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Re-imagining classrooms as spaces for learning and professional development of teachers and teacher educators

Abstract

In this article, we identify the potential areas of support required by teachers while teaching in the classroom. We discuss two classroom episodes where the teacher educators did not engage with the struggles of the teacher and the demands of the teaching situation. The lack of support from teacher educators and persistence in routinising classroom observations, has refrained teachers and teacher educators in utilising the potential of classrooms as spaces for learning of all. An exploration into the beliefs of teacher educators indicates that they overlook critical aspects of teaching and learning when observing classroom teaching. We conclude by suggesting possible ways in which teachers and teacher educators can collaborate by reflectively engaging with learning opportunities arising from classrooms.

Radha has newly joined as a primary teacher in a private school. As she enters class 5, she feels excited and nervous. She wants to listen to students, know more about them and work towards making mathematics accessible to all. The principal assures Radha that she will visit her class in the first week. She is happy that the principal is interested in her teaching. The principal comes and sits in her class for a few minutes and then leaves. After the class, Radha immediately goes to meet the principal and excitedly asks, "how was it?" The principal tells her that she is new and should learn to have a disciplined class, students should attentively listen to the teacher. As a teacher, she should be able to say the last word on every (mathematics) problem. Radha's class was just the opposite! As time passes, the principal and other senior colleagues observe Radha's classes and find them to be very noisy, slow in completion of textbook exercises, and therefore not up to the mark. Radha continues to receive similar feedback from other observers but she does not have anyone to discuss her struggles about teaching, the new curriculum, and student difficulties. The fear of performance during classroom observations by seniors leaves her disappointed!

An Experience illustrating the teaching concern

The reality of Radha's (pseudonym) classroom is not very different from several teachers who begin teaching with enthusiasm and try novel pedagogic ideas in their classes. Teachers do not receive the required support in classrooms for them to be able to teach constructively (Takker, 2012). Developing a culture of teaching does not involve seeking feedback and reflection on the content alone but also requires an engagement in teaching of peers. The school culture does not have mechanisms by which teachers are encouraged to engage in their own and others' teaching. When teaching is observed by the school principal or teacher educator, teachers receive cursory remarks about improving classroom management and organisation. The feedback on teacher's delivery or knowledge of the content is uni-directional (from teacher educator or senior teachers to the junior teacher) and does not involve discussion about teaching and classroom struggles of the teacher. The impression of classroom observations as events, where teachers prepare the lesson and teacher educator gives feedback, gets ingrained with time. We believe that the purpose of these interactions between teachers and teacher educators requires serious rethinking. Engagement with teaching requires more deeper deliberations on 'what' is

being taught in the classroom, and 'how' can learning be made more responsive and engaging for all. As we notice in Radha's case, her goals of teaching include listening to students and making mathematics accessible to all. In her attempt to listen to students, the classroom becomes noisy. The feedback she receives from the principal focuses on the disciplinary aspects of classroom observation. The content of teaching and Radha's struggles in making classroom more interactive are not discussed. Based on Radha's example where the feedback from the principal and her colleagues is limited, it is important to ask what is the role of teachers and teacher educators in their growth as professionals. Further, how classroom observations and deliberations around them are utilised as learning opportunities for teachers and teacher educators. We intend to deliberate on these two questions in this paper.

Perceptions about teacher's role

Teachers are responsible for communicating the curricular ideas into practice in the process of educating learners. Textbook is the key resource available to teachers to comprehend the curricular principles (in their own ways). It is important to ask about the perceived role of the teacher in planning and designing a new curriculum. Do teachers have a (collective) voice in the process of curriculum development and revision? Teachers' voice and agency in shaping the curricular discourse is compromised even in the democratic processes of curricular reforms as in National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 (Batra, 2005), which envisions the larger goal of education as mediating social transformation (NCERT, 2005). The gap between the theoretical principles, values, and suggestions in NCF 2005 (proposed curriculum) and teachers' perspective on their implementation in practice (enacted curriculum) needs to be bridged through the creation of support structures at the ground level, and close to the work of teaching (Takker, 2011). Further, teacher's role in the discourse around the curriculum and its implementation needs to be re-imagined. The revision of teacher's role from being an implementer to a reflective practitioner requires that teachers develop the tools for deliberation on the content of teaching and making conscious connections with the curriculum and aims of education. This is another important area which can be strengthened and utilised for discussion between teachers and teacher educators, with classrooms as sites for learning. Classroom can serve as rich contexts for deliberating about students' backgrounds, bridging knowledge with students' ideas, create discourses which encourage questioning, etc. We believe that there is a need to strengthen teacher's identity as a professional, thus utilising their experience in designing and revision of curriculum. A more practical concern remains how and in what ways can teachers be supported while they are teaching. We attempt to respond to this concern through use of anecdotal experiences of working with teachers and teacher educators.

Teachers and classrooms

In the context of formal education, classrooms are spaces where the process of teaching and learning takes place. It is a meeting ground for students of different abilities, aspirations, and backgrounds. The complexity and richness of classroom comes from the interactions between the teacher, students and the subject-matter at a socio-cognitive plane. Teaching is an act of complex, social and intellectual collaboration (Lampert, 2001) and the classroom space offers challenging realities to teachers. In this space, the prime responsibility of making learning possible resides with the teacher. A teacher is expected to maximise student learning by planning the learning experiences as well as reciprocating appropriately to in-the-moment situations arising while teaching. However, after a few years, a teacher tends to gets moulded into the routines of teaching. Teachers get caught up in a vortex of framed responsibilities and managerial accountability such as maintaining registers, completing the syllabus even if the number of teaching days are compromised, managing the cultural programmes, etc. Teaching often ends up becoming a job aimed towards completion of the prescribed syllabus. In our participant classroom observations, we have often found that teachers miss noticing potential learning opportunities for students while

teaching in the classrooms. Keeping in mind students' backgrounds and prior knowledge when teaching content, probing an interesting student question or response, unpacking students' thinking underlying procedures, thinking deeply about the content to be taught beyond the textbook, etc. are some of the examples. The institutional work environment has created a dominant culture of teaching, usually referred to as *traditional teaching*. This culture of teaching includes beliefs held by teacher and parents, such as children do not learn unless taught, mistakes need to be corrected immediately, children should be kept away from conflicts, etc. Teachers, constantly immersed in a work culture that propagates and reinforces such beliefs, either accede to or passively imbibe such beliefs. Other stakeholders such as the principal, parents, curriculum designers, teacher educators, etc. contribute by enforcing systems to ensure that the teaching happens in "prescribed" ways. As Dewan (2009) points out, it is not just the teachers who do not want to teach the poor children and take the responsibility of their non-learning, but the academicians and administrators from state level institutions also do not value diversity. The traditional culture of teaching needs to be challenged and alternate images of teaching need to be co-constructed with the teachers. This would require breaking off from the demarcated roles operating within the structure of schooling, where the students are expected to learn, teachers make the learning possible, and teachers educators are experts assessing teachers and their teaching. This structural edifice marks the failure in acknowledging the worth of classrooms as a valuable resource for learning of teachers and teacher educators. There is a need for understanding the complexity of classrooms and utilising their potential for learning of students, teachers and teacher educators.

Observing classrooms: purposes and challenges

In India and elsewhere, teacher preparation (pre-service) as well as evaluation (in-service teacher education) relies significantly on experiences of classroom observations (Batra, 2005; Lasagabsater & Sierra, 2011). Education officers, teacher educators and principals, with a certain teaching experience and training, make visits to classrooms. In the case of in-service teachers, this visit is once or twice a year and the teacher whose lesson is to be observed is informed about the day and session for observation in advance. The teacher's performance of a lesson on a particular day then decides her/his identity as a 'particular kind' of a teacher and subsequently her/his promotion. Classroom observations can vary from taking a passing look at the class or notebook work to sitting in an ongoing class for a few minutes by a teacher educator. The teacher educator 'inspects' a class and fills up a proforma on teacher's performance. However, observations with an exclusive evaluation orientation misses out opportunities for drawing insights from an understanding of student-teacher interactions, in making sense of how students' thinking mediates with content such that it shapes the learning discourse in dynamic, insightful ways. Also, an understanding from classroom observations in this manner does not translate in any meaningful way to support teacher in reflecting on her teaching practice. Scholars (Saginor, 2008; Wragg, 1999) in the field draw our attention to this value of classroom observations in preparing teachers for their profession.

In pre-service teacher education programmes, practical teaching experience includes micro-teaching, practice teaching, peer teaching, etc. As teachers teach, mentors or teacher educators observe and comment about their teaching. Student-teachers are expected to prepare special lessons for observation so that they can display not their routine but their best. The 'best' implies executing the lesson plan closely aligned with what they had stated, have all the materials in place to conduct an activity, manage to keep a class disciplined, and achieve the objectives promised in the lesson plan. When preparing to teach, the student-teachers need to develop a culture of *talking about teaching* and tasks entailed in it. Such a discussion is crucial for becoming reflective about teaching and discussing concerns that arise later.

So what is it that teacher educators observe in pre-service and in-service teacher's teaching? What kind of perceptions do teacher educators hold about classroom observations? What aspects do they consider as significant? In order to

explore this understanding, let us begin by studying an anecdotal experience shared by a science teacher, Tarique. He has been teaching in a government school for over five years.

Tarique is introducing the idea of biodegradation to seventh graders. He begins his class by asking children to look around and list things around them. Children say wooden chair, cotton clothes, bananas, potato-chips, wooden duster, chalk piece, plastic bottle, steel tiffin-box, slippers, etc. After having about 20 different names on the board, he picks up a plastic water bottle and asks, 'what will happen to a bottle after you throw it in a bin? Where does it go from our bins?' Some children say it goes into a big dumping ground and that they have seen it. One girl said that she has seen some old women, sitting at the end of a street and separating all junk. Tarique then asks 'why do they separate these things and how do they know which thing to put where?' In groups, children discussed different criteria for classification. The criteria used included nature of material, breakability, edibility, etc. Tarique then asks children to imagine, 'what will happen to these materials if they had been there in a very old house, unused for several years?' Children respond, 'the colour may fade, the thing may break into pieces, will become soil, etc.' Tarique asked 'Does that happen with all the materials? How do we know which one will become soil and which will not?' Children were certain that glass and plastic bottle will not become soil while peels of fruits and vegetables, potato-chips, will mix and become soil. They were not sure of the old clothes. Later, Tarique tells them that objects that completely mix with soil are called biodegradable materials and others non-biodegradable. Students shared some of their observations about materials and how they look when they are old. They decide to find old things around and note down how they looked. Together they identified empty spaces in the classroom to keep some objects and observe them over time. The items they agreed upon were bananas, potato chips, cloth piece, iron key and chalk piece.

After observing the session, the teacher educator remarked that it was an activity-based classroom but the teacher did not use any teaching aids. Students were making a lot of noise. More than that, they were asking unnecessary questions like, would a (rubber) *chappal* (footwear) be degradable or non-degradable, is their tiffin-box which is made of stainless steel, biodegradable or not? Tarique (also a pseudonym) wanted to discuss a student's experience of seeing an onion kept over several days in a plastic bag, developing black and green spots. He was not quite sure about this observation. When he later sought a clarification from the teacher educator, he was advised to use textbook examples rather than wasting time in making students think about so many objects around them. Tarique was asked to include more structured written work and focus on his classroom management skills. He was told to teach more content in reference to the textbook.

Role of techer educators

Do we notice some similarity in the way Radha and Tarique received the feedback? What kind of an impact would it have on them? What is it that teacher educators expect to see in teachers' classrooms? Intrigued by these thoughts, we asked teacher educators in informal interviews and sessions in workshops to elaborate on the role they perceive for themselves and what they observe in classrooms. These teacher educators included District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) faculty, education officers, in-service teacher educators, teacher leaders, and principals of different schools (henceforth, we refer to all of them as teacher educators). Teacher educators have the task of observing classrooms of in-service and/ or pre-service teachers and provide feedback. So we asked them individually and in groups about what do they observe in a classroom. Here is a consolidated list, exhaustive of responses from all the teacher educators:

a) *infrastructure*: availability of blackboard and chalk, desks in order and facing the black board and teacher, sufficient light, air, etc.

b) *student behaviour*: disciplined, giving answers to teacher's questions, not talking to each other unless asked, maintain neatness in

notebook work, taking turns (no mass answering), copying correctly from the board and in time, listening to teacher carefully, following instructions, etc.

c) *teacher behaviour*: asking questions from students, correcting students' mistakes, using language (mostly English) clearly, taking care of bright children as well as slow learners, ability to draw the attention of students in proper ways, fulfilling the objective of the day's lesson, classwork and homework, asking questions to individual students; and

d) *others*: proper activity along with lecture, considering the need for using lab (should be avoided mostly as it is chaotic), use of teaching aids, correction of notebooks, tracking students' performance, completion of activity in time.

The conversations with teacher educators suggest that they pay a lot of emphasis on behavioural patterns and physical attributes of classroom. The idea of physical space is limited to desks, light, and board in the classroom. Only one teacher educator mentioned that she actually checks whether the ladies toilet in the school is functional and then goes for classroom observations. When we explicitly asked this question to other teacher educators, they said that this is not their concern. They are expected to focus on the classrooms not elsewhere. Even the physical infrastructure, which emerged as a prominent feature being observed is quite limited. The tacit protocol for observations does not include aspects which may have bearing on learning, like the students' socio-economic background, their regularity in school attendance, peer interactions during the class, etc. On probing about the kind of oral and written comments or feedback they provide to teachers, it came up that they rarely engage in any discussions with teachers. The feedback is usually handed over to the teacher-in-charge of that section or school. Occasionally, a copy of this feedback sheet is given to the teacher who was observed.

Many of the teacher educators talked about the significance of time management. They felt that, teaching an idea, such as decomposition of objects around us or the multiplication with tens and halves should not take the whole of one lesson (30-40 minutes). There should at least be three or four different topics (or types of problems) with some written work in every class. It is no surprise that the feedback given to teachers does not include much on the content of what is being taught. For them the content to be taught should be visibly present in the textbook (exercise, page and question number). Also, there is a preference towards disciplined classrooms where children sit in order, take turns while talking, complete their class work quietly, and follow the instructions given by their teacher. Several teacher educators believe that if students respond to all the questions posed by the teacher, then they are not learning anything new.

Interestingly, many of the beliefs that are attributed to teachers, such as correction of mistakes, emphasis on (correct) answers, disciplined classroom, use of teaching aids, etc. seem to be consistent with beliefs of teacher educators. The content (subject) matter, nature and form of student-teacher and student-student interactions, teacher's thinking and decision making in class, students' questions, teaching difficulties, opportunities to learn from diverse opinions and experience, etc. are completely missing from the teacher educators' discourse. An interesting and illustrative example to notice is the concept of 'bio-degradable' in Tarique's case. Biodegradation seems to be perceived as a consequential culmination with soil. Opportunities for exploring degradation by microbes (as in the case of onion) or degradation of iron (through a process of rusting) actually would have allowed for a substantiation of knowledge across diverse examples. All of this, received a precocious termination because of a structured arrangement of evaluation with no opportunities for critical reflection and insights about the act of teaching. It is important for us to ask here why decisions which are central to teaching are missing from teachers educators' reflections on classrooms. Perhaps, an authoritarian outlook towards teacher educators' engagement with teachers and a narrowly scoped understanding of student-teacher interactions

which largely involves managerial practices (e.g. disciplining) and completion of syllabus has robbed the profession of teaching to draw upon and benefit from the emergent contexts of learning embedded in student-teacher interactions.

Nature of interactions between teacher and teacher educator

The assessment of a teacher by teacher educator without any interaction presents a unilateral mode of feedback. Also, why is teacher educators' learning from these classroom observations not discussed? The top-down approach of learning is evident as students learn from the teacher and teacher from the teacher educator. Adopting a top-down approach, it seems, will create multiple levels of cadres for training of each group. Re-envisioning the classroom spaces would require students, teachers and teacher educators to draw upon the relevant experiences of classroom teaching. We believe that a potential way to utilise classroom teaching experience as a learning resource would be through communities of teachers and teacher educators talking about the dilemmas of classroom teaching. We need to acknowledge and utilise the work of teachers and teacher educators as opportunities for learning.

The use of structured proformas is inadequate for capturing the diverse yet shared needs of teachers. The diversity of different classrooms can be captured by teacher educators through a variety of modes, such as, studying audio-video records, notes of classroom discourse, students' writing and records of response during their teaching, etc. There is a need for teacher educators to engage groups of teachers using these artefacts of teaching. Through discussions with teachers about the challenges they face in different contexts of teaching, teacher educators can expand their knowledge base and reflect on the experience of teaching. Together with teachers, they can engage in the process of identifying connections in content, develop ways to support students' learning by addressing difficulties in student learning, sharing strategies to teaching difficult concepts, appropriate sequencing, and inter-relations among concepts and domains. Such interactions will promote sharing insights about the nuances of classroom contexts, learning, subject matter, and the learners. Exploring ways to support classroom teaching will in turn enrich the experience of teacher educator visiting different kinds of classrooms.

Reimagining classrooms as spaces for teaching and learning

Classrooms are imagined as spaces for active interaction between students and a teacher. In such an imagination, conceptually the classroom appears to be a flat-land, a level-playing field, which is largely governed by subject knowledge dealt in the class and the concerns of the students engaged in learning. This contemporary imagination envisages classroom as an 'object' or 'site' where learning is monitored. Instead of tapping the value of classrooms for learning, there is an overemphasis on pedagogic transactions over content, deliverables or outputs over the process of learning, right answers over connections with learners' knowledge, and an interest in judging students and teachers in an environment of learning more than their contribution by participating in a class discussion. As evidenced from the cases of Radha and Tarique, the imagination of classrooms as a site need some kind of a re-envisioning. Perhaps, the landscape metaphor is indicative of the dynamic nature of components within a system prone to transformational changes by an uneven topography of a classroom. Classrooms ought to be looked at as *authentic* resource for learning of students, teachers and teacher educators. Moving from 'classroom as a site for practice' to 'classroom as a resource enabling learning' reconfigures the essence of classroom spaces. The teacher's experiences of dealing with classroom realities and the teacher educators' experiences from diverse classrooms will widen the scope for nurturing learning from each other. Motivated by this idea, we have directed our efforts in drawing teacher educators' attention to these crucial aspects.

We are in a process of developing and trying out some tasks to initiate building of a community of practitioners. One of the initial efforts has been to identify artefacts of practice and designing tasks around the artefacts for focused discussions with teachers and teacher educators. We often

engage them in discussions using short classroom video clips. The focus in on student's knowledge, teacher's decision making, struggles of individuals in a classroom setting, etc. We encourage deeper engagement of teachers and teacher educators, going beyond commenting (or suggesting) to discuss different ways of dealing with situations. Often, it works well when there is a mixed group of teachers and teacher educators. We believe an appropriation of this kind creates a mutual learning environment and sharing of ideas and resources. Such a learning ambience encourages an organic building of association, not coloured by authority coming from a power position but for a pragmatic engagement with teaching *per se.* An atmosphere of mutual learning, trust, and commitment to make learning meaningful can connect Radha and Tarique with other teachers and teacher educators who share similar concerns and sense of purpose.

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