CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

A fundamental component in professional education is the link between theory and practice. However, students in professional education programmes experience a lack of coherence between theory and practice which is often described as theory practice gap. The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between theory and practice in MA Education Programmes offered by International Islamic University and to contribute with knowledge about how to bridge the gap between theory and practice in teacher education programme. Data were obtained through focus group interview with 40 MA Education female students who completed their four months teaching practice in December 2011. Data reveal that student teachers are quite satisfied with their pedagogical preparation and find difference in theory and practice in teacher education institutions and practice schools in Pakistan. Data indicate that student teachers were not allowed by schools to implement their learnt teaching strategies.

Keywords: Theory, practice, pedagogical approaches, teaching practice, teacher education

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1. Introduction

To produce world class teachers and empower them to educate generations of learners/scholar, the fundamental requirements have been clearly delineated in pedagogical subjects, there is need to train the prospective teachers with in-depth knowledge of pedagogical subject and training about how to practice theory (NPSTP, 2009). Classical approaches to teacher education curriculum have increasingly been critiqued because of their limited link with student teachers needs and being for away from the approaches which are practised in schools. These approaches have limited impact on practice. There is need to introduced new and effective pedagogical approaches in teacher education in which theory and practice are linked together. The purpose of this study was to point out the gaps between the theory and practice in teacher education programme of Department of Education, International Islamic University. Pedagogical knowledge is very important in order to perform high quality teaching. Pedagogical knowledge and new teaching methods are emerging and it is very important that future teacher is fully equipped with latest information and teaching techniques whereas actual practices need to be strongly connected with these new changes. All teacher-education institutions impart both theoretical and practical information to prospective teachers before coming to the field. Even then it has been observed that a big gap exists between what is being taught in the teacher education institutions and what actually is happening in the schools as real practices. The purpose of this study was to explore the gap between theory and practices in teacher education in Pakistan. Teacher education plays a very important role in reforming and strengthening the education system of any country. Pre-service teacher education provides knowledge and skills to the student teachers that are necessary for the teaching profession.

The key element of teacher Education institutions is the right coherence between theory and practice. It is also needed to ensure proper combination between theory and practice for better teaching practice in schools, as teaching practice is an important element of teacher training institutions. Teaching practice is key element of formal education programmes and during teaching practice there must be proper combination of theory and practice (ETUCE - European Teacher education policy paper, 2008).

Gap between theory and practice in teacher Education is extensively discussed all over the world including Pakistan. Student teachers during their teaching practices experience gap between theory and practice and bridging this gap is widespread endeavour in pre-service teacher education institutions (Westbury et al., 2005). It is need of time to create a linkage between the theory and practice in teacher education institutions, so that student teacher get rid of the state of anxiety and implement their learnt strategies in their practice classes (Parker & Leinhardt, 1995). The problem of theory and practice in teacher education has increased day

by day and over the last decades this problem has become common interest. Gap between theory and practice was highlighted in particular by Dewey (1933). Dewey created a difference between reflective action and routine action of student teachers. In 1980s through the work of Schon (1983) interest for this topic was transformed. The ideas and conceptions of Schon are not only concerned with teachers and teacher educators to contribute in research but are also for teacher educators to apply theory into their practice. A teacher makes decisions on the basis of situations and applies theory into practice. Knowledge of theory and insight do play a part, but they do not unambiguously determine the behaviour of the teacher, as teacher decides its implementation according to situation during class (Schon, 1983).

Although the literature on teacher education and on linkage of theory and practice in teacher education is enormous, however, among these studies very few have focused on pedagogical preparation and teaching practice in pre-service training. A successful field-based project in Texas provides one design (Wilmore, 1996). A group of school leaders consisting of teacher educators, principles and mentors focused on Integrating learning and teaching "to directly tie theory to practice". There are few studies in Pakistan related to coherence of theory and practice with special reference to pedagogical preparation of student teachers.

Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell (2006) described seven principles for change in teacher Education with context to theory and practice, these are; 1.Teacher education involves continuously convict and competing demands of theory and practice, 2. Teacher education demands as a subject to be created rather than as a created subject, 3. The focus of teacher education requires a shift from curriculum to student teachers, 4. Teacher education programme stress focus on student teacher research and field work, 5. Teacher education requires a stress on those learning strategies to teach working with their groups, 6. Teacher education requires meaningful relationships between schools, Universities and student teachers, 7. Teacher education is enhanced when the teaching and learning approaches advocated in the programme are modelled by the teacher educators in their own practice. On the basis of above mentioned principles of teacher education programmes, the researchers made it easy to develop a liaison between pedagogical approaches, theory and practice in schools and universities.

When student teachers learn pedagogical approaches in their classes, they learn these concepts not for implementing it but for the sake of their own learning experiences. Student teachers commented on teaching practice, that they set their own teaching on the base of class teacher's observation. Student teachers asked questions, why should we arrange the seats of students like this? What advantages shall we have if we do so? How we make decision in classes according to situations? How we implement our learnt skills in school setting? Teacher

educators train student teachers in sucha way that they develop their own teaching skills according to situations and the latter must develop their own basic pedagogical principles. On the basis of these pedagogical principles develop their own model of teaching and monitor their performance during implementation of learnt strategies.

1.1. Orientations of Theory and practice in Teacher Education Programmes in Pakistan

Over the last few years, studies in teacher education programmes have stressed on the central questions how student teacher can create integration between theory and its practice and which kind of learning environment is required to contribute that integration.

However, no unambiguous conception of theory exists, nor of practice or the relationship between the two. In the context of the discussion about relating practical knowledge of student teachers, Three orientations that have been stressed in teacher education over the last 40 years:

1. impactful behaviours of student teachers, leading to the training of student teachers in behaviours that appeared to be effective in process-product research, 2. reflective practices, and 3. development of professional knowledge and competency.

The central question, in fact, is which kind of training methods will avoid a gap between theory and practice. The focus of the next question is on the development of student teachers, about the integration of the several elements of the knowledge by the student teachers, and how this knowledge can be realized by student teachers. Next question is about how student teachers construct knowledge and ways of linking the theoretical knowledge to practical situations. We will further elaborate the concepts of theory and practice as well as on the relationship between those concepts in the following paragraph.

1.2. The concepts of theory and practice in Teacher Education

Research literature shows a difference of definitions and opinions concerning the meaning of the concept of theory. The Greek philosopher Aristotle provided the fundamental concepts of theory. Over the last decades, researchers in teacher education have rediscovered the ideas of Aristotle with the context of recent development in teacher (Fenstermacher, 1994; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). However, Aristotle's opinion about the manifestation of knowledge is often cited. Different framework, concepts and principles in teacher education theories are used to explain and judge experience in education and educational related settings (Eraut, 1994).

The concept of practice can be best described as professional situation. Practice comprises of learning environment with materials, tools and actors in which a profession is

practiced. The professional worker (student teachers) in that environment has been trained to act professionally, that is to say to act adequately on the basis of practical knowledge. According to Beijaard et al. (1995), A teacher can also be considered as someone who practices a profession. Practice has many representations, which can be based on a number of views. In the case of teacher education, school practice is an important representation of practice, being a learning practice for prospective teachers.

2. Problem Statement

A fundamental component in Teacher education is the link between theory and practice. However, many prospective teachers in teaching practice experience a lack of coherence between theory and practice which is often described as the theory practice gap. The aim of Bridging the Gap is to explore the relationship between theory and practice with relation to pedagogical approaches and teaching practice and to contribute with knowledge of pedagogy about how to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

3. Research Questions

The study asked four questions:
1) How student teachers develop their own fundamental and meaningful skills of teaching?
2) Which kind of decision they made in their classes according to the learnt theories?
3) What was the framework of the teacher education institutions for better integration of theory and practice?
4) What kind of differences student teachers find between theory and practice?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the gaps and reason of less connection between theory and practice in teacher education programmes.

5. Research Methods

The research group decided to do focus group semi structured qualitative interviews as the obvious method to know what theory and practice gap find by student teacher during their teaching practice with relation to pedagogical subjects and school subjects. Student teachers of education department, International Islamic University often say that there is huge gap between theory and practice and Theory is one thing and practice is something else. We decided to interview the prospective students in focus groups because we expected that

student's conceptions of these fundamental issues developed together with fellow's students and more expressed by a group. We constructed a group interview instead of individual interviews of prospective teachers. Total 40 students were divided in 8 groups and we asked the prospective teachers four broad questions in order to draw out their own thinking. After the conclusion of each group interview which was done in Urdu (national language), all data was translated in English language. Before going to that, interviewees were again consulted to get clarifications of certain points. At the initial stage of analysis researchers gained insight about the response of student teachers and became familiar with their responses. Although transcribed interviews were evaluated purposely to tackle the points raised under the study about student conceptions of linkages between theory and practice during their teaching practice and also recorded work was checked other relevant points came across. Some other very important arguments, such as student teacher empowerment in practice schools, came on surface. Respondents came with variety of thoughts. Differences of opinion were thrashed out, other themes were further emerged. This process was done by each researcher and finally coding was finalized. At the end of analysis findings given by individual researcher were compared to check the authenticity of data.

6. Findings

The data from the taped interviews of student teachers were arranged into four categories. These categories were: 1. Identified gap between theory and practice that student teachers found during teaching practice, 2. Elaboration of different events during teaching practice (successful teaching practice), 3. Record of contradictory ideas during practice teaching, and 4. How the student teachers assessed their own pedagogical preparation during teaching practice. Then these categories were considered the philosophies of teaching of student teachers during their teaching practice. In each and every interview student teachers were free to provide ideas and contexts for discussion. During interview, freedom of expression showed that there was no external judgment which affected the ideas of student teachers. Student teachers were free about the length of time to devote to a particular issue. With this focus and control over the discussion student teachers provided critical reflection of their ideas and feelings during teaching practice. They recalled the in depth events in teaching practice. Student teachers provided comparative reflection of feelings during and after teaching practice. All of these helped to develop their ideas and theories as a teacher.

Focus and control of student teachers interviews lead to accurate recall of what student teacher thinks and what actually took place during teaching practice. Key information found in response and conversation additional to the answers of the interview questions, for example,

the student teachers would describe how they assessed children's progress while giving details about classroom management; decision making and what were the hurdles they found to implement the learnt skills in school classes.

A focus group interview of student teachers indicates that students were quite satisfied with their pedagogical preparation in teacher education institutions. During their preparation they learnt all school required courses. "*We are quite satisfied with our pedagogical preparation by our institution, we leant all new approaches of teacher education and we feel that we are well equipped with all modern techniques of teaching.*"

Student teachers described about their practice in school; almost all focus groups indicated that they were not allowed to apply their pedagogical skills in school classes; the fix methodologies of school did not permit student teachers to implement learnt skills and methodologies in school classes.

Student teachers identified a new theme linkage; between teacher education institution and linkage between theory and practice. Student teachers indicated that they did not find any liaison between schools and teacher education institutions. School administration set their own standards of teaching which were based on tradition teaching approaches. Schools did not allow student teachers to use technologies in classrooms. "We learnt all teaching methodologies, theories and wanted to practice our learnt strategies but could not implement all these due to the fix methodologies and system of practice school." They commented that they learnt all new teaching strategies, theories, assessment techniques, and classroom management techniques. However, great hurdle to implement these techniques was the different methodologies adopted in practice schools. So, they did not find any linkage between theory and practice in terms of school separate system of teaching.

7. Conclusions

Difference between what student teachers learn and implement in school classes. Almost all focus groups were agreed with this point that they found difference about their pedagogical preparation and implementation in actual class situation during teaching practice. Student teachers were bound to follow the pedagogical aspects given by the schools. They were not allowed to student teachers to apply their teaching skills during teaching practice. Student teachers were satisfied with their pedagogical preparation. Student teacher indicates that they were not allowed to practice their own meaningful theories of teaching in school classes. Schools apply traditional approaches of teaching whereas teacher education department trained them according to new methodologies. Student teachers said they were highly satisfied with their pedagogical preparation by the teacher education department but

during their teaching practice they find gap between theory and practice due to the schools environment. They learnt all theories but were unable to practice and were unable to use these theories in decision making, assessment of school students and in teaching. Student teachers mentioned that they found successful integration in theory and practice in their teacher education department and the teacher educators were highly qualified to prepare them to become a teacher. Student teachers highlighted that they did not implement different methodologies in their practice classes as school instruct them about methodology and strictly confined them to apply school's prescribed methodologies for teaching.

The preparation by the teacher education institutions in Pakistan fulfilled the demand of preparation of student teachers. This is the first study in its nature about the pedagogical preparation of the student teachers in Pakistan.

During teaching practice student teachers felt difference what they have learnt and what is implemented. Student teachers were bound to apply methodologies, assessment techniques given by school administration. In school classes they applied traditional approaches of teaching whereas teacher education institutions trained them according to new trends and approaches in teacher education.

After completion of the internship, respondents' views showed that they are the big source of creating significant connection between what they have learnt and what is actually happening in the field. Whereas the current study indicate a huge gap between theory and practice due to the restricted response of school administration. Pedagogical preparation must be linked with practice schools so that practice schools adjust student teachers and allow them to implement their learnt strategies in school classes. Enhanced orientation by the school administration and school teachers and principal accommodate student teacher and welcome them in their schools. University supervisor must restructure the policy of observation of student teachers and also developed a close link with school administration so that students may implement their learnt skills in free environment and feel relax in school environment. Such kind of researches support and enhance education institution to create coherence in theory and practice and prepare students according to the demands of schools. Schools teachers should be trained through the refresher courses and also new trends and approaches in teacher education must be adopted. More importantly university should develop a liaison with schools so that student teachers, school teachers, faculty, school administration may continue to work for personal and professional growth.

Acknowledgements

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