

PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION OF RURAL TEACHERS: ANALYZING THE EXPERIENCES OF THE PANCHAYAT TEACHERS OF BIHAR

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Abstract:

The schools in rural India have very distinct needs as compared to those in urban areas. But, hardly any difference exists between the teacher education of urban teachers and rural teachers. The condition gets more serious when we talk of professional development of rural teachers specifically in educationally backward state Bihar. The cadre of Panchayat teachers in Bihar has been increasing in number for almost every year. Many of them are professionally unqualified in the state and are in the process of getting professional qualification through some specific In-service education programmes. Therefore, In-service teacher education has the significant decisive role for the future of rural education in Bihar. This paper is informed by a research study undertaken by the researcher to explore the perceptions and experiences of Panchayat teachers about their In-service education. The findings show that the Panchayat teachers have a mixed response towards their In-service education programmes. Along with their firm belief about the benefits of the In-service programmes, they also have various critical issues to tell. The paper concludes with placing a conceptual framework of teacher education for rural teachers.

Keywords: Rural Teacher, In-Service Teacher Education, Panchayat Teacher, Bihar

Introduction:

Despite of latest developments, the teacher education system in India is still in a dismantled state and it is argued that there is no any substantial development in the approach of teacher education programmes since last hundred years (Kumar, 2005). The condition is even more serious in the context of rural education which demands an urgent revival with critical observation of its status. According to Beckner (1996), one of the main problems encountered in the field of rural education historically, has been the notion that rural schools should be modeled after good urban or suburban schools and the same situation has confronted rural teacher education. There is huge gap in the way teachers are prepared and the role they have to play in rural schools because training colleges, largely located in urban centers, do not equip teachers to handle multi-grade situations which are a norm rather than an exception in rural context (Anitha, 2005). This divorcing situation of teacher education from the contextual reality of rural teachers is limiting the progress of rural schools. According to Govinda and Varghese (1993), in places where only minimal physical infrastructural facilities are available, the teacher remains the primary resource for

educational transactions. Therefore, the professional development of teachers in rural and remote areas becomes an associated area that requires significant attention (Moriarty & Gray, 2003).

The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) 2009 emphasizes that as professionals, teachers are critical observers of the contents of their professional development activities or training programmes. The extent to which they learn from the training is a function of their assessment of its quality and the extent to which it relates to their needs. But, in reality the rigid nature of teacher education programmes doesn't permit such space. The significant potential of teachers to assess their own professional development has never been seriously utilized for the reforms in teacher education. This paper argues about the need to critically look in to the teacher education from the lens of rural teachers. The paper is informed by a research study undertaken by the researcher to capture the experiences of rural teachers about teacher education programmes. The study is using narrative inquiry to explain participants' experiences. The research study is focused on the In-service education of the Panchayat teachers in Bihar.

Context of Panchayat Teachers of Bihar:

The recently recruited rural teachers in Bihar are known as Panchayat teachers due to their formal appointment by village Panchayats. To fill the huge gaps of the pupil-teacher ratio in schools, there has been a substantial increase in their number since 2006. However, the presence of the Panchayat teachers in schools has contributed to the revival of schools in Bihar, but their quality of teaching has been also questioned on the ground of their professionally unqualified status (Banerji, 2011).

The In-service teacher education for Panchayat teachers in Bihar consists of several distinct phases of training. An initial thirty days' induction programme, ten days' Bodhi Samvaad programme and Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) Course of IGNOU constitute the major part of their In-service education.

Although efforts are being made to professionalize them through In-service education, yet several questions about these programmes also emerged. Such as, do the professional development programmes for the Panchayat teachers, are prepared with taking concern of their specific professional needs? How effective these programmes are to address their professional needs at practical level? How the Panchayat teachers have perceived these programmes for their professional growth. These questions are not only significant for the professional development of Panchayat teachers but contribute to understand the challenges of rural teachers in general.

Methodology of the Study:

In this study, Qualitative research design was used for data collection from the stakeholders which are the Panchayat teachers of Bihar. In the beginning of data collection process, an interview schedule was developed. The questions of interview schedule were focused on capturing the experiences, learning and opinions of Panchayat teachers about their In-service education. In the later stage, the questions were also

changed keeping in mind the context of each individual teacher. Many questions also evolved on the bases of the responses of the participants. Each stakeholder was interviewed two to three times during this whole process. In total, there were nine participants for this study.

On the basis of the in-depth interviews conducted and the experiences shared by the stakeholders, case narratives of the participants have been developed. Here, the narrative approach is seen as the discovery of social information and is employed within the qualitative paradigm (Silverman, 2006). It is strongly believed that the narratives, explored through interpretive research, allow access to the respondents' reality via their socially constructed stories. It is also understood that narratives have multiple interpretations which provides multiple perspective for understanding.

Informing through Case Narratives:

The case narratives have been analyzed on the bases of certain themes that have emerged from the interviews of the participants. The themes of the analysis include the perceptions of the participants about the In-service education programmes, perceived differences between trained and untrained teachers, their professional development through In-service education and the role of the teacher educators.

I. Perceptions about In-service Teacher Education Programmes

The case narratives reveal that each participant has strongly emphasized the importance of In-service teacher education programmes for professional development. They highlight that teacher training programmes enable teachers to be more organized, aware and sincere towards their work. Training facilitates the development of necessary skills required to perform a particular job. It also helps teachers to develop confidence in themselves and assurance in their actions. Teacher education programmes also serve as personality development exercises, enabling teachers to develop personalities that leave a positive impression on the students. It enhances their understanding of a systematic classroom and provides guidelines on how to make it interesting.

To sum up, the views of the participants reflect that without formal training, a newly recruited Panchayat teacher has an insufficient understanding of the teaching learning process.

“Training ke bina ek shikshak ki antrik kshamata vikasit nahi ho sakati, isiliye hamare liye training bahut kaargar hai aur isase bahut kuchh sikhane ko mila”

(Quote of a Panchayat Teacher)

II. Perceived differences between Trained and Untrained Teachersⁱ

Participants also pointed out the differences between trained and untrained teachers. For example, an untrained teacher lacks a professional attitude towards her/his work and may create more problems owing to mistakes. A trained teacher thinks differently from an untrained teacher and also develops an attitude towards work. S/he becomes inclined towards creative pursuits and undertakes initiative in school based

tasks with poise and confidence. One of the participants also mentioned that without training, he always felt that something was missing in his teaching, despite his best effort.

“Pahle shikshak sirf achchhe aur bure ki apni samajh se padhaya karate hain. Par jab aap training kar ke aate hain to aapke shishan ki kuchh badhyatayen ho jaati hain. Aap niyamon ke anusar padhate hain.” (Quote of a Panchayat Teacher)

According to one of the participant, influence of the training programmes on them is rarely visible. In his opinion, Panchayat teachers only do attend training programmes for completing the formality and fulfilling the eligibility requirements of a teacher. They do not focus on understanding the teacher learning processes.

III. Perceptions related to their Professional Development through the In-service Education

The Panchayat teachers have also talked about the impact of In-service education programmes. The teacher education programmes have helped them in grooming their personality as a teacher. They observed significant changes in themselves after attending the training programmes and were able to get direction for their profession. One of the participants mentioned that earlier he used to go to school as part of his daily routine but now after training sessions, he feels satisfied, happy and active while teaching. He spends most of his time in managing the matters of the school as he is the officiating in-charge. He utilizes this opportunity to improve the conditions of the school.

“Pahale main school me duty karne jata tha, par ab school me man lagata hai, main apne aap ko santusht mahsoos karta hun aur chhutti hone ke baad bhi school me ruka rahta hun, taki school ke liye kuchh exta kar saku.Kai kaam hote hain jinko main school ke baad pura karta hun taki school hour me bachchon ki padhai baadhit na hoye.” (Quote of a Panchayat Teacher)

Another participant has gain confidence in her way of teaching and as a result she created ‘Sangeetmay Pranaali’ of teaching. Through this technique, students learn the chapters very easily and with great interest. She has also become very social and sensitive towards her society. The training programmes also created an interest, towards reading books, in many participants. In this way, all the participants have admitted that the teacher training programmes have brought a change in the teaching process. Before the training, they were following a teacher-centric, traditional approach to teaching. After undergoing the teacher training programmes, they became familiar with the learner-centric approach, which they always try to incorporate in their pedagogy. After the training sessions, they have become more responsible towards their profession. Their personality, language, attire and approach to teaching have changed remarkably.

Another participant not only relates the quality of Panchayat teachers with training, but also brings the issue of their condition of salary. He believes that until the economic conditions of Panchayat teachers

improve, they would be devoid of any satisfaction professionally. The participants have emphasized that these training programmes are not just a formality. The selection of qualified professionals is crucial to raise the bar of the trainings. They also believe that proper check should be maintained on the mediators' capacities and capabilities because the quality of professionals defines the effectiveness of the programmes.

However, the In-service education for Panchayat teachers is very important. The Panchayat teachers also believe that one should not completely depend on any training course because these are not the only source of professional development. Discussions with the seniors, colleagues and students also help to learn several aspects of teaching. The Panchayat teachers should promote their own skills to discover new methods of teaching and learning.

IV. Perception about Teacher Educators

Role of Mentors: Mentors were the senior trained teachers of government schools under which Panchayat teachers were placed for guidance. According to many participants, their mentors were very positive and encouraging, who were always ready to provide solutions and suggestions, to guide them in teaching. However, the participants have appreciated their mentors' support, but they also raised several concerns related to the mentoring. First, the process of mentoring was new for the mentors. They did not have any orientation for mentoring. Second, the mentors were hardly able to observe the class of Panchayat teachers since they didn't have any official order. They also said that the mentors should be trained because if they are not trained then they would be unable to help the Panchayat teachers in raising their standards of teaching. According to one of the participants, mentors do not perform any substantial task. They simply perform the formality of signing assignments and lesson plans. But he doesn't blame them, as he acknowledges that they cannot leave their own schools and go for mentoring as they are not given any official letter.

Role of Counselors: Counseling provides opportunity to the Panchayat teachers to clarify their doubts about the concepts which have been written in the modules. The counseling session was generally held before the term-end exams of each module. The counselors and resource persons, who were the senior teachers, solved various queries of the teachers during the session. Most of the participants believe that the counselors were qualified and trained, but due to scarcity of time, could not pay attention to the problems of Panchayat teachers. However, some participants also found the counselors very inefficient and disinterested in counseling. They only came for three days and expected the Panchayat teachers to read and come prepared from home. According to the participants, there should be multiple counseling sessions during the entire course. In the absence of counseling sessions or when they are held infrequently, the purpose of the course is not fulfilled completely.

“Training sirf Panchayat shikshakon ke liye hi aavashyak nahi hai, balki teacher educators ke liye bhi bahut jaruri hai. Kyunki unake achchhe training ka prabhav hamaare training par hota hai.”

(Quote of a Panchayat Teacher)

Concluding with:

On the basis of the perceptions and experiences shared by the Panchayat teachers, it can be inferred that the Panchayat teachers have got valuable support from the teacher education programmes. But, there professional learning could be more enriched if the programmes were prepared systematically by understanding the basic concerns of rural teachers. There is a need to do the capacity building of rural teachers through providing effective teacher education programmes on regular intervals. However, the participants have talked a lot about the impact of their In-service education on them. But, the evidence of change in Panchayat teachers is still not very visible in the environment of schools in Bihar. Therefore, this is to be understood that the teacher education in the state must be examined carefully to inculcate the required reforms. The revival should not be cosmetic but fundamental and inherent. The paper concludes with placing a conceptual framework of teacher education for rural teachers.

Conceptual Framework of Teacher Education for rural teachers:

It is evident from the recent documents and reports that rural teachers have very limited opportunities for professional development. In this situation, teacher education programmes have to provide such space which can strengthen the professional growth of rural teachers and equip them to create the scope of their professional development by themselves. National Curriculum Framework 2005 states that *“Teacher education programmes need to provide the space for engagement with issues and concerns of contemporary Indian society, its pluralistic nature, and issues of identity, gender, equity, livelihood and poverty. This can help teachers in contextualizing education and evolving a deeper understanding of the purpose of education and its relationship with society”*.

The curriculum should be *glocalized* i.e. a combination of global as well as local knowledge. It is important to have both kinds of perspectives to break the isolation of a rural teacher from the outer world. A combination of global and local context is also important to mobilize the movement of a teacher and avail the opportunities. Through this, the rural teachers should be exposed to diverse pedagogical approaches of teaching.

The rural schools have a distinct demand from the teachers. Beyond providing literacy, the schools are also a medium to address current social issues of rural society. A multicultural perspective in teacher preparation is crucial if a programme of teacher education and professional development is to be effective (Gorski et al., 2000; Norberg, 2000). So, knowledge, skills and dispositions to work with children of diverse cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds becomes important during creating any professional

programme for teachers (Gay & Howard, 2000). Goodlad (1990) also suggests that good teacher education programs should provide opportunities to candidates to become more “other-oriented” and identify with a broader culture of teaching.

Updating the knowledge of the rural teacher is also an important aim of teacher education programmes. This should be happened through multiple ways. The programme should be informed through the recent researches in education. Rural teachers should be given some challenging situation during their professional programmes to test and enrich their knowledge. Technology is one of the missing and challenging elements from the space of a rural teacher. So, the professional programmes should incorporate basic useful technology for the rural teachers. It will not only advance their teaching skill but also act as a medium of contact with the outer world.

The professional programme should acknowledge the sensitivity to the context of rural teachers. It should provide flexibility and practical use of learning and scope for self-reflection. To enable the teachers for the new changes in education, Andrew Pollard (2002) has emphasized the importance of reflection for the professional development of teachers. Developing critical as well as creative thinking skills should be encouraged in the different activities of professional development programmes. Discussions on the kinds of challenges that novice teachers are expected to face should also be an integral part of the programmes. The teacher education programmes should also include components that empower the rural teacher and make them aware of their agency for change (Batra, 2009). How is the teacher’s role reflected in the programmes and how are these programmes addressing the personal and social dimensions of a teacher, are also important questions to be addressed. The programme should provide space to teachers to share their own values and beliefs about the teaching learning process. The programmes should enhance the ability of rural teachers to evaluate and access their teaching learning process. The programmes should reflect an attitude of comprehensive and continuous evaluation.

It is required to move ahead with the continuing professional development (CPD) model where the inner knowledge, judgment and wisdom of the professional teachers are seen as one of the greatest resource. CPD acknowledges the existing experiences, practices, perspectives, insights and, most usually, anxieties about the highly complex nature of teachers’ work.

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End Note:

ⁱ Here 'Training' word is used in the place of 'teacher education', since the Panchayat teachers have mentioned their In-service education as 'Training' during the interview process. However, both the terms are not synonymous to each other.