

## Interview

### CPD for Teacher Empowerment

*Prachi Kalra in conversation with Professor Shobha Sinha*

*Dr Shobha Sinha, is Associate Professor in the Department of Education (CIE). She is a leading expert in the area of literacy and has been instrumental in shaping the emerging field of reading, and children struggling with reading and writing in Indian schools. Her other interests include multiculturalism in children's literature and assessment issues in language teaching. In this interview, she talks about how continuous development can be made truly empowering for school and university teachers.*

*Prachi Kalra (PK): Let me begin by formally thanking you for agreeing to talk to Fortell about Continuous Professional Development (CPD), and how it takes shape in both the school as well as the university context, and to see if there are connections between the two. Let me begin by asking you a very general question. How do you envision continuous professional development and what value do you see for it in the teaching profession?*

Shobha Sinha (SS): See, if you don't develop professionally, what happens in teaching? I mean, when we talk about the teaching profession, we are conscious that after a while staleness can come into your teaching. I always say to my students that the punishment that you have of poor teaching is right there—you can see it in the faces of your students. So there is really no choice, you have to develop professionally. The other thing is that in the field of education and pedagogy, or even a subject area that you are teaching [in], there is a lot of growth which you should know about and which you should contribute to. Otherwise you would be teaching yesterday's content and knowledge. So for very obvious reasons it is not a matter of choice, you really have to keep going with CPD.

But I just want to share a personal story with you. One of the areas I teach is a course in literacy, which I am absolutely passionately interested in. In spite of that, about 10 years back, one year I just felt that I don't even want to go to class and it's just repetitive and I said "My goodness! Is something wrong with me that I don't even care about class?" And then, just after that I went on

study leave where I was doing research on early literacy in Jharkhand. When I came back, and I had to start teaching again, I noticed that my class [dynamics] dramatically changed. There was a lot of energy and excitement in the class. There were things to talk about, and I was willing to listen much more. This is just a small example to show that if you really want to teach effectively, there is no choice about professional development.

*PK: My next question is that you have been a school teacher; you teach at the university now. You have taught courses in Literacy, in Reading and Writing. Do you feel that there is a difference between say teaching at the school level and teaching at the university level, and would you say that continuous professional development in both these contexts would therefore be different or should take a different shape?*

SS: The demands sometimes can be different. I mean, again for very obvious reasons, there are differences in the volume of teaching that you do in school and in college. [Also] how much responsibility the student takes and how much responsibility you take, those things differ. But I don't think that we differ very much in terms of the need to keep up with the development of ideas or the need for freshness of ideas. I think CPD is equally important for both the fields.

*PK: Talking about freshness of ideas, how do you think CPD could engage with that? Very often, when we talk about CPD, it takes the form of training, inviting experts and then training teachers. Do you think that that's a very good way of looking at CPD? What could be other ways of bringing in freshness of ideas, of empowering teachers, giving them the ability to look at their own classrooms and learn from that?*

SS: See when you started interviewing me, I wanted to tell you, that the most important question is just how much do we understand the nature of our profession itself. We may understand it from our own experiences, but how much is it a part of the discourse? If you understand the nature of the profession, there are many things you will understand. What does the teaching hour mean? During that one hour, you might be teaching or you might be engaged in some serious intellectual conversation. So there are many aspects of the teaching hour. It's only when you teach, that you really understand how staleness comes in when you look at the teaching hour only in one way. I don't know if we have done enough of a job to make people and the bureaucracy understand this. At one level, we protest against rules and notifications, but at another level we just go along instead of really questioning bureaucratic perceptions of teaching.

I'll give an example from our own profession. For example, as teacher educators we make school visits to observe students. That's also a form of teaching. It's just that you are not giving a lecture, but you are sitting at the back of the classroom and observing student-teachers teach. Now you have done it, so you do realise that when you go and observe a certain number of students, it's a very draining experience; and we keep on doing it year after year. Now if you understood the nature of the teaching profession, you would realize that it is very important to give a break in between and then to go back refreshed. If you don't, you destroy the teacher; you destroy the programme and most importantly hurt the students. So the growth and the well-being of the teacher is very important because your programme is only as good as that. You can't worry about students independently of worrying about teachers. I think we lack in our concern for teachers.

Also, empowerment is not something which we can offer to someone on a platter. You can just create an enabling environment. A few years back, I had gone for a training programme where people did care about it [creating an enabling environment], but the policies were very top-down. The organizers wanted us to train teachers in early language and literacy in three days. I have taught that for years and, tell me, what do you achieve in three days? I find this whole cramming thing very problematic. Just because all the topics have been covered, does not mean everyone has understood.

The other thing is, why aren't we asking the teachers about their point of view, their learning? Do they have something to share? And it's the same with refresher courses. Even if it's a good programme for three weeks, we could envision it differently so that there is empowerment and people bring their own ideas to share. It should be interactive in nature, more of a dialogue. Of course, we can invite experts, but the need should be dictated by teachers, not top down. Let me tell you a funny incident. At a three-day CPD programme, where from morning to evening somebody came and talked about something or the other, a colleague kept writing furiously. So, I asked her, "What were you taking notes about?" She said, "You know I have finally caught up with all the letters that I had to write to relatives!" So something in me just rebels at the thought of people coming in and just dictating things to you.

I am not saying that all of us can't learn; and, that's another aspect of the teacher which is very important, that you should be willing to learn, but I think that at some point we should start talking about an enabling context for CPD. Development doesn't take place in three weeks, [or] three days, it happens only through [a] dialogue. Have a dialogue! Teachers should be on the panel, talking about their experiences. One thing that I have been recommending at different

forums is that there should be a research component in each college, research not to get 10 or 15 points for publishing, but to engage with ideas and to talk to other scholars. It is in the corridors when you regroup while having coffee, when you talk about a book you might have read, that dialogue happens. But, first of all, you should have that book to read! There should be an inclination and availability and mingling, and an environment where you can talk about it.

*PK: So, taking off from there, would you say that one very important aspect of CPD might be enabling teachers to form their own professional networks. All CPD seems to happen in the form of 'top-down' training modules, as you said, which happen sporadically over a certain number of days and then we are done with them. How do you think teacher networks can be built, where teachers can support each other and engage either in doing collaborative research together or in getting together and discussing issues that they feel concerned about?*

SS: See, there are again two sides to it. You might have been teaching for a long time, there have been many developments in your field, so I am not saying that you don't have new things to learn. But I object just to the fixed structuring of that. With new ideas, initially, there is a lot of resistance. Unless you are willing to listen and talk about the different ideas, you will not learn. Teachers also need to be open to new ideas. It needs to be a true dialogue and not a fake one. Again, whatever CPD model you choose, don't try to do everything, as a banking model of teaching. You could talk about one point, and let people try it out and come back and discuss what happened when they tried to implement it, and critique it. Then there is much more investment in that CPD programme. Otherwise, you can get a lot of resistance. Just because teachers were physically present over there and nodded their heads doesn't lead to continuous professional development.

Empowerment has to be enabled, there has to be a dialogue; and, you're right, we do not have strong enough networks. When we do organize conferences for CPD at the university level, we just drain our energy in figuring out all the details, from the quality of the academic papers, to thinking about what kind of food you are going to order, to every other practical thing. And that is quite draining! In the US, for example, professional networks are very strong and I know that it's unfair to compare our country to theirs, but we can take some lessons from them. Their organizational networks are fairly big and they have funding for conferences, and arrangements are made so that you are not dealing with all the details, but only with the academic part. Here, it has all become very mechanical, if you ask me. So, I think that networks need to be strengthened so that members have space to go and discuss things. That kind of dialogue among teachers is very important where you can just meet to talk about your difficulties, or even know that others

are in the same boat.

*PK: Since I am a university teacher, I know that most of my colleagues in the other departments do not really come with an understanding of pedagogy and that's the way it is at the university level. What could be some important elements of CPD that need to be addressed for teachers at the university level?*

SS: This point is very valid I think, because teaching is teaching, no matter at what level you are doing it. However, in education, while we do talk about pedagogy and assessment, but when it comes to applying it to our students fully, we are unable to do it. During our moderation meetings, I remember, one faculty had given six assignments for 15 points. So if you have 15 points for your internal assessment out of a fifty-mark paper, (remember the student has way more papers), and yours is just a part of it. Because we like to be a busy department, we like to give a lot of assignments, but that is totally against the whole principle of assessment. Merely knowing about assessment doesn't mean it translates into your teaching.

However, as far as other departments are concerned, I think your point is very valid. There should be discussions on assessment and pedagogy. What form it should take, I really don't know. Like other countries, for example, we need to have a course on composition. So, for instance, you might have a refresher course on teaching clarity in writing, instead of a refresher course where you are being refreshed with almost everything! A more focused course where a group meets to discuss about teaching and then reads certain things together and talks about them; maybe that could work. I remember when I was a beginning faculty in the US, we used to have a lunch meeting once every week about different aspects of undergraduate teaching. Sometimes, you might have very rebellious undergraduates and you may not be sure how to assess them or how they might respond to their assessment. So, we would talk about that or about what we could read, but it [the meeting] grew out of our needs. Throughout the term we had these meetings and we could mention them in our annual report. We had the freedom to talk, sometimes even complain, but we also actually learnt from each other and also from students. I think that every model doesn't have to be very rigid. As I said, corridors are the best places for growth.

*PK: One thing that I feel is very important at the university level now, is the ability of the teachers to understand the diversity in their classrooms. So, do you think that there is some way CPD could address this issue?*

SS: That is very important, but again if you had, let's say, a three-day workshop and somebody came and told you about [its] various components, would it help?

See, one thing is just acknowledging a field of study and getting some terms which you can glibly use, and it is completely another thing to transform your pedagogy. If you want to focus more on impact, then again it has to be more interactive, it has to be spread over time. And it does not need to be very focused or intense. Maybe you can meet over two days and talk about ideas, read together, but I think it needs to be a little bit spread out to sink in.

And I think the point you raise is very valid, because when I started teaching in CIE, many a times in my tutorial class or in my school visits, I would have visually-challenged students and I really didn't know exactly what to do. I needed a more in-depth understanding of those issues, but also about various kinds of diversities that you have in your classroom and how you deal with them to develop that level of sensitivity. I think that applies to all departments; they should be thinking and talking about diversity; there should be an environment for it. Of course, we must have access to lectures and scholars coming in, and they are important, but training courses or workshops are often just so spread out and ritualistic. I do have a problem with them because people attend them for commercial purposes and that should not be the spirit.

*PK: Do you think it's a good idea for, say the Department of Education and its various pedagogy experts to have that kind of synergy with the other departments at the university and therefore to form an exchange where pedagogical ideas get addressed and then feed into classroom teaching? Do you think that is a feasible idea?*

SS: Can the other departments accept that? I'm not sure. But I think the first challenge is to understand that there is much more to classroom teaching than just going in and delivering the lecture. So, those are the things that we need to think about. As I said earlier, just knowing about pedagogical topics doesn't mean that we do implement them in our classrooms. I gave you that example of assessment. But the awareness that there are lots of issues to think about, I think that is very important. Teacher empowerment is not just a nice fashionable word to use, because teachers can have their own ways of resistance, and in a way I sympathize with that because of the way teachers get treated. But if the need for learning new ideas comes more from within and there is more dialogue, it's not as if we can't share materials and ideas. And it's not like the Department of Education alone has experts.

*PK: Ok, one last question! This is a question that is close to my heart. I have, in my readings, come across what are called 'Reading Experts', especially in the US, through the continuous professional development that they have. So, teachers*

*who become Reading Experts very often work more with struggling readers and writers in schools, and are seen as reading specialists. Do you think that that is something that we could learn from [the US] and develop further?*

SS: First of all do we even recognize “reading” as an area of expertise? Actually, in the Master’s programme in the US, Reading Specialists study a certain number of courses to become that. It is not as simple as a few hours of CPD. I recall that teachers used to come back to the university to take a full course. Like I remember once I taught a course in the Foundations of Reading and there were many teachers who had years of experience and they took the full course. I think that is more effective than taking a three-day workshop on reading. It’s so counter-intuitive to people. Whatever professional development we do, we should do it with a more sustained engagement. Another thing I want to say is that no development can take place without real space and real time. That enabling context—we really need to think about that. And we are very careless about protecting our time.

One more thing now I will say without you asking. I had read about a leading college in Delhi University, and there was this scathing piece by the Principal where he gave this caricature of a university professor who dashes off to this conference and then to another and writes a paper and isn’t worried about the students. Let me tell you, that without your own growth and learning and also, being in the position to produce knowledge, you are not going to be a very good teacher. What spaces are we providing for that? For instance, if you are teaching English, let’s say in school, and you never get a chance to read a book, how effective are you going to be? Maybe you won’t teach that very book. And so it’s tough to put your finger on it. I might read a book for another purpose and because I really enjoyed it, I might use it for teaching “Marginalization”. If I hadn’t read it I couldn’t have used it. So, to be on the cutting edge of research and knowledge-building, you have to actually engage with new ideas and you can’t do that without having the time for it. Especially for us teachers, we need to realize that space and time need to be protected.

*PK: Thank you very much Professor Sinha for sparing your valuable time for this conversation and sharing your views on this significant area of CPD for teachers.*

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