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## Ensuring continuing competence

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It is widely accepted that pre-service training courses such as D.Ed and B.Ed do not fully prepare teachers for the job. This is because of the gap that exists between the pre-service curricula and field reality. When teachers go to school, they encounter challenges such as lack of resources, low student motivation, poor learner performance, overwhelming workload, etc.

Also, issues such as a solitary/isolated work environment, especially in rural schools, poor relationships with colleagues and parents and low language proficiency bother them constantly. One of the ways of helping teachers address these issues is by providing them with opportunities for 'learning on the job'. 'Learning on the job' is also called Continuing Professional Development (CPD), where individuals aim for continuous improvement in their professional skills and knowledge.

Teachers' professional development is yet to gain focus in our country. Once recruited, teachers hardly put in any efforts to engage themselves in professional development activities. Teachers who are concerned about CPD get few opportunities to access such activities. It is important to provide opportunities for teachers to share good practices, ask questions, understand the problems other teachers face, and develop new insights into their own teaching. CPD is necessary to ensure continuing competence in the job, to train for new responsibilities and for a changing role, and to increase job satisfaction.

As spelt out in The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009-10), the broad aims of continuing professional development programmes for teachers are to:

1. Explore, reflect on, and develop one's own practice.
2. Deepen one's knowledge of, and update oneself about one's academic discipline or other areas of school curriculum.
3. Break out of intellectual isolation and share experiences and insights with others in the field, as well as intellectuals in the immediate and wider society.

In-service training (INSET) is one of the means of achieving continuing professional development. INSET programmes should promote teacher learning – help teachers develop pedagogic competence, linguistic competence and reflective practices. However, not many teachers have access to in-service courses. Also, there is no strong mechanism to monitor those teachers who have been trained in in-service training programmes. Moreover, there is very little research into the effectiveness of such training programmes (NCFTE, 2009-10).

In addition to INSET, there are other effective forms of CPD. Professional development activities such as mentoring, classroom observation, professional discussion, informal networking, etc., which help teachers come together regularly to engage in professional exchange, to ask questions, to share their experiences and concerns and to exchange teaching ideas. These opportunities help them become better practitioners.

At present, how many of our experienced teachers have been observed by another teacher?

How many teachers engage themselves in professional discussions and readings? It is found that professional talk among teachers occurs for less than 2 minutes per day!

If we desire to bring about improvement in teaching and learning, we need to pay greater emphasis to the continuing professional development of teachers. The following are some of the professional development activities that teachers can engage in:



- In-school workshops/whole-school training
- Joining teacher networks (e.g. ELTeCS, ELTAI, etc.), teacher study or research groups, or a professional learning community
- Mentoring/lead teaching/Team teaching
- Observing other staff members teaching, observing teachers in other schools, observing someone teach your class, etc.
- Engaging with specialist subject associations
- Maintaining professional portfolios
- Carrying out action research

- Visits to other schools
- Pursuing short courses/degree upgrading courses
- Attending conferences, seminars/contributing to a professional publication
- Using ICT tools
- Engaging with academic readings/self-study
- Discussing teaching with critical friends/experts

Classroom observation is a useful method to develop. The processes of observing someone's class, thinking about it and discussing it with him/her afterwards, learning some key techniques, trying them out in your class and getting someone to observe your class and collect some

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feedback are essential to hone professional skills.

The concept of critical or professional friendship is useful in teaching. A 'critical friend' is someone with whom a teacher can share his/her experiences, thoughts and concerns about teaching and learning. Similarly, critical friendship groups (CFGs) are helpful in giving and receiving feedback within and between schools. Such groups are committed to improving student learning and teacher practices through collaborative learning.

These forms of CPD seem to have the greatest impact on professional growth and change. CPD benefits teachers in the following ways:

Develops professional abilities, improves pupils' learning/achievement, improves teachers' understanding of recent developments in the field, has more impact on the teacher's own knowledge and practices, encourages reflection and self-evaluation, makes teachers experimental and adaptive, develops enthusiasm, provides opportunity to collaborate, provides innovative strategies for teaching, helps gain technology expertise, gives insights about student's background, motivates teachers to invest in the profession, helps interact with others more confidently, brings attitudinal changes in dealing with students, improves teacher retention and recruitment.

There has been a huge investment of efforts made in many countries on continuing professional development programmes for teachers. We must recognize this and encourage teachers' active involvement in CPD activities. For example, as NCFTE (2009-10) suggests, teachers could be provided with the option of taking a year off (paid or unpaid) to pursue a course or spend time at another school, university, or NGO in order to learn and study. Also, teachers could be permitted to avail duty leave to attend seminars and conferences connected to the profession.

Professional development does not just happen. The government must recognize the importance of CPD for teachers at the policy level. Teachers' access to CPD is very limited. Therefore, giving an official status and space for CPD activities is important. The Department needs to be proactive in promoting and providing access to continuing professional development. Individual teachers should be made responsible for their career development.

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