

Pre-Service Teachers' Reflections On Community-Based Field Experiences

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Abstract

The present research paper studies the reflections of preservice teachers' community-based field experiences as a feature of teacher education programs. Through a qualitative study, 105 prospective teachers' working with the community, a 10-day programme is designed to provide an opportunity to prepare a future teaching force for the diverse educational settings that they will encounter in the twenty-first century. This programme has been carried out in two remote villages located near Ajmer district of Rajasthan. The pre service teachers were engaged in various activities, experienced, reflected, conceptualised and applied to solve the problems in the society. The findings of the study include enhanced confidence levels in inquiry and social skills as a result of the community-based field experiences. The participants expressed they could come out of their comfort zones, explore themselves, understand others and also took a resolution of being a contributing member of the society. This not only helped them in their self-development but also prepared them as future teachers.

Key words- Community Based Field Experiences, Pre Service Teachers, Inquiry skills, Social Skills

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is considered as a noble profession due to its impact on the lives of students and society and the trust that is entrusted on it. It is very rightly spelt out in NCFTE 2009 that "Preparing one for a profession is an arduous task and it involves action from multiple fronts and perspectives". Moreover, it recognizes that there are a variety of curriculum sites and learning environments beyond classroom, such as the home, workplace, community and media etc. It also values the variety of learning styles that children display and the learning environments that teachers must work on, such as large classrooms, linguistic and ethnic differences, socio-economically disadvantaged group.

It has been observed that Pre-service teachers after being appointed in the professional settings find it difficult to adapt themselves into the real learning situations. This may be due to the lack of community participation on the part of the Pre-Service teachers. Because of this, the teacher education programs have recognized the importance of preparing preservice teachers for meaningful engagement with the community along with mastery in pedagogical content knowledge. Through a well-planned community development program, they can make themselves aware of the socio-cultural, educational, economic issues and problems related to the society and can prepare themselves to be effective teacher-practitioners.

The Teacher Preparation programme should engage teachers with children in real contexts rather than teach them about children through theories alone. It should help them understand the psycho-social attributes and needs of learners, their special abilities and characteristics, their preferred 21 modes of cognition, motivation and learning resulting from home and community socialization. The programme should prepare teachers or potential teachers to develop social sensitivity and consciousness and finer human sensibilities. Teacher education programmes need to broaden the curriculum (both school and teacher education) to include different traditions of knowledge; educate teachers to connect school knowledge with community knowledge and life outside the school. Teachers need to re-conceptualize citizenship education in terms of human rights and approaches of critical pedagogy; emphasize environment and its protection, living in harmony within oneself and with natural and social environment; promote peace, democratic way of life, constitutional values of equality, justice, liberty, fraternity and secularism, and caring values.

Schools need to facilitate the creation of vital links between children's experiences at home and in the community and what the school offers them. Bringing into the teacher education curriculum and discourse trainees' own assumptions about children and beliefs about knowledge and processes of learning, help teachers to reflect upon their own positions in society – gender, caste, class, poverty, linguistic and regional variation, community, equity and justice. Engaging them with theory along with field experiences to help trainees to view knowledge not as external to the learner but as something that is actively constructed during learning, integrating academic knowledge and professional learning into a meaningful whole (NCFTE 2009).

Community-based field experiences are very crucial for any profession. These experiences immerse the preservice teachers in the communities in which they are going to work in future. They not only help in understanding the cultural, socio economic, linguistic background but also are able to build connections between the curriculum and real life. In other words, this would help in reducing the disconnect and biases in the classroom processes. Further also increases empathy and cultural competence in preservice teachers. NEP, 2020 and other policy documents recommend adopting culturally responsive pedagogy where the teachers respect the students background, their cultural values, traditions and challenges. This pedagogy includes designing lessons that can be made more interactive, engaging and meaningful facilitating diverse learners.

Working with the community not only builds collaborative skills but also enhances the problem-solving skill among the teachers. During the interactions the preservice teachers also examine their own assumptions, beliefs, biases and position and also reflect on the inequities in education. They also understand the role of social justice in teaching. As a result, it deepens the reflective practice among the preservice teachers. These experiences create professional readiness with professional competencies like adaptability and leadership skills. This also encourages one to take civic responsibility, develop risk taking tendency and ultimately become an agent of change in the society.

Camps are typically held in a rural area near colleges and are often part of a curriculum. Some goals of community living camps include:

- Developing social responsibility
- Building self-identity, self-worth, and self-esteem
- Learning about the importance of community living
- Fostering teamwork and cooperation
- Encouraging cultural exchange and personal growth
- Learning through first-hand experiences
- Developing intergenerational relationships

Some activities that may take place at a community living camp include: Group activities, Workshops, Discussions, Team work, Social-skill building sessions, Activities to discover others, Identifying shared experiences and purpose

Purpose of working with community in teacher preparation programme:

The purpose of this field based community program for Pre-service teachers was to bring them closer to the community of compassionate adults in order to foster in them experiential learning and appreciation for human values. It also, resulted in development of self-identity, self-worth, self-esteem, leadership, and self-respect, which are reflected in the four "C's" of this program that were compassion, contribution, commitment, and character. These qualities will help them to build a successful nation and a civil society. Since teachers shape the minds of future generations. They have the potential to nurture the students' knowledge, attitudes and skills. It is not just the students, but through students they also leave lasting legacy to the society. It is this dedication and passion that can create a better world for future generations. All this is possible only when they understand the community from which the students come from, their living standards, value systems, etc. The awareness would in turn help in building connections, identify challenges/problems and gain persistence to facilitate them to overcome the challenges. Through the community involvement the student would develop a sense of citizenship and their responsibility towards the society.

Inclusion of locally relevant content in the curriculum along with the pedagogical practices and resources has been emphasised in National Curriculum Framework. In order to accomplish this the teacher needs to be equipped for selecting, organising and integrating the subject content and relevant learning experiences from the community in the classroom practices. For the contextualisation of learning experiences from the community teachers need to understand certain specifics such as community knowledge about new reforms such as technology, local occupations, culture including songs, festivals, and games etc.

Teachers who create curriculum materials and learning experiences based on gender, peace, and sustainable development etc. also acquire the ability to recognize and analyze the details for the sake of a meaningful curriculum transaction through hands-on experience. (page 23, NCFTE 2009)

Also, reflection plays a pivotal role in helping preservice teachers make sense of their experiences especially with the community. Through these reflective practices, pre-service teachers acquire the skills to examine their assumptions and may develop culturally responsive teaching strategies. Reflection also fosters a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dimension of education.

This study explores the reflections of preservice teachers who participated in community-based field experiences as part of their teacher education program. It aims to understand how such engagements affect their inquiry and social skills helps them in self-development. By analysing their narratives, the study sheds light on the role of community-based programs in shaping empathetic, and sensitive educators who will be equipped to bridge the gap between school and community.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore community-based field experiences of the preservice teachers
2. To study the effect of community-based field experiences on preservice teachers' inquiry and social skills
3. To find out the effect of working with community on preservice teachers' self-development (challenges faced and how they overcame, resolutions taken)

Design of the Study

A qualitative research design has been used to explore and analyse preservice teachers' reflections on their community-based field experiences. A qualitative approach was found to be most suitable for analysing the in-depth and complexity of participants' insights, perceptions, and meaning-making processes.

Site, context and participants

The participants consisted of 105 students of preservice teacher education programme out of which 69 female and 36 male teacher trainees were present. These participants completed a community-based field component where, which involved working in rural community settings as part of their teaching program. The villages Kadel and Dongariyakala near Ajmer were the sites of working with community programme where participants carried out various activities.

All Participants enrolled in the course comprising a mix of gender, type of programme and subject specialization encompass the sample to gather diverse perspectives. The details of the sample structure is as given below:

Table 1: Details of the sample

Subject	Male Teachers	Female teachers	Total
Humanities	15	40	55
Science	21	29	50
Total	36	69	105

Tools and Techniques

The primary data sources included, participant observation, field notes, interview schedule, Daily reflections in the report were used for collecting data. The purpose of the various tools and techniques used is as given below:

Table 2: Instrumentation

Tool/technique used	Participants	Purpose
Observation (Before, during and after the programme)	Faculty	Record the process of inquiry, making field notes, social skills demonstrated by the students
Interviews (After the programme)	Preservice teachers	Data regarding the challenges faced, lessons learnt, resolutions taken
Reflections (After the programme)	Preservice teachers	Reflections in their daily dairies

Data collection procedure

This is a structured programme for a period of 10 days with different types of activities that are carried out in different modalities. The participants were divided into eight distinct groups for visiting the community. These groups discussed amongst themselves and decided to take Sustainable development goals for the surveys to be conducted in the concerned villages regarding status, implementation of initiatives and challenges being faced in the villages for various SDGs. The assigned groups worked collaboratively to create a questionnaire as an interactive tool to delve deeper into the issues. They did research on the different goals; key activities, initiatives and actions. They constructed questions on the respective aspects of the survey in their groups. After presenting the tool, feedback from other groups was collected to further enrich its quality and scope. The various areas which these groups explored were:

- Exploring energy savings and affordable alternatives.
- Fostering small-scale industries, economic growth, and entrepreneurship.
- Understanding and eradicating poverty.
- Advocating gender equality in every sphere.
- Enhancing quality education for all.
- Sustainable practices related to food, medicine, etc
- Practicing sustainable agricultural practices.
- Promoting health, hygiene, cleanliness, and well-being.

This exercise encouraged critical thinking, teamwork, and creativity as students prepared for their roles in the field. The tools were finalized in the groups and were used during the survey.

Learning Activities

It includes morning yoga, training on first aid, providing exposure visits, plantation drives, interaction with villagers, youth, teachers and students of rural villages, serving the needy, designing tools for interactions, collection of data through interviews and questionnaires, cleanliness drives, carrying out rallies on various aspects like cyber-safety and security, women empowerment, sustainable development and practices, government initiatives, etc. The students are randomly grouped where they develop tools for surveys and learning aids to use in schools in a workshop mode. They were taken to a farm where millets, roses, amla, etc. are cultivated to understand farming practices. Their day begins with a Yoga session wherein they do various asanas followed by meditation. The students took the responsibility of all the activities during the ten-day programme. Maintaining a reflective diary on every day activities is one of the reflective mechanisms to understand the people, process and outcome. A confidence scale was administered before and after the intervention to the sample.

Data analysis

To understand the impact of community-based field experiences on preservice teachers, a self-assessment was conducted on ten core skills. Participants rated their confidence levels on a 3 point reaction scale as Not at all confident (1), Somewhat confident (2), Confident (3) before and after the field experience.

The statements included demonstration of Inquiry skills like preparation questionnaires/creating surveys, conducting interviews, listening and observing the process of inquiry, reflecting on the issues and concerns, preparing reports; and Social skills like collaboration, cooperation, navigating the group dynamics, adjusting with each other, negotiating, The results for the same are summarized below:

Table 3: Self-Perceived Confidence of Preservice Teachers Before and After Community-Based Field Experience

S. No	Aspect	Before Field Experience			After Field Experience		
		Not at all confident (1)	Somewhat confident (2)	Confident (3)	Not at all confident(1)	Somewhat confident (2)	Confident (3)
1	Create Surveys	12(11.43 %)	66(62.86 %)	27(25.72 %)	2(1.9%)	18(17.14%)	85(80.95 %)
2	Conducting interviews	21(20%)	55(52.38 %)	29(27.62 %)	2(1.9%)	16(15.24%)	87(82.86 %)
3	Reflecting & sharing issues and concerns	23(21.90 %)	41(39.05 %)	41(39.05 %)	4 (3.81%)	14(13.33%)	87(82.86 %)
4	Preparing reports	32(30.48 %)	42(40.00 %)	31(29.52 %)	1(0.95%)	16(15.24%)	88(83.81 %)
5	Collaborating with others	20(19.05 %)	43(40.95 %)	42(40.00 %)	1(0.95%)	10(9.52%)	94(89.52 %)
6	Using the group dynamics for better work	12(11.43 %)	53(50.48 %)	40(38.10 %)	4(3.81%)	15(14.29%)	86(81.90 %)
7	Adjusting with each other	14(13.33 %)	35(33.33 %)	56(53.33 %)	1(0.95%)	8(7.62%)	96(91.43 %)
8	Negotiating and resolving conflicts	14(13.33 %)	50(47.62 %)	41(39.05 %)	1(0.95%)	25(23.81%)	79(75.24 %)
9	Understanding strength & weakness of self	20(19.05 %)	45(42.86 %)	40(38.10 %)	1(0.95%)	27(25.71%)	77(73.33 %)
10	Taking initiative	25(23.81 %)	41(39.05 %)	39(37.14 %)	-	20(19.05%)	85(80.95 %)

Across all ten aspects, it was found that there was a significant shift in the confidence level of the participants from lower to higher levels after the field experience. Prominent improvements were seen

in the areas such as **Creating Surveys** in which the confidence of participants increased from 25.72% before the field experience to 80.95% after coming back from the field. The participants carried out surveys on various aspects related to sustainable development goals like No Poverty/Zero Hunger; Good Health and Well-being; Clean Water and Sanitation; Quality Education; Gender Equality; Reduced Inequality; Affordable and Clean Energy; Decent Work and Economic Growth/ small scale industries/ entrepreneurship; Sustainable practices/ food habits, traditions, medicines; and Agricultural activities/Farming/vocations. On interviewing they expressed that the tool development in group gave them confidence in collaboration, cooperation and formulating questions.

Also, the confidence level of participants increased in **Preparing Reports** from 29.52% to 83.81%. While **Collaborating with Others** the level of confidence of participants inflated from 40% to 89.52% and the skill of **Adjusting with Peers** amongst the participants reached the highest confidence at 91.43%. Many of the participants said that the tool development; travelling and carrying out surveys and also preparing reports together taught them adjusting with peers to complete the task. It gave them the opportunity to negotiate, adjust, and solve the problems or face the obstacles in the process. Areas like Reflecting and Sharing, Group Dynamics, and Conflict Resolution also showed positive growth, indicating enhanced interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Taking Initiative started with the lowest "Not at all confident" (23.81%) and ended with 80.95% reporting confidence—highlighting enhanced leadership and self-direction. In a nutshell it is observed that the participants have shown improved confidence in inquiry and social skills as a result of the programme.

Qualitative Analysis of Reflections on Community-Based Field Experiences

Based on the reflections of preservice teachers regarding their Community-Based Field Experiences, a thematic analysis has been done to get insights of emotions, challenges, and transformations that the pre-service teachers underwent during community-based field experiences. Given below is the qualitative analysis organized by major emerging themes:

Table 4: Themes emerged from the reflections

Excerpts/ Reflections	Sub themes	Emerging theme
<i>Rising in the morning for yoga was difficult but became a good habit</i> <i>I could self-reflect and perceive things differently</i> <i>WWC made me more empathetic; struggles of villagers made me value food and resources</i>	Waking early and discipline Self-reflection Empathy and emotional maturity	Personal Growth and Self-Awareness
<i>Experienced confusion from villagers due to my short hair, reflecting gender-based biases.</i>	Gender identity and stereotypes	Social Awareness and Sensitivity to Inequalities

<i>Observed caste-based discrimination and gender inequality prevalent in village settings</i> <i>Alcohol consumption is affecting education in villages</i>	Caste and gender discrimination: Alcoholism and its impact	
<i>Experience helped us overcome our introverted nature and improved interpersonal skills.</i> <i>Managing group differences was difficult</i> <i>Working in a group had its challenges but developed bonding</i> <i>Learning sign language and applying it in Badhir Vidyalaya (school for the hearing impaired) was a new experience</i>	Introversion to expression: Teamwork challenges Language and inclusivity	Communication and Collaboration Skills
<i>Leadership and managing sessions with resource persons and students was quite challenging</i> <i>It was difficult but transformative to take on a leadership role.</i>	Leadership development Group leading experiences	Leadership and Responsibility
<i>Absence of quality education and that</i>	Lack of quality education and	Educational System and Resource Challenges

<i>amendment not being implemented.</i> Visits to schools like Badhir Vidyalaya opened eyes to inclusive practices, yet gaps in infrastructure and promised support from sarpanchs were often unmet.	implementation gaps Facilities for marginalized groups	
<i>Villagers are hardworking and self-sufficient</i> Observations included farming (e.g., rose farming in Rajasthan), water shortages, caste systems, and domestic violence.	Village self-sufficiency Traditional practices	Community Dynamics and Cultural Insights
<i>I plan to start an NGO</i> Others reflected on " <i>what I can do for society</i> " Several students expressed intent to replicate good practices observed in villages in their own contexts.	Desire to serve and lead Learning from models	Aspirations and Future Goals

The reflections provided insights into the transformations experienced by participants in themselves, bringing out *Personal Growth and Self-Awareness* as the emerging theme. In the beginning of the programme they experienced the difficulty in rising early for yoga, but after a few days, it evolved as a healthy habit, it helped the participants in internalization of the habits such as self-regulation and time management. The reflections also align well with David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. The participants' exposure to real-life challenges, such as community interactions and personal discipline, serve as concrete experiences. Their thoughtful reflections, including increased empathy and self-awareness, represent deeper cognitive engagement and internalization. The second reflection—"I could self-reflect and perceive things differently" signifies the development of metacognitive awareness. The participant becomes more introspective and open to alternate viewpoints.

The final reflection relates to social and emotional learning: observing the hardships of the locals encouraged thankfulness and empathy. Sub-themes like self-awareness, empathy, and discipline show how character development is facilitated by organized activities and exposure to real-world situations. When taken as a whole, these revelations show a path toward emotional fortitude and increased self-awareness, highlighting the significance of experiential and value-based learning in comprehensive education.

The reflections from the participants reveal growing social awareness and critical sensitivity to inequalities experienced in rural contexts. Reaction of villagers due to short hair of participants reflects gender stereotypes, while observations of caste-based and gender discrimination indicate social exclusion and biases. Additionally, the reflection on influence of alcohol consumption on education highlights socio-economic challenges impacting children's learning, Kumari and Sharma (2021) in their study highlight how field-based experiences expose teacher-trainees to realities, fostering deeper understanding of inequalities. Such experiences are essential for preparing reflective and socially responsive educators. Reflections from participants revealed that there was an improvement in interpersonal communication and social anxiety was considerably reduced after collaborative activities. The inclusive learning environment and interactions at Badhir Vidyalaya enhanced participants' awareness and sensitivity, validating the significance of communication and collaboration in developing social-emotional skills. Participants expressed increased confidence, decision-making skills, and accountability, reflecting a shift from passive roles to active leadership. These experiences align with the study conducted by Sharma and Singh (2023), that the student-led initiatives in educational settings cultivate self-efficacy and collaborative leadership and facing the challenges contribute to deeper self-awareness and responsibility. Thus, leadership experiences proved pivotal in fostering essential life skills.

Field observations revealed significant gaps in the implementation and actual support from local authorities like sarpanches(village head) especially for providing resources. Visits to institutions such as Badhir Vidyalaya highlighted efforts toward inclusive education, yet also exposed infrastructural deficiencies and limited resources for marginalized groups. These findings resonate with the results of the study indicating disparities between educational policies and ground realities by Kumar and Rani (2022), which concludes that the inclusive education in India is hindered by systemic neglect, lack of accountability, and infrastructural barriers, particularly in rural areas.

- The field exposure provided deep insights to the participants about village life. Participants observed hardworking villagers engaged in practices like rose farming in Rajasthan, despite facing challenges such as water scarcity. These experiences fostered respect for indigenous knowledge systems. Many participants expressed a sense of purpose and were planning to start NGOs or replicate sustainable rural practices in their own settings. This aligns with research by Mehta and Verma (2023), which emphasizes that experiential exposure to rural realities cultivates social responsibility and leadership aspirations in youth. The willingness to engage with grassroots issues and promote inclusive development reflects a shift from passive learning to active engagement.

- The reflections and the emerging themes from the reflections highlight that community-based field experiences were a transformative experience for preservice teachers in order to develop professional skills like communication, collaboration, and leadership and also to develop the skill of facing real social issues such as discrimination, gender bias, and educational disparities. This process cultivated greater empathy, cultural sensitivity, and social responsibility, aligning well with the goals of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Challenges faced by the Participants:

During these ten days of field experience programme and follow up, the participants shared certain challenges that they faced including managing their sleep routines and waking up early for yoga; coordinating with groups, communicating with locals, and formulating insightful questions; participating in team work and leading the teams.

In turn they also expressed that some of the challenges/issues they came across in way of development in the village include:

- There were several reports of poor hygiene, contaminated drinking water, and inadequate restrooms at schools.
- There was evidence of casteism, child labour, gender-based discrimination, and ongoing customs like parda pratha and child marriage.
- Children's schooling and general well-being were adversely affected by alcoholism in the village.
- Misconceptions and ignorance regarding mental health and disabilities
- Government schools lack inclusive methods and high-quality instruction.
- Gaps in care and inclusion were discovered during visits to special schools and assisted living facilities.

In depth deliberations with the villagers, youth and amongst the preservice teacher led to some of the **suggestions like** upgrade the infrastructure for schools and sanitation in remote villages; Organize frequent community awareness campaigns about issues such as substance abuse, gender equality, and the rights of children and people with disabilities; Provide frequent exposure visits and train the pre service teachers and enhance their understanding about the real contexts and lives of people; Encourage habit formation by engaging in regular activities (sports, yoga, etc.); and promote the preservice teachers who want to lead change and start their NGOs.

Findings:

Some of the key findings from the analysis of the data have been enlisted below:

There was a significant increase in confidence level of the Pre-service teachers across all ten core skills after community-based field experience. Broadly the ten core skills could be categorised as Inquiry and Social Skills.

It was found that the Pre-service teachers depicted remarkable improvement in inquiry skills, with increase in the level of confidence in creating surveys from 25.72% to 80.95%, conducting interviews from 27.62% to 82.86%, preparing reports from 29.52% to 83.81%, and reflecting and sharing issues from 39.05% to 82.86%.

Also, there was significant growth in the confidence level of the Preservice teachers for using social skills, such as for collaboration the level of confidence increased from 40% to 89.52%, for adjusting with peers it reached up to a level of 91.43%, for effective use of group dynamics and negotiation and conflict resolution it increased by 43.80% and 36.19% respectively, a substantial increase was found in understanding personal strengths and weaknesses rising and taking initiatives.

The reflections from the Pre-Service teachers provided insight that these community-based field experience served as a transformative journey for them, and it fostered in them

- the sense of personal and professional growth through self-regulation, empathy, and emotional maturity;
- awareness of social inequalities and systemic educational challenges;
- enhanced their communication, collaboration, and leadership skills;
- deep understanding of rural life and indigenous practices;
- purpose and commitment for inclusive education and prepared them to bring social change.

CONCLUSION

Preservice teachers' professional, emotional, and social development was greatly affected and influenced by the community-based field experience. In line with the goals of NEP 2020, both quantitative data and qualitative reflections show that real-life exposure fosters transformative learning by encouraging critical consciousness, empathy, leadership, and teamwork. They acquired 21st-century skills like inquiry, teamwork, leadership and critical reflection by actively engaging with the rural communities. Their increased awareness of social issues, including gender inequality, caste-based discrimination, and educational disparities, cultivated empathy, cultural sensitivity, and a stronger commitment to equity and inclusion in education. Such field experience programs prepare socially conscious, reflective, and proactive educators who are equipped to address diverse classroom issues and contribute meaningfully to nation-building.

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