

Teachers Need Support

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The purpose of adult and non-formal basic education is to provide an opportunity to those who were left out or dropped out of school for some reason. There are a host of reasons why they lagged behind in the mainstream of education and development. Generally speaking, they come from the resource poor families who have no faith in the meaning and fruitfulness of long years of schooling.

Attracting such adults and children to education at a later stage requires not only dedication in the key education players but better teaching skills and the capacity and capability in teachers to meet up the challenge. They have a set of learners in front of them fundamentally different from the mainstream students in their world view and socioeconomic reality. Their thinking patterns take shape by the demands of practical life they have to live in. They do not experience the same kind of childhood a middle class child has. Most of such children either assist their parents in on/off farm work, work as helpers at petty businesses in urban centers or work as apprentices in various workshops. As children are economically active in the low-income households, faced with greater responsibilities and harsher realities of practical life, they are very different from the typical middle class children who enjoy a cozy family environment and who live in economic and social protection. They learn to give fiscal value to every thing. They know the immense value of commodities and to guard their possessions jealously. They have clear views on social issues like dowry and gender roles.

The adult learners also have their own priorities that are in contradiction with the goals and objectives of the policy makers. As adult education that is focused on adult literacy does not respond to their needs their situation very soon throws them back to work for survival and to make both ends meet. Under such circumstances the role of teachers becomes much more complex and demanding than a regular school teacher. With syllabus not responsive to the learners' reality just to retain the learners in the school becomes an uphill task for the teacher. They are required to teach the same mainstream syllabus that does not take into consideration their special circumstances and special learning needs.

As non-formal education teachers, they have to be competent and better skilled to teach the same syllabus in three and half years that is taught in the formal schools in five to seven years. Furthermore, they must know how to deal with the parents who do not have the same kind of interest and commitment to send their children to school, displayed by the formal school children's parents. The matter does not end here and unlike the formal school teachers they have to face various kinds of pressures from the community.

But who are expected to do this demanding job? Those who have discouraging educational background. They are selected either on the basis of availability or the local politics play a key role. Contrary to a formal school teachers who are required to be formally trained and whose training is spread over a couple of years, they have no proper training. Resultantly, they are incapable of either leading the classes or responding to the problems raised by the learners or to show them a way in the difficulties they face. For instance, they are ignorant of the most basic rules involved in simple literacy (and such is the fate of the most of the teachers) and have absolutely no idea of the correct pronunciation. How can a person display any degree of motivation that has no solid grounding in the field she/he is expected to work in? Only a teacher, who has some basic understanding of the topic being dealt with, can be receptive to the questions, issues and problems raised by the learners. Obviously, in the absence of qualified, competent and well-trained teachers neither quantity nor quality in the realm of education for all can be achieved. And the net result is in the shape of schooled illiterates.

An adult educator's job is more challenging and daunting but her job is seen as merely passing on some literacy skills to learners. No in-depth training, therefore, is seen necessary. Teaching adult literacy is seen as an even easier job where a teacher is required to teach how to read and write. We have a situation both in adult literacy and formal and non-formal education that in most of the cases literacy in Urdu language is taught that is not the mother tongue of the most of the learners in the country. Literacy programs do not display this understanding that imparting literacy skills is much more challenging when a second language is to be taught to perfect illiterates. Teaching the recognition of letters of alphabet and at best how to write a word does not help but in fact blocks comprehension and self expression.

In a number of situations there is no real choice available for selection of teachers. But that should not be an excuse for throwing the future of the already under-privileged and disadvantaged sections of society to such empty hands. If education has to become a vehicle for social and economic development, the experience shows that such teachers require, in most of the cases, not only training in how to teach but a capacity needs be built to understand and absorb the objectives and the contents of the training.

In order to take education to the right track, we need to invest more on teachers' education and training and a focus has to be on teacher development. Teacher trainers have to be well versed in what is happening in the schools and their training design must be informed of the training needs specific to the group of teachers being trained. It is imperative to build a linkage between the training and the actual instruction and the process of teaching. Otherwise trainers and the trainees have totally different terms of reference.

The training design must make a good use of the feed back by the monitoring and evaluating staff. A critical appraisal of the school performance, socio-cultural-political and development issues that play a positive or negative role goes a long way not only in improving the method but also the content of teaching.

In order to be fruitful, the training has to be a two way process. The trainer must be aware of the specific training and learning needs and the training program designed must be a response to those in letter and spirit. A challenge for any such training lies in bringing the teachers on the track of using the newly acquired knowledge and skills and making that use a habit. Thoughtful interventions need to innovate to bridge the gaps between learning and doing. The trainer need to be constantly in touch with what is happening in the field and having feed back so that a timely response can be given by the trainer. Without creating such a link between training and implementation the dream of education for all can not be realized in the real sense.

A teacher, undoubtedly, is at the center stage of educating the nation but other key players and stakeholders can not absolve themselves of their responsibilities in the process. Education should no longer be seen as the sole responsibility of teachers. It has to be a team effort. If various pillars of a given education program come together and contribute in the training design and also in assessing how far the training responds to the learning needs of the learners the perspectives and experiences of the management, the monitors and evaluators, the parents, the community and above all of the teachers it yields far better results than a conventional training program.

The above process helps the trainer to tailor the contents of further training and follow up. Going through such a process, results in better quality of future training programs.

Such training is process oriented but yields not only encouraging results but contributes greatly in teacher development in terms of their personal educational attainment, their understanding of issues in teaching and learning, their views on curriculum and education policy and the role of a teacher pertaining to the above.

The above model of teacher training has been experimented with encouraging results. It is process oriented and demands time and energy. In a number of cases there is no other viable

option of teacher training if an education program has to get off the ground in any sense. Working with human mind is not an easy task; it is a demanding job. The players in the non-formal education sector has to be content with a limited territorial jurisdiction as working with human beings is fundamentally different from building physical infrastructure. They need to focus on the intensive work instead of spreading themselves too thin.

The dividends of such an endeavor are incomparable. It can produce teachers with better educational attainment and entailing higher self confidence. When they are involved in the process of planning and designing the training they become competent in planning their work, developing teaching aids and other educational materials. Qualified and competent teachers become potential trainers. And having local teachers and trainers brings knowledge to the doorsteps of the people. If we are able to develop such teachers at the local level lack of motivation and commitment would no longer be an issue.

One must not forget that teacher training and grooming is an ongoing process.