



Preparing Prospective Teachers for Diversity and Social Justice: Avowing Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

Learning about social justice at a young age prepares children to be informed, young adults. Teachers play a central role, helping children understand and accept people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as those with disabilities

Key Words:- Learners, Justice, Skill, Curricular, Elementary Education

INTRODUCTION

This research paper discusses some of the processes that are examined to understand whether and how prospective teachers' cognitive orientations, attitudes, and dispositions towards diversity and social justice are challenged, expanded and enhanced during their preparation to become teachers. An attempt is made to locate these processes in the context of the programme structure and its components. The first section presents a description of the BEIED programme structure and an analysis of how ideas related to diversity and social justice are embedded in it. The aim is to unfold the manner in which specific courses of the programme attempt to engage student-teachers with ideas of diversity and social justice in society and the larger educational context. This is followed by reflections on how these various components interact to provide specific learning experiences. Drawing on individual in-depth interviews, classroom observations, documents and artefacts (programme related), students' work, such as reflective journals; this chapter unfolds the role of specific curricular features and pedagogical approaches deployed by faculty; the manner in which these enable acts of revisiting concepts and building on prospective teachers' experiences and beliefs about diversity, difference, marginalization and social justice Curriculum content, structure and features of the BEIED programme

The Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEIED) programme is a four-year integrated professional degree programme of elementary teacher education offered after the senior secondary (class XII) stage of school education. Designed as a bilingual programme, the BEIED is being offered in select constituent colleges of the University of Delhi since the academic year 1994-95. Initiated by the Maulana Azad Centre for Elementary and Social Education (MACESE) at the Central Institute of Education (CIE), the programme embodies the idea of bringing justice in society through an educational frame that reasserts the "social function of the teacher" (Sadgopal, 2001, p. 6). The programme has been acknowledged as an exemplar programme of innovation practiced in initial teacher education in post-independence India. It has been recognised as a pioneering attempt towards fulfilling the need for professionally qualified elementary school teachers and is considered as one of the most robust elementary teacher preparation programmes (Nawani, 2013) "with an explicit commitment to prepare teachers as change-agents so as to make a dent in the elementary education system of the country" (Raina, 2016, p. 176). The BEIED is designed to link the elementary school education system with the university system, thus contributing towards "upgrading the professional status of the elementary school teacher by providing a university degree for elementary education" (Sadgopal, 2001, p. 7). The underlying premise rests on building a cadre of professionally qualified elementary school teachers who can empower the marginalised and view themselves as "agents of social transformation" (Batra, 2014, p. 7). The focus of the programme is on developing the "individuality of the student based on the assumption that it is individual transformation that leads to social transformation" (NCERT, 2005, p. 15). The BEIED handbook which details the programme of study, states the aim of the programme as committed to preparing teachers for state schools that cater to children from various sections of society. This it does, by engaging teachers with critical perspectives on society, knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy. Scholars argue that the BEIED programme through its course components facilitates engagement with issues of "identity, caste, class, gender, equity and poverty" that concern Indian society and its pluralistic nature (Batra, 2009, p. 140). The aim is to prepare reflective practitioners who are socially sensitive. Raina (2016) states clearly that the programme corresponds with the vision of National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCTE, 2009) "of educating [teachers] for and in a diverse society" (p. 176). She further, delineates that the programme considers "establishing school-community linkages and supporting social

justice” as essential social functions of teachers (p. 157). The “B.El.Ed curriculum is grounded in the belief that “teachers prepared ‘differently’ can trigger a chain of desirable changes in the system” (Kumar, 2001, p. 3). The programme is argued to be a “conscious attempt” to prepare educators who can “re-construct the prescribed knowledge as well as to evolve a critical appreciation of curricular (Sadgopal, 2001, p. 6). This vision gets translated through pedagogic interactions wherein prospective teachers are encouraged to question existing practices and “learn to challenge hierarchies and obstacles that resist change” (Batra, 2001, p.11). The vision statements contained in the Handbook indicate with sufficient clarity that the programme has underlying values and principles that promote ideas of diversity and social justice, aimed to facilitate teachers to develop a critical understanding of inequities and hierarchies embedded in Indian society and the need for social justice as a central aim of education.

Learning to “unlearn”: Knowledge, children and childhood

The practicum courses include field visits that provide opportunities for teacher candidates to strengthen and verify knowledge gained through theoretical engagement. Structured spaces provided in the curriculum help teacher candidates to examine the interface between theory and practice. Classroom observations for instance, indicate that student-teachers are encouraged to examine the relevance of the theories of child development in the Indian context and to review their “universal” applicability critically. Alongside an engagement with developmental perspectives on children, student-teachers also engage with questions of diverse childhoods; learning to situate childhood in varied frames rather than seeing them confined to a universal psychological frame. For instance, some of the components of the School Contact Programme (SCP) practicum are designed to provide opportunities to connect theories of child development with the larger socio-historical and contemporary realities of Indian society. The SCP component involves visiting three kinds of schools - government, private and an inclusive school - over a span of one year. Both SCP and the Observing Children (OC) practicum offer rich opportunities to study the influence of socio-economic and cultural factors on developing children and how these shape childhood experiences. Interviews, observations and prospective teachers’ writings highlight the different learning experiences they have as they engage with theories about children’s development, childhood, field-based concepts and issues. Prospective teachers attribute their developing understanding about children to the opportunities provided to read, reflect, discuss and share ideas and experiences during practicum and theory courses. These experiences underline the ways in which teacher educators guide them to explore various ways of interacting and communicating with children. Theatre and craft learnt during other practicum courses are drawn upon to design activities that will help student-teachers understand children and their lives. Working collaboratively with their classmates also helps student-teachers gain confidence and build harmonious relationships with each other. Nalini shares her feelings while talking about understanding children’s lives through drawing. By examining children’s drawings she develops insight into the fact that corporal punishment though legally banned, is still practiced in schools. She questions the ‘need’ to physically hit children in the guise of disciplining them as, indicated in a diary entry of her reflective journal:

“Hitting any student is an unacceptable practice but it is still very common in government schools and honestly no one cares. The children have accepted the suffering they go through and most teachers are insensitive. Teachers cannot and do not have the right to treat children harshly. It is an indirect way of telling them that hitting people who are smaller and weaker than you is an acceptable way of getting what you want from them”.

Managing discomfort: Role of background experiences

Britzman (1991) argues that “learning to teach – like teaching itself – is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become” (p.31). The case of two prospective teachers studying in the first year of the programme, namely, Juhi and Vandita, points out how this ‘process of becoming’ unfolds. This process of transformation unfolds as prospective teachers engage with their own experiences, beliefs and assumptions during teacher preparation. Both Juhi and Vandita belong to the same age group; similar socio-economic backgrounds and have had similar kind of schooling experiences in reputed institutions; easy access to resources and several other privileges. Juhi studied in an affluent private school and both her parents are involved in doing business. She has a younger brother. Juhi has her own You-tube channel and earns “pocket money” from it. Vandita too studied in a reputed private school; both her parents own and work in an NGO. Vandita is a single child. She frequently assists her parents and travels with them often for NGO related work. Both Juhi and Vandita have a lot in common in terms of affluence and privilege. However, each one’s interpretation of the teacher education course components and experiences differ a lot.

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