Transforming Teacher Education in India: Ten New Roles for Departments of Education in Universities

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Abstract

The Departments of Education in Universities mainly focus on running pre-service and in-service teacher education programs and facilitating educationally relevant researches. Upcoming the National Education Policy of India expects from the Departments of Education in Universities to play a significant role in transforming teacher education. To fulfill, l this mandate, Departments of Education are expected to look beyond their routine activities and envision new roles for moving their boundaries. Extending this argument, the present paper suggests ten new roles for consideration of the Departments of Education. The suggested roles are: (i) offer professional development support to teacher educators, (ii) run academic clubs for teacher educators to share and connect, (iii) help teacher educators to become a good researcher, (iv) promote ICT usage among teacher educators, (v) compile and use best practices in teacher preparation, (vi) cultivate University-School partnerships, (vii) initiate teacher-trainee exchange programs, (viii) start Diploma programs to train School Principals/Leaders, (ix) conduct more researches on teacher education issues, and (xi) hold hands of beginning teachers.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Departments of Education, Universities, Roles, India, Teacher Educators.

Background

Underlining the expectations from Departments of Education in Universities regarding teacher education, the Draft National Education Policy 2019 of India (MHRD, 2019) observes, "They will cater to pre-service education and in-service CPD of teachers in school education as well as faculty in higher education (p.282). This policy document further states, "These Departments of Education will nurture collaborative relationships with all other departments in the university for teacher preparation, and with schools.." (MHRD, 2019, p.288). From these observations, it is clear that Draft Policy envisages Departments of Education in Universities as one of the main stakeholders in improving teacher education in India. This new-found importance to Departments of Education in Universities may be credited to the argument that '*quality of education mainly depends on the quality of teachers and quality of teachers by and large depends on the quality of teacher preparation institutions.*'

Data from University Grants Commission reveals that at present, there are 935 Universities in India (409 State Universities, 127 Deemed to be Universities, 50 Central Universities, and 349 private Universities) (UGC, 2020). The majority of these Universities have teaching Departments named 'Departments of Education.' In some Universities, these Departments are also named as 'School of Education,' 'Department of Teacher Education' and 'Department of Educational Studies.' These Departments of Education, more or less, conducts similar types of teaching and research activities.

The main activities of these Departments include: offering different types of pre-service teacher education programs, organizing programs for in-service teachers, training future researchers (Ph.D. scholars), and facilitating faculty members to conduct educationally relevant researches.

Ten New Roles for Departments of Education in Universities

At present, there are 16917 teacher education institutions in India, and these institutions are offering a total number of 24199 courses (NCTE, 2020). Based on this figure, we can claim that more than 16000 teacher education institutions reside outside University campuses (deducing 935 Universities). The Departments of Education are expected to act as role models and provide academic leadership for these teacher education institutions. The reason is that these institutions are not as privileged and resourceful as University Departments. These institutions look towards University Departments of Education for continuing guidance and support on many counts. Besides, Departments of Education are also expected to initiate new activities for the betterment of teacher education. To fulfill these and many more expectations, Departments of Education in Universities can consider and act upon the following ten roles.

Offer Professional Development Support to Teacher Educators

About 92% of teacher education institutions in India fall under the category of self-financed institutions. Therefore, it can be argued that the quality of teacher education in India more or less depends on these institutions. It is an open secret that the majority of teacher educators serving in these institutions get fewer opportunities to renew and further their skills and competencies. These teacher educators are often unable to avail of the professional opportunities offered by other institutions due to administrative and financial reasons. They find it difficult to get leave to attend these programs, and in case they get it, it is often left without pay. Besides, these teacher educators hardly have institutional support to pay the fees for attending desired professional development programs. Departments of Education in Universities can provide a viable solution to overcome these challenges of teacher educators. These Departments can offer need-based and on-demand professional development programs for teacher educators of nearby institutions. The Departments can offer a variety of programs in emerging areas for teacher educators to make them more competent and skilled. These Departments can also invite teacher educators from nearby institutions to utilize their library and ICT facilities for better exposure and training.

Run Academic Clubs for Teacher Educators to Share and Connect

There is hardly any forum for teacher educators of different institutions to sit together and discuss professional issues. There are several online social platforms, but these are mainly confined to and thrive on the exchange of information. These platforms hardly provide an opportunity for teacher educators to engage in useful academic activities, share their best practices, get guidance to develop professionally, initiate collaborative academic activities, deliver resource lectures in their areas of expertise, etc. To fulfill this vital need, Departments of Education in Universities may plan and run academic clubs for teacher educators of nearby institutions. Through these clubs, Departments can provide different opportunities for willing teacher educators to share and learn with each other for their continuing professional development. The regular meetings of these clubs are supposed to develop a new level of bonding and break the inertia prevalent in the teacher educator community. This sharing will be especially helpful for new teacher educators to know and practice their profession in a better way.

Help Teacher Educators to become a Good Researcher as Well

It has been observed that educational research is very useful and important in teacher education. Extending this claim, Counsell, Evans, McIntyre, and Raffan (2000argue that:

> subject-related educational research can play an important role in trainee teachers' learning since it provides a disciplined perspective from which trainees can derive new ideas and understandings related to their developing practice as well as a critical basis from which to formulate, examine and justify their views through reference to a

wider, collective pool of experience (p.467).

Unfortunately, the existing teacher education system hardly gives any opportunity to teacher educators of self-financed institutions to conduct and practice research. Considering this situation, Departments of Education can organize research methodology workshops for teacher educators of nearby institutions at regular intervals. Through these workshops, the Departments can train teacher educators, especially in conducting case-studies and action research. This research orientation will be quite helpful for teacher educators to get competencies to plan and conduct need-based researches in their classrooms and to make trainee teachers aware as well.

Promote ICT usage among Teacher Educators

It is widely believed that ICT can improve access to and the quality of teacher training. Extending this thinking, the Government of India as well as several national and international organizations have launched different projects for promoting the use of ICT in teacher education. But these initiatives have not produced desired results so far, and the main reason is lack of competency and motivation at the part of teacher educators. Teacher educators often feel reluctant or demotivated to use ICT for the betterment of the teaching-learning process. To improve this situation, Education departments in Universities can organize need-based ICT training programs for teacher educators of nearby institutions. As another measure, the Departments can identify those teacher educators who are well versed and competent in using it. The Departments can name them 'ICT Champion Teacher Educators.' The Departments can ask these ICT champion teacher educators to carryout ICT training in nearby teacher education institutions of his/her vicinity voluntarily and in online or offline mode. Departments can give an appreciation letter/award to these teacher educators for rendering this service.

Compile and use best Practices in Teacher Preparation

Realizing the importance of teachers in the education system, countries across the world have developed several best practices in teacher preparation. These best practices are intended to develop them into effective and humane teachers. Contrary to this, the teacher education system in India remains more or less unchanged since independence. Therefore, as academic leaders, it is the responsibility of Departments of Education to compile best teacher preparation practices across the globe, adapt them in Indian contexts, and start using the adapted practices. This compilation will also be helpful for nearby teacher education institutions to learn and emulate these practices. As another useful measure, Departments of Education can come forward to compile best practices in teacher education of their region. Departments may decide a format and open a call for submission of best practices from all the recognized teacher education institutions of their region. From these practices, Departments can select a good number of practices dealing with different aspects of teacher education and can publish them in offline and online mode for wider dissemination and use of teacher education fraternity.

Cultivate University-School Partnership

Teacher education is often viewed as too theoretical and not sufficiently concerned with the realities of classroom practice. Noting the perceived disconnect between university-based teacher education and the complex world of classroom teaching, Smagorinsky, Cook, and Johnson (2003) observe that in teacher education:

> ….theory and practice are set up as different concerns, with university-based faculty, aloof within the ivory tower, espousing ideals and the principles that govern them, while school-based teachers engage in practice in the teeming world of the classroom (p.1400).

Departments of Education can play a vital role in bridging the divide between theory and practice in teacher education. The Departments can identify and invite some members from the corporate sector and school committees to present their views about the existing curriculum and suggestions for making the existing curriculum more practice-oriented. The Departments can also invite members from the school sector as special invites in different committees to give their views about promoting University-school partnerships and conducting collaborative activities. The involvement from representatives from the schooling sector with Departments of Education will

certainly be helpful to suggest newer pathways to teacher preparation programs more practical, need-to be based, and employable.

Initiate Teacher-trainee Exchange Programs

The other area, where Departments of Education from Universities can play a vital role, is an exchange of teacher-trainees. As an initial step, Departments can initiate the exchange of teacher-trainees at a local level. Gradually, Departments can expand it at the regional, national, and international levels. As the first step in this direction, Departments may devote a section of the institutional website to publish information/offers related to the exchange of teacher-trainees with willing institutions. Departments may also request different Indian embassies in other countries to find out and share such type of information with those institutions who are willing to send their teacher-trainees for exchange. On the other hand, Indian embassies may also publish information on their websites about those University Departments that are willing to host trainee-teachers from other countries. These exchanges at local, national, and international levels will certainly bring a fresh approach and new ideas to improve the existing system of teacher education. This sharing of ideas and experiences will encourage teacher education institutions to introspect about their policies and practices and align them for better outcomes.

Start Diploma Programs to Train School Principals / Leaders

Departments of Education can do a big service by devising a mechanism to train School Principals and other educational administrators. In an existing system, there is no provision for training of School Principals/Leaders. They usually get this position based on academic qualifications and experiences. Whereas it is a well-known fact that to be a successful school Principal/Leader; one needs to have more than academic experience. To fill this void, Departments of Education in Universities may start a six months 'School Leadership Diploma' in a blended mode for all those who are working as School Principals/Leaders or wish to act as School Principal/Leader in future. Even those running and managing different schools may also be invited to join this diploma

program and learn further. It can be expected that these Diploma programs will help present and would be School Principals/Leaders to run their schools in a more effective and efficient manner. And these better-managed Schools will help the teacher education system in two ways i) providing better-qualified candidates to the teaching profession, and ii) absorbing quality trainees as teachers.

Conduct more Researches on Teacher Education Issues

A search on the different databases regarding 'research in teacher education' returns with a clear message 'lack of quality researches on teacher education issues in India.' Departments of Education who are supposed to be a pioneer in teacher education researches are also lagging on this aspect. The majority of Ph.D. theses produced by Departments of Education are on psychological issues rather than teacher education issues. To bridge this knowledge gap, the Departments of Education must come forward to promote researches on teacher education policies, practices, and issues from national and international perspectives. The findings from these researches will be particularly helpful for apex bodies to revision teacher education policies and practices in India. Besides, dissemination of these research findings will also support teacher education institutions across the country to learn about policies, practices, and concerns in teacher education in India and other countries and adapt them in local contexts.

Hold the Hands of Beginning Teachers

As soon as the beginning teachers join the work in a school, they are loaded with expectations to carry on the similar roles and functions as their experienced colleagues and are usually assigned with the least desirable and most difficult tasks (Misra & Tyagi, 2019, p.5). To help these inexperienced teachers, a concept of induction programs is prevalent in many countries. Induction programs are supposed to help inexperienced teachers with the necessary models, tools, and guidance for beginning their teaching careers and meet performance standards (Kaufmann, 2007). Unfortunately, the practice of induction is not much prevalent in India (Misra & Tyagi, 2019). Considering this situation, Departments of Education can come forward to hold the hands of these beginning

teachers of different schools. The Departments can organize counseling and mentoring sessions for all beginning and less experienced teachers of nearby schools at the start of every academic session. These Departments can also organize monthly support sessions as per the need and requirements of the schools/teachers. Besides, the Departments can also support these teachers by allowing them to come and consult the faculty members according to their professional needs.

Conclusion

Departments of Education in Universities have expertise, experiences, and facilities to play a significant role in transforming teacher education in India. But to make it a reality, these Departments need a vision and action-plan to proceed. The present paper has attempted to fill this void by suggesting ten new roles for the University Departments of Education. These roles are not much difficult to master, do not require many financial expenses, and can be played easily by utilizing the services of faculty members and existing infrastructure of the Departments. More than any other support, these roles mainly require the commitment and motivation of faculty members of the Education Departments. Policy makers can hope that faculty members of Departments of Education in different Universities across India will realize their potential and come forward to play these new roles for the benefit of teacher education at an institutional, regional, and national level.

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