



Inter University Centre for Alternative Economics
Department of Economics, University of Kerala,
Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala-695581

Three Days International Seminar on
Higher Education in a Developing Economy:
Problems, Policies and Perspectives

24th-26th October 2016

REGISTRATION FORM

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: Quality issues and trends in Teacher

Education: An Alternate Perspective

Details of Co-author(s) if any

Years of Teaching/Research Experience

: Nil

: 19 years

No of Articles published in Refereed journals/Books : 23

No of Books/Reports published

:

6

No of national/International seminars or Conferences or Workshops
which papers presented: 32

Quality issues and trends in Teacher Education: Perspectives and Concerns

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Abstract: The diversity in educational contexts found in India should be viewed as a valuable feature and as a unique challenge. In an era of greater globalization and educational standardization, of policy borrowing and of international comparisons of achievement, there is a high demand and need to respect context and to appreciate how countries with different traditions and resources deal with the challenges of teacher education. For example, Indian cultural traditions have much to say about the virtues needed of teachers and the roles teachers played in developing its age old rich heritage. Reports say that Singapore seeks to draw upon its links to Asian traditions while it simultaneously appropriates ideas from Anglo-Saxon and continental traditions. This is not simply a matter of ensuring representation but a unique and distinct way of integrating traditions within which education and pedagogic systems are embedded that can provide valuable insights. Both researchers and policy makers want the same thing – high quality teachers. Both want evidence of what is likely to work best. While the practice is to rely on the best available evidence and scholarship, it is equally important to clearly set out some propositions to guide policy choices. The balance has been difficult to achieve; however, it is hoped that it could be achieved to a reasonable extent. In the context of curriculum revisions happened in the country as per NCTE norms, the present paper tries to find out whether the new direction tries to chisel out a workable quality assured teacher preparation scenario in the country.

Introduction

The new human capital paradigm is no longer just about having extended years of schooling to prepare students for industrial jobs; it is about content mastery,

deep disciplinary understanding as well as acquiring the soft skills of communication, initiative, resilience, group dynamics and problem-solving abilities, among others. The increasing mobility available to many young people, privately funded opportunities to study abroad, and a weakening attachment to state and nation in many countries, even the emergence of a “civic deficit” society, is alarming policy makers. The new distractions offered by new technologies and entertainment platforms are putting pressure on educators and teachers to make schooling both relevant and meaningful. With the growing recognition that teacher quality is critical in preparing students for a society undergoing far-reaching economic and social changes, the need for policies and strategies to strengthen teacher preparation, and as a consequence, teaching, is even greater.

Professionally, powerful teaching is very important and increasing in our contemporary society as a result of the steam of dynamic initiatives of human development and evolution. Due to these developments and evolution, standards of learning would be higher in the 21st century than it had been in the 20th century. As a result teachers would need to acquire additional knowledge and skills, both general and specific, to be able to survive and be successful in the 21st century school environment. Education has increasingly become important to success of both individuals and nations. Growing evidence demonstrates that, among all educational resources, teachers’ abilities are especially critical contributors to students’ learning and consequently the success of a nation to advance in its economic, social and political spheres (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

A considerable body of research has shown that pre-service teacher education has a significant impact on early-career of teachers’ teaching skills and their philosophies of teaching (Carter, Carre, & Bennett, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2000b; Iredale, 1996; Temmerman, 1997; Caena,2014). The role of teachers has become the most challenging in the present millennium, for they had to respond to varied/special needs, deficiencies and aspirations of the taught. The teachers and educators need to experiment with various innovative methods to make teaching appropriate to ground realities in specific conditions that exist in different parts of the state and in different system of schooling. The constructivist teacher education practised elsewhere in the world has shown to have a positive impact on student teachers’ perceptions of their own teaching competencies, leading to increased confidence and also improved

teaching practice within schools (Brinda, 1998; Byo, 1999; Chen, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2000a; Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999; Feuerstein, 2011). However, some writers maintain that teacher education has relatively little impact on classroom practice (Su, 1992; Lampert & Ball, 1999; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Anitha, 2001), where teacher training has been shown to be ineffective, it can arguably be attributed to the *type* and *design* of teacher training being provided (Iredale, 1996; Kennedy, 1999; Erudyce, 2015). In general we do acknowledge the fact that it is not with the system but with the way it is imparted that its strengths and weaknesses are truly reflected.

Building a high-quality education system relevant to 21st century social and economic realities has become a top priority for most governments and nations. Reforming education systems within a context of ever-deepening globalization without first understanding its present challenges is not judicious. However, the recent efforts undertaken by the NCTE to achieve planned and coordinated development of the teacher education system throughout the country, the regulation and proper maintenance of Norms and Standards in the teacher education system and for matters connected therewith is really laudable. The mandate given to the NCTE is very broad and covers the whole gamut of teacher education programmes including research and training of persons for equipping them to teach at pre-primary, primary, secondary and senior secondary stages in schools, and non-formal education, part-time education, adult education and distance (correspondence) education courses. In the context of curriculum revisions happened in the country as per NCTE norms, the present paper tries to find out whether the new direction tries to chisel out a workable quality assured teacher preparation scenario in the country.

Objectives of the study:

1. To analyse from the observation of teacher educators whether the revised curriculum is capable of achieving the planned and coordinated development of the teacher education system
2. To identify the major challenges experienced by the teacher educators in incorporating the three components of the curriculum – theory, practicum, internship within the semester frame work

3. To collate the opinion of teacher educators on the issues emerged due to marketisation of education as a commodity, which is marked by mushrooming of the self financing teacher education colleges
4. From the opinion collected from teacher educators, formulate suggestions for a curriculum frame work reflecting alternate perspectives

Methodology

Since the present study attempts to bring out relevant details from teacher educators regarding the discrepancy in the practices adopted and expected outcomes of the revised curriculum followed in teacher education institutions, Normative Survey method was found appropriate for this study.

Sample : A sample of 42 teacher educators selected at random from those teaching at M.Ed, B. Ed and D.Ed levels.

Tools and techniques: A comprehensive questionnaire with open and closed items was given to the sample. Regarding a few items, clarity was sought from teacher educators through an interview.

Analysis and discussion

The National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) Framework has highlighted the focus, specific objectives, broad areas of study in terms of theoretical and practical learnings, and curricular transaction and assessment strategies for the various teacher education programmes. The Framework argues that it has been prepared in the background of the NCF, 2005 and the principles laid down in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. Some important dimensions have been articulated as the vision of teacher education, which is considered as the hall mark of the new approach to teacher education. They are:

1. Reflective practice to be the central aim of teacher education
2. Student-teachers should be provided opportunities for self-learning, reflection, assimilation and articulation of new ideas;
3. Developing capacities for self-directed learning and ability to think, be critical and to work in groups.
4. Providing opportunities to student-teachers to observe and engage with children, communicate with and relate to children.

As envisaged by the curriculum-developers, these dimensions help transform the prospective teachers to be self directed and productive. The questionnaire had items for gathering information on the basic issues in implementing these dimensions for achieving planned and coordinated development of teacher education system. It had four sub areas: developing capacities for self-directed learning, developing capacities for innovation in teaching and learning, incorporating the three components of the curriculum – theory, practicum, internship within the semester frame work and the issues emerged due to marketisation of education. It was accompanied by a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5 (‘Strongly disagree’ to ‘Strongly agree’). The questionnaire was subjected to a pilot test in a similar context and the content validation was performed by five experts and the contributions from these enabled to develop the final version of the questionnaire.

Planned and coordinated development of the teachers through teacher education

For moulding teachers who can take up the challenges in the changing scenario, the prospective teachers should develop capacities for self-directed learning and capacities for innovation in teaching and learning. The teacher educators addressed the items pertaining to the first dimension and the average general satisfaction with regard to ‘developing capacities for self-directed learning’ through the revised curriculum is 3.7 (on a scale of 1-5). This shows that most of the teacher educators are quite satisfied with the new curriculum for the two year teacher education courses –M.Ed, B.Ed and D.Ed.

In all other items, the average of all indicators is greater than 3 (scale of 1-5), indicating that the teacher educator’s evaluation was positive in all categories. The characteristics of the curriculum that received the highest score from teachers are autonomy in their methodology and use of learning strategies, and resources that the new curriculum provides (3.9). The next-highest characteristics reflected by them was the convenience of collaborative learning provided in the curriculum, utility of the curriculum for linking theory, knowledge and experience (3.1). Also stress on the active participation that the curriculum facilitates and aids in achieving the learning goals established in the course (3.6).

Incorporating the three components of the curriculum – theory, practicum, internship within the semester frame work

Opinions on the dimension, incorporating theory, practicum and internship within the frame work, the average is 3.4 and a general evaluation is of 3.2. The aspects with the highest scores are information about and explanation of the various related activities and records (3.47). The capacity of the curriculum in developing a positive attitude to achieve good classroom atmosphere; help and orientation provided receive the same score (3.02). The analysis show that majority of the teachers could comply with incorporating theory, practicum and internship within the semester frame work. In fact many suggested internship as a good practice.

Issues emerged due to marketisation of education as a commodity

The teacher educators identify the effect of marketisation most closely with the feeling of freedom (3.6). This result relates to the evolution of self financing colleges; the methodology seems primarily to make the students feel that they have more freedom and autonomy in their learning process. Next in their ranking of the qualities with which they identify most closely are: discipline exhibited in regular attendance (2.7) and assessment of what they have learned (3.2), which again align with autonomous learning and learning by discovery. These results do not rank motivation among the feelings with which they identify most strongly although it does receive a positive score (3.31). Another aspect highlighted by the teacher educators was the inexperienced teachers handling courses and subjects in teacher education. The novice teachers who do not have any orientation along with other aspects lead to quality compromise was an apprehension expressed by the teacher educators. Therefore this analysis leads us to the fact that it is not the curriculum but the institution and transaction of curriculum is what matters most.

Suggestions for a curriculum frame work reflecting alternate perspectives

A content analysis was also performed based on an open questionnaire on 'Things that you would keep and change in the curriculum if asked to revise'. We analysed a total of 10 thematic units, of which 6 refer to maintaining the curriculum and methodology and 3 reflecting on things they would change. The major changes suggested were:

- The art education and work experience provided in the syllabus may be changed so as to meet the self development needs of teachers, such as developing skill of good calligraphy, improving the skills of expression during role plays and dramatisation of ideas etc.
- The community living programme may be modified from the ‘living together’ for one day to ‘living in the community’ to identify the needs and deficits of the poor and needy in the society. This will help to develop a positive attitude towards the problems of the society.
- There is a need to provide cultural awareness to prospective teachers, and for this, performance of various folk arts and orientation of the folk literature through various activities may be included.
- For providing social orientation to the prospective teachers, they are to be encouraged through the curricular activities to organise clubs- either environmental, cultural, arts and sports and to monitor the works of the club for a period either simultaneously with internship or practice teaching.

The analysis of the personal interview with teachers hints at the fact that our system falls short of the characteristics of high quality teacher education in these ‘new times’. To support the needs of a diverse student population, the teacher preparation programmes should:

- provide orientation to identify the needs and challenges of a pluralistic society so that the prospective teachers could better address the needs of minority ethnic and cultural groups, and support students who use a different language from the language of instruction, or who come from low socio-economic backgrounds;
- renovate the evaluation pattern from the traditional requirements of academic performance and results on standardized testing to include other relevant personal and experiential characteristics; and there should be a provision to grade the portfolios and records prepared by prospective teachers as a testimony to their innovation
- encourage entry of a “non-traditional” pool of applicants like graduates from engineering, computer science, law and many other disciplines and provide room for training specialist teachers, who have proved their ability in different

trades, art, music etc. and have aptitude to become part of the education system.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need to recognize teachers' work as complex and demanding, and improvement in teacher quality requires a re-conceptualization of how we prepare a new generation of teachers. The impact of teachers on the upcoming generation i.e their students, is very subtle and long-lasting and is therefore necessary that they should feel committed, contented and devoted to their noble professions. Many students who take admission see the course yet another alternative to secure a job and do not have the commitment or sincerity that is expected from a prospective teacher. Therefore, it is hoped that certain aspects which are characteristics of the new system, which accommodates and responds to the demands of the drift in time and technology, will improve our system and give an impetus to mould responsible teachers. These include a few alternate perspectives which have been emerged from the interaction with teacher educators. They are:

- Giving greater emphasis on teachers' values, skills and knowledge that are fundamental to good teaching. For realising this, instead of testing the theory through examinations only, the theories and principles may be integrated and linked through special intervention programmes and are to be spiralled in the two year curriculum
- Expanding roles and responsibilities of teachers that can be shared collaboratively with other professionals. For this, there is a need to have successful partnerships which go beyond university faculties, schools and teachers to relevant outside stakeholders outside education.eg: tourism, disaster management, LSGIs etc. The practicum for each course in the curriculum can have links which can be utilized by students as well as these agencies for the betterment of society.
- Setting up a section in every college of teacher education disseminating the different career options and opportunities for the degree holders of M.Ed/B.Ed/D.Ed pertaining to their expectations and aspirations resulting from changing teacher demographics and new job opportunities.

- “Personalizing” learning for individual students to accommodate greater diversity in learning contexts. Adaptations and alteration to accommodate special learning needs, improvisation of assistive devices and soft tools for ‘personalising’ learning can be a good area which every teacher education institution can volunteer.

A special aspect which should be treated with priority highlighted by the teacher educators was that taking into consideration, the mushrooming of D.Ed/B.Ed/M.Ed colleges and the novice faculty handling the papers, there is a need to provide orientation course / faculty development programmes. Also it is advocated to introduce onsite support to teacher educators through discussion/expert consultation forums. The universities, NCTE and the like the nodal agencies, have unleashed their powers for giving sanction to start teacher education colleges in a reckless way leading to the mushrooming of teacher education colleges in our nation. Hence, there is in fact no meaning in voicing on the lowering quality of the teachers produced through our system of teacher education. Being simply part of the system, it can only be avowed that a teacher is the fortune maker not only of an individual but also of the nation as a whole.

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