



Remedial teaching in Indian under-resourced communities: Professional development of para-teachers



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summative evaluation of a professional development program for para-teachers within an Indian NGO. The program aimed to support para-teachers in well-structured learner-centered enactment by introducing planning and reflection of daily lessons. The study investigated lesson plans, enactment and pupil outcomes to assess the extent to which para-teachers could plan and enact well-structured learner centered lessons. The study suggests strong evidence that the program was successful in helping para-teachers achieve greater quality of lesson planning, enactment and pupil learning.

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1. Introduction

The employment of para-teachers in place of qualified teachers has proliferated in India and internationally, especially as NGOs and governments struggle to achieve universal education against the odds of teacher shortage and limited finances (cf. Pandey, 2009; Jagannathan, 2000). In India, the induction of para-teachers has been highly debated. Para-educators are valued for their commitment, insider insights and ability to relate to the unique needs of children in difficult circumstances, and their access to poorer areas (Desai, 2003; Pandey, 2006; Sharma and Mallick, 2009; Ramchandra, 2008). Public debate on the employment of para-teachers is mixed. Besides the economic benefits of employing para-teachers they have earned much credit because of their enthusiasm and regularity (Govinda and Josephine, 2004). However, concerns exist about the lack of basic education and professional teacher training of the para-educators, which threatens to dilute the quality of teaching and learning (Pandey, 2009; Govinda and Josephine, 2004). Infact, unlike professional teachers, pre-service training for para-educators is not mandatory. Para-educator training is extremely limited, in comparison to teacher training; whereas teacher training programs generally take four years to complete and are at the bachelor level, para-teaching programs are known to be as short

as five days of induction training (Ramachandran et al., 2008). Increasingly, calls are being made for the professional development (PD) of para-educators in India (Jagannathan, 2000; Sharma and Mallick, 2009) and elsewhere. A recent study (Raval et al., 2012a,b) highlighted that because of their lack of professional teacher training and cultural context; para-educators working in India (and developing countries) require tailor-made professional development support which is compatible with their unique learning needs and context. While there is considerable documentation of the benefits and challenges of employing para-teachers, the research-base for designing tailor-made professional development for para-educators is limited.

This article contributes to the limited research base on para-teacher professional development by describing an evaluation of a professional development (PD) program for para-teachers. The development of the para-teacher PD program, flanked by a research study took place within an Indian educational NGO, Maitri. It developed over three iterative phases of design plus implementation and two formative evaluation studies. A summative study which is reported in this paper marked the end of three phases. The following describes Maitri's organizational context along with research and development activities that led up to the summative evaluation.

1.1. Context of the PD program and the study

1.1.1. The organizational setting

Maitri, a western Indian city with a population of about four million people, provides educational support to slum children through learning centers within their residential communities.

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Each center has a para-teacher recruited from the local area on a small honorarium, with qualifications ranging from 12th grade to bachelor's degree. 30–40 centers are evenly distributed over three clusters, each run by a senior teacher called the cluster head. The cluster-heads report to a program-leader from the management team.

Originally, the centers had been providing free remedial services to public school children in reading and basic math. Later, with the objective of supporting these clusters toward becoming self-sustaining learner-centered community learning institutions, Maitri modified its strategy to teach additional subjects including Gujarati (first language), English, Math, Science, History, Geography and Civics up to grade 7 in a learner centered way and charge fees. Maitri mandated the development of a professional development program to enable the para-teachers to implement learner-centered remedial teaching. A limited base of scientific literature and comparable field practices on para-teacher professional development provided the impetus for a systematic research and development approach for shaping the PD program.

1.1.2. Needs and context analysis

A needs and context analysis (Raval et al., 2012a) was conducted at the onset, to determine the learning requirements of para-teachers and contextual influences that would foster or hinder the professional development. The study revealed that para-teachers had high level of commitment and motivation which could play a crucial role in fostering professional development. The study also revealed substantial gaps in basic teaching skills that are required to make enactment well-structured and coherent. The study highlighted characteristics of institutional factors, especially the classroom; organizational factors and policy factors which posed potential challenges to the design and implementation of the PD program. Based on a thorough understanding of the para-teachers' learning requirements and the context drawn from the needs and context analysis, a professional development objective was framed. This objective was in terms of supporting para-teachers to design and implement systematically structured lesson plans with teaching strategies that had a learner centered orientation.

1.1.3. Evolution of the PD program

- (a) After the professional development objective was framed a conceptual model was developed to implement the professional development. This model (extensively discussed in Raval et al., 2010) applies relevant insights about (mostly western) professional development literature to the contextual realities that emerged in this study, to lead to a tailored set of feasible and meaningful professional development activities for the para-teachers. The model entails (i) three core activities within a cycle and (ii) supportive strategies outside the cycle and (iii) organizational conditions in the backdrop. The core activities are: lesson planning, lesson enactment and lesson reflection which serve as the main on-the-job PD activities. Together, the three core activities, when embedded into the daily work routine of para-teachers, can prove to be concrete and effective ways of integrating learning with work. Support for these daily PD activities is also provided through workshops, micro-teaching sessions and coaching support. The model also highlights that all this happens within an organizational context where the conditions for fostering the core activities must be created (e.g. support of leaders, sufficient time to prepare for lessons). The conceptual model guided the development of the PD program which had three phases, each of which was evaluated by a research study.
- (b) Pilot Phase of the PD Program: During this phase, the main researcher piloted the program (in consultation with the

management) during which for the first time, on-the-job PD activities of daily lesson planning before enactment and reflection after enactment were introduced as a part of the daily routine of teachers. Templates were designed to scaffold lesson planning and reflection on daily lessons in which learner-centered ideas were to be enacted. Supportive strategies were also implemented. A workshop was implemented to help teachers understand how to use the templates for planning learner-centered lesson plans for concepts that they were to teach in that academic term. Micro teaching sessions supported the teachers in practicing the ideas in their lesson plans, and on site coaching by the cluster-heads helped them reflect on the actual enactment. The researcher-facilitator supported the cluster-heads through intensive weekly meetings in improving their coaching strategies. Minimal organizational changes were required as the study took place in the summer vacation, during which para-teachers taught an optional subject. Research carried out during the pilot phase (Raval et al., 2012b) helped to conclude that the core routine of planning, enactment and reflection activities had been successful in supporting para-teachers to gain proficiency in designing lessons that were well-structured and had a learner-centered orientation. After the success of the pilot, the NGO decided to invest in the organizational changes necessary to allow these PD processes to continue when para-teachers had to teach regular academic subjects.

- (c) Formative phase of the PD Program: This phase of the PD program continued the on-the-job PD activities, but involved substantial changes in the organizational conditions necessary for the PD activities to flourish. For example through a bottom up process, policy changes were introduced that led to improved working conditions for teachers by means of realistic well-planned curricular targets, stable classroom population, reduced class size and increased class heterogeneity. Research conducted during this phase concluded that: (1) successful adoption of learner-centered strategies in lesson planning and enactment had been achieved; (2) due to the nature of the on-the-job learning activities, para-teachers experienced enhanced autonomy and collaborative relationships; and (3) organizational changes had contributed substantially toward the success of the PD program (Raval et al., 2011). The bottom-up manner through which the organizational changes had been introduced, had contributed to a high level of ownership even on the part of cluster-heads to take up an educational leadership rather than administrative role within their clusters.
- (d) Institutionalization phase of the PD program: While studies during the pilot and the formative phases of the PD program yielded conclusive evidence that participants gained proficiency in planning and enacting lessons with learner-centered strategies, these phases were centrally facilitated by a management member, who worked intensively with the cluster-heads, who in turn facilitated the implementation of the core activities at their clusters. During the institutionalization phase, the central facilitation role was withdrawn and the implementation of the core PD activities was left to the cluster heads and para-teachers. The study reported here compares earlier results of the PD program (implemented with non-sustainable forms of support) with those obtained during the institutionalization phase (under completely natural, and sustainable conditions). The following sections provide the theoretical framework and the research design for the study.

1.2. Theoretical framework

Across all three phases, evaluation of the PD program was inspired by Guskey's model of professional development (Guskey,

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