

Action research through Mentorship Model: A sustainable Framework for professional development

Ipshita H Sasmal

Assistant Professor, ELT, Centre for English Language Education (CELE), Ambedkar University, Delhi

Email: ipshita@aud.ac.in

Monishita H Pande

Assistant Professor, ELT, Centre for English Language Education (CELE), Ambedkar University, Delhi

Email: monishita@aud.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Action research or classroom-based research is steadily gaining popularity in the Indian context because it focuses on the teachers' real-life classroom issues and solving those through an enquiry-based approach. English teachers at the school level need to collaborate with professionals in the field to gain insights as well as receive guidance in their journey of action research. School teachers in India are not motivated to conduct research which is largely considered the domain of 'higher education'. Thus, action research has the potential to bring research practices into the English classroom and encourage teachers to look at their classrooms critically. At present, continuous professional development (CPD) activities in the Indian context are based on the cascade model (Mathew, 1998). To manage the huge number of teachers who need to be part of CPD programs, the cascade model seems to be the most feasible method of teacher education in India. The effectiveness of this model has however been challenged. This paper argues that the mentorship or network-based model can be a sustainable framework citing British Council's Aptis Action Research Mentor Scheme (AARMS), which is an initial attempt to gauge the feasibility of the mentorship model in the Indian context.

Key words: *action research, mentorship model, enquiry-based, continuous professional development, cascade model*

Teacher education which is a continuum of professional development, enables teachers to improve their classroom practices. The first yet critical stage on that continuum is the practical component of the pre-service programme which is an extended field

experience conducted under the guidance of an experienced teacher who is often referred to as a cooperating teacher or 'mentor'. As student-teachers across the world consider this practicum of the Bachelor of Education degree as most

crucial and the mentor as critical to their success in that degree (Kirk, Macdonald, & O'Sullivan, 2006; Weiss & Weiss, 2001), it is important to focus on the field experience of the teachers under the supervision of their mentors. In India, while the pre-service training does expose student-teachers to the field, this experience is not enough to equip teachers to tackle the complex teaching-learning situations which they would encounter while in-service. This is not to claim that ours is the only country facing this challenge. It is a situation of concern in the larger fraternity of teacher educators and researchers in the field of teacher education.

In general, pre-service teacher education programmes tend to focus on the immediate and theoretical knowledge but to evaluate its impact at a distance is challenging. As teacher education is not a single entity, what student-teachers are exposed to during their pre-service training would not work in identical ways in other settings. Therefore, making changes to teacher education programmes is not a question of reforming one specific set of practices, a specific type of course, or a specific evaluation system. Instead, there is a need for a comprehensive re-conceptualization of what could be effective teacher education. Given the constraints under which we operate, this paper argues that in-service teachers need continuous collaboration and support to engage in meaningful professional learning through a social network model beyond their pre-service experience of mentoring as part of their practicum.

The challenges of pre-service teacher education programmes

The international community of teacher educators today faces dilemmas of how to bring research together with practice in ways that enable both a mutual interaction and a qualitative improving of practice. A number of reports on teacher education (Abell Foundation, 2001; American Federation of Teachers, 2000; Cochran Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 1997,2001; Haselkorn & Harris, 1998; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999) suggest that teacher's practice in the field is challenging and problematic and requires constant improvement and there is a need to raise credibility and standards. For example, Levine (2006:1) reports that 'Too often teacher education programs cling to an outdated, historically flawed vision of teacher education that is at odds with a society remade by economic, demographic, technological, and global change'. Other critiques of pre-service teacher education programmes claim that (Abell Foundation, 2001; Maclver, Vaughn, Katz, 2005; NIES, 1999)

- *The activities engaged in by preservice teachers in college/university settings are rarely relevant to their subsequent professional practice*
- *Student teaching placements are often too brief*
- *Sites are chosen to accommodate faculty and students' comforts rather than to*

challenge tacit images of good schools and good teaching

- *In fieldwork, there is often little supervision; it is often of poor quality; and it is rarely in genuine synchrony with the teacher education program*

Considering we are facing this challenge of pre-service programmes failing to equip teachers adequately for their real time teaching, it is imperative to re-imagine how in-service teachers can be supported in their continuing professional development activities.

The teacher education model in India

National Curriculum Framework of Teacher Education circulated in March 2009 has been prepared in the background of the NCF, 2005 and the principles laid down in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 which necessitated an altered framework on Teacher Education which would be consistent with the changed philosophy of school curriculum recommended in the NCF, 2005. While articulating the vision of teacher education, the Framework has some important dimensions of the new approach to teacher education, as under:

- Reflective practice to be the central aim of teacher education;
- Student-teachers should be provided opportunities for self-learning, reflection, assimilation and articulation of new ideas;
- Developing capacities for self-directed

learning and ability to think, be critical and to work in groups.

- Providing opportunities to student-teachers to observe and engage with children, communicate with and relate to children.

Given that the framework promotes critical reflective practices, self-learning and generation of ideas, it is important to re-look at the existing models of providing professional development opportunities to in-service teachers.

At present, the cascade model is prevalent in our country which involves the delivery of training through layers of trainers until it reaches the final target group. This approach to training was used during the UNDP/UNESCO Pacific Educational Management Project (1990-1992) and during Phases One and Two of the current UNDP/UNESCO/UNICEF/AusAID Basic Education and Life Skills (BELS) Programme. The BELS Programme through the Primary and Literacy Education (PALE) Module aimed at upgrading the quality of basic education by training in-service teachers at primary level.

A cascade model requires a team of resource persons who can give relevant inputs and create a training material which can ensure uniformity and quality. Then it requires the selection of adequate number of trainers from the pool of best teachers. Finally, under this model the training material needs to be best in terms of content and delivery.

The cascade model works in situations

where there is dearth of resources and numbers are large. It gives a large number of people the opportunity to be involved in professional development activities by getting trained and becoming trainers. If given the necessary recognition and support by ministries/departments of education, it helps create the initiative among master trainers and teachers to become more responsible for their own professional development within schools and between nearby schools.

However, the cascade model also has certain drawbacks. There is a definite degree of dilution which results in loss of quality from level to level. As a result, by the time the training reaches the final target group, it has lost some of its “real value”. Moreover, master trainers may not always have the required skills and may also be overburdened with responsibilities. Another issue is that within the cascade model adequate monitoring and assessment of activities are not possible and there is no way of fairly measuring teacher performance on a comparative basis.

Continuous professional development of English teachers in schools

Professional development of school teachers in our country at the state level is primarily the responsibility of SCERTs and DIETs. While we deal with big numbers and a host of challenges, an effective way to address it has been the cascade model. This model as discussed earlier has its advantages as it allows us to reach out to a large number of teacher, however, its effectiveness has been

challenged by many in the field. In 2008 SCERT, govt. of NCT of Delhi, identified 200 teachers to be trained by British Council as master trainers. 40 master trainers were then sent out to train 7000 English language teachers. This was done following the cascade model. However, the Impact Study (2010) showed that only 15-20% of the teachers were carrying forward the cascading. This programme was in the format of 5 days of training followed by a break and then another 5 days followed by 2 days of follow up sessions. In 2012 the same cascading was carried out by Regional English Language Office (RELO) with Delhi government school teachers with similar low impact results.

While the cascade model has allowed us to reach out to large numbers, Impact studies show that the effect is low. Therefore, there is a need to think of alternative ways to strengthen in-service programmes. In order to bring in the component of self-inquiry and problem solving within the local contexts of the teachers, action research can be an effective tool to engage teachers in exploratory practices.

Action research through the social network model

Action research which is also known as Participatory Action Research (PAR), community based study, co-operative enquiry, action science and action learning is an approach which is used for improving conditions and practices in a variety of professional spheres. The purpose of undertaking action research is to bring

about change in specific contexts. Meyer (2000) comments that action research's strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practitioners, by getting them to engage with research and the subsequent development or implementation activities. Meyer states that practitioners can choose to research their own practice or an outside researcher can be engaged in helping to identify any problems, seek and implement practical solutions, and systematically monitor and reflect on the process and outcomes of change.

Action research supports practitioners in seeking out ways in which they can improve classroom practices. Koshy (2010: 1) writes that, 'Action research is a method used for improving practice. It involves action, evaluation, and critical reflection and – based on the evidence gathered – changes in practice are then implemented. It is participative and collaborative, situation and context specific, develops reflection based on interpretations made by the participants. It results in creation of knowledge through problem solving, if the solution to the problem leads to the improvement of practice. In action research findings will emerge as action develops, but these are not conclusive or absolute.

Research is about generating knowledge. Action research creates knowledge based on enquiries conducted within specific and often practical contexts. The purpose of action research is to learn through action that then leads on to personal or professional development. Kemmis and
Journal of English Language Teaching LX/5, 2018

McTaggart (2000: 595) describe it as participatory research. The authors state that action research involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles of: Planning a change, Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, Reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning, Acting and observing, Reflecting and this goes on.

Cohen and Manion (1994: 192) describe the emergent nature of action research in their definition and maintain that action research is: *essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation. This means that ideally, the step-by-step process is constantly monitored over varying periods of time and by a variety of mechanisms (questionnaires, diaries, interviews and case studies, for example) so that the ensuing feedback may be translated into modifications, adjustment, directional changes, redefinitions, as necessary, so as to bring about lasting benefit to the ongoing process itself rather than to some future occasion*

Considering that in-service teachers need to engage in self-enquiry and reflective practices through action research, the question then arises as to how can they be supported and encouraged to do so. The present cascade model lacks the potential to support such a practice. We argue for a social network model of teacher collaboration to enhance teacher learning and professional development. In the past 20 years, educational researchers and policy makers have become increasingly interested

in teacher relationships and teacher collaboration to support teacher professional development and capacity building in schools.

As teachers need to play an important role in curriculum implementation, researchers and policy makers have started to acknowledge the importance of teacher collaboration for strengthening schools and building individual teachers' knowledge. A social network model promotes teacher collaboration of various kinds. Using this framework, social network studies outside of education have indicated the significance of social networks for organizational performance and innovation (e.g., Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Tsai and Ghoshal 1998) and suggested useful principles for the design of effective initiatives to enhance the value of collaboration (e.g., Cross et al. 2002).

Social network perspective facilitates our understanding of human interactions. In order to support this claim, the social capital theory (Degenne and Forse i 1999; Portes 1998; Scott 2000) is invoked by scholars. Social capital theory proposes that social structure, or the web of relationships among individuals, offers both opportunities and limitations for the exchange of resources. Individuals may tap into the resources that are available in the social structure in which they are embedded and use these resources to their advantage to achieve individual or organizational goals (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998).

Social network model is based on three main

assumptions (Degenne and Forse i 1999): First of all, it assumes that resources, such as information and knowledge, are exchanged in relationships among individuals. These resources flow through a social network and are transferred through social interaction among the individuals—for example, by asking for advice, collaborating, or helping (Borgatti and Ofem 2010; Burt 1992).

Secondly, social network theorists believe that individuals are inter-dependent rather than independent as they are embedded in their local social context (Degenne and Forse i 1999). Third, a social network perspective further implies that social networks may provide opportunities for, but also limitations for, the actions of individuals and organizations. In other words, in schools, teachers may benefit from the tangible and intangible resources that flow in a school's social network, such as instructional materials and expertise. However, teachers may only benefit from these resources if they have access to them through their social relationships. If the patterns of social relationships are not favourable for teachers to tap into this flow of resources then it will hinder the ability of the school to achieve its goals. In the last few years, educational studies have been exploring social network theory to comprehend ways in which the complex role of teacher relationships can improve teaching and learning in order to facilitate educational change. Social network model can involve teacher collaboration across schools or districts (e.g., Lieberman 2000; Veugelers and Zijlstra 2002). This can

include collaborations with universities (e.g., Cornelissen 2011); teacher support groups between schools (e.g., Anderson 2010); and school partnerships in which two or more schools collaboratively work on a shared goal (e.g., Muijs et al. 2010). It can also involve teacher collaboration within schools (e.g., Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar et al. 2010; Moolenaar 2010; Moolenaar, Daly et al. 2011; Penuel et al. 2009).

The Social network model needs to be adopted along with the cascade model in the Indian context to ensure reflexive and enquiry based approach to teacher development. As we are struggling with large numbers, rejecting the cascade model may not be an immediate solution. However, along with the cascade model if we are able to build strong social networks both within and outside schools and districts, it has the potential to begin a new discourse in India's experiences with in-service teacher education. Coupling the social network model with the idea of a cooperating teacher or mentor, as seen in pre-service training programmes, in in-service situations a mentor teacher and a group of mentee teachers will allow teachers to collaborate and learn in a reflective manner by engaging in action research projects that are embedded in their classroom practices and local micro-contexts. Collaborations between school teachers and university teacher educators/teachers, researchers, other school teachers is the first step to exploring the social network model which allows teachers to access new ways of improving their classroom practices. Such

exploratory research must be incentivised and brought into the school system to encourage and support teachers.

British Council's Aptis Action Research Mentorship Scheme (AARMS) launched in February 2017 is an initial attempt to explore this on a small scale. It identified 14 mentors who in turn build social networks with 80 teachers across India to work over a period of one year. This scheme aims at supporting English teachers and create an environment and framework that enables a group of teachers to try out different approaches and ideas, develop their reflective practice, make choices and decisions about their teaching styles, develop their confidence and help them improve their student learning.

Conclusion

Though there are a number of challenges involved in exploring the social network model in the Indian context, adopting it within the existing cascade model will be a good first step to explore ways to support teachers' continuing professional development. Tapping into the available resources within a network of schools will maximise opportunities for teachers to engage in reflective practices. Specific mentors can also be stationed in a particular school (for a specific period of time) to facilitate networking and action research work. The social network model thus has the potential to encourage school teachers to collaborate with mentors and explore and address their classroom concerns emerging from authentic teaching learning contexts.

This model can be implemented in the Indian context only when school teachers are motivated at the institutional level to engage in action research. Unless such requirements are made an intrinsic part of the institutional culture, in-service professional development activities will continue to have a diluted impact.

References

- Abell Foundation. (2001). *Teacher certification reconsidered: Stumbling for quality*. Baltimore, MD: Author.
- American Federation of Teachers. (2000). *Building a profession: Strengthening teacher preparation and induction*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Anderson, Lauren. (2010). Embedded, Emboldened, and (Net)Working for Change: Support-Seeking and Teacher Agency in Urban, High-Needs Schools. *Harvard Education Review* 80 (4): 541–72.
- Borgatti, Stephen P., Martin G. Everett, and Linton C. Freeman. (2002). *UCINET for Windows: Software for Social Network Analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Analytic Technologies
- Cochran S.M., & Zeichner, K., (Eds.).(2005). *Studying teacher education*. New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education (6th edn)*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Cornelissen, F., Jacqueline, van S., Douwe, B., & Theo, B. (2011). *Aspects of School-University Research Networks That Play a Role in Developing, Sharing and Using Knowledge Based on Teacher Research*. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27 (1): 147–56.
- Cross, R., A. Parker, and S. P. Borgatti. (2002). Making Invisible Work Visible: Using Social Network Analysis to Support Strategic Collaboration. *California Management Review* 44 (2): 25–46.
- Daly, Alan J., Nienke M. Moolenaar, Jose M. Bolivar, and Peggy Burke. (2010). Relationships in Reform: The Role of Teachers' Social Networks. *Journal of Educational Administration* 48 (3): 359–91.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *Doing what matters most: Investing in quality teaching*. Kutztown, PA: National Commission on Teaching & America's Future.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2001). *The research and rhetoric on teacher certification: A response to 'Teacher certification reconsidered.'* New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.
- Degenne, Alain, and Michel Forse.(1999). *Introducing Social Networks*. London: Sage.
- Haselkorn, D., & Harris, L. (1998). *The essential profession: A national survey of public attitudes toward teaching, educational opportunity and school reform*. Washington, DC: Recruiting New Teachers.
- Kemmis, S., and McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research reader (3rd ed.)* Geelong: Deakin University Press

- Kirk, D., Macdonald, D., & O'Sullivan, M. (2006). *The handbook of physical education*. London, England: Sage.
- Koshy, V. (2010). *Action Research for Improving Educational Practice: A Step-by-step guide*. London: Sage.
- Levine, A. (2006). Educating school teachers. The Education Schools Project. Accessed June 7, 2009 on the web at http://www.edschools.org/teacher_report
- Lieberman, Ann. (2000). Networks as Learning Communities: Shaping the Future of Teacher Development. *Journal of Teacher Education* 51:221–27.
- Maclver, M. A., Vaughn, E. S., Katz, G. (2005). *A teacher for every classroom : New teachers in the Baltimore City Public Schools, 1999-2004*. Baltimore, MD: The Abell Foundation. Accessed on the internet
- Meyer, J. (2000). Using qualitative methods in health related action research, *British Medical Journal*, 320: 178–181.
- Meyer, J. (2006). Action research. In K. Gerrish and A. Lacey (Eds), *The Research Process in Nursing*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Moolenaar, Nienke M. (2010). *Ties with Potential: Nature, Antecedents, and Consequences of Social Networks in School Teams*. PhD diss., University of Amsterdam
- Moolenaar, Nienke M., Peter J. C. Slegers, and Alan J. Daly. (2011). Teaming Up: Linking Collaboration Networks, Collective Efficacy, and Student Achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28 (2): 251–629
- Nahapiet, J., and S. Ghoshal. (1998). Social Capital, Intellectual Capital, and the Organizational Advantage. *Academy of Management Review* 23 (2): 242–66.
- Penuel, William R., Margaret Riel, Ann E. Krause, and Kenneth A. Frank. (2009). Analyzing Teachers' Professional Interactions in a School as Social Capital: A Social Network Approach. *Teachers College Record* 111 (1): 124–63.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:1–24.
- Scott, J. (2000). *Social Network Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Tsai, W., and S. Ghoshal. (1998). Social Capital and Value Creation: The Role of Intra-organizational Networks. *Academy of Management Journal* 41 (4): 464–78.
- Veugelers, W., and H. Zijlstra. (2002). What Goes on in a Network? Some Dutch Experiences. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 5 (2): 163–74.
- Waterman, H., Tillen, D., Dickson, R. and de Koning, K. (2001). Action research: a systematic review and assessment for guidance, *Health Technology Assessment*, 5 (23).
- Weiss, E. M., & Weiss, S. (2001). Doing reflective supervision with student teachers in a professional development school culture. *Reflective Practice*, 2, 125-154.