

Exploring Gaps in the Professional Preparation of Rural Teachers in Bihar

Chandan Shrivastava

Abstract: Bihar is a rural state with more than ninety percent of its population dwelling in villages. Therefore, providing education to the rural areas is always a key agenda for the State. But it is evident that the quality of education being provided in government schools of rural areas is always under criticism due to many reasons. The rural teacher is one of the prime focus of such criticism, being blamed as unprofessional and inefficient to teach. However, there are deeper reasons for such conditions of imparting education among rural teachers in Bihar. The schools in rural areas have very distinct needs due to their unique socio-cultural contexts. But there is huge gap in the way rural teachers are prepared in the ongoing training programmes and the role they have to play in such rural schools. This paper is about exploring the gaps in the professional preparation of the rural teachers in Bihar and to suggest a framework for their effective professional development.

Keywords: Rural Teachers, Professional Development, Teachers' Identity, Education in Bihar

Introduction

In the light of recent National Achievement Survey (NAS) report released by NCERT in 2018, the teachers' professional preparedness has become a central issue of academic discourse because children's learning has an indispensable link with the quality of teachers. According to National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (2009), "teacher quality is a function of several factors: teachers' status, remuneration, conditions of work and their academic and professional education". This new discourse lays emphasis on understanding the complexity and contextual reality of a teacher's world for a comprehensive reform in teachers' professional preparation. Going back, the National Policy on Education (1986) has underlined the significance of the status of the teacher and its reflection on the socio-cultural ethos of the society (MHRD, 1986). The Education Commission (1964-66) has also urged to treat the professional preparedness of teachers as a key area in educational development (MHRD, 1966).

For understanding the present scenario of teachers' profession, various policy documents and academic discussions have stressed on research studies of current trends and features of teachers' professional development. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 expects a

teacher to be the facilitator of students' learning in a way that would create space for knowledge creation and acknowledgement of personal experiences (NCERT, 2005). But all attempts to improve education – through the provision of better facilities, better curriculum and better textbooks – can prove effective only if the teacher is kept professionally alert and academically sound. Therefore, the professional development of teachers must be addressed effectively for meaningful education in schools.

Many steps have been taken to reform the professional preparedness of teachers in Bihar, but the recent National Achievement Survey (NAS) Report reflects a dismal picture of learning in the schools of the state (NCERT, 2018). With respect to learning outcomes, the performance of state is very alarming and unsatisfactory. According to the data of NAS, the learning performance of children is deteriorating as they move from early grade to upper grades. For instance, in Pashchim Champaran District, the learning outcome of children for Mathematics in class-3 is 63.95, which decreases to 53.97 in class-5 and is further reduced to 44.97 in class-8 (NCERT, 2017). The situation becomes worse in class-X with an outcome of just 31.65 (District Report Card-NAS, Class-X, Cycle-2: 2017-18). This kind of situation is prevailing in almost all districts of Bihar with the same trend of gradual decrease in learning outcome from lower grade to upper grade. This shows that the teaching-learning processes in rural schools are not addressing the real learning problems of the learners. There can be many reasons, but the professional preparation of the rural teachers would always be recognised as a prime reason for such conditions. Therefore, the basic objective of this paper is to identify and understand the gaps between the professional needs and professional preparation of rural teachers and provide a suggestive framework for the professional development of rural teachers. The paper is informed by a research study undertaken by the researcher to capture the experiences of rural teachers concerning their professional development programmes.

Methodology of the Study

The study has been conceptualised as a qualitative study with grounded theory approach. The researcher has undertaken interviews and conducted focus group discussions (FGD) with the rural teachers of West Champaran district. Here the term 'rural teachers' is taken for 'Panchayat Teachers', appointed in rural schools by the Gram Panchayats. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for this study. Only such rural teachers were selected as participants who were trained and had undergone at least one short in-service programme at the district level. In total, 51 rural teachers participated in this study. The questions of FGD and interview were focused on capturing the experiences, learning and opinions of the rural teachers about their learning from the training programmes attended by them and the condition of teaching in their schools. The responses were then categorised under different themes for analysing the gaps in their professional preparation.

Conceptualising Teachers' Professional Preparation

The concept of teaching is itself in a process of transformation. The atmosphere of rapid change sometimes compels teachers to modify their professional approach. So, more and more teachers have to teach in ways they were not themselves taught (Hargreaves 2000, p. 151). With respect to this, there is a growing concern in the field of teaching on refining the

approach to teacher preparation by shifting from 'teacher training' to 'teacher education' to 'teacher development'. In the conventional notion, teacher training comprised unidirectional transfer of a set of patterns and behaviours from the experts or the trainer to the teachers. But with the change in perspective, teacher education programmes are the medium for exposing the teacher to various possible and desirable ways of amplifying the use of the learning environment. The professional development of teachers must also consider that teachers themselves undergo professional evolution and experience different phases and cycles in their lives, in which they often adopt different perspectives on life and work.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 advocates preparing teachers to play enhanced roles in the education system as reflective practitioners, researchers, resource persons, and head teachers, etc. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE), 2009 reiterates that teacher development should be considered as a continuous process of developing and maintaining professional competence in teachers through pre-service, induction training, in-service training and on-going professional development programmes. Teachers would be able to explore, reflect on and develop their own practices. They would be able to break out of intellectual isolation and share experiences and insights with others in the field, both teachers and academics working in the area of specific disciplines as well as intellectuals in the immediate and wider society.

Complexity of teachers' work has also got wider recognition. Translating new strategies, approaches and pedagogy from theory to practice within individual classrooms is a tough task for teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). To enable the teachers for the new changes in education, Andrew Pollard (2002) has highlighted the importance of reflection for their professional development. Here, reflection is the process through which teachers become aware of the complexity of their work and can take actions positively.

It is also imperative to understand that teaching, apart from being a practical and intellectual activity, is also, in many ways, a socio-emotional and moral endeavour. It involves caring for children, considering their interests, preparing them to deal with the difficulties and challenges in their life situations, and grappling with inequalities of caste, gender and social class, at least in the classrooms and schools where they work. The 'ethic of care' is in many ways the central facet of teaching, especially in the present humanistic tradition in education, which locates the 'child' at the centre of all educational processes (Noddings, 1992; Carr, 2000).

Several moral dilemmas confront teachers in the form of decisions which show their professionalism and ethics of teaching. The teachers have to decide how to allocate time in the classroom, how to cater to the individual needs of children needs, how to maintain equality of opportunity, how to deal with heterogeneity, how to augment learning levels, enhance retention in schools and bridge gaps between home-school discontinuities. Such issues influence the teacher's mind and work and must be addressed in their professional development programmes. Knowledge, skills and dispositions to work with children of diverse cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds become important while creating any professional programme for teachers (Gay & Howard, 2000). The teachers should also be exposed to understand the social, economic, and political realities of the profession. This will situate their professional practice with contextually rich knowledge.

Teacher empowerment is another dimension which is a prerequisite for any substantial change in the condition of teaching in schools. The professional preparation of teachers should

also be linked to the voice and agency of the teachers. A teacher with an empowered identity can only be able to perform his or her task efficiently (Batra, 2009). With the researches in the last three decades, the professional identity of a teacher has emerged as a key area of research in the field of teacher education. Several researchers (Nias, 1989) have noted that teacher identities are not only constructed from technical aspects of teaching (i.e. classroom management, subject knowledge and pupil test results) and their personal lives, but also as the result of an interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis. Beijaard et al. (2004) have noted the significance of pupil agency in the process of professional development of teachers' identity. He proposed that pupils' attitudes and behaviour may have profound effects upon the teacher's 'self'. So, it can be inferred that the teachers' identity is not something one possesses, but, rather, something that is developed over the course of life in which the role of their professional experiences is very crucial.

In Indian context as well, the issue of professional identity of a teacher has been discussed extensively with reference to their professional role in schools. Drawing its legacy from the colonial era, teacher as a 'meek dictator' is seen as a deep-rooted feature of the Indian teachers' profession whose identity is full of conflicts and contradictions (Kumar, 2005). It has also been pointed out that, despite all prescribed works and goals, the teacher's profession stands at the receiving end of all decisions and is only confined to government or corporation. Even, the capacity building of teachers is done only to enable them as 'deliverer' of state goals and policies with their own voice and agency undermined (Govinda, 2002). With the new vision of National Curriculum Framework 2005, the concept of teacher as a 'reflective practitioner' is promoted widely for understanding the diversity among children and creating active learning spaces. In the emerging trend of community schools, teacher's role is being emphasised to act as a link between the child, the school, and the community to evolve participative-shared framework of pedagogical and other activities. Teacher's historical image as an 'ideal for society' and 'creator of knowledge' is also informing their current professional practices in the school.

The above discussion asserts that the professional preparation of teachers has multiple dimensions i.e. personal, social, cultural, professional and many others. A holistic professional development acknowledges the development of all these dimensions.

Analysing Gaps in Professional Preparation of the Rural Teachers

It was inferred through the FGD and interview of participants that there are several gaps at various levels in the professional preparation of the rural teachers. Even after being trained for many years, they are facing various challenges in their schools. This has also come out that the gaps are not just limited to their professional preparation, but are related to the overall school culture. The unfavourable condition of learning in their schools, lack of community support, no incentive for good performance, no support from colleagues, corruption of school management committee etc. are many other significant factors which deeply influence their professional functioning in the schools. Here in this paper, only the gaps in their professional preparation programmes are taken for analysis. By analysing their responses, the following critical issues have emerged about their professional preparation.

Inflexible Nature of the Professional Preparation Programmes

The participants talked about their two-year diploma courses and a couple of short capacity building courses attended by them at the district level such as five days training workshops on learning outcomes, special education, language teaching etc. This has emerged from their responses that those programmes were more prescriptive in nature, with little flexibility and space for any creativity. The short programmes have a combination of academic, practical and technical aspects but they were not well interconnected and merely dealt in a mechanistic approach. The concept of child-centred learning was taught in a formally prescribed manner in such a way that it only remained a rhetoric. The prescribed nature provides little scope to go beyond the stated goals and objectives. The instructions of the programmes were never questioned in a manner to create a free space of boundless thinking. Even modules concerning critical thinking and reflection were dealt in a set prescriptive manner. The impact of the prescriptive nature of the professional programmes was visible in the responses of the rural teachers. In response to any question, they would hesitate to deviate from the fixed norm and would apologise if they were unable to match that notion in their responses. It is possible that the same prescriptive nature could be reflected in the pedagogy of the rural teachers in their schools which would render them incapable to address the diverse learning challenges of the children. As stated by many participants, their schools were full of children from marginalised community who only spoke in their mother tongue and couldn't talk in Hindi in classroom. Since, the teachers generally use Hindi as the medium of instruction in their classrooms, language becomes the prime barrier for these children in learning. The rural teachers have little understanding about how to bridge this gap between home language and school language.

Overstress on Skills Development

Another finding was that the training programmes of rural teachers were basically limited to the enhancement of their teaching skills. The objectives as well as given activities were mainly addressing the skill development of rural teachers. With reference to the skill-oriented nature of the programmes, two basic gaps were identified. First, the programmes were designed with the assumption that teaching skill development is equivalent to pedagogical enhancement. The teaching skill and pedagogy were treated as same in the programmes. Second, the teaching skills were isolated from the basic disciplines. The approach was to learn a teaching skill and then apply that skill to teach a subject. The interrelatedness between the teaching skills and the nature of the subjects was hardly acknowledged. However, efforts were made to do so but insufficient understanding of pedagogy restricted a wider impact. Due to over-orientation of teaching skills, the rural teachers were unable to think beyond this boundary of mechanistic model of teaching skills.

Insufficient Space for Critical Thinking and Reflection

Developing the abilities to reflect or think critically was not the central agenda of these programmes. The terms like reflective teaching and critical pedagogy were rhetorically used in between but with little clarity and insufficient attention. It seems from the responses of the participant rural teachers that the process of reflection and critical thinking was reduced to teaching skill. It is also very crucial to understand that the concept of reflection and critical thinking can't be understood through definitions and explanations. A practical approach is

actually needed to induct the teachers in the process of reflection and not a mechanistic approach. The classroom reality of Panchayat teachers as well as their level of engagement have remained unaddressed in this programme.

Missing Contextual Concerns

The profession of teaching is not just limited to delivering subject knowledge in the classroom. An ideal teaching links the classroom with the context of the learners and proceeds towards a wider understanding. This can be only possible when a teacher's knowledge is situated in the wider social context. Especially in the rural context, the issues like gender discrimination, inequality in education, health and nutritional problems of children, impact of media on children, marginalisation on the basis of class and caste are very prominent. Sensitivity towards gender issues is highly relevant since the schools in the rural areas are witnessing a twofold challenge. At one side, the schools are struggling to reduce the gender gap in enrolment whereas on another side many schools have majority of girls' enrolment since parents prefer to send their boy child to private schools. The agency of a rural teacher must have such potential to deal with these challenging issues effectively in their classrooms. The professional development programmes for rural teachers have only touched some of these issues in a way to do cosmetic change in their contents. An engaged and active association with these issues was out of the framework of the programmes.

Neglected Identity of Rural Teachers

In order to professionally develop the rural teachers for teaching, it is necessary to understand their personal beliefs, values and assumptions. This will provide a base to frame a professional development programme accordingly. The space to address personal and social dimensions of the rural teachers is completely missing from such programmes. In teacher training programmes, there is need to treat the teachers as participants or as recipients of certain prescribed knowledge. Their personal experiences should be treated equally important for the discussions. The training programmes for the rural teachers were completely silent on the issue of acknowledging teachers' identity and building an agency of rural teachers. The neglected and unacknowledged attitude towards teachers led them to show low interest in their professional development programmes.

Unprepared Teacher Educators

The transaction of the training programmes is also reliant on the quality of the resources and the resource persons available. According to the participants, the resources used during the programme are traditional and lack creativity. The participants raised concern that training is not only necessary for themselves but for the teacher educators as well. In the in-service training programmes, the role of master trainers is very crucial. It was inferred from the responses that the master trainers involved in the trainings were not professionally qualified as teacher educators. Basically, they were the senior teachers of government schools on deputation. The situation of faculty at the training institutions was more critical than the master trainers. They have very little understanding about the content knowledge as stated by the participants. Many of them were not able to use ICT resources or any other innovative

strategy of teaching in their classrooms. This led to disinterest of the participants in many training programmes.

Discontinuity Within

According to NCFTE 2009, teacher development should be considered as a continuous process of developing and maintaining professional competence in teachers. So, continuity between the professional programmes is also expected for the professional growth of teachers. Along with this, the career cycle of teachers should also be taken into concern while designing any professional education programmes (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). The in-service programmes available to the rural teachers in Bihar lack this concern. The contents of the programmes have been provided to the rural teachers in an isolated manner because of which they face problems in linking them together in their classroom practices. For instance, the training on learning outcomes at district level was not able to give them clear understanding of its utility for classroom teaching. During training workshops, the learning outcomes were discussed very superficially without linking them with textbooks, as reported by many participants.

Neglect of Assessment

Effective assessment was missing at both levels, viz. a) how to do one's own assessment, and b) how to assess others. The professional programmes had not dealt with these levels of assessment adequately and seriously. In the programmes, teachers were assessed in the same traditional approach of examinations, assignments and supervision. Their active participation in their own assessment was neglected. Along with this, the assessment of others i.e. students, was also not at the centre of the training programmes. The latest development in education has brought up the idea of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) and it demands from a teacher to do the holistic assessment of their students. The process of assessment requires a prepared teacher and a favourable condition. The training programmes have not devoted enough attention on this issue. All the programmes lack an effective process of assessment of the rural teachers. These issues need to be addressed seriously.

A Suggestive Framework for the Professional Preparation of Rural Teachers

In recent researches, it is advocated that the professional development of teachers is highly correlated with the holistic development of learners. It is a question of both academic and practical interest as to what is the reality of teacher professionalism in India (Khora, 2011). It is evident from the recent documents and reports that rural teachers have very limited opportunities for professional development. In this situation, professional development programmes have to provide such space which can strengthen the understanding of rural teachers and enable them to deal with their contextual challenges of learning in schools. Therefore, the nature of the professional development programmes and their role in building teachers' understanding must be framed after exploring the status and context of rural teachers. Instead of training them with universal programmes, there is need to develop specific programmes for their ongoing professional development.

Therefore, the professional programmes should acknowledge the sensitivity to the context of rural teachers and their schools. It should provide flexibility and practical use of learning and scope for self-reflection. To enable the teachers for the new changes in education, Pollard (2002) has emphasised the importance of reflection for the professional development of teachers. Developing critical as well as creative thinking skills should be encouraged in different activities of professional development programmes. Discussions on the kinds of challenges that novice teachers are expected to face should also be an integral part of the programmes. In this way, the programmes should be designed with ample scope for self-reflection by the rural teachers.

Second, the rural schools with their network can be the most effective medium for the professional development of rural teacher. The schools' space is to be utilised efficiently to provide the opportunity of collaborative learning among the rural teachers. Events of academic interaction among rural teachers should be frequently organised in schools. The role of Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) and Block Resource Centre (BRC) is also very significant in networking the schools of a region together. This is also important to understand that the rural schools have a distinct demand from the teachers. Beyond providing literacy, the schools are also a medium to address current social issues of rural society. Gender differentiation, class and caste division, inequality of opportunities, health and nutrition problems, and there are many more grappling issues in rural societies. An interdisciplinary approach needs to be followed in order to address the current concerns of the society such as inclusive education, adolescence education, gender sensitisation, role of constitutional values and environmental education in the training of the rural teachers. The scope of knowing the community around must be an integral part of the programmes.

Updating the knowledge of the rural teacher must also be an important aim of any professional preparation programme. This could be achieved through multiple ways. The programme should be informed through the recent researches in education. Rural teachers should be given some challenging situation during their professional programmes to test and enrich their knowledge. Technology is one of the missing and challenging elements from the space of a rural teacher. So, the professional programmes should incorporate basic useful technology for the rural teachers. It will not only advance their teaching skill but also act as a medium of contact with the outer world. The rural teachers should be exposed to diverse pedagogical approaches of teaching. Innovative teaching practices should be encouraged. Addressing classroom issues, such as handling multicultural classrooms and multi-grade teaching, should be addressed through the programmes.

The teacher education programmes should also include components that empower the rural teacher and make them aware of their agency for change (Batra, 2009). How is the teacher's role reflected in the programmes and how are these programmes addressing the personal and social dimensions of a teacher, are also important questions to be addressed. The programme should provide space to teachers to share their own values and beliefs about the teaching learning process. The programmes should enhance the ability of rural teachers to evaluate and assess their teaching learning process. The programmes should reflect an attitude of comprehensive and continuous evaluation. It is required to move ahead with the continuing professional development (CPD) model where the inner knowledge, judgment

and wisdom of the professional teachers are seen as the greatest resources. CPD acknowledges the existing experiences, practices, perspectives, insights and, most usually, anxieties about the highly complex nature of teachers' work.

In conclusion, this is to be understood that the professional preparation of rural teachers is a very challenging area which has gained very little attention till now. There are many ways through which the professional preparation of rural teachers can be accelerated such as teacher education programmes, school environment and community participation. Especially, the professional development programmes should be reviewed in the light of the contextual professional needs of the rural teachers. Even with all the expected changes in the professional preparation programmes, their own effort to learn is the key for their professional development.

References

- Batra, P. (2009). Teacher empowerment: The education entitlement-social transformation traverse. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 6(2), 121-156.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P.C. & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, 107-128.
- Carr, D. (2000). *Professionalism and ethics in teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Educational Research in Education*, 24, 249-305.
- Fessler, R. & Christensen, J. (1992). *The teacher career cycle: Understanding and guiding the professional development of teachers*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gay, G. & Howard, T. C. (2000). Multicultural teacher education for the 21st century. *The Teacher Educator*, 36(1), 1-16.
- Government of India (1964-66). *Education and national development (report of education commission)*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- Govinda, R. (2002). *India basic education report*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hargreaves, A. (2000). Four ages of professionalism and professional learning. *Teacher and Teaching: History and Practice*, 6(2), 151-182.
- Khora, S. (2011). *Education and teacher professionalism*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.
- Kumar, K. (2005). *Political agenda of education*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development. (1986). *National Policy on Education*. Delhi: Government of India.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2012). *Vision of Teacher Education in India: Quality and Regulatory (Report of the High-Powered Commission on Teacher Education Constituted by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India - Volume I)*. New Delhi: Government of India.
- National Council for Teacher Education. (2009). *National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education*. New Delhi: Author.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2005). *National Curriculum Framework*. New Delhi: Author.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2018). *District Report Card - NAS, Class-X Cycle-2*. New Delhi: Author.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2018). *National Achievement Survey -NAS (Survey of Learning Outcomes)*. New Delhi: Author.
- Nias, J. (1989). Teaching and the self. In M.L. Holly & C.S. Mcloughlin (Eds.), *Perspectives on teacher professional development* (pp. 155-173). London: The Falmer Press.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: an alternative approach to education*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Pollard, A. (2002). *Reflective teaching: effective and evidence informed professional practice*. London: Continuum.