

Preparing Educators for Inclusive Classrooms

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Although in our country the law provides for access to equal quality education, the reality is replete with examples of uneven access and dismal educational outcomes. There are a large number of children in the system who suffer the consequences of disability, poverty and social exclusion. Academic achievement in the school system has been elusive, especially, for first-generation school-goers. Teachers in these schools have the hardest job of all. They have to ensure that all the academic learning happens within the school, as these children do not receive any academic support at home. The circumstances that the children live in are so fragile that teachers are not sure whether, for familial or cultural or socio-economic reasons, they will turn up at school the next day because their lives are in a constant state of uncertainty and ambiguity. They need teachers and an overall supportive system, that consistently believes that *all children are capable of learning and achievement*. The belief that poverty, caste, religion and other social differences account neither for intelligence nor for inquiry ought to be central to the philosophy and practice of schooling.

The curricular discourses on school education and teacher education in the last decade have focused attention on issues of diversity amongst learners and the need to prepare teachers to enable all children to learn. The sixth chapter in the Draft National Education Policy, 2019 (on *Equitable and Inclusive Education*) outlines its objective as achieving an inclusive and equitable system so that all children have equal opportunities to learn and thrive. To accomplish this, it proposes to make inclusive education integral to pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development. It states:

‘...these programmes will ensure that all teachers are continuously sensitised about different learners and hence, will be able to cater to the educational needs of all learners, particularly from the under-represented groups.’ (p142, Draft NEP).

Research studies focussing on teachers’ perceptions about educating children of the poor show that educators have a view of children as being

cognitively deficient and possessing poor study habits (Batra, 2015). There have also been other field accounts of teachers in the public education system, (Azim Premji University, 2019; Giridhar, 2019), which reflect the lives of teachers who cross the borders of caste, religion, class and other institutional and bureaucratic structures to ensure that children learn and complete their schooling.

Both narratives exist. The critical question is how do we develop an inclusive teacher preparation programme aimed at improving the learning and development of all children? What pedagogic practices would help students bring their beliefs and assumptions to a surface level of awareness?

Learning to teach: pedagogy of teacher education

Learning to teach is a knotty affair. It is the first phase of contact between the student teacher and her prospective profession. The aims of pre-service teacher education include developing content and pedagogical knowledge of the chosen school subject, understanding the backgrounds of the learners and the process of learning, developing social and moral dispositions to work with children and teachers in school contexts and acquiring a preliminary repertoire of approaches towards planning, pedagogy and assessment. Teacher education pedagogy rests on the premise that theory, practice and inquiry are embedded within each other and development of theoretical and practical knowledge is central to a rich conceptualisation of educational practice.

Student teachers enter the programme with a barrage of assumptions and beliefs about the backgrounds of their learners, their childhood experiences and learning. They need to be given spaces to express and reflect upon their assumptions. Assumptions shape one’s practice. Construction of new knowledge begins by examining preconceptions. Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann (1986) observe that: ‘In learning to teach, neither first-hand experience nor university instruction can be left to work themselves out by themselves. Without help in examining current beliefs and

assumptions, teacher candidates are likely to maintain conventional beliefs and incorporate new information or puzzling experiences into old frameworks.' (p.255)

The pedagogic approaches outlined here emerge from my experiences of teaching a course on *Child Development and Learning*, where every attempt is made to challenge the prior assumptions about childhood, children, learning and teaching.

Challenging assumptions through readings and discussions

The article selection for the courses serves as a good source to challenge students to examine their prior assumptions. The phase of reading articles needs to be supported by opportunities to reflect, discuss, and consider alternative viewpoints on childhood, caste, gender, disability, poverty and so on. The first few classes follow very focused discussions about who is a child? What is the meaning of childhood? Is it a unitary concept? Do children experience childhood in similar ways? I do a specific discussion around poverty, childhood and learning. Poverty is only an anchor to spin-off a range of issues around children on streets, in institutionalised homes, in war zones, in hilly areas and so on. Students carry out a *time-line* activity, which instructs them to go back to their childhood days and to think about the factors that shaped their learning.

Students are given full-length articles or edited excerpts from readings, such as Sukhadeo Thorat's *Passage to Adulthood: Perceptions from Below*, Sarada Balagopalan's *Remembering Childhood* on child labour, Singh and Ghai's article on *Notions of Self: Lived realities of Children with Disabilities*. Narratives on themes such as children in conflict zones, children with nutritional problems, children on the streets and so on, are also shared with students.

Texts do not necessarily refer only to print texts. Students view videos on children from different contexts. Students who have read the same articles form a group and are provided discussion questions, which are critical to meaningful conversations. They guide the course of conversations to an extent, leaving enough scope for a free-wheeling discussion. Some examples of such questions are:

How has our society constructed/represented working children/children with disabilities? What is the impact of this construction? What is the place of education in the life of these children? Are there alternative ways to construct their childhood?

Collaborative discussions are followed by a *collective* process, where the entire class comes together and is asked to summarise the readings and share the discussions that happened in their group. Sometimes, they are asked to submit individual write-ups. In-class discussions along with readings can be a very powerful medium to generate self-awareness amongst the students and help students understand the backgrounds of children from marginalised sections.

The student teachers are encouraged to reflect upon their own positions in society vis-à-vis gender, caste, class, linguistic variation, disability and equity and justice. During such collective discussions, it is inevitable that questions about the larger societal process, market phenomenon, politics, human violations, differing ethical positions emerge. The spectrum of responses from students and their alternative views also help to strengthen the teacher educator's experience and qualify her pedagogy. Students realise that there are questions to which there are no straightforward answers. They will need to work hard and delve deeper into the ideas of what childhood is.

Challenging assumptions through field experiences

The Master's in education programme offers a course on *Child Development and Learning*, which has a practicum component in which students visit orphanages, disability centres, juvenile homes, urban slums and other similar institutions. A large number of children in these institutions are from the marginalised sections and those who may be first-generation school-goers. Students play and converse with these children. They understand their everyday life, routines, food habits, games and interest in schooling. Students utilise their understanding of child development and learning theories by analysing these observations.

Listening to the 'voices' of children from the poor socio-economic contexts challenge their long-held beliefs about children and childhood. They begin to introspect and reason. The cognitive and emotional discomfort leads to agreements, disagreements and tensions. Students realise that they need to suspend their beliefs and stereotypes and consider the perspectives of others. The discussions facilitate reconsideration/questioning existing perceptions in the light of their experiences and through a process of refining, qualifying or reviewing and reconstructing experiences, and they generate new knowledge and diverse conceptions. Often,

they write reflective journals. One of the students observed, 'I thought children who stay in the orphanages would look sad. But they aren't. They are good fun and they asked me so many questions, for which I didn't have an answer'.

Students, thus, understand that the circumstances of the poor are not defined by their individual attributes or complacency or ignorance of the parents. In other words, the students are made to the question the dominant deficiency approach that, society at large, has towards the children from the marginalised sections. They also understand that childhood is not only a biological construct but a social construct too.

Many first-generation school-goers, whose lives are impeded by socio-cultural practices and financial constraints, need a caring and supportive adult at school who holds the firm conviction that *all children are capable of learning*. The notion of inclusion as one of the central principles that organise schools, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment needs to be brought to the fore in teacher preparation programmes. Their curriculum needs to provide protracted opportunities for reading, classroom discussions and field experiences.

Pedagogic practices that guide students to make connections between the *field*, *text* and *self* may not only help bring assumptions and preconceptions of the students about childhood, teaching and learning to the level of self-awareness but will also help them to imagine inclusive school environments and classroom practices.

More than a century ago, John Dewey wrote his essay, *The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education*, focussing extensively on teachers' growing knowledge of their students and of their students' thinking. He described this as 'insight into soul-action'—a teacher's ability to attune herself to her students' thought and responses, and recognise 'the attitudes and habits which his [or her] own modes of being, saying, and doing are fostering or discouraging' among students.

It may be pertinent to ask: can teacher educators attempt to engage with their students in ways that align with Dewey's ideas of knowing children? Developing competent and caring teachers for an inclusive society will require us to consider Dewey's proposal and get to soul-action through our pedagogic practices.

References

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