that the technical aspects of teacher education should be well taken care of and be an integral part of the training programmes. This would provide them the knowledge regarding latest research trends in the concerned field, helping them to update their innovative skills.

3% teacher educators poignantly mentioned, "In-service programs should change the existing mindsets of Teacher Educators; they should be practical rather than philosophical." 3% respondents stated that small batches should be formed in all in-service programs so that learning could be maximum 33% respondents suggested Yoga and physical education to be an important component that would help teacher educators develop holistically and increase their efficiency. 3% stated "Physical Fitness and Yoga schedule should be made mandatory for all teacher education programs". Some of them also felt that Computer Education should form an important component of teacher education programs as it would make them competent enough to get connected to the rest of the world's community working in their field, helping them gain heaps of knowledge. 3% of the respondents stated, "After every training programmes, efforts should be made to put what had been learnt into practice". For this, there should be a follow-up of whether the constructed knowledge is being implemented in actual teacher education classrooms.

3% respondents thoughtfully pointed out that they should be provided an opportunity to visit some of the innovative teacher education classrooms where such ground-breaking and innovative practices were going on in any part of the country in any educational institution. 7% respondents mentioned that the emerging issues and problems should be thoroughly discussed in these capacity building programs so that they are provided with an opportunity to develop various perspectives on the concerned issues related to teaching and learning.

Many needs, concerns and problems of Teacher Educators emerged on the basis of the discussions in the workshop, such as Topic, agenda etc. not clear either to teachers or teacher educators; Lack of availability of time for training; Difficulty in training too many teachers at one time; Teacher educators themselves not trained to train teachers; Existing model of training (21 days) ineffective. Regarding Research, Teacher educators did not seem to know about the current trends in education and new researches; No space or time for undertaking research of any kind was available. With respect to training of Teacher Educators, the following points emerged: No platform exists for their professional growth; No exposure to new pedagogic techniques for student-teachers and teachers (content-cum-pedagogy); Not exposed to current trends in education; Regarding material development, no opportunity provided for undertaking any work related to it. The Problems faced at workplace related to, Handling large groups of students; Conducting *several* training programmes (role of DIET faculty has changed from academic to coordination work only); All departments of DIETs are not functional (all their energy gets vested in running the PST programme); Library not functional, so non-availability of resources.

In order to meet the challenges, and to address the needs, concerns and problems, the educationists and other experts suggested that the professional development of teacher educators should include the following: Becoming familiar with innovative programmes; Training of principals of DIETs as well; Need for Self development programmes; A need to set right the vision (a shared vision with SCERTs); Improvement of in-service programmes by undertaking faculty visits to the innovative programme sites, use of new techniques, bringing a change in existing structures, building linkages to promote networking and collegiality.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

From the data analysis and interpretation, it has well emerged that there is a need to undertake a continuous analysis and a critical review of existing programmes with a view to identifying and generating new components of development and growth. This would contribute in reducing the hiatus between theoretical knowledge and practice. The search for a knowledge-base in teacher education is a challenge. The nature of the knowledge-base in teacher education ought to be such that it takes cognisance of the fact that effective implementation of teacher education programmes requires personnel in teacher education institutions (that is, teacher educators) who have a specialized knowledge of pedagogy and of disciplines cognate to education.

They also have to be oriented in a manner that they can see the knowledge-base as a unified whole, they visualise clearly the placement of their respective knowledge domains or specialities as its integral part. Sometimes, teacher educators themselves may not have favourable attitudes towards teacher education. Perhaps, this is because they have not been helped to acquire a new knowledge base in teacher education through their own specialised knowledge. Thus to organise teacher education programmes, a need arises for a systematic examination of the faculty's professional qualifications and plan the orientation of these teacher educators accordingly.

Group formation can also be on the basis of areas which not every teacher has to teach such as environmental education, population education, value education, human rights, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome etc. The few teachers teaching these could be seen as specific groups of teachers who may need social orientation and updating of knowledge. For such areas, training needs assessment and organisation of relevant inputs is necessary. This would help in dovetailing pre-service and in-service teacher education. Such programmes would need to be institutionalised on a larger scale.

Thus, what is emerging is that the education of teacher educators needs serious attention. It is important that teacher educators are *suitably equipped for their roles*. In recent times, the criticism of the relevance of teacher education programmes has become more pronounced and they need to be made more responsive to the emerging roles of teachers. It is in this regard that, *Research* in teacher education assumes significance. Research is expected to contribute to improvement in educational practices and to enhance their effectiveness, Researches need to be reviewed and analysed to find what specific insights they offer to contribute to practice or to understand it for devising innovations. Teacher educators need to develop capacities to be able to undertake such researches. The findings of this study provide a direction to visualize the future tasks which need to be undertaken. It, thus, becomes significant that education of teachers should have relevance to the school system and teachers are prepared for their diverse functions. This implies that the teacher educators would have to assume the role of professionals, requiring an inter-disciplinary, broader vision and goal consciousness. The gap between the need of teacher education institutions and the professional preparation of teacher educators working in such institutions needs to be addressed and bridged as well.

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