

The Personal Professional Development of Pre-service Teachers: A Study of Narratives

Nirupma Jaimini

University of Delhi, Chhatra Marg Delh-110007, India

Corresponding author: njaimini@ gmail.com

Paper No: 88 **Received:** 14 January, 2014 **Accepted:** 15 March, 2014

Abstract

Understanding the process of the personal and professional development of pre - service teachers is significant in exploring their potential for self growth and evolution into reflective practitioners. The present study embarks on a thematic analysis of the narrative texts of the reflective journals of six pre-service teachers who were placed in the same school for their internship. The framework in which the analysis has been done focuses on three dimensions: (i) engagement with learners (ii) transaction of the teaching learning processes; and (iii) self concept as a teacher. The findings of the study emphasize two important aspects: the role of reflection in the personal professional development of prospective teachers and the need for a paradigm shift from a uniform, institution-built approach to teacher development to a context related, flexible and reflection oriented mentoring approach that acknowledges the voices and experiences of the evolving teachers.

Keywords: Narratives; personal professional development; reflective journals; thematic analysis

The process of reflection is acquiring an increasing significance as a potent means of context-embedded self growth as a person and in terms of professional competence. According to Baird (1993), reflection is a cornerstone of learning and of personal and professional development. In a preparatory programme for teachers, the school internship is a critical phase to provide field experiences to the prospective teachers. The critical observations and self analysis could possibly create conditions for progressive changes in teaching strategies as well as attitude among interns. Schon (1987) in his book endorses “reflection in action” as a process which requires practitioners to “remake their practice worlds” and “promote flexibility and creativity”. With this purpose, the analysis of these reflections would be meaningful to gain insights into the trajectories of personal-professional growth of the prospective teachers. Britzman (2000) had stated that there is little understating regarding how those trying to teach actually learn from their practices, their students, or their incidental anxieties and contextual dimensions.

Research on teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts has shown that teacher candidates approach teaching with a plethora of initial beliefs and ideas about teaching. Their knowledge, however, tends to be based on simplistic views of teaching and learning in the classroom, and hence may not be “well adapted to teaching” (Calderhead, 1991, p.532). It is only when they reflect upon their knowledge critically that they gain pedagogical and personal insights to become better teachers.

To promote reflective thinking, journal writing has been used in teacher education. The reflective journals can activate teacher candidates’ thinking and facilitate meaning making during the learning process (Cole, Raffier, Rogar, & Teacher, 1998), serve as a means of generating questions and hypotheses about teaching and learning (Richards, 1998). Through questioning their own assumptions, teacher candidates raise their awareness of teaching and develop a sense of ownership of their future work (Daloglu, 2001). As

teacher candidates engage in journal writing, they are able to develop a habit of reflection (Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza- Bailey, 2000). Elliott (1991) held that the journals of teachers may contain observations, feelings, reactions, interpretation, punches, explanations; in a way the journal is a potentially rich research tool.

Research Questions

The researcher, as a teacher educator aimed to examine:

- i) How the six interns perceive their learners' behaviour and interactions and how each of them engaged with their learners
- ii) The nature of their reflections on the teaching learning processes that they transacted and how they translated their emerging ideas into pedagogical practices
- iii) How they perceived their role as teachers and what was the nature of their evolving self-concept as a teacher

Context and Method

The study was located in a government school of Delhi. The school was only for girls. The researcher was there as a mentor to observe and facilitate school internship for the six interns as a group. Unlike the private schools the government schools have very moderate or nominal facilities. In this case the school building was undergoing a major renovation so there were day-to-day exigencies relating to shifting venues of the classes and stuffing of equipments and materials in all possible spaces. The classes were frequently being conducted in the open ground with a small sized mobile blackboard. So, such was the infrastructural set up when the group of six interns started their internship.

The major tool adopted for the study were the reflective journals that were being maintained by the interns on weekly basis. The internship programme was of a duration of ten weeks. The researcher, as the mentor of the interns was with them in the school, observing their teaching and other school related activities; interacting with them at individual and group levels. Thus, the researcher was a part of the total context during the internship programme. This situation helped the researcher to triangulate the data in the reflective journals.

The writings in the journals, building up on the lived experiences are *narratives* that were to be probed and analysed in the contextual framework of the school ethos and learner groups.

Analysis of the Narratives

A *thematic analysis* of the narratives was undertaken to trace

the trajectories of the personal professional development of the six interns. The themes were – engagement with learners, transaction of the teaching learning processes and self concept as a teacher. The narratives were probed for their perceptual nuances, how each of them viewed the context and the learners, their negotiations and strategies adopted. Some selected excerpts from the narrative text are presented as a sample to bring out the personal articulation of ideas, subtle feelings and contextual influences.

Participant interns (pseudo names): Anu; Geeta; Nina; Neera; Rita; Seema

The interns were teaching classes between six and eight, except for Geeta who was teaching science to class nine. Each intern was teaching in two classes. Anu, Geeta and Seema were teaching science; Rita and Neera were teaching Hindi language; Mathematics was being taught by Nina and Seema; while social science by Rita, Nina and Neera.

As mentioned earlier, the internship programme for the six interns was arranged in a government school that was undergoing renovation. The first few days experiences in their journals bring out their apprehensions as to how they would carry on with their internship in the prevailing conditions.

Some Reactions about the School Context

Geeta: .. *I am still in initial phase, getting familiar with the school which has some new surprises and shocks for me everyday.... ..lack of infrastructure is the main problem of this school. But it is surprising to see how they still manage to run classes here..* Here the apprehension is interestingly coupled with a positive note about the conduct of classes even in adverse conditions. The comments by Rita and Neera.. *a lot of disturbance in school*; and Seema had written.. *we don't have any fixed place to sit*; and Anu.. *I am trying to understand the school system*; however, Nina had not commented about the school infrastructure and renovation work. These feelings were soon seemed to be taken over by their curiosity about their students.

Some Excerpts from the Narratives and the Peer Observation text of the six interns are given below.

I. Anu

Anu was teaching science to classes six and seven. Some excerpts from her narratives are sampled as under:

..I am happy and surprised to see the excitement of students and they are eager to talk to us,..this is one good thing after all

..some students do the activities easily but some are not able to do even after demonstration. I ask them to take the help of their friends who have done the activity...there is a variety in the levels of understanding among students, and this I have to understand first.

..I think the class did not go as well as I had hoped for...as the activity I gave them to perform took more time than I thought. So, from next time I have to keep in mind that I have to be better prepared about the timing of activity, as the students can take more time than what we expect from them...

Anu fell ill and so she had to be on leave for some time. After coming back some narrative text:

..today it was a very challenging day for me as I have joined after a long break. I am afraid my weakness might leave a negative impact on my learners..

..I am happy that the class was interactive.

Some observations about Anu from her peers:

- *There was a tendency to give explanations herself rather than building up from student response.*
- *The circulatory system was taught with help of a creatively made model.*
- *The questions were quite obvious and not thought provoking type.*
- *Her lesson is more 'teacher centered'; she should give more space to the students.*

Anu was encouraged by the positive pre-disposition of her learners. She related her teaching and learner engagement through 'activities'. She was able to note the diversity (among her learners) in activity performance and wanted to plan her activities in a more learner-friendly manner. She was apprehensive about her students' response to her teaching after a gap. According to the observations by her peers, she needed to frame higher order questions and provide more space to her learners to participate in the knowledge construction process. They appreciated the creativity in her teaching learning materials. As a teacher she was concerned that she should not have any negative influence on her learners.

II. Geeta

Geeta was teaching science to classes eighth and ninth.

..it was encouraging to see the students responding to my initiation of the topic and then reaching final conclusions through active discussions and demonstrations.

..I had asked students to make musical instruments so that they can understand that vibrations cause sound...the students had used their imagination and were jumping to show their creations. I felt very energized to see their delighted faces..

Geeta's descriptions of developing concepts in science were quite detailed and showed a logical flow from presenting illustrative situations and activities to induce learners' reasoning from which conclusions were drawn and the concept was arrived at. It was repeatedly emphasized by her that the students arrived at the conclusions on their own.

.. after the class was over, one of the girls came out of the class and asked me a thought provoking question on the content taught. I answered her question and gave some examples. But the point is that she has started thinking and questioning and is trying to find explanations. I am happy about her, but I want the whole class to think. The students are used to learning science by 'book reading' method.

Geeta had narrated her observations about the difficulties her students faced while communicating in English (a second language for students), *..although it is an English medium section but the students are more comfortable in Hindi. When I asked them to explain the concept in their own words in Hindi, they were jumping to answer but when I asked them to 'define' in English, they were not that enthusiastic;.. .. "I am trying to help students in improving their writing skills. I check their note books and try to give individual feedback. I have realized that it is my duty to ensure that my learners are able to express in writing what they have learnt."* In a way Geeta was concerned about her students' problems and made efforts to help them.

..I divided the whole class into five groups, each group member was assigned a specific task..the girls performing experiments looked like little girl scientist at work..in the next class there was a very engaging discussion about the chemical reactions. With proper questioning the students were able to explain well and compare the reactivity of metals used by them in the reactions.

Geeta was happy to be able to create an active learning environment through activities and group learning. She could look back on her classroom teaching as proceeding through an 'inductive reasoning' based approach to arrive at concepts and generalizations.

Some observations about Geeta from her peers:

- *No efforts were needed to discipline the class as the students were observing the activities with keen interest and full attention.*

- *There is a lot to learn in Geeta's class. She provides the opportunities to her students to perform various activities themselves.*
- *Students are being taken forward through logical understanding. Good analogies are being used.*
- *Inquiry skills being developed among students, they are asking observations related questions.*

It can be inferred that as a teacher Geeta made conscious efforts to develop 'science process skills' and thinking skills among her students. She felt her sense achievement through her learners' performance.

III. Neera

Neera was teaching Hindi language and mathematics in class seven.

..I found my students attentive in spite of the near around noise as the class was being held in the ground...I liked my students asking questions without hesitation.

Neera's narratives did not show much evidence of her delving into pedagogical reflections. Her peers however had made observations about her pedagogical approaches:

- *an interesting use of a little game activity being used to initiate the usage of adjectives under the learning of hindi grammar.*
- *Students being asked to point out commonalities and differences and thereby to develop an understanding about the writing of formal and informal letters. Student response active.*
- *An effective use of newspapers is being made to enable the students to understand the role of advertising(a concept in economics). The questions being asked are thought provoking.*
- *There is scope for a better class management.*

Neera's classroom engagements showed her efforts to adopt student-centric pedagogy, as was observed by her peers. Her own narratives focused more on the school context and school practices like mid day meals, morning assembly etc. Her narratives also depicted her sensitivity to social and community issues in which her learners were a link. For instance, the 'anti-cracker' stance for the festival of Diwali.

IV. Nina

Nina was teaching mathematics and social science in class seven and six respectively.

..I started my class by telling them discipline rules.. in my geography class I noticed that my students were unusually attracted to big charts and photographs. while answering they were giving their opinion also which I liked very much...at times I found their response not very correct but they were innocent responses with sparks of imagination..., perhaps, my blackboard work was not so good, may be because I wanted give everything in writing to my students and I was falling short of space on the board.

.. now I know the names of most of my students, I have a good rapport with them..

..I find the students so eager to learn, then why do the regular teachers say, "these children don't come to study at all! They don't know anything". I find these children know a lot..

.. I showed them a model of a 'plateau' and asked them to write about it in their own words.They wrote so many points and appropriate ones..

..I changed my mathematics class to morning time as the students are quite tired to be attentive in the afternoon.

..I learnt about class management(which is not so good in my class) and about giving attention to all the students through 'peer observation'.

Nina's narrative had detailed descriptions of issues related to teaching learning processes all through the text of her journal.

Some peer observations related to Nina:

- *In her mathematics class she discussed the common errors made by students in their home task.*
- *There was a role play(managed effectively by Nina)to depict atmosphere, biosphere, earth etc.*
- *Appropriate questioning to develop logical thinking among students in maths class.*

Nina's reflections show her ability to go deep into students' response behaviour and use that understanding constructively to strengthen their learning base. She has a very positive attitude towards her students which seemed to become her intrinsic motivation to do more and better for them.

V. Rita

Rita was teaching Hindi language and social science to class eight and six respectively.

.. on my first day I instructed them about what kind of behavior I like..I am worried, I don't know if I would be able to manage these children..my classroom looks more like a store with so

many things stuffed into it..even the mice come here...I was appalled to see all this...

Some time later

..it feels nice when students wait for you to come and teach..when they are keen to be taught you..those students who used be quiet in class six, are now eager to respond..I feel now I am nearer to them..they have started telling me their difficulties...they do all the tasks that I give them.

..class eight students have started taking more interest in hindi now.

..students take me seriously, they have become self disciplined... I like it...

..my students in social science class did a role play and I was amazed to see their performance..

.. although the students say they enjoy studying hindi much more now I want to include more and more activities in my hindi class..

Some observations from peers:

- *The story telling in hindi language teaching encourages students to further build up the story in an interesting manner.*
- *Students being asked to point out errors in the words written on the board..she is making good efforts to include all students in responding.*

It was interesting to note how Rita's perceptions have undergone transformation from the physicality of the learning environment to the psychological dimension. She gradually finds herself attuned to the learning styles of her students.

VI. Seema

Seema was teaching science and mathematics to class eight and seven respectively.

..students have started recognizing us as teachers..class eight students are actively participating in my class.. class seven students are too talkative but when I show them any activity they start participating..there is a huge difference between my two learner groups.

.. I was surprised to find the students keen to do project even though it was an extra work...they now come and ask me mathematics questions after the class and during the recess time.

Some observations from peers:

- *students are observing the formation of images and are being enabled to arrive at conclusions and write the explanation in their own words.*
- *the examples taken should match the understanding level of students.*
- *Class could be made more interesting.*

Seema was able to sense the diversity among her learner groups. She also found her students opening up to clarify their doubts. Perhaps, she needed to make the teaching compatible to her learners' interest and understanding levels.

Discussion

The text excerpts considered above bring out the interns' observations and reflections in their individual styles of expression. These narratives could be discussed under three broad dimensions that are not exclusive; rather they fall under the ambit of pedagogy in a wider sense. In its comprehensive sense pedagogy would address the learner through the mediating self of the teacher, rather than just concerned with teaching. The evidences for the learner context, teaching learning processes and the teacher-self were looked into through the narratives of the interns, along with the peer observation text, observations of the classroom processes and focused discussions at the individual and group levels with the six interns, by the researcher as their mentor. The discussion follows:

Engagement with learners

The most significant indicators of teacher development are the nature of learning environment and the emergence of the learner. Therefore, it was pertinent to understand as to how the prospective teachers viewed their engagement with the learners. This could be considered under the following parameters:

- The interns' notions about the learners' disposition to learning.
- The nature of learner-learner and learner-teacher interaction.
- The interns' sensitivity to the learners' problems and their efforts to handle them in order to provide their learners an enabling environment.

The analysis brought forth that the interns could by and large sense the diversity among their learners in terms of the levels of understanding, performance of activities and problem solving ability. One of the interns, Geeta was making efforts to make

her learners comfortable with the second language English, in understanding science. They were all encouraged by the eagerness of their learners to learn.

Teaching Learning Processes

To understand the nature of classroom practices, they could be considered in the frame of reference of the theoretical anchoring and personal beliefs. The narratives of the six interns were considered under the following dimensions:

- The intern's views on the relevance of the Teaching Learning Material(TLM) used by her to the learning facilitation process.
- The ability of the intern to judge the suitability of a teaching strategy/activity used with reference to the nature of subject knowledge and the context of her learner group.
- Thinking about possible alternatives that go beyond the performed activity.

The evidences for the abovementioned parameters were looked into the narratives of the interns along with the observations of their classroom processes made by the researcher.

The self-concept as a Teacher

The internship experience for the prospective teachers was perhaps their first formal exposure to perform as a teacher in a real situation with all its complexities and uncertainties. The reactions were found in the narratives of the interns. The emergence of self concept as a teacher could be shaped by a person's own beliefs, personality dispositions and attitude towards task and task situations. This implicit dimension could be interpreted from the reflections on learner behaviour, teaching learning processes, interactions with peer interns and the school personnel etc. Many a times the reflections showed a dangle between vulnerability and performance satisfaction. The initial apprehensions showing a state of flux gradually started showing increasing levels of comfort with their learners and at times they were overwhelmed by the thoughts and abilities of their learners. Here the peer interactions were found to be a comforting support and a source of motivation to take up many of the tasks assigned by the school administration.

Their perceptions about their role as teachers were interesting where they felt a sense of pride as well as duty towards their students. Towards the end of the internship they talk about their self-confidence and look back at their internship as a "journey" which they enjoyed with their students and fellow interns. Thus, the study is able to bring insights into the three thematic dimensions at individual level as well as a peer group. The link between reflection and growth in teaching was observed also by Gipe and Richards (1992) who analyzed journals and observed teaching.

Conclusion

The study brings out the researcher's observations in two areas, namely the role of reflection in the personal professional development of prospective teachers and the second being the felt need for a paradigm shift from a uniform, institution-made approach to teacher development to a context related, flexible and reflection oriented mentoring approach. The narrative texts of interns in the study provide evidence of their varied perceptions, how they analyse their own and their students' actions and try to cope with and handle day to day complexities. The role of peer facilitation and support also emerges significantly as 'peer mentoring'. These observations are an ample evidence to re-envision our teacher development approaches, whereby, we assure our prospective teachers that as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners, they should acknowledge and listen to their own voice(Belenky et al.,1986) and we as teacher educators have to create those mentoring contexts

References

- Androws, Molly., Squire, Corinne. & Tamboukou, Maria. 2008. *Doing Narrative Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Britzman, D.P. 2000. Teacher Education in the Confusion of Our Times. *Journal of teacher Education*, **51**(3):200-205.
- Calderhead, T. 1989. Reflective Teaching and Teacher Education. *Teaching and teacher Education*, **5**(1):43-51.
- Gipe, J. P., & Richards, J. C. 1992. Reflective Thinking and Growth in Novices' Teaching Abilities. *Journal of Education Research*, **8**(1): 52-57.
- Schon, D. 1983. *The Reflective Practioner*.New York:Basic Books.