

Exploring the Views of Teacher Educators and Pupil Teachers on Status of Reading in Pre-Service Programmes

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Introduction

The quality of reading instructions given in schools by teachers has always been a matter of concern. This is because the ability to read and write is valued not only in language curriculum, but it also influences the achievement of the students in other disciplines. Kumar (1992) stated that the majority of children drop out of school due to poor literacy instructions and lack of meaningful classroom interaction. The teacher remains an important character in the classroom in designing literacy instructions. The teachers' beliefs influence the nature of classroom interaction, literacy instructions and students' achievement. The teacher's pedagogy of reading influences the students' competency in it. However, it is important to understand that the teachers' assumptions and competence in leading effective discussions in the classroom is in turn influenced by their training and education (Sinha, 2010). Indeed, teachers themselves are a product of teacher education programmes. The way reading is discussed in teacher education programmes influences how teachers deal with it in their classrooms. Thus, it makes one curious about teachers' views on reading and the reading instructions given in their training programmes. This paper aims to understand the opinions of teacher educators and pupil teachers by exploring their views on the component of reading and how it is dealt with in their training programmes. For this teacher educators and pupil teachers were selected from three types of programmes in Delhi, namely, Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.),

Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.—a four-year Integrated Professional Degree Programme offered after Senior Secondary School Level) and Elementary Teacher Education (ETE—a two-year Diploma Course).

First, I will begin by discussing what reading involves in Indian classrooms. Then, I will present the opinion of teacher educators on the status of reading in their programmes. Finally, I will look at the problems faced by pupil teachers in the classroom while applying the knowledge gained in these programmes.

Reading in Indian Classrooms

In Indian classrooms, reading is mostly done in the form of decoding. In the early grades especially, the focus of literacy instructions is on sounds rather than meaning, parts rather than whole. My own teaching experience with primary grades has been no different. In the initial grades, language curriculum focuses only on strengthening the decoding skills such as learning the letters of the alphabet and fragmented words. Teachers believe that in the early grades, the focus cannot be on reading comprehension because children do not know all the letters of the alphabet and *maatras*. In fact, teachers believe that the most important goal of early reading programmes is to develop sequential mastery of letters and to blend them to make words. Loud reading without any connection with reading for meaning is one of the most common practices in the classroom. Such classroom practices, which isolate skills

from meaningful reading make learning to read difficult. Children are not taught to develop inner control and strategic functioning as readers. Even in the higher grades, teachers provide only an explanation of the text or difficult words, and students do not get a chance to engage with the text by expressing their emotions. Therefore, instead of becoming independent readers, students become dependent on teachers to read and make meaning of texts.

Reading in Teacher Education Programmes

As mentioned earlier, teachers are the major players in the classrooms. Their beliefs, views and opinions have a powerful impact on children's learning and achievement. However, teachers alone cannot be blamed for poor reading instructions in classrooms and children's lack of motivation for reading. One needs to examine the knowledge and expertise teachers bring to the field of reading as a consequence of teacher education programmes. Therefore, exploring teacher educators' views on the status of reading in the teacher education programmes is essential in order to understand the source of the teachers' knowledge about reading. In this paper, I have tried to understand what teacher educators think about the effectiveness of language curriculum in terms of the reading component, both in terms of theories and pedagogy of reading. Teacher educators are the best judges of their programmes since they are the ones who deal with the everyday concerns of pupil teachers.

The major focus of my study was on what teacher educators feel about the status of reading in the curriculum of language education; the extent to which the present curriculum is able to develop the essential skills and attitude towards reading in pupil teachers to be able to further develop it in their students; the purpose of including this component in the language education curriculum and how well this purpose

is fulfilled through the prescribed curriculum for the reading component in language education; and lastly the extent to which they were aware of the theories of reading. The views of the teachers and pupil teachers were collected through interviews with them. Analysis began, first by identifying the various themes and then classifying the responses of the teacher educators under them, for instance, views on the status of reading, the objective of reading in the language curriculum, the various reading theories, and so on. Data revealed two kinds of responses—those which indicated satisfaction among teacher educators and those which showed critical remarks on the reading component along with an urge for improvement. Based on their views, the teachers were classified into two groups, namely, those who expressed satisfaction with the current status of reading in their programme and those who felt that reading was neglected in their programmes. The differences in both views are discussed as follows.

Views of Teacher Educators who Expressed Satisfaction with Their Programmes

It is notable that all teacher educators showed concerns regarding the poor reading performance of children and believed that unmotivated teaching/learning context was one of the factors responsible for it. However, they discussed differences of opinion in the role of training in developing the knowledge base of the teachers.

The first group of teacher educators shared positive remarks on the status of reading in their respective programmes. A detailed discussion unfolded, in which the teachers talked about their understanding of the nature of reading and about their role in developing it. Surprisingly, these teacher educators did not have a theoretical understanding of reading. They were simply

concerned about the mechanical aspects of reading and believed that the focus of the curriculum must be on developing the pupil teachers' ability to do fluent and loud reading with correct pronunciation and appropriate voice modulation. As a consequence, the pedagogy of reading as discussed by the pupil teachers also focused on reading aloud by teachers, explaining meanings of difficult words (mostly chosen by teachers) and finally, writing question-answers. This was a typical traditional approach of reading which has been frequently criticized for it regards reading as nothing beyond decoding or sounding out the words and completely neglects the complex and holistic nature of reading. According to this group of teachers, reading aloud was the only pedagogic tool a teacher needed to use to correct flaws in children's reading. Thus, according to them, teachers should read in an ideal manner which pupil teachers should imitate. Undoubtedly, this reading pedagogy is religiously followed by such teachers in the classrooms and it makes children believe that reading has nothing to do with meaning. The ETE teacher educators in particular, did not have any theoretical understanding of reading. For them, reading was merely a receptive skill.

When these teachers were asked about the objectives of the reading component in their programmes, they provided general statements such as, "Reading should help in developing the overall personality of the teacher". The teacher educators were not aware of what specific purpose reading should serve or perhaps they did not think about it at all. Similarly, the evaluation of reading pedagogy was also affected by how reading was perceived by teacher educators. Teacher educators did not mention any clear specific criteria for evaluating the pupil teachers' progress in the understanding of reading. Rather, they assessed the pupil teachers' reading in terms of whether they could read aloud with correct pronunciation and

explain the text and difficult words. Their views revealed their lack of concern with whether pupil teachers provide children with opportunities to engage with the text.

Views of Teacher Educators who Felt Reading was Neglected in their Programmes

The second group of teacher educators was relatively better informed about current theories of the reading process and pedagogy. They shared two kinds of concerns: first, the lack of theoretical foundation of reading in teachers in their respective teacher education programmes; second, their inability to apply these theories in the classroom context. Their views on both these issues are shared here in detail.

All teacher educators in this group felt that reading is one of the neglected areas especially in the Elementary Teacher Education programmes. Furthermore, theories of reading either did not form part of the syllabus or were given a peripheral status. According to them, in the name of theories only a few approaches and types of reading were listed and discussed. These teacher educators were aware of the contemporary reading theories and expressed the view that these should be made part of the language curriculum. The current non-inclusion of these theories was attributed to time constraints.

Teachers also expressed concerns about the application of the theories in the classroom. They felt that in most cases, the teaching of theories of reading was reduced to a ritual. As a result, the gap between old practices and new developments forced the pupil teachers to rely on traditional methods. Teacher educators were aware of the gap between theory and practice and admitted that it needed a lot of deliberation between the teacher educators and pupil teachers. This problem was further aggravated due to insufficient time for a large number of

pupil teachers. Even in the four year innovative B.El.Ed programme, this gap was inadequately addressed. In this programme, reading got an adequate emphasis in primary school experiences, but in middle school teaching/learning it was not addressed satisfactorily. Although, many innovative ideas such as maintaining reflective journals and response journals had been tried out by teacher educators and students in the B.El.Ed programme, there was a need for face to face discussion among them. As Sinha (2010) argued, it is important to explore what theories mean in the context of the classroom but the experiences and challenges faced by pupil teachers should be valued and should constitute the focus of the discussion.

The teacher educators of this group also expressed the view that reading should be made a compulsory paper where the primary focus should be first on building a theoretical understanding of reading. The gap between theory and practice would then be addressed properly with more focus on the pedagogical implications of the theories learnt in the programme. In fact, one of the teacher educators stressed that reading should be made a compulsory foundation paper in all undergraduate programmes.

Views of Pupil Teachers

This section explores the effectiveness of the reading component in teacher training programmes in resolving the challenges faced by pupil teachers during their school experience. An attempt was made to understand the viewpoints of pupil teachers; how they felt about the reading course they were studying; whether the reading component in their course equipped them with the required understanding and skills to deal with reading in their practicum and later in their career. Finally, the pupil teachers were asked whether they were satisfied with the reading programme or not.

Most of the pupil teachers agreed that the reading component of the training programme did not fully equip them with the expertise needed in the classroom. They shared a variety of concerns and challenges faced in the classroom context.

Firstly, they had a narrow understanding of reading as reflected in the way they defined reading and its pedagogical practices. They held the belief that reading is nothing more than sounding out words. They could not imagine reading as a field of study based on theories and research. They also shared their concerns regarding their inability, as pupil teachers, in generating interest in reading among their students. Moreover, they had no idea about how to handle this problem. Some of them commented on the flaws in the structure of teacher education programmes which placed pupil teachers in the classroom without equipping them with any theoretical understanding of reading. They illustrated their complaint by pointing to a widely known malaise in the system—practice teaching before teaching theory. This practice encouraged the pupil teachers to bank on what they had learnt in school rather than what they learnt in the reading programme.

There were some pupil teachers who felt that their teacher education programme was innovative for it created in them a sound knowledge base of reading. They shared how reading and writing was focused on meaning from time to time and helped them to move beyond traditional understanding of reading. Some of them wanted to pursue research in this field and desired that the programme address some of their concerns. One of these concerns was related to the challenges faced in the classroom while applying theoretical knowledge. They believed that such challenges were never part of the discussion while they were learning the theories and they actually got highlighted

only during the school experience programme. They suggested that such challenges should constitute the core of every discussion and solutions should be explored collectively. They further recommended that a platform be created where teachers could be invited to share their experiences of how they resolve challenges in the everyday teaching context.

These suggestions are truly a reflection of the difficulties faced by pupil teachers in a classroom situation. Their suggestions need to be considered while reflecting on the objectives of the teacher education programmes.

Conclusion

It is clear from the views of the teacher educators that pre-service teacher education programmes require a lot of debate, deliberation and changes. Moreover, since the approach followed by the pupil teachers in an actual classroom is influenced by their experiences in the pre-service teacher education programme, the pre-service needs an overhauling. If this overhauling is not done, they will continue to teach according to the traditional understanding of reading and children in the classroom will continue to perceive and pursue reading as a meaningless mechanical process.

References

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