

What makes a good teacher education programme?

C.Suvasini

In light of National Council of Teacher Education ushering in a major overhaul of Teacher Education (TE) in the country, we must ask a basic question, '*What makes for a good teacher education programme?*' This question is closely tied to the other basic question, '*What makes a good teacher?*' In this paper, I answer the former, drawing upon my experiences as a teacher educator in the Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed) programme, which has been successfully running in Delhi University since 1994. In this programme, which recruits faculty from different disciplines, I teach foundational courses in Psychology, facilitating them to understand the fundamentals of child development, learning and cognitive processes. I also supervise teacher trainees' school internship, where I support them in practising inclusive teaching, humane classroom management and other such student-centered practices. In this paper, even as I address the first question, I also indirectly respond to the second.

Critical understanding and spirited engagement with the discipline.

It is a no-brainer that a teacher should have an in-depth, correct understanding of the subject matter. This is as much an essential requirement for a Class I teacher, as it is for Class XII teacher. We cannot have an Environmental Science teacher who does not quite know why the sky is blue, or how plants 'make food'. A mathematics teacher must know the basics of probability theory. But a professional pedagogue will instinctively know and do more - she will continually relate the subject matter to the real world, in the process, stimulating children's curiosity. She will critically engage with the subject textbooks, and be watchful of any flaws in the textbook. She would have an informed opinion of curricula and syllabi development. As a professional, she will be able and willing to furthering her subject knowledge. Most of all, the teacher would have imbibed the spirit of her subject. A science teacher will inculcate scientific values among her learners. She will reason with any superstition which students may bring to the classroom discussion.

A literature teacher will evoke aesthetic sensibilities when teaching a poem. A good teacher, almost always loves her subject. She is animated in her teaching, and evokes similar passions among her students. Any teacher education programme, worthy of its name must therefore, provide the trainee teacher an engaged, earnest and critical immersion into the subject. Without this, the TE will altogether fail the schooling system. In the B.El.Ed, which prepares teachers for classes 1st to 8th –courses on school subjects are integral to the curriculum.

Training in pedagogy, or how to teach

Since the 1990s, Indian educationists have been increasingly concerned with the question of why, despite several years of schooling, do children fail to learn? It was clear then, as it is now (as ASER reports regularly testify), that, despite regularly attending schools, a significant number of children do not learn to read, write and do arithmetic effectively.

The closure of schools during the corona years has vastly exacerbated the problem.

Over the years, educationists deliberated on these and related issues - do children find classroom teaching meaningful? Does schooling help the child to understand and engage with his world in a useful way? What teaching methods should we use so that children are able to read, write, comprehend texts, understand math and so on.

They turned to the knowledge available from many disciplines - psychology, pedagogic studies, education, linguistics, as well as innovative, experimental practices in school education across the country (the work of Digantar shiksha Evam Khelkhud Samiti, and Eklavya foundation are stellar examples). From such theoretical works and real life experiments in the schooling sector, educationists derived some fundamentals, which should guide any TE programme. These principles include - children always bring their previous knowledge to a new learning experience, what is written on the blackboard/ textbook does not automatically imprint on a children's mind, they need to process the information, actively make sense of it - only then will this new information becomes truly theirs, which they can relate to, and use in real life. When it comes to language, well, humans are equipped with a biological capacity for speaking and comprehending oral language(s) - teaching must build upon this biological instinct. When these precincts are laid out in bare, it becomes clear that a TE must prepare prospective teachers accordingly. More so in our culture, where even today, it is commonplace for a school teacher to write on board, and students to mindlessly copy the same. Over the years, I have witnessed many school children copying from the board without a clue. They could understand the written text, nor the meaning it sought to convey. In the B.El.Ed, we take students through a cross-section of psychology and pedagogy papers, to deeply instill in them this basic, inviolable principle. Our students read psychology books on how children's thinking develops from infancy to adulthood. There are courses which dwell on how socio-cultural contexts shape the way children grow and think. Theory courses are accompanied by practical courses, where students observe and interact with children in schools and other settings, and from different socio-economic backgrounds. Psychology courses lead to pedagogy courses, where the emphasis is on translating these psychological principles into pedagogic practices in different subjects. For example, learning mathematics in primary years, may involve children working with objects, for example, stacking ice-cream sticks in groups of ten, to understand the basics of the decimal system. In social sciences, learning about a historical period may involve a

theatrical enactment of events of that period, or watching documentaries. The penultimate test however, is in the act of doing. A good TE will have an intensive, rigorous internship, where the trainees will have an opportunity to practice what they learnt, make mistakes, reflect on these mistakes, and continue in a loop - for a long enough period of time. Just as it is impossible to imagine doctors being trained without a hospital attachment, it is equally impossible to imagine teachers being prepared without a school internship.

Further, it is not enough to throw trainee teachers into the school system - they need to be closely, regularly supervised. In the B.El.Ed, this involves a weekly supervision of each intern by one or more supervisors, individual feedback on an intern's teaching plan, and students writing reflections on their daily school experience, which in turn receives feedback from the teacher educators.

Forging a warm, affectionate relationship with students/ the human angle

The teacher is first and foremost an adult among children - a significant, powerful presence in their lives. Children watch their teachers closely, emulate them and keenly desire their attention and love. A good mathematics teacher who has a temper teaches students, not mathematics, but to fear the subject.

Teachers influence and sustain the emotional state of children, for an entire 6 to 8 hours every day - for many, long years. As parents we must ask - what should these emotions be – happy, relaxed, attentive, wanting to participate, feeling confident, not afraid to make mistakes, and most important - wanting to go to school the next day, and every day? Or fearful, anxious, ashamed, afraid to speak lest that he be punished? Sure, what children go through in school emotionally and socially, in part depends on their classmates. But, the teacher reigns supreme— she wields the power to turn around bullies, make a sad child laugh, and she can instill confidence in a not so confident child. I have witnessed, over and over again, how an ordinary remark from a teacher – *'Yes, you are correct'* – suffuses a young child with so much enthusiasm and energy- that he complies with the teacher, punctually completes his homework, and raises his hand to once again, answer her questions. I have seen children showing off to their friends, an ordinary notebook remark – *'Good'*, from their beloved teacher. I have also heard stories of how students turned away from a subject due to a single teacher's negative attitude. We have read about abuses hurled by teachers, not so rare in the schools of the country.

For adolescent students, the issue of forging a relationship with the teacher becomes even more significant. During these years, when they are overly sensitive, they need a teacher who knows to respond appropriately. An insensitive remark, a harsh punishment, it takes very little for the adolescent to rebel, to turn to self-destructive ways.

My point is, any teacher training program, has to educate the trainees in this realm - of emotional, moral and social development and sensitize them to the vulnerabilities of children through the growing years. Such an education has to go beyond the theoretical – because, the teacher trainee has to develop real sensitivity towards children, show patience in her daily dealings with them, empathetically understand errant behavior from the perspective of the child, and master the art of resolving conflicts among children. She has to do all this deftly, without losing sight of syllabus coverage, or the larger goal - that children learn well. The teacher trainee has to learn to control her own emotions – anger, impatience, irritation – some of which may be ‘natural’ but display of these in the class would be terribly unprofessional.

From the outside the school and classroom may appear as serene places, but as parents and teachers, we know – schools and classrooms are socially and emotionally complex, and many children struggle in these spaces. Bullying and labeling are hardly unusual among school children. The teacher, a powerful adult in their midst, can make or break a child’s lived experience of the school. And that is huge!

A good TE has to capacity build the trainee, so that she is ready for these emotional and social challenges. The B.El.Ed curriculum, developed in the last decade of the 20th century had the foresight to include courses to address issues of communication and human relationships. It even includes a practical course where students delve into their own emotional and social upbringing, and are encouraged to become compassionate human beings and teachers.

Gender sensitivity, and respect for constitutional values

On 16th December 2012, the country woke up to the shocking news of the brutal rape and murder of a young woman. It was appalling that ordinary, young men could be so barbaric. As we mourned the loss of the young woman, it also became clear that there is an urgent need to educate our boys and young men to respect women. Unfortunately, since 2012, the country has not witnessed any abatement of crimes against women, making these concerns even more grave.

If this is a matter of concern (and surely, it is), school teachers can play an important role. For this, they need a foundational understanding of gender issues. The B.El.Ed program, includes a compulsory course on gender, and gender-sensitive perspectives are also integrally woven into other courses. Such sagacity in the curriculum framing was hardly fortuitous. The B.El.Ed curriculum was the product of collective efforts of the finest intellectuals of the country, including social scientists at the forefront of their respective

disciplines. And our teacher trainees delve deeply into gender studies. How else would they convince their girl students that they can excel in STEM courses? Or respond to, along with school counselors and experts, emerging gender and sexual concerns among adolescents? Without such education, how can school teachers contribute to creating a world free of violence, such as the one that occurred in December 2012?

Not just gender, a school teacher must understand several contemporary issues. She should have imbibed the constitutional values, which should reflect in her teaching practice. A teacher should not simply be aware that corporal punishment is illegal, she should never feel the need to wield the stick. As a professional, she should feel aghast on hearing any student smear a particular community. A teacher imbibes her students with values. And these must be the right ones.

To conclude

The making of a good teacher is no quick fix task. It takes time. A school teacher is a professional, and becoming one requires intense immersion in a specialized program of study. At present, there are a variety of TE programs in the country, all of which take two to four years for this process. We can understand why so much time is needed. For instance, in case of B.El.Ed, NCTE prescribes that there should be a minimum of 200 working days each year, with at least 36 hours of weekly study, and a school internship of a minimum duration of 20 working weeks.

The point is, school teachers do not need to be prepared in a hurry; school teachers need to be prepared well. The new TE programs proposed by NCTE compress into 4 years, a teacher training program as well as undergraduate B.A/ B.Sc/ B. Com courses. Such an integrated model will surely dilute both the teacher training component as well the undergraduate course. It is obvious that the curriculum objectives which are accomplished through a four year B.El.Ed programme, cannot be achieved through these twin degree programmes, sandwiched into the same number of years.

Changes in TE programs, in response to the changing world around us, are undoubtedly needed. But they must have a rational basis, and build upon the wisdom of existing traditions. I can understand, if for example, NCTE suggested that TE programs include compulsory courses on climate change and sustainable development. The problem with the current changes proposed by NCTE is that we cannot discern any convincing basis for these changes. Moreover, they run contrary to the wisdom amassed over the years. With one policy fiat, the work which has gone into building meaningful TE programs in the country, including the B.El.Ed may be lost. It is therefore natural that anyone concerned with school education will be perturbed.

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