
Book Review

A Learning Community of Reflective Teachers From Whispers to Resonance

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The isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic drew out several solutions— virtual meetings, digital resources and online collaborative platforms. In contrast, chronic isolation that creeps up gradually, though still as debilitating as the sudden variant, often goes unheeded and unattended. *A Learning Community of Reflective Teachers: From Whispers to Resonance* puts the spotlight on the compounding benefits of moving from isolation to community building, of transitioning from teaching and researching in silos to collaborating across disciplines, institutions and regions. The book showcases the action research of members of the learning community of reflective practitioners (LCoRPs) anchored by the editor, Neeraja Raghavan. Their work is a rare, if

not unique, example of collaborative action research in the Indian school education sector.

Neeraja Raghavan, a former Professor at Azim Premji University, has a doctorate in Chemistry from Princeton University. She has worked extensively in the field of science teacher education. Raghavan's considerable experience as a teacher and Principal is evident in the academic undergirding and pragmatic perseverance demonstrated in the book. The members of LCoRPs met regularly for over two years, first in Raghavan's course on reflective writing and later in the Teacher Jottings programme. Finally, they decided to carry out a collaborative action research project under the banner of Teachers as Change

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Agents (TACA) in three phases over two years. Their project represents an entanglement of multiplicities—multi-disciplinary, multi-regional, multi-level and multi-directional.

In the chapter titled, 'Teachers as Change Agents' Raghavan points out five lacks that impacted the group dynamics of LCoRPs— the lack of initial familiarity among members, compulsion to join, competitiveness, pre-determined objectives and a hierarchical structure. The group, lacking these characteristics, became a free-flowing discussion forum in the primary phase. As discussions deepened, the community progressed towards becoming a purpose-oriented collaboration. Their objective was to produce academically rigorous papers on action research. Raghavan states that she was mindful of Roger Brindley and Christine Crocco's cautionary advice, "Committed educators may come to the table with the best of intentions but lack the facilitative processes and protocols that lead to significant results". Therefore, even though the community's initial agenda was amorphous, she ensured that members had access to facilitative processes to collaborate from the start. The emphasis on processes rather than outcomes is a common theme in all instances of action research presented in the book.

The book has two sections. Section 1 is comprised of two chapters authored by the editor. The first chapter, 'Teacher Development',

outlines how LCoRPs came together, their geographic spread and the activities during the sessions. By including unedited responses shared by the participants and entries from her own journal, Raghavan brings alive the mood and challenges of the lockdown years with which many other teachers can relate. The second chapter, 'Teachers as Change Agents', explains the theoretical and conceptual anchoring that guided the LCoRPs community. The chapter is rich with references to several key conceptual tools in education research, including Shirley Hord's definition of a professional learning community (1997), Eric Mazur's articulation of peer instruction (2001), and Laura Servage's understanding of teacher development (2008). Based on the foundation created by other scholars, Raghavan develops a model for teacher development that remedies the deficiencies of the other reformative models prevalent in Indian schools. Raghavan shows how teacher development can generate a transformative impact through her model.

Section 2 includes eight papers whose subject matter spreads over various stakeholders, including school support staff in an elite alternative school in Andhra Pradesh and students from a marginalised rural area in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra. Among the eight papers, five are student-oriented and three are teacher-oriented.

In line with the necessarily contextual orientation of action research, each of the five student-oriented papers deals with a specific education level—primary, middle or senior. And of these, two papers stand out for selecting less explored niches as their subjects—Nivedita Bedadur and Anita Butani's *The Road Less Travelled* and Swati Gautam's *Building an Ecosystem of Empathy Between Students and Support Staff in School*. Bedadur and Butani's findings on using the 'audio only' mode for teaching students in rural Maharashtra have significant implications for second language teaching and distance education at the school level. Similarly, Gautam's research has cross-over possibilities for organisational value-setting and ESG compliance in schools. The student-oriented papers from researchers located in Chennai and Coimbatore inquire into the processes required to enhance students' autonomy. Ganga Sundar lays out a blueprint for turning 'passive' middle-schoolers into self-driven learners but does not clarify the indicators of their passivity. A short description of the students' demographic or psychological profiles would have enriched the reader's contextual understanding. Unlike Sundar, Krithika Bharath steers clear of homogenisation. Instead, she offers a clear view of the circumstances of the population she studies in her paper on turning students into autonomous

learners. She observed that some second graders in her school, possibly imitating the adults around them, were exhibiting exclusionary and disparaging behaviour towards a darker-skinned classmate. Viewing this behaviour as an indicator of imitative attitudes, she sought to stop mindless imitation by encouraging them to think autonomously. The fifth student-directed paper by Nandashree Natarajan and Anne Isaac is exceptional in taking a 360° view of the problem by considering the parents' perspective. The researchers increased the trust level in their programme for turning the classroom from a teacher-centric to a learning-centric environment by incorporating parents' observations in the plan of action.

The three teacher-oriented papers also explore distinct axes; one looks at the vertical axis of vision implementation and the other two papers examine the challenges of breaking boundaries in lateral collaborations. Vidhya Nagaraj outlines a step-wise project for augmenting teacher agency that she rolled out for her school in suburban Bengaluru. Her research demonstrates that loosening the top-down command chain can contribute to better alignment with the organisation's vision. In another teacher-directed paper, Deeptha Vivekanand, a *Storytelling Specialist* based in Chandigarh, makes a compelling case for taking on

storytelling pedagogy as a mission. The third teacher-oriented paper by Madhusree Majumdar calls for breaking departmental silos because “when teachers work in isolation, they are more vulnerable to ignorance”. Vivekanand and Mazumdar’s papers deserve the urgent attention of the educator community at large because they offer roadmaps for immediate and desirable pedagogical transformation.

All the papers in the book are divided into bite-sized sections arranged in a logically coherent sequence. The book’s regular use of pictographic tools— diagrams, mind

maps and photographs— facilitates quick absorption of complex aspects of the research. The book’s only constraint is its regional bias, which limits its capacity to capture the cultural specificities of a country as diverse as India. Except for one paper from Chandigarh, there are no papers from northern or eastern India. Of course, this bias is unintentional, as the book is the outcome of a voluntarily associated group. One hopes that more educators from the north and east will follow the lead of From Whispers to Resonance to generate similarly valuable action research.