

EXPLORING PEER FEEDBACK IN BUILDING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF TEACHER INTERNS

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ABSTRACT

The internship programmes under teacher development commonly make provision for peer observation as a component but what purpose(s) it is meant for, is usually not made explicit, neither to the supervisors nor to the interns. Most of the time, peer observation is done as a ritual and it does not have the desired visibility or significance as the lesson planning or its delivery has. If we intend to develop reflective teachers through a process-based approach, then there is a need to enrich the internship programme through multiple perspectives. This paper attempts to tap the potential of peer feedback as a constructive input in the socialization and collaborative competence building of teacher interns through interactions and reflective practices. The researcher as a mentor of a group of six teacher interns; analysed the peer observation narratives along with post observation discussions. The insights gained from the findings helped in addressing contextual issues and in evolving an evidence based support to strengthen the constructive role of peer feedback in building up the teacher competence.

KEYWORDS: Narratives, Peer Feedback, Reflective Practices, Teacher Competence

INTRODUCTION

Any attempt towards reinvigorating the professional preparation of teachers would involve action from multiple fronts and perspectives (The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, 2010). The school internship programme, being the field-based component of professional practice is in itself a conglomerate of multiple and diverse activities in the school set up. With a move towards process based approach the internship activities need to have a thrust on experience generated reflections by the prospective teachers. Here, the reflection on not only the self experiences but on peer experiences too becomes significant.

The peer reflection relates to the philosophy of active learning (Piaget, 1971) and androgogy (Cross, 1981) and may also be seen as a manifestation of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962) as it often involves joint construction of knowledge through discourse. Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) through a meta-analysis considered the faculty as well as peer assessment in various areas of teacher development programmes.

Some formal approaches to documenting effective peer observation in Australian higher education can be found in papers by Bell (2001); MacKinnon (2001); and Magin (1998). It is difficult however to find quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of peer observation of teaching because of the nature and context of the practice. There is some evaluation data, for example from the Monash and Wollongong courses, that indicates the effectiveness of peer observation as a learning activity for teachers. There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that peer observation improves teaching and develops collegiality and reflective practice. This evidence stems mainly from the experiences of educational developers

who take part in discussions, read participants' journals, observe the development of collegial relations, observe the changes in participants' teaching skills and approaches and their level of comfort with the observation process. In addition to these, their own experiences of being themselves observed are added to the evidence (LTSN Generic Centre, 2002).

Research Questions

The study posed the following research questions:

- What were the emerging thrust areas in the feedback narratives of the peers?
- What were the possibilities of peer support becoming an enabling structure in professional practice of pre-service teachers?

CONTEXT AND METHODS

The study was located in a government school of Delhi. The school was only for girls. The researcher was there as a mentor to observe and facilitate school internship for the six interns as a group. Unlike the private schools the government schools have very moderate or nominal facilities. In this case the school building was undergoing a major renovation so there were day-to-day exigencies relating to shifting venues of the classes and stuffing of equipments and materials in all possible spaces. The classes were frequently being conducted in the open ground with a small sized mobile blackboard. So, such was the infrastructural set up when the group of six interns started their internship.

The major evidence looked into for the study were the peer observation cum feedback records that were being maintained by the interns and also the post observation interactions. The internship programme was of duration of ten weeks during which each intern was expected to conduct a minimum of twenty peer observations. They would do peer observation in individual capacity rather than as a group.

The researcher, as the mentor of the interns was with them in the school, observing their teaching and other school related activities; interacting with them at individual and group levels. Thus, the researcher was a part of the total context during the internship programme. This situation helped the researcher to triangulate the data in the peer observation journals. The writings in the Peer observation journals as *narratives*, were built up on the lived experiences. These narratives were probed through interactions and analysed in the contextual framework of the school ethos and intern related practices.

Analysis of the Narratives

A *thematic analysis* of the peer observation cum feedback narratives was undertaken to trace the trajectories of the personal professional development of the six interns. The narratives were probed for their perceptual nuances, how each of them viewed the context and the peer practices, the nature of their post observation discourse. Some selected excerpts from the narrative text are presented as a sample to bring out the personal articulation of ideas, subtle feelings and contextual influences.

Participant interns (pseudo names): Anu; Geeta; Nina; Neera; Rita; Seema. The interns were teaching classes between six and eight, except for Geeta who was teaching science to class nine. Each intern was teaching in two classes. Anu, Geeta and Seema were teaching science; Rita and Neera were teaching Hindi language; Mathematics was being taught by Nina and Seema; while social science by Rita, Nina and Neera. Thus the group was diverse with respect to the

subjects taught. Some classes were taught by more than one intern too, so the sharing of common learner groups created conditions of more intense peer discussions and feedback.

To begin with, the interns were oriented (by the researcher as their mentor) about the procedures for peer observation and the recording format. *The major sub-headings in the format were: i) detailed observations, ii) analysis, iii) feedback/ suggestions to peer and iv) what have I learnt.* Every peer observation cum feedback record was to be signed by the peer observed with the provision to write counter comments to put her point of view. There were regular rounds of post observation discussions where there would be self as well as peer appraisals for the lesson observed.

Some selected peer observation texts are taken for each of the six interns to highlight the format of the narratives under the four themes mentioned above, namely:

- Articulation of peer observation
- Analysis of the observations by the intern
- Feed back to the peer observed
- The evidences of vicarious learning.
- **Anu**

Anu was teaching science to classes six and seven. Some excerpts from her peer narratives are sampled as under:

Some excerpts from “observations” about Anu from her peers:

- *There is a tendency to give explanations herself rather than building up from student response. She is not asking questions from students. She is not looking at all the students.* (Neera)
- *The circulatory system was taught with help of a creatively made model. “The coloured beads have been used that are helping the students in differentiating among the various constituents of blood”.* (Ritu)
- *To explain about red and white blood cells, examples of diseases are taken with the showing of model which students are understanding well. The questions are quite obvious and not thought provoking type.* (Nina)

The pattern of observations shows her use of teaching aids is effective but she needs to have student participatory approach in the explanation building. There are comments about her nature of questions and questioning process.

Some excerpts from “analysis” from Anu’s peers:

- *Her class is teacher centered.* (Neera)
- *The class management was effective, students were taking interest, the teaching aids used were small in size so not visible to all the students, she did the recapitulation herself without involving the students, usage of some English words in a Hindi medium lesson.*(Ritu)
- *The teaching aids used were interesting but the labels were in English. All the students were not attentive.*(Nina)

Some excerpts from “suggestive feedback” from Anu’s peers:

- *Give attention to all your students.* (Neera)

- *Give more opportunity to your students to participate and speak and pay attention to all your students. The visibility of teaching aids to be kept into consideration. Anu's own medium is English so she finds it difficult to teach science in Hindi.*(Ritu)
- *Try to increase student participation and lessen yours. Try to use Hindi words.*(Nina) Some excerpts from "self learning" (in a way, vicarious learning) from Anu's peers;
- *The students are unable to understand the content in a teacher centered class.*(Neera)
- *In any subject the use of appropriate teaching aids exposes the learners to reality or near reality. In spite of your own medium being English it is appreciable if we make efforts to teach in Hindi to make our learners comfortable.*(Ritu)
- *To make proper use of teaching aids.*(Nina)

According to the common observations by her peers, she needed to frame higher order questions and provide more space to her learners to participate in the knowledge construction process. They appreciated the creativity in her teaching learning materials but suggested that she should use them properly. Interestingly, there was a variance in perceptions about teaching in Hindi medium and this aspect was discussed further in detail during post observation discussions.

- **Geeta**

Geeta was teaching science to classes eighth and ninth. Some observations about Geeta from her peers:

- *The things in the classroom (duster, desk etc.) being used effectively to explain the concepts. She is asking students to give examples of noise pollution from their daily life situations. Students listening attentively and taking active part in discussion. Very clear instructions to students for performance of activities. They are being addressed by their names.* (Seema)
- *No efforts were needed to discipline the class as the students were observing the activities with keen interest and full attention.* (Rita)
- *Students are being taken forward through logical understanding. Good analogies are being used.*(Seema)
- *Inquiry skills being developed among students, they are asking observations related questions.*

There seems to be a focus on Geeta's effectiveness to involve students in activities and through active student participation building up observation based explanations.

Some excerpts from "analysis" from Geeta's peers:

- *When students are called by their names they feel included in the class* (Ritu).
- *Good development of observation skills and questioning skills among the students.*(Seema)

Some excerpts from "suggestive feedback" from Geeta's peers:

- *Take the test tube to the back of the class so that the students sitting at the back could also see the reaction properly (Seema).*

Some excerpts from “self learning” (indirectly it was vicarious learning) from Geeta’s peers;

- *If students are called by their names they become more attentive, I will try to remember students’ names. I should also give clear instructions. Generation of students’ interest in a positive manner.(Seema)*
- *It is necessary that the teacher should make the problem creating students realize their mistake without letting them feel hurt, I have learnt to manage the class. There is a lot to learn in Gaeta’s class. She provides the opportunities to her students to perform various activities themselves (Rita).*

Here the peer reflections show incidence of vicarious learning relating to learner engagement, pedagogy and class management.

- **Neera**

Neera’s own reflective narratives did not show much evidence of her delving into pedagogical reflections.

Her peers however had made observations about her pedagogical approaches:

- *An interesting game based activity being done to initiate the usage of adjectives under the learning of Hindi grammar (Anu, Seema).*
- *The types of adjectives explained effectively by taking examples from students and asking them to classify (Geeta, Rita, Nina).*
- *Students being asked to point out commonalities and differences and thereby to develop an understanding about the writing of formal and informal letters. Student response is active (Rita, Seema).*
- *An effective use of newspapers is being made to enable the students to understand the role of advertising (a concept in economics). The questions being asked are thought provoking (Nina)*
- *There is scope for a better class management (Nina).*

Neera’s classroom engagements showed her efforts to adopt student-centric pedagogy, and it was emerging as a thrust area of observation by her peers.

- **Nina**

Nina was teaching mathematics and social science in class seven and six respectively.

Some peer “observations” related to Nina:

- *An effective use of wire for explaining circumference, perimeter etc. Good to first develop their understanding for the formula by a simple demonstration and then applying it (Anu, Seema).*
- *In her mathematics class she discussed the common errors made by students in their home task (Geeta, Rita)*
- *There was a role play (managed effectively later on by Nina) to depict atmosphere, biosphere, earth etc. (Anu).*
- *You should have responded to the question asked by a student about mountain peaks (seema).*

- *Appropriate questioning done to develop logical thinking among students in maths class (Rita).*

The peer observation pattern indicates that perhaps, Nina is performing better in her mathematics class and that she is less comfortable with her learners in the social science class.

Some excerpts from “analysis” by peers:

- *There are too many students in her mathematics class and they are not able to sit comfortably but they are still listening attentively to Nina because she is showing visual aids for making angles. Such aids help in capturing the attention of the big groups of students even (Rita).*
- *She has improved herself a lot in class management and voice modulation (seema).*

Here the correlation of teaching aids with learner management and also performance over a period is reflected upon. This indicates a ‘sense of continuity’ in peer engagement.

The peer “suggestions/feedback” for Nina

- *When students complete the task you give, encourage them with appreciation so that they keep having interest in class. Also check by going around if they are working on the task and doing it correctly (Anu).*
- *Ask different students for maximum participation (Geeta).*

The focus of the suggestions here seems to be the management of learner groups.

- **Rita**

Rita was teaching Hindi language and social science to class eight and six respectively.

Some observations from peers:

- *The story telling in Hindi language teaching encourages students to further build up the story in an interesting manner.*
- *Students being asked to point out errors in the words written on the board. She is making good efforts to include all students in responding.*

“Suggestions” to Rita from peers:

- *You are asking yes/no type questions only, ask for the reason also. Your voice is loud enough but it could be more effective if it was modulated well. (Anu)*

The excerpt above projects a facilitative feedback.

“Self-learning” by Rita’s peers:

- *I like how she manages the class without scolding or punishing the students when they are not attentive. She just engages them through questions. I will also follow it (Anu).*
- *A good teacher should have a good sense of humour (Geeta).*

Here both peers are appreciating Rita's positive approach to class management in their own individual styles and at the same time showing an evidence of vicarious learning.

- **Seema**

Seema was teaching science and mathematics to class eight and seven respectively.

Some observations from peers:

- *Students observing the formation of images and are being enabled to arrive at conclusions and write the explanation in their own words.*
- *The examples taken should match the understanding level of students.*
- *Class could be made more interesting.*

Here the observations indicate that the peers are able to sense some kind of incompatibility in teaching with the interest and the understanding levels of the learners.

DISCUSSIONS

The text excerpts considered above bring out the interns' observations in terms of learner engagements: teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions; in terms of content development and use of teaching aids etc. It was also found that at times some observations were emerging as common across more than one peer; thus, bringing out the thrust areas too. The observations were then analysed by the peers in reference to the learner group contexts and pedagogic skills. The emerging analytical patterns provide subtle insights into the reflective thinking of the peers.

They are able to evolve context specific and precise 'suggestive feedback'. Finally, they are able to culminate with self learning. The narratives project the individual styles of expression. The evidences for the peer assumptions and perceptions looked into through the narratives of the interns and were triangulated with post observation rounds of focused discussion. The discussions significantly brought forth their attitudinal and emotional dimensions as peers.

The researcher observed that initially the interns were hesitant and looked a little perplexed in spite of the pre-internship orientation they have had earlier. The researcher as their mentor tried to convince them that giving feedback to your peers is a way to help each other in a constructive manner. One has to develop a positive attitude as a 'giver' and 'receiver' of the feedback and that the nature of feedback is to be 'suggestive' and not 'evaluative'. Gradually their level of comfort increased and they started voicing their ideas freely and they also started sharing as to how they were helping their friends to tackle and get over apparent difficulties. In fact, it was visibly the peer support that their initial apprehensions (about the school renovation caused problems) gradually mellowed down and the group emerged with amazing resilience and affection for their learners. It was interesting to know when they shared that they got inspired by their learner groups who were so eager to learn even under adverse conditions.

The peer interactions were found to be a comforting support and a source of motivation to take up many of the tasks assigned to them by the school administration. Their perceptions about their role as teachers were interesting where they felt a sense of pride as well as duty towards their students. Towards the end of the internship they talk about their self-confidence and look back at their internship as a "journey" which they enjoyed with their students and fellow interns.

Thus, the study is able to bring insights into the enabling peer support; the link between reflection and growth in teaching was observed also by Gipe and Richards (1992) who analyzed journals and observed teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

The study brings out the researcher's observations in two areas, namely the role of peer feedback as an enabling structure to facilitate the socialization of prospective teachers in the school context and in building of their competence. Second, the felt need for a paradigm shift from a summative 'critical lesson' approach to a developmental, flexible and reflection oriented peer facilitation approach. No doubt there are issues of the reliability and validity of peer feedback but these could be addressed by further research. According to Fagot (1991) it is generally acknowledged that multiple ratings are superior to single ones. Similarly, further research is needed to understand the effects of individual versus group based peer observations and what should be the optimal size of the group. In the present study it was an all girls group, otherwise gender effects could be studied in a mixed group. Similarly, sociometric dimensions could be researched to investigate friendship or rivalry effects and their potential for possible bias in the peer feedback.

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