If the Destination is Emancipation of Teachers then One of its Major Routes is Reflective Practice

Some Insights from Personal Experiences of an Education Worker

Kuldeep Garg

The Problem

Any professional development of teachers requires a continuous support[1] at various stages of teachers' careers, but in India today we have seen the dismal conditions of all such support both in their availability as well as their quality. Another interesting aspect is that wherever such support, particularly good interventional, fixed-time support is available, two things have happened. The first, its effectiveness stagnates after about five years, second, when the project winds up, the new initiatives and practices dip significantly and gradually die out. So external support neither works for a long period nor does it sustain its initiative and accomplished changes when it gets closed down. At least, I have personally observed this (being a part of different teams in Digantar[2]) in the fields throughout particularly during the last decade (2005 to 2012) with regard to different interventional projects viz. Shiksha Samarthan Pariyojna, Phagi and the Quality Education Programme, Baran.

These observations raise the question – can outside support promote sustainable educational change?

We do not have any definitive answer to this question. However, it seems that, at least in its present model, the initiatives and achievements from exogenous support mechanisms usually fade away gradually soon after their closure.

However, it does not mean that we should stop visualising and implementing them- that would be suicidal. In a democratic country the participation of volunteer organisations, parents associations, NGOs, teacher unions, research groups and cultural groups is vital to a vibrant as well as healthy education system. Outside support and intervention are crucial and a logical necessity in a democratic country to keep a sharp eye on the developments in educational policy and practices and raise its voice as and when they deviate from their foundational values- values to reproduce the democracy and sustain it.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to think of having such support mechanisms but in different mode with different set of objectives, which focus on creating conditions wherein teachers and other stakeholders come forward and take the charge of their learning or professional needs and their development. They themselves could see a problem or area of the development, visualise its solution and implement it too. That will be a self-propelling and hence self-sustaining mechanism instead of depending completely on external support and finally not owning the result. This can only be developed and maintained by those stakeholders who themselves are self-learning, self-correcting, self-determining, help-seeking and accountable people.

If we agree with this formula, then the question arises: how is it possible? How can we have such people or stakeholders? What would be the processes of their development? What would the role of external support then be?

Experiences and insights culled from a participatory Action Research Project

I. Understanding the Project First

With all such questions as mentioned above, I would like to share some of my experiences and acquired insights here in order to arrive some answers, which might be very localised and do not give a sort of grand general answers of these questions. At the same time we cannot deny that even local experiences provide us important theoretical insights necessary to generate a plausible theory of certain phenomenon of education in the long run.
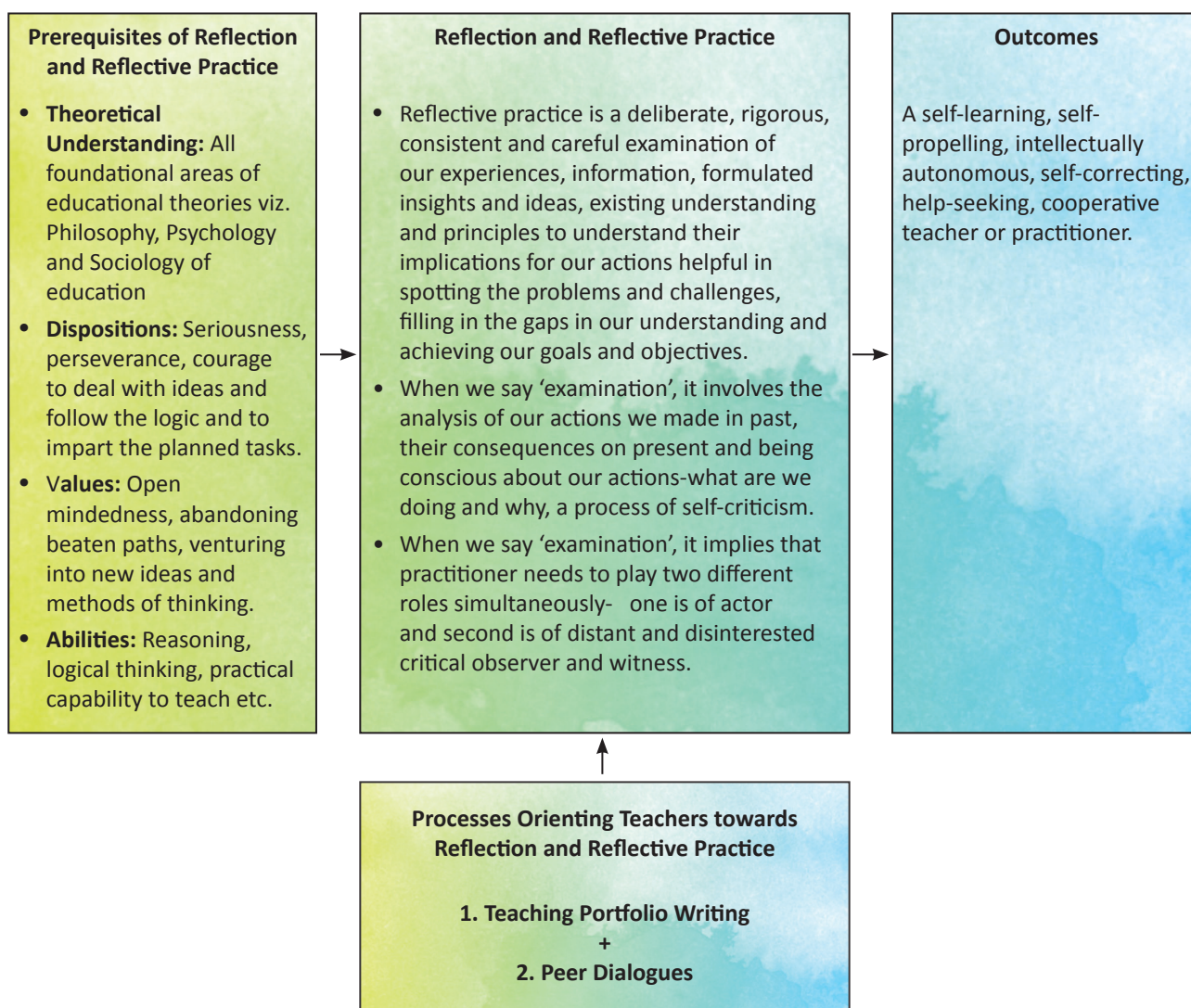
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[1] Such support comes largely in the following three different forms: i). pre-service teacher preparation programmes that shall construct a foundational understanding of education and inculcate various abilities and dispositions required for good teaching and managing school life; ii). regular in-service programmes which shall help teachers in finding a platform wherein they can discuss and address the various problems and challenges they face in their professional practice; and iii). other various interventional supports through different governmental or non-governmental or volunteer projects which again shall aim for helping teachers and schools with regard to their academic, systemic and infrastructural problems or challenges.

[2] Digantar is an NGO who works in the field of Elementary Education. It also runs few alternative schools. It is located in Jaipur and further details about it can be accessed on www.digantar.org.

Digantar initiated a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project called 'Teacher Empowerment Programme' which ran between 2013 and 2016, with 30 government teachers and a team of three researchers from Digantar in Phagi block of Jaipur district, Rajasthan of which I was a part. This was a collaborative effort of the Rajasthan Government, WATIS (Wipro Applying Thoughts in Schools) and Digantar. The aim was to get some plausible answers on how teaching portfolio writing, followed by regular peer dialogues could help the participant teachers in being 'Reflective Practitioners'. It is to be noted very carefully that this research project had fundamentally assumed that teaching portfolio writing and peer dialogues could initiate the process of reflection and reflective practice could transform a teacher into a self-learning, self-correcting, self-determining, help-seeking and accountable professional- the same kind of stakeholder which we need to develop a self-propelling and self-sustaining system of education.

Before embarking upon the findings of this project and my experiences, we need to understand the project's theoretical framework so that we can connect it with our context as well as appreciate its overall objectives and the means to achieve them. To make it easy I have tried to describe it with a diagram below:

Prerequisites of Reflection and Reflective Practice

- **Theoretical Understanding:** All foundational areas of educational theories viz. Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology of education
- **Dispositions:** Seriousness, perseverance, courage to deal with ideas and follow the logic and to impart the planned tasks.
- **Values:** Open mindedness, abandoning beaten paths, venturing into new ideas and methods of thinking.
- **Abilities:** Reasoning, logical thinking, practical capability to teach etc.

Reflection and Reflective Practice

- Reflective practice is a deliberate, rigorous, consistent and careful examination of our experiences, information, formulated insights and ideas, existing understanding and principles to understand their implications for our actions helpful in spotting the problems and challenges, filling in the gaps in our understanding and achieving our goals and objectives.
- When we say 'examination', it involves the analysis of our actions we made in past, their consequences on present and being conscious about our actions-what are we doing and why, a process of self-criticism.
- When we say 'examination', it implies that practitioner needs to play two different roles simultaneously-   one is of actor and second is of distant and disinterested critical observer and witness.

Outcomes

A self-learning, self-propelling, intellectually autonomous, self-correcting, help-seeking, cooperative teacher or practitioner.

Processes Orienting Teachers towards Reflection and Reflective Practice

1. Teaching Portfolio Writing
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2. Peer Dialogues

This diagram shows us that how this project visualised a systematic mechanism that may transform a teacher. This mechanism visualised in the project seems to have the following crucial interrelated elements:

i). Writing and dialogues with peers may appear to be a simple thing but are actually very demanding and can transform a person if practised seriously. To write and discuss critically about your and others' practice in classroom compels you to think a lot before, during and after acting on various issues- what did I do in my class today? Why did I do it, how and in this manner? How will these things help my students in achieving curricular objectives? How do I know that they have achieved it? Why those students were not participating properly? All this actually pushes the practitioners to locate their entire work in larger context of theoretical realm- who am I as a teacher? What are my roles? Why am I here? Why we are educating our generations? It gradually becomes a two-way process: You work as an actor as well as you work as an observer, witness and a critic of your own work. It pushes you out of the terrain of a mechanical doer and leads towards a mental state where you become aware of you, of your work, of your objectives, of your ways to achieve the same and all those things which still troubles you and/or helps you- you become a conscious practitioner.

ii). Writing and dialogues are like a craft which can be learnt and mastered only by acquiring certain theoretical understanding of education (e.g. understanding of human nature, nature of society, nature of human knowledge and learning, etc.); dispositions (e.g. seriousness, perseverance); values (e.g. abandoning beaten path, open mindedness); and abilities (e.g. logical thinking, ability to teach). Therefore, if someone wants to write and dialogue on her own educational practices; she needs to work on orienting herself towards the foundational theoretical discourses since a theory like a torch which sheds a beam of light on the dark and make things visible to you. Simultaneously it is like a tool box containing various tools that help you to deal with all of your professional needs. Any serious professional practice is necessarily based on an integrated repertoire of various theoretical discourses.

Therefore, a strategy was adopted in this project. Firstly, lot of emphasis was put on the value of bridging the gap between everyday life experiences and theory. Both of them need to be incorporated in each other and pondered upon in teaching portfolios and dialogues. Experiences need to be looked at through the lenses of theory and theory need to be put into the action to see its effects and feasibility. All participants of this project were asked to theorize their experiences and practice and articulate in written all those implicit theories which guide their practices. Secondly, whenever some problem was encountered, some appropriate theoretical literature was consulted and tried to acquire some insights out of it. Similarly, the logical consistency in arguments, openness for the valid criticism, innovativeness and serious commitment to the endeavour of pursuing the problems were valued throughout.

In brief, this project believed that writing teaching portfolio and peer dialogues on the same, if done properly, can produce certain irreversible intellectual changes among the practitioners. And these changes are nothing but the theoretical sensibilities, values, dispositions and abilities which are necessary for a reflection and reflective practice. Such changes were being visualised irreversible because once you got a knack of them it is hardly possible to unlearn them; no matter whether certain help is available or not.

II. How Did This Happen?

May be this is not the space wherein all the processes can be described in details. However, it will be useful to know that we started with 30 teachers as a group but eventually we could constitute an active team only by 20 of them. All of them together wrote about 70 teaching portfolio entries on various issues of EVS, Language, Maths teaching. During a period of 3 years (April 2013 to March, 2016), this group held 08 peer group meetings to discuss the portfolio entries and emerging issues. Everything was kept minimal from Dignatar's side deliberately. Almost everything was left to be done by the group only on their own so that an ownership as well as self-sustaining ethos could be developed. However, it was done in a gradual fashion. Initially, a rigorous support was provided by some team members (especially who were from Digantar) to help the group in developing frameworks of teaching portfolio entries, etc. Other crucial factor was the provision of one day space (even if it happens monthly) for organizing peer group meeting at Phagi. This was the space which was provided by education system which can again be considered as minimal.

III. What Are the Outcomes Finally?

My personal experiences as well as analysis of team of the project confirm various positive outcomes. Some of the major and most crucial findings can be understood as follows:

a). I have personally followed the trajectory of individual members of the group what they took throughout the journey of teaching portfolio writing as well as participation in peer group meetings. This trajectory shows a shift in various things. If you take the first portfolio entry and compare it with the last one written by any member of the group, it shows that ability to penetrate the educational reality of the members was enhanced. In starting, they were able to capture their classroom experiences but only to a superficial extent: What they planned? What did they do? What happened today?, etc. The description of "why" questions were almost negligible. However, by the end of this project, members were oriented themselves to think in terms of "why" questions: why after all shall I teach this? why am I doing this? why education? why am I a teacher? This indicates towards their acquisition of a disposition of theorization as well as a critical eye to their practices.

b). Analysis shows that initially the members were more focused on "in-action" (during teaching) mode of thinking and practice. However, gradually their focus seems to be expanded beyond it and they started doing "before-action" and "after-action" mode of thinking too. This was the framework of teaching portfolios which demanded to write their plans, its transactions, and its evaluations. Therefore, a cyclical mode of reflection on teaching seems to be emerging throughout which indicates an emergence of "actor" and "observer" disposition among the participants.

c). Peer group meetings proved to be very useful. Just a place in a month or two wherein teachers can gather together and discuss their experiences may emerge a very crucial space. I myself have observed that such gathering do various things. Gradually, people start coming forward with their unique personalities embodying all very peculiar experiences and problems they have been engaging within their professional life. Over a period of time, we all observed that many common strands of problems, belief-systems, perceptions and experiences are becoming prominently obvious to everyone in the group- a sort of collective consciousness of educational practices and problems seems to be emerging throughout the meetings. This I believe is very crucial and perhaps very fundamental stage to be acquired which help in developing those ethos and concerns which lead a group toward a self-sustaining group. Such a collective awareness is perhaps a first step towards self-sustainability.

Conclusion

Perhaps more crucial insights and sensibilities could have been acquired through this project if it would have continued further at least for few years more. However, whatever insights we could acquire through it are more or less enthusiastic and very positive. Perhaps, a space in the form of a monthly meeting (a very minimal expectation from system) and teaching portfolio writing wherein teachers and other stakeholders can gather together and can constitute a group who study, discuss, debate and question their own practice may help teachers in acquiring a repertoire of necessary irreversible intellectual abilities and dispositions which emancipates them from any dependence and help them to be a better professional practitioner.

Kuldeep Garg works with Azim Premji Foundation, Jaipur. He has worked with Digantar for a decade during 2007 to 2016. He may be contacted at kuldeep.garg@azimpremjifoundation.org