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Taking workshop lessons into the classroom

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One of the most important resources in any educational institution is a team of competent and well-performing teachers. It is necessary to equip them with in-depth and up-to-date knowledge and pedagogical skills in order to bring in changes in the educational system. Hence, teachers' professional training and professional development play a pivotal role and it should be a priority area for any civil society.

As teachers teaching English in government primary schools are not specialized in the subject and have little formal professional training in it, the Government of Karnataka planned an intensive month-long teacher professional development programme and trained nearly 4,100 teachers across the State in the year 2016-17 with the following objectives:

- To make teachers aware of a comprehensive strategy for teaching English at the primary level.
- To enable teachers to transact the English curriculum through a learner-centred, participatory approach to ensure quality elementary education.
- To develop teachers' competence to understand and teach the English textbooks of classes I to VIII.
- To encourage teachers to involve themselves in continuing professional development activities.

The Department of State Educational Research and Training (DSERT) and the Regional Institute of English South India (RIESI) were involved as nodal agencies for the implementation of this ambitious teacher professional development programme. The training was residential in nature and was managed by 204 Master Resource Persons (MRPs) who had completed the same training at the state level.

An online survey was conducted in March 2018 to assess the impact of the one month training on primary school teachers with the following questions in mind:

- To what extent does teachers' professional learning have an impact on their classroom teaching?
- What changes are seen in the classroom as a result of teachers' professional learning?

Nearly 1041 teachers took part in the survey which had 20 questions and 937 teachers (91%) gave complete responses. About 86% teachers who participated in the online survey were from rural areas; 67% were female and 33% were male teachers. The majority of them teach grades 6 to 8.

Impact of the training

Nearly 68% teachers stated that the training helped them teach English confidently. Also, a majority of them said that students showed more interest in learning English than before. Teachers felt that the techniques, activities and games learnt in the training helped them teach English in interesting ways.

The training seems to have developed teachers' fluency in English to a great extent and as a result, teachers talk mostly in English in the classroom. Still, a few teachers feel that 'children definitely need to know their mother tongue as well to grasp the meaning of abstract things. So, even after the training, we occasionally use their mother tongue. It really takes time for children to use English.'



The majority of the teachers stated that they learnt to use additional materials to supplement the textbooks. Charts for lessons, cards and pictures for grammar aspects, dictionaries, newspapers and story books for developing language skills are increasingly being used in schools.

Challenges ahead

Teachers cited lack of resources as a constraint to use ICT tools in the classroom. At the most, they use mobiles to play rhymes, show motivational videos, etc. Also, they are yet to come to grips with reflective practices. Teachers need to assess themselves, analyze classroom processes and reflect on their teaching experiences and keep changing their classroom strategies, techniques and approaches accordingly. Teacher development programmes need to sensitize teachers towards the crucial aspects of professional practice such as questioning one's own assumptions and beliefs about language teaching, pedagogical practices and issues of language assessment.

As far as students' abilities are concerned, teachers mentioned that most of the students in the upper primary (classes V, VI and VII) can use dictionaries, can read aloud with clear pronunciation and can talk about their school, family, pet animal, etc. However, only some of them can read short passages silently, comprehend and answer the questions given. Also, very few can use familiar words in their own sentences, narrate simple stories and write short paragraphs. This qualitative improvement in student learning – seems to be the litmus test to measure the real impact of teachers' professional learning. Teachers need to set realistic, achievable targets and strive to uplift the disadvantaged learners studying in government schools.

Some of the everyday challenges that teachers face, as stated by them in the study, are as follows:

- Irregularity of students.
- Handling combined classes.
- Lack of parental support.

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- Lack of time to prepare activities.
- Paying attention to individual students in large classes.
- Lack of reference materials and other resources such as projector, computer, electricity, etc.
- Teaching English along with other subjects.

In spite of such systemic constraints, it is reassuring to see teachers being enthusiastic and concerned about finding ways of helping disadvantaged students. It is clear in the metaphors they have used for their classrooms. For many teachers, a classroom is either a beautiful garden or a colourful fish tank, a playground, a fairyland, a sky, a small library or a home itself!

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