

TRANSFORMING CLASSROOM PRACTICE: TEACHER EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY IN INDIA

Poonam Batra

University of Delhi, India

batrapoonam@yahoo.com

This review is an attempt to illustrate the intimate relationship between pedagogic practices and the education of teachers within the larger contemporary Indian socio-political context. The first part of the paper will examine this relationship in the light of a neo-liberal economic and social engineering oriented international policy discourse which is centered on concerns of national competitiveness in a globalising world. This has gained momentum in India over the last decade with the increasing engagement of the corporate sector in education, leading to a superficial policy consensus. In practice the tension between policy imperatives and the lived reality of school education continues. This is further accentuated by an entrenched teacher education discourse and practice that has become largely immune to interrogation and challenge.

Two parallel strands of thought can be discerned within the current policy discourse: the neo-liberal frame of standardisation, teacher accountability and learning outcomes that regards education as an enterprise of efficient delivery; and the academic-led perspective that emphasises radical change in the preparation of teachers (NCFTE, 2009) as agents of social transformation. Given the RTE, the policy imperative is to bring both these contending streams into the fold of education. The agenda is to create knowledge ‘workers’ for a ‘service economy’, not an active citizenry. In this frame the pedagogic enterprise is to ‘teach to test’ and the central thrust of pedagogic practice is one of ‘control’ and ‘outcomes’. The policy-practice interface remains purposefully unexamined.

The second part of the paper will explore how classroom practice is fastidiously tied to the manner in which teachers learn to engage with teaching as a practical and political activity. This draws upon a wide review of theoretical and empirical literature and a mapping of micro processes that various institutional arrangements invoke. These institutional arrangements are probed as the backdrop of a policy discourse that is driven by simultaneous but contradictory persuasions, political and bureaucratic imperatives, and academic judgment.

The attempt is to understand how social interactions within teacher education institutions – contiguous and remote – give rise to patterns of engagement in the teaching-learning

enterprise, thus shaping pedagogy. Two assumptions are examined in the process. First, the need to view educational practice from the viewpoint of social science and philosophical perspectives; not only from the perspective of the knowledge domain that is being taught. Second, the premise that curriculum changes alone cannot have a great impact if cultural, social and the political expectations are not challenged and alternatives envisioned.

The contested terrain of formal knowledge necessitates an engagement with the epistemological underpinnings of school subject-matter but is consciously left out of teacher education programmes. It is argued that engaging with contested terrains of knowledge in various domains is critical in the preparation of teachers. This cannot be adequately addressed through the school curriculum alone. Questions of what knowledge is; its relationship with power; how knowledge is selected and presented; how power equations of social relations based on gender, caste, religion and language operate in educational practice and how these are reinforced, extended or challenged to form the critical core of the preparation of teachers are examined. For instance, it is often wondered why the legacy of ‘logical positivists remains etched in the practice of many science teachers’ despite attempts to redesign school curricula in the frame of ‘the reconsidered epistemological basis of the science curriculum in the light of contemporary views in the philosophy of science’; and why learning is perceived as ‘acquisition of knowledge’ rather than as ‘understanding and conceptual change’. In order to answer these questions it is necessary to problematise the practice and discourse of teacher education.

This paper will argue how each of the crucial elements of the teacher education discourse wraps itself in dualities, thus getting circumscribed and resistant to meaningful interrogation. It is further argued that dualities around the child and the curriculum, the teacher and the curriculum, pedagogy and the curriculum, theory and practice are reinforced and even extended by the very processes that seek to ‘train’ teachers to transact curriculum. The hiatus between educational studies as a field of academic enquiry and the

practice of school education is probed to understand existing dualities and conceptual disconnects. This can be traced to a long held view that 'education is a field subject and not a basic discipline and that there is no distinctly 'educational way' of thinking'.

While individual disciplines have been trying to create relevance for the practicing teacher, the practice of education remains an unexplored field for developing pedagogical theory. The emergence of curriculum studies (positioned as an approach to educational studies in the late 1960s-early 1970s), as an area of enquiry attempted to interface foundational

disciplines with the practice of education. However, psychology with a much older engagement through the psychometric tradition continued to assume an overarching influence on matters of curriculum transaction and learning through the customary practice of 'training' teachers. Classroom pedagogy is being shaped by the culture and social ethos of teacher education as much as the neo-liberal frame within which teachers' work and worth is being viewed and judged. The public belittling of theory in the preparation of teachers provides the scaffolding within which many of these issues are discussed.