

# Whither teacher development – stubborn continuity or winds of change?

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## ABSTRACT

*After an in-service programme is over, the organizers try to judge the impact of the programme by trying to find out, generally through a questionnaire, whether the teacher participants are willing and able to use the 'materials and methods' 'recommended' to them on the programme. Some teachers may adopt the 'new' methods and materials for a while after they have had the 'exposure', but most of them, sooner or later, slide back into their 'normal', pre-programme practices. They return to their respective institutions only to develop feelings of confusion, insecurity, inadequacy, and often guilt. The purpose of this article is to examine the possible effects of teacher training programmes on the participants of such programmes and to emphasize the need to re-evaluate the assumptions that have traditionally guided teacher education, training and development efforts.*

**Keywords:** Teacher development; Issues in teacher training; In-service training.

I have worked as a teacher, researcher, administrator, and teacher educator for over a quarter-century. Over these years, certain basic questions on teaching and education have been troubling me — questions that seem unanswered and often unanswerable, at least to me. Let me share two of these questions that have been troubling me; these two questions, I believe, are linked together.

1. *How could teaching over a period of two decades and more seem almost the same?*
2. *Why do so few instructional reforms get past the classroom door?*

While the first question underscores the

apparent uniformity in teaching practices regardless of time and place, the second points to the apparent invulnerability of classrooms to change. Both these questions are equally puzzling to me.

Shanker (1974) expressed a similar view with regard to the New York school system where ten thousand new teachers enter the system each year “as a result of retirement, death, job turnover, and attrition.” According to Shanker, these new teachers “come from all over the country. They represent all religions, races, political persuasions, and educational institutions. But the amazing thing is that, after three weeks in the classroom, you can’t tell them from the teachers they replaced.”

Cuban (1983) examined how various forces shaped the school curriculum and their consequences for classrooms over almost a century (1890 – 1980). He came to the alarming conclusion that “teacher-centered instruction seemed uncommonly stable at all levels of schooling, touching students of diverse abilities in different settings over many decades in spite of extensive teacher education.” He found that “curriculum theories did influence professional ideologies and vocabularies, courses of study, and some textbook content” in teacher education programmes, but he “did not find much evidence of significant change in teaching practices.” On the contrary, he found “evidence of a seemingly stubborn continuity in teacher-centered instruction despite intense reform efforts to move classroom practices toward instruction that was more student-centered” (1983:160).

In other words, “a dominant core of teaching practices has endured since the turn of the [20th] century in both elementary and high school classrooms. These practices persisted over time, in different settings in spite of changes in teacher education and the knowledge that students bring to school, and major social and cultural movements” (1983:165).

The teaching practices that he claims have endured are the following:

- Teaching the whole group rather than small groups or individuals
- An almost total reliance upon a textbook with very little use of tapes, films, records, television or other technology

- Arrangement of the classroom into rows of desks or chairs facing a blackboard with the teacher’s desk nearby
- Far more teacher talk than student talk during instruction
- Most teacher questions calling for reciting factual information
- Use of class time determined by the teacher
- Tests usually concentrating on recall of factual information.

Historically, therefore, teaching practices have fallen into a familiar teacher-centered pattern that persistently tends to reassert itself after reform impulses weaken and disappear. Since the role of the teacher is absolutely central to any reforms planned to improve teaching practices, this stubborn continuity becomes a serious issue.

Getting teachers to change is difficult. They particularly resist complex, conceptual, longitudinal changes, as opposed to changes in management routines or other temporary changes. This is so even though they may respond positively in simulated situations (such as observation lessons in teaching practice) or in-service programmes. We could classify the teachers who attend in-service programmes into three groups depending on the ‘impact’ of these programmes on their attitudes and teaching practices.

### **The Untouched**

A majority of these participants attend in-service courses for the break they offer them

from their teaching routines, for the certificate, and perhaps for the opportunities they provide for a kind of social get-together. These teachers are quite happy with their own practices and do not intend to risk their self-esteem and sense of security by imbibing [or adopting] new ideas. They return to their schools practically untouched by the course, and hence unchanged, and would like to carry on exactly as before. They find the new ideas rather threatening. Perhaps, the best defense against this 'imposition' of new ideas is to hear, but not to listen.

### **The Guilty**

Some of the participant teachers, however, are eager to learn new ways. They listen to new ideas with keen attention and express positive feelings towards them, even gratitude for what they have received. They return to their schools determined to mend their ways, but fail to fit the new ideas to the old realities, such as large classes, poor resources, lack of time, the demands of the set syllabus and exams, and so on. They quickly fall back upon their old practices, but now feel guilty and insecure. They also lack the confidence and conviction they had earlier in their teaching. They are told on the in-service programme about a 'sensible' innovation and are expected to apply the innovation directly to practice, but they find that in reality they cannot make this innovation work.

### **The Radicals/The Overeager**

Some of the eager, attentive and enthusiastic teacher participants are so

convinced of the value of their 'new wisdom' that they rush back to their schools with revolutionary zeal. They want to change their practices overnight. A few of these 'radicals' may succeed because they have clearly understood the new ideas and are able to modify their practices accordingly; they are even able to develop their own supplementary materials, tasks and activities to make the new ideas work. But many of these 'radicals' who do not have such a clear understanding and the ability to adapt themselves may often 'damage' the learning process by implementing the reforms in an unplanned and ad hoc manner [often proudly touted as "eclecticism"]. After a short period, when they run out of new materials or ideas, they revert to their old ways, thus confusing the learners in the process.

### **What prevents teachers from accepting changes?**

It is often assumed that teachers do not implement the innovation they are exposed to in their training or in-service programmes either because they do not believe it to be sensible enough or because they feel they have no 'ownership' in the innovation. This is not found to be the real reason. On the contrary, interactions with teachers have shown that almost all of them endorse the innovative ideas they receive. They find them to be very sensible and worthy of implementation. They are, in fact, committed to these new ideas at the figurative (or conceptual) level, but cannot make the necessary decisions to implement the innovations on a daily basis. They find

it difficult to make such decisions in real classrooms even after they have received training in how to make decisions. They tend to use the new ideas only when they are 'observed', but do not consistently and regularly apply them in their day-to day teaching practices.

There are several constraints on real teacher development. First, teachers resist change because they feel insecure if they have to give up practices they are used to. For instance, we find teachers saying, "It's like taking away half of you. You've done it for twenty years and you know how, and all of a sudden you find out...there's a better way. And it's really painful ..... your teaching is a very personal thing. And if anybody says, 'I want to show you there's a better way,' it's hard to let go."

Second, there are constraints which are milieu-related. Teachers work within a system and innovations have to be accommodated to that system. The need to satisfy the demands of the milieu probably makes it difficult for them to change their teaching practices. Teachers often complain about **problems** such as the following:

- Imposed regulations about text coverage – "I've always felt pushed because I knew that I had so much to do."
- Pressure to follow textbook prescriptions without deviation – 'to go along and do exactly as the book told us to do.'
- Class sizes and grouping patterns
- Pressures from students to move faster and to give them questions and answers

- Large classes and fixed seating arrangements in the classroom
- "Indifferent" or "uninterested" students and hence student indiscipline
- Lack of administrative support
- Too much emphasis on students' scores in examinations

As a result of all these constraints, teachers generally refuse to change their practices so long as the examination results [of their students] are good.

Then, there is the problem of having to disrupt the daily classroom routines to implement any innovation. A shift from safe organizational routines to the insecurity of finding new ways of teaching involves effort, extra work, time and emotional energy for which most teachers are not prepared. Organizational patterns and routines for getting through the day are, in effect, survival patterns. So, innovations which require modifications of these routines or which might even 'disrupt' them are resisted – "I always feel really pressured, you know."

More fundamentally than these constraints, teachers feel persistent difficulties in changing their traditional ways of thinking about the content. For example, most teachers have been teaching reading skills, conceptualizing them as automatised procedures. Thinking about them as flexible strategies conflicts with their 'prior knowledge and experience.' — "it is ... a rather radical departure from the way we have been teaching... so what you might be suggesting here might be totally impossible."

Similarly, teachers who are used to dictating compositions to students to be copied by them find it difficult to visualize writing as a process. So they are unable to take the necessary classroom decisions about the topics for compositions and the procedures by which students could be led through the process of composing by themselves. In other words, the teachers' "experience as students and their professional training cause them to base their daily practice on procedural–memorization views of curriculum and instruction rather than on strategic cognitive–processing views." (Duffy and Roehler, 1986:58).

Traditional models of teacher education and training depict teaching as a rational process of selecting many alternative courses of action (Shavelson, 1976). Such a view implies that teachers routinely make complex, sophisticated decisions regarding course content, instructional practices and assessment procedures. But research on classroom practices (Duffy, 1982) and our own experience show that teachers are not rational decision-makers, but merely technicians who follow the prescriptions of textual materials. They appear to make relatively few substantive decisions about what content to teach, which teaching strategies to employ, or how to assess students' learning (Duffy and McIntyre, 1982). Instead, they follow text recommendations, limiting their decision making to changes in management routines. Effective teaching, however, requires more than technicians and going beyond temporary changes in management routines.

Teacher educators and teacher developers must realize the fact that teachers, like all learners, are "boundedly rational" (Shulman and Carey, 1985). That is, they combine information received from teacher educators and researchers with what they already know and believe in, restructure it, and make it fit *their perception of reality*. After filtering the new information through this reality, they make decisions different from the ones they did while considering the new information in isolation from their reality, such as in in-service programmes.

Duffy and Roehler (1986) examined teacher resistance to change by collecting self-report data on why a particular instructional innovation was not regularly implemented in classrooms. From the interview responses, they have identified at least four sets of "Filters" that constrain the teachers' decision-making. According to them, teachers "restructure new information in terms of *their* conceptual understandings of curricular content, *their* concept of instruction, *their* perception of the demands of the working environment, and *their* desire to achieve a smoothly flowing school day." (Duffy and Roehler, 1986:57). Hence, an innovation that seemed sensible when discussed in a teacher education course or an in-service session cannot be implemented on a regular basis in the classroom, because the innovation is modified by these "filters".

The major problem, therefore, with the teacher education courses or the in-service programmes that are being offered now seems to lie in assuming that the 'input'

provided to the teachers in these programmes influences and changes the teachers' perceptions and practices. In reality, however, each teacher makes decisions not on the basis of what the teacher educator or researcher said, but on the basis of their restructured understanding of the 'input'.

### **Implications for Teacher Development**

A major implication of the [preceding] discussion is that 'one-shot' afternoon workshops, or in-service programmes, and contextually-isolated methods courses in teacher education programmes of study will probably have little or no effect on practising teachers. Instead, undergraduate teacher preparation courses and teacher development efforts to improve the practices of in-service teachers need to be longitudinal efforts based in real classroom contexts.

Another implication is that field experiences in themselves are of little value if they do not approximate the conditions of real classroom teachers. Clinical or tutorial settings seldom reflect the organizational constraints of real classrooms. Hence, short-term in-service programmes and student-teaching activities (Practice Teaching) seldom subject the teachers to the same milieu constraints found in actual teaching situations. 'Any-field-experience-is-better-than-none' approach will not help teachers to [undertake and] incorporate complex innovations.

The third implication is that, if teaching is to be a genuinely professional enterprise, which it ought to be, it calls for continual

experimentation and evaluation by the teachers themselves. The pressure to change should come from teachers and learners who actually feel the need to change. In seeking to be more effective in their teaching, teachers can, at the same time, and in that process, provide for their own continuing education and development. The emphasis is on [individual] teacher's learning through personal enquiry and reflection rather than through transmitted advice. Teachers must have the *honesty* to examine *critically* their own practices and experience, and confront their failures as well as successes. They must also have the *courage* to take risks and to learn from taking risks. In other words, they should understand that they have the major responsibility for their own development. They can always get support and guidance from professional journals, teacher groups, or specialists/teacher educators, but they must take the first step forward. These days, the internet is a boon to teachers because it has enormous potential for interactions among teachers across the globe, but that would be subject matter for another article.

I would like to leave a few questions with the readers which can form the basis for further studies, all of which, I hope, would contribute towards teacher development.

- ❖ Can the undergraduate teacher preparation programmes be re-evaluated so that more effective links may be forged between them and the reality of classrooms in diverse settings?
- ❖ Can we encourage teachers and researchers to obtain hard classroom

data to find out what exactly is happening in classrooms across a [town], city, district, state, or even the country? Many of our observations now rely rather heavily on our own impressions, experiences, or published literature. We need to have studies that capture concretely what teachers actually do in classrooms across space and time.

- ❖ Can ELT research in Indian universities be more targeted and contributing to analyzing and changing classroom practices in a systematic and organized way? Much of the ELT research in the country, particularly for M. Phil., M. Litt., and Ph. D. degrees, seems to be either repetitive or disconnected. Can there be a way of making researchers take classroom practices forward in clearly specified areas such as reading, writing and speaking?
- ❖ Can autonomous colleges, some of which at least claim to have introduced innovations in the ELT curriculum, produce descriptive, written accounts of their experiences with implementation of innovations to show how they started, what processes they have gone through, where they stand now, and what future direction(s) they intend to take? (e.g., Xavier, Ramani and Joseph, 1987).
- ❖ Have the agencies meant to function as catalysts of change, such as autonomous colleges, really brought about changes in teachers' attitudes or classroom practices in other institutions?

These and other questions may appear difficult to answer straightaway, but I

believe that an earnest effort in trying to tackle at least a few of these would go a long way in ensuring true teacher development.

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**NOTE:**

*This article was published nearly twenty*

*years ago in JELT with the title “Stubborn continuity or winds of change? – Issues in Teacher Development,” [Vol. 37, No.1 (Jan.-Feb. 2002): 9-16.] It has been reproduced here with the author’s consent.*

***Have things changed since then [i.e., 2002]? Have the issues raised in the article been addressed? To what extent?***

*The author would like to get answers to these questions from the readers.*

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