INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Introduction

In all aspects of the school and its surrounding education community, the rights of the whole child, and all children, to survival, protection, development and participation are at the centre. This means that the focus is on learning which strengthens the capacities of children to act progressively on their own behalf through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills and appropriate attitudes; and which creates for children, and helps them create for themselves and others, places of safety, security and healthy interaction. What does quality mean in the context of education? Many definitions of quality in education exist, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously (Adams, 1993). Considerable consensus exists around the basic dimensions of quality education today, however. Quality education includes:

- Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn,and supported in learning by their families and communities;
- Environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities;
- Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition
of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life,and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace;
- Processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities;
- Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

This definition allows for an understanding of education as a complex system embedded in a political, cultural and economic context. It is important to keep in mind education's systemic nature, however, these dimensions are interdependent, influencing each other in ways that are sometimes unforeseeable. This definition also takes into account the global and international influences that propel the discussion of educational quality while ensuring that national and local educational contexts contribute to definitions of quality in varying countries. Establishing a contextualized understanding of quality means including relevant stakeholders. Key stakeholders often hold different views and meanings of educational quality. Indeed, each of us judges the school system in terms of the final goals we set for our children our community, our country and ourselves.

Definitions of quality must be open to change and evolution based on information, changing contexts, and new understandings of the nature of education's challenges. New research — ranging from multinational research to action research at the classroom level — contributes to this redefinition. Systems that embrace change through data generation, use

and self-assessment are more likely to offer quality education to students (Glasser, 1990). Continuous assessment and improvement can focus on any or all dimensions of system quality: learners, learning environments, content, process and outcomes.

Problems in education have no fixed answers. No teacher education program can prepare teachers for all the situations they will encounter. Teachers themselves will make the final decisions from among many alternatives. Such judgments may be good or poor. Therefore, it is important for teachers to constantly reevaluate their decisions. This can be achieved through collaborative and reflective practices in teacher education. Co-operative learning in teacher education can instill in future teachers the value of social interactions. Reflection improves a teacher's ability to make appropriate and sound judgments and, therefore, become an empowered decision-maker.

What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative or collaborative learning is a team process where members support and rely on each other to achieve an agreed upon goal. The classroom is an excellent place to develop team building skills you will need later in life. Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it. Cooperative / collaborative learning is interactive; as a team member, the student teacher:

• Develops and shares a common goal

• Contributes his/her understanding of the problem: questions; insights and solutions

• Responds to, and works to understand, others' questions, insights and solutions

• Empowers the other to speak and contribute, and to consider their contributions

• Is accountable to others, and they are accountable to him/her

• Is dependent on others, and they depend on him/her

Elements of Cooperative Learning

The conditions/elements that will ensure more productive than competitive and individualistic efforts are:

1. Positive Interdependence

• Each group member's efforts are required and indispensable for Group

• Each group member has a unique contribution to make to the joint effort because of his or her resources and/or role and task responsibilities

2. Face-to-Face Interaction

• Orally explaining how to solve problems

• Teaching one's knowledge to other

• Checking for understanding

• Discussing concepts being learned

• Connecting present with past learning

3. Individual and Group Accountability

• Keeping the size of the group small. The smaller the size of the group, the greater the individual accountability may be.

• Giving an individual test to each student.

• Randomly examining students orally by calling on one student to present his or her group's work to the teacher (in the presence of the group) or to the entire class.

• Observing each group and recording the frequency with which each member-contributes to the group's work.

• Assigning one student in each group the role of checker. The checker asks other group members to explain the reasoning and rationale underlying group answers.

• Having students teach what they learned to someone else.

4. Interpersonal and Small-Group Skills

• Social skills must be taught:

o Leadership

o Decision-making

o Trust-building

o Communication

o Conflict-management skills

5. Group Processing

• Group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships

• Describe what member actions are helpful and not helpful

• Make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change

What makes for a good Co-operative/Collaborative learning team?

• Team activities begin with training in, and understanding group processes. An instructor begins by facilitating discussion and suggesting alternatives but does not impose solutions on the team, especially those having difficulty working together • Three to five people in a team. Larger teams have difficulty in keeping everyone involved.

• Teacher-assigned groups. They function better than self-assigned groups

• Diverse skill levels, backgrounds, experience

o Each individual brings strengths to a group

o Each member of the group is responsible to not only contribute his/her strengths, but also to help others understand the source of their strengths

o Any member who is at a disadvantage or not comfortable with the majority should be encouraged and proactively empowered to contribute

o Learning is positively influenced with a diversity of perspective and experience increasing options for problem solving expanding the range of details to consider

• Commitment of each member to a goal that is defined and understood by the group

o Confidential peer ratings are a good way to assess who is and who is not contributing

o Groups have the right to fire a non-cooperative or nonparticipating member if all remedies have failed. (The person fired then has to find another group to accept him/her)

o Individuals can quit if they believe they are doing most of the work with little assistance from the others. (This person can often easily find another group to welcome his/her contributions)

• Shared operating principles and responsibilities, defined and agreed to by each member. These include:

o Commitment to attend, prepare and be on time for meetings

o Have discussions and disagreements focus on issues, avoiding personal criticism

o Take responsibility for a share of the tasks and carry them out on time. You may need to perform tasks that you have little experience, feel ill-prepared for, or even think others would do better. Accept the challenge, but be comfortable in stating that you may need help, training, a mentor, or have to resign and take on different task.

Some Activities for Co-Operative Learning :

1. Jigsaw - Groups with five students are set up. Each group member is assigned some unique material to learn and then to teach to his group members. To help in the learning students across the class working on the same sub-section get together to decide what is important and how to teach it. After practice in these "expert" groups the original groups reform and students teach each other.

2. Think-Pair-Share - Involves a three step cooperative structure. During the first step individuals think silently about a question posed by the instructor. Individuals pair up during the second step and exchange thoughts. In the third step, the pairs share their responses with other pairs, other teams, or the entire group.

3. Three-Step Interview- Each member of a team chooses another member to be a partner. During the first step individuals interview their partners by asking clarifying questions. During the second step partners reverse the roles. For the final step, members share their partner's response with the team.

4.RoundRobin Brainstorming- Class is divided into small groups (4 to 6) with one person appointed as the recorder. A question is posed with many answers and students are given time to think about answers. After the "think time," members of the team share responses with one another round robin style. The recorder writes down the answers of the group members. The person next to the recorder starts and each person in the group in order gives an answer until time is called.

5. Three-minute review- Teachers stop any time during a lecture or discussion and give teams three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions or answer questions.

6. Numbered Heads Together- A team of four is established. Each member is given numbers of 1, 2, 3, 4. Questions are asked of the group. Groups work together to answer the question so that all can verbally answer the question. Teacher calls out a number (two) and each two is asked to give the answer.

7. Team Pair Solo- Students do problems first as a team, then with a partner, and finally on their own. It is designed to motivate students to tackle and succeed at problems which initially are beyond their ability. It is based on a simple notion of mediated learning. Students can do more things with help (mediation) than they can do alone. By allowing them to work on problems they could not do alone, first as a team and then with a partner, they progress to a point they can do alone that which at first they could do only with help.

8. Circle the Sage- First the teacher polls the class to see which students have a special knowledge to share. For example the teacher may ask who in the class was able to solve a difficult math homework question, who had visited Mexico, who knows the chemical

reactions involved in how salting the streets help dissipate snow. Those students (the sages) stand and spread out in the room. The teacher then has the rest of the classmates each surround a sage, with no two members of the same team going to the same sage. The sage explains what they know while the classmates listen, ask questions, and take notes. All students then return to their teams. Each in turn, explains what they learned. Because each one has gone to a different sage, they compare notes. If there is disagreement, they stand up as a team. Finally, the disagreements are aired and resolved.

9. Partners- The class is divided into teams of four. Partners move to one side of the room. Half of each team is given an assignment to master to be able to teach the other half. Partners work to learn and can consult with other partners working on the same material. Teams go back together with each set of partners teaching the other set. Partners quiz and tutor teammates. Team reviews how well they learned and taught and how they might improve the process.

## Why use Cooperative Learning?

Research has shown that cooperative learning techniques :

• Promote student learning and academic achievement

• Increase student retention

• Enhance student satisfaction with their learning experience

• Help students develop skills in oral communication

• Develop students' social skills

• Promote student self-esteem

• Help to promote positive race relation

Reflective teacher education

In the past ten years, the terms `reflection' and `critical reflection' have increasingly appeared in descriptions of approaches to teacher education. It is clear however that the terms are often ill defined, and have been used rather loosely to embrace a wide range of concepts and strategies. Reflection is a natural process that facilitates the development of future action from the contemplation of past and/or current behavior. Reflection refers to the ongoing process of critically examining and refining practice, taking into careful consideration the personal, pedagogical, societal (including social, political, historical and economical) and ethical contexts associated with schools, classrooms and the multiple roles of teachers.

Educators and researchers have struggled to define the term "reflection." While Dewey (1933) believed that reflection is an aim of education, others view it as a means to help pre-service teachers become effective. Much of the writing on reflection in teacher education is derived from Dewey (1933). He believed that reflectivity involves active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of its supporting grounds and its eventual consequences. Dewey implies that two distinct components are involved in reflective thinking: the process and the content. In order to have a better understanding about teachers' reflective thoughts, both the process and the content of reflective thinking must be considered simultaneously. While the process element of reflection emphasizes how teachers make decisions, content stresses the substance that drives the thinking. What type of knowledge do teachers or prospective teachers draw upon when they reflect? Content includes understanding children, including their developmental levels and perspectives.
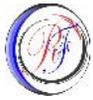
Teachers must also consider appropriate teaching methods, teacher's image, professional collaboration and support, and the impact of society on schools; they must have knowledge of a wide range of educational environments, evaluation and interpersonal relationships; and they must have an ethical commitment to children, parents and the field (Surbeck, Han and Moyer, 1993).Kemmis (1999) presents five propositions about the nature of reflection, that not only clarify what reflective teacher education entails but also indicate that reflective teacher education is a complex approach, not easy to put into practice and even less to evaluate:

1. Reflection is not biologically or psychologically determined, nor is it pure thought; reflection expresses an orientation towards action and is about relation between thought and action in real historical situations.

2. Reflection is not the individualistic working of the mind as a kind of mechanism or speculation; it presupposes and shapes social relations.

3. Reflection is not value-free or neutral as regards values; it expresses and serves concrete human, social, cultural and political interests.

4. Reflection is not indifferent or passive towards social order, nor does it extend socially accepted values; it either reproduces actively or transforms the practical ideologies that support social order.

5. Reflection is not a mechanical process or a purely creative exercise to construct new ideas; it is a practice that expresses our power to reconstitute social life through participation in communication, decision making social action. These propositions highlight the transform Tory potential and empowering role of reflection, both at individual and social levels.

The basic assumptions of reflective teacher education are as follows;

1. Promoting critically reflective teachers is a value laden goal, with direct implications for deciding the direction of reflection, its aims and scope.

2. Critical reflection involves critical reason, critical self reflection and critical action.

3. Critical reflection should facilitate teacher autonomy, especially through the mediation between pedagogical goals and situational constraints, within a research-like approach to teaching, whereby educational contexts are questioned and scrutinized in order to be understood and changed.

4. Critical reflection must entail an understanding of the nature and goals of school education and of its role in social transformation. Criteria for Reflective Teacher Education :

The criteria for reflective practices in teacher education are grouped in six broad areas, namely, Assumptions, Goals, Tasks, Content, Roles and Discourse : These areas are essential for the

critical regulation of teacher development practices and also to plan teacher development programmes.

Assumptions

 All teacher development practices are based upon assumptions about the nature of teacher education and school pedagogy. Analyzing these practices requires inquiry into those assumptions;

• To what extent do teacher development practices build on the assumptions of a reflective approach? The assumptions as developed by Donald Schon, Kenneth Zeichner and John Smyth

can be summarized as follows- Teacher education is a process of personal and social transformation; practice generates theory; a good teacher is a reflective practitioner; an autonomous teacher develops autonomous learners.

Goals: An understanding of teacher development practices implies the analysis of its direction. Reflective teacher education aims at primarily the empowerment of student teachers towards the promotion of a pedagogy for autonomy;

• To what extent do teacher development practices promote an empowering transformation of student teachers in tandem with pedagogy for autonomy? Basic knowledge, abilities and attitudes involved in this goal are, content knowledge, pedagogical

knowledge, artistry, ability to act, ability to self regulate, ability to communicate and negotiate and a critical stance towards institutional and socio-cultural contexts.

Tasks: The nature of teacher development tasks greatly determines the quality of teacher education. This area involves the following criteria;

• Transparency- To what extent are teacher development tasks made explicit as regards their assumptions and aims, steps and demands, potential value and limitations and evaluation? Task transparency improves awareness and enhances a critical attitude

towards practices. It can be promoted directly by the teacher educator/the task instructions (external explicitness), or achieved by student teachers' reflection on tasks (participatory explicitness).

• Theory-practice integration- To what extent do the teacher development tasks focus on the integration of private and public theories and practices? Integration implies the activation of student teachers' experiential knowledge and/or practical experimentation. Experimentation may be indirect or direct.

Indirect experimentation involves tasks other than teaching, aiming at preparing for teaching (e.g. communication development tasks, analysis and production of teaching materials, observation of video-taped lessons, etc.). Direct experimentation is school based and refers to all the tasks involved in real teaching (planning, developing, monitoring and evaluating pedagogical action). Both the types of experimentation should foster a pedagogy for autonomy.

• Consistency- To what extent do teacher development tasks reveal congruence between aims and processes, as well as between their different steps? Internal consistency increases task

meaningfulness, intentionality and impact. Lack of consistency affects course credibility and student-teacher commitment.

• Organization- To what extent is the management of resources, space and time adequate to the assumptions, goals, content and roles of teacher development practices?

 - Content : The content of teacher development practices highlights the arena of professional reflection and action and it is important to assess their relevance and progression.

• Relevance- To what extent is the content of teacher development programme/s relevant considering student teachers' previous knowledge, expectations, interests and needs (meaningfulness); past/recent developments within the area of study (information);

contribution to challenging established assumptions and practices towards the development of a pedagogy for autonomy (innovation)?

• Progression- To what extent does the content of teacher development practices promote the elaboration of student teachers' theories and practices? Roles : The roles student teachers assume vary according to the assumptions and goals that orient development practices. Reflectivity,
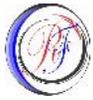
(inter)subjectivity, negotiation and regulation are important qualities of roles in a reflection-oriented approach.

• Reflectivity- What kind of reflection does teacher development practices promote? What view of school pedagogy do they encourage? Reflection should be the basis for the definition of the teachers' role. At a technical level, reflection aims at the achievement of

short term objectives; in order to improve performance (What do I do? How can I improve my action?). At a practical level, reflection is centered on the analysis of assumptions, predispositions, values and results of teachers' practice (How do I explain my action? What are the implications of my action upon others?). At a critical or emancipatory level,reflection includes the ethical, social and political dimensions of teachers' practices. This level includes reflection on teacher education processes (metacognition), from an inquiry-oriented perspective. All three levels of reflection are important in promoting the development of pedagogy for autonomy.

• (Inter) subjectivity- To what extent do teacher development practices integrate the student teachers' self in interaction with others? The construction of professional knowledge is both a personal and social process which involves description, interpretation, confrontation and reconstruction of educational practice. This means that roles are redefined through meaningful interaction that fosters both individual and collective commitment.

• Negotiation- To what extent do teacher development practices create opportunities for negotiation? Negotiation can involve various degrees of student teacher autonomy, but it always requires that teacher education curricula are conceived as praxis, not as pre-defined products to be consumed.

• Regulation- To what extent do teacher development practices enable the individual and collaborative regulation of development processes? The promotion of student teachers'

autonomy requires their critical participation in the supervision of their own learning and of the learning and of the learning contexts.

Discourse : Reflective teacher education assumptions and goals have implications for the discourse of student teachers and teacher educators, especially for the quality of communication, which has a strong influence on the quality of development processes,particularly in terms of relevance and degree of democracy.

  • Communication- To what extent do teacher development practices integrate focused and expressive communication?

Conclusion: Quality of education needs to be continuously improved and teacher education institutions play vital role. Some new innovative practices has to be adopted by teacher education institutions. Strategies like cooperative or collaborative learning ,reflective learning will be a steping stone to enhance the quality of education.

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