

ONLINE TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA: LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Dr. Pradeep Kumar MISRA
Chaudhary Charan Singh University,
Meerut, INDIA
Email: pradeepmsr@yahoo.co.in

ABSTRACT

The abrupt closure of educational institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic forced the education systems across the world, including India, to migrate to the online mode of teaching and learning. Several institutions and organizations in India, motivated by the successful conduction of online teaching-learning activities, started offering teachers' professional development activities via the online medium during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a way, the pandemic period provided an alternative route to offer professional development programs for teachers. This paper attempts to critically analyze the teacher professional development offerings in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis reveals that, in general, the pandemic period has witnessed a surge of online teacher professional development activities in India, and the majority of teachers attended such programs while confining to their workplaces or homes. Based on these reflections, this paper proposes five lessons for policymakers regarding popularizing and taking the benefit of online teacher professional development activities.

Keywords: Teachers, teacher professional development, online learning activities, online education, policymakers, pandemic, Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 pandemic has affected human lives in many ways. It has slowed down the economy, disrupted businesses, limited movements, and closed down the educational institutions. But unlike the negative impact of Covid-19 on the economy and businesses, its impact on the educational sector is disputed. The pandemic is responsible for keeping students away, for several months, from educational institutions. But this adverse situation also motivated the educational institutions to continue teaching-learning activities in online mode. And now, researchers across the globe are busy contemplating the impact of Covid-19 on the education sector. In the quest to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the education sector, the prime focus is on the learning of students, the sufferings of students, the mental health of students, and the losses vs. gains. Unfortunately, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the learning of teachers has not found a significant mention in such discourses and researches.

There is no denying that, like other sections of society, Covid-19 has also impacted 'teachers' lives. The tremors of the Covid-19 pandemic have been felt in teachers' social, psychological, professional, and economic spheres. But, the discussions about teachers and the pandemic, if any, mainly revolve around teachers' roles and competencies to carry-out online teaching or whether pandemic made teachers jobless or presented new job opportunities before them. Whereas, discussions and reflection on the equally significant aspect that '*how teachers' get engaged in professional learning activities via online mode during the pandemic*' are not reported sufficiently. To fill this void, the present paper

reflects upon the emergence of online teacher professional development activities during Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lessons for policymakers.

METHODOLOGY

The present research is an outcome of the researcher's observations of online teacher professional development programs planned and organized during the Covid-19 pandemic period in India and abroad. The researcher got engaged in these programs in various capacities (e.g., participant, subject expert, and organizer). Besides, the researcher also gained further insights about online teacher professional development programs as a member of several online social media groups of teachers and having discussions with colleagues who attended such programs. Although this research is based on the trends and experiences emancipated from India, it has a broader appeal for promoting online teacher professional development programs and activities in countries across the world.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHERS

Educational researchers, policy analysts, and politicians across the globe often argue and suggest that meaningful and relevant enhancement of teachers' professional capabilities and commitment to education is essential to improve education as a whole (Misra, 2018). Emphasizing the need for the meaningful and relevant professional development of teachers, a review of teacher education in Scotland suggests,

"Long-term and sustained improvement which has a real impact on the quality of children's learning will be better achieved through determined efforts to build the capacity of teachers themselves to take responsibility for their own professional development, building their pedagogical expertise, engaging with the need for change, undertaking well-thought through development and always evaluating impact in relation to improvement in the quality of children's learning" (Donaldson, 2011, p. 84).

Teachers engage in professional development activities to "develop, implement, and share practices, knowledge, and values that address the needs of all students" (Schlager, Fusco, Barab, Kling & Gray, 2004), or simply, to get better as teachers. Teacher professional development can be considered as an ongoing process of education, training, learning, and support activities which is: taking place in either external or work-based settings; engaged in by qualified, educational professionals; aimed mainly at promoting learning and development of their professional knowledge, skills and values; to help decide and implement valued changes in their teaching and learning behaviour so that they can educate their students more effectively thus achieving an agreed balance between individual, school and national needs (Earley & Bubb, 2004, p. 5). Highlighting the importance of professional development for teachers, a report from OECD (2009) suggests,

"No matter how good pre-service training for teachers is, it cannot be expected to prepare teachers for all the challenges they will face throughout their careers. Education systems therefore seek to provide teachers with opportunities for in-service professional development in order to maintain a high standard of teaching and to retain a high-quality teacher workforce" (p. 49)

Teachers, in general, engage in professional development activities due to many reasons. These reasons may be classified under two broad categories, professional compulsions, and intrinsic motivations. Let's first talk about professional compulsions. Education systems of several countries make it legally binding for teachers to get engaged in professional development activities on a continuing basis. The teachers are expected to complete fixed hours or days of training every year for renewal of their teacher licenses or to get the promotion, or other monetary benefits. The teachers are also expected to complete professional development activities to move to leadership positions. The rules and regulations of such activities are mainly framed by respective governments and educational institutions. The other reason to get engaged in professional development activities is to get recognized and appreciated among peers and academic circles. All these

reasons, in combination, may be termed as professional compulsions for the teachers to participate in various professional development programs and activities continuously.

As a second and equally significant reason, many teachers view professional development as a self-oriented activity. These teachers do not want to learn or gain new knowledge to impress someone or have material gains, instead, they pursue professional development activities to satisfy and impress themselves, i.e., self-improvement or self-satisfaction. Such teachers engage in professional development, not because the system is forcing them, but on the call of their inner voice. This category of teachers believes in the philosophy that *'only a lit lamp can brighten other lamps'*, and keep learning and professionally developing without aspiring for any material gain or extrinsic reward. This way of thinking and acting is termed as an intrinsic motivation approach to join teacher professional development activities.

Teachers teaching at various levels of education get engaged in professional development activities either due to professional compulsions or intrinsic motivations or by both. But engaging in such activities is not an easy task for teachers. There are many issues and challenges to it. Odden, Archibald, Fermanich, and Gallagher (2002) described in detail the various issues for professional teacher development and created a cost-framework to categorize professional development costs that consisted of six key elements: 1) teacher time, 2) training and coaching, 3) administration, 4) materials, equipment, and facilities, 5) travel and transportation, and 6) university tuition and conference fees. Normally one or other of these costs deter teachers from practicing CPD. While Lawrie and Burns (2013) observe:

“Despite a global need for quality teachers, the majority of the world’s teachers receive professional development that does little to promote quality teaching. For many teachers from around the globe, the frequency of professional development is episodic, the quality varies, its duration is limited, and support or follow-up are almost non-existent” (para 2).

Such challenges become more evident in a country like India having millions of teachers. Most importantly, the teachers in India come from varied social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, serve in different localities and institutions, and work under different service conditions. Besides, the professional development of teachers in India appears to be restricted in scope and offered in form of short-term in-service training programs. Commenting on this aspect, Bolitho and Padwad (2011, p.7) argues,

“Professional preparation consists of short pre-service teacher education courses with limited field exposure and practical relevance. There is no formalized system of induction and normally a teacher is required to handle responsibility independently and autonomously right from their first day in the profession.”

Based on these observations, it can be argued that engaging in professional development is an integral part of teachers’ lives. They have to participate in these activities on a continuing basis, instead of the fact that whether they have been facilitated for it or not. Usually, to attend professional development programs, teachers have to travel to other places, stay there, and pay a registration fee. But, pandemic brought a change in the scheme of offering professional development activities to the teachers.

THE INCLINATION OF TEACHERS TOWARDS ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES DURING PANDEMIC: POTENTIAL REASONS

During lockdowns, like other professionals, teachers were forced to stay within the boundaries of their homes. Slowly, they started teaching their students via online mediums and platforms. Their engagement in online teaching activities helped them to realize that they can use online mediums and spare time to engage in professional development activities. Besides, in confinement to their homes, teachers experienced a different type of physical environment and mental situations that were hardly experienced during normal

working days. A summary of the situations and conditions that provoked teachers to think over and get engaged in professional development activities are as follows:

- Availability of spare time
- The feeling of isolation and loneliness
- Desire to utilize the available time in a meaningful way
- Desire to connect to peers and the outer world
- Follow-up of a new work schedule in place of routine activities
- The desire for meaningful utilization of available time
- Fear of losing the job
- Spare time to self-reflect on their success and failures as a teacher
- Desire to become a global teacher by using online social media platforms

Such mindset helped teachers to introspect, reflect, and find new ways to better their professional practices or learn new practices. Fortunately, the majority of the teachers in India are, nowadays, having access to smartphones, the internet, and experiences of using online social media platforms. Buoyed by their success and newfound interest in using online mediums and platforms for teaching purposes, teachers teaching at different levels of education (i.e., primary, secondary, higher) started using online mediums and platforms for professional development purposes. The social situations, psychological conditions, and existing realities compelled them to trade a new path, i.e., engaging in professional development activities via online routes.

ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES BY TEACHERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EMERGING PRACTICES

Long lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of educational institutions in India. Although this closure of educational institutions does not result in the stoppage of teaching activities and, instead of face-to-face made, teachers were asked to switch over to the online mode of teaching (Misra & Chauhan, 2020). As discussed above, teachers across the country have immediately realized that online media and platforms can also be used for organizing and participating in professional development activities. Following this thinking, India has seen an upsurge in the offerings of and attendance in online teacher professional development activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Following is a summary of teachers professional development activities offered and attended by online mode during the pandemic.

Online Seminars and Conferences

Seminars and conferences are one of the most popular and widespread professional development activities among teachers in India. The seminars and conferences help teachers to listen to experts, ask questions, present their research and views and discuss with fellow participants on matters of mutual interests. In a country like India, having more than 9 million teachers at the school level, and 1.5 million teachers in higher education, seminars and conferences are of utmost importance to offer professional development opportunities for the majority of the teaching workforce. In a nutshell, seminars and conferences have been seen as a viable medium to fulfill the professional learning needs of teachers at a mass scale in India.

The Covid-19 pandemic may be credited to bring a change in the pattern and philosophy of organizing seminars and conferences. After a few days of lockdowns, educational institutions across the country have realized that they can easily organize seminars or conferences via using different online video conferencing programs. The paid and free versions of apps like Google meet, Zoom, CiscoWebex, Microsoft teams, etc. have presented an opportunity before educational institutions to plan and organize seminars or conferences at a very minimal cost. The brochures were designed and circulated online via social media platforms, and the experts were invited and requested to deliver resource lectures online. Most importantly, teachers from all over India were able to attend such programs without spending much money on registration fees or leaving their places. The only cost to bear was the cost of the Internet. Such was a situation of online seminars and

conferences during the days of lockdowns that teachers have attended more than one program in a day.

Fortunately, online mode also helped many Indian teachers to attend international seminars and Conferences. The reason was that the majority of the international events organized during this period were either non-paid or with a low fee for program attendance. The online social media platforms became a doable carrier to spread information about these programs. As a result, many teachers in India were able to attend International seminars and conferences. On an interesting note, the pandemic period helped Indian teachers to attend both national and seminars and conferences with ease, at their will, and without much expenditure.

Online Training Program and Workshops

Attending online training programs and workshops emerged as other useful professional development activities for teachers in India during the pandemic. In comparison to online seminars and conferences that were organized for a smaller duration and every willing participant, the workshops and training programs were of longer duration and organized for a specific group of participants. In comparison to seminars and conferences, these programs were usually paid and offered to a specific group of teachers. Irrespective of provision of fee, many teachers attended these longer duration training programs and workshops for gaining further expertise or new skills.

Online Study and Resource Surfing

Online study and resource surfing emerged as other prevalent professional development activity among teachers during the pandemic. Usually, teachers teaching at different levels of education in India are burdened with teaching, examination, and administrative tasks. They hardly have enough time to read much or reflect on their professional activities and competencies during face-to-face mode of teaching. Fortunately, the pandemic allowed them to online search and read the literature of their choice to enhance their professional competencies. Besides, teachers were also able to search various useful resources related to their professional development needs.

Online Discussions, Advice, and Interactions

The pandemic period also helped the teachers to connect with peers and discuss several professional aspects via online mode. Texting, massaging, sharing of resources, and audio and video calling helped teachers to connect, share and learn with peers. The teachers formed several groups to delve into various professional and academic issues. The loneliness of lockdowns compelled teachers to pick their phones and connect to those having expertise in a particular area. Similarly, teachers also played the role of counselors and advisers for their fellow teachers on various professional issues.

Online Publishing

The free time during pandemic lockdowns helped teachers to write and publish online on various teacher professional development issues. The teachers put their ideas and opinions on such issues through online platforms. Besides, teachers also get engaged in producing teaching-learning resources that include class notes, presentations, audio and video lectures. The resources produced by teachers were published on institutional websites as well as on social media platforms. The pandemic became an opportunity for teachers to showcase their expertise to the outer world through online means. In a way, online publishing helped local teachers to become global teachers.

In a nutshell, it can be said that irrespective of working in different education sectors (higher, secondary, primary), teaching in different types of institutions (public, private), living in different places (rural, urban, semi-urban), and speaking in different languages (Hindi, English, regional languages), teachers across India tried to utilize the pandemic time to learn something useful and meaningful via online mode. Here it will be safe to claim that not every teacher was engaged, but the majority has tried to make use of available opportunities. Most importantly, the pandemic period has shown alternate and

cost-effective online ways for teachers to organize as well as attend professional development activities.

UTILIZING PANDEMIC EXPERIENCES FOR PROMOTING ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AMONG TEACHERS: LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

As discussed earlier, the pandemic period has witnessed a surge in online teacher professional development activities in India. The offerings made by several institutions in form of online seminars and training programs, and responses and enthusiasm of teachers across the country to accept these offerings may be termed as a bright spot during the gloomy period of the pandemic. In a way, this sudden success has presented many lessons before policymakers regarding the organization and promotion of online teacher professional development practices. Some of the lessons are as follows.

Lesson 1. Offer Varied Online Teacher Professional Development Activities

Usually, any teacher willing to pursue any kind of professional development activity (except self-study), has to visit the place of the activity organizer or provider. This was the norm till the pandemic occurred. But the success of online professional development activities confirmed that instead of asking the teacher to leave the place, the professional development activities may be brought to their doors. The experiences confirmed that teachers were able to successfully participate and learn from several professional development activities. Most importantly, teachers were able to attend the activities organized by institutions spread across different parts of India. Also, teachers participated in international professional development programs, without applying for a visa and taking a flight. The pandemic period has busted the myth that engaging in professional development activities means *'leave your home for a few days first, ask anything later'*. Instead, teachers received a new slogan, *'No need to leave your home for professional development, activities will come to your door'*.

Taking cognizance of this success, the policymakers and educational institutions may work on offering more and more online teacher professional development activities. The policymakers may ask the willing educational institutions and government agencies to prepare an academic calendar of proposed online teacher professional development activities at the beginning of the year and circulate it among different sections of teachers in advance. This advanced information will help the willing teachers to pick the activities of their choice and participate in them accordingly. The institutions may also be advised to offer these activities mainly in online or blended mode.

Lesson 2. Have a System for Advertising Online Teacher Professional Development Activities

Organizing a seminar or conference is a costly and tedious affair in India. The host organizations need a lot of preparation, physical and financial resources, and administrative cooperation to organize such events. Similarly, it is never easy for a participant to attend such events organized in a faraway place. India is a big country, and to attend any seminar or conference organized in any other state, teachers have to take leave from the institution, pay the registration fee, and take care of their accommodation and living expenses to attend the event. As a result, the majority of teachers hardly attend seminars or conferences organized at faraway places. This is equally true regarding the attendance of events organized in other countries. Only a few and privileged ones can attend such events.

Fortunately, the pandemic period taught that seminars, conferences, and long duration training programs may be organized online with a minimal cost for organizers and almost no cost for attendees. This is a boon for those teachers in India who keep complaining about lack of financial support and non-grant of leave to attend such programs. Now, it will be easy for any willing teacher to attend any professional development program of his/her choice via online mode. The only requirements for this purpose will be information about the event, an internet-enabled smartphone or laptop, and a few bucks to spend on

the registration fee. In a way, the pandemic period paved the way for the organization of low-cost professional development activities for teachers across India.

Taking a clue from this success, the policymakers may develop an online portal where educational institutions and organizations may be invited to upload their proposed teacher professional development programs. The institutions may be asked to provide sufficient details about the offered programs including registration fees and other specific requirements. This portal may be envisioned as a one place shop for teachers regarding the selection of online professional development activities. Through this portal, it will be quite easy for teachers across India to know the availability of the programs, compare them on various parameters (e.g., offering agency, subject experts, methodology, duration, registration fee) and select the best available online program to fulfill their professional needs.

Lesson 3. Give Opportunities to Teachers to Suggest and Share Teacher Professional Development Resources Online

The pandemic period also witnessed a surge in self-help and peer-supported professional development activities among teachers. Reading professional development related books and articles, watching professionally helpful videos, and discussing with colleagues from the same and different institutions emerged as a newfound interest among the teaching community. During lockdowns, the teachers realized the importance of peer-support to professionally develop and excel. At the same time, many teachers started sharing their expertise, skills, and resources via online for the benefit of other teachers.

Taking a clue from this success, the policymakers may develop a portal where teachers will be allowed either to upload or provide the link of the resources developed by them for the professional development of fellow teachers. The teachers may also be asked to share useful resources from other teachers or organizations or selected readings related to teacher professional development activities via this online portal.

Lesson 4. Have a Mechanism to Ensure the Quality of Online Teacher Professional Development Activities

During the pandemic, India has seen a surge in online teacher professional development activities. Almost every institution, organization, or even individuals thought that they are capable of organizing some form of online professional development programs for teachers. Considering that they were neither required to seek any permission or clearance from anybody to organize, such programs were planned and organized at their own will. And there is no denying that the quality of all the offered programs was not up to the mark. In a way, quantity overpowered the quality of programs. And one of the most important lessons regarding online teacher professional development activities is that only a well-organized and quality-oriented program can help a teacher to develop professionally.

Taking a clue from these situations, policymakers may develop a mechanism to check and certify the quality of the offered online teacher professional development programs. The responsible agencies may form a committee of subject experts from different fields to peer-review and provide feedback on the proposed programs. Those institutions willing to offer any online professional development programs may be asked to submit their proposal to the concerned committee. The institutions may be suggested to adhere to the suggestions and guidance given by the committee members to improve the quality of the programs. Only after the satisfaction of the committee, any institution should be allowed to offer an online professional development program for teachers. This mechanism will not only streamline the offerings but also be able to improve the quality of the offered programs.

Lesson 5. Recognize Online Teacher Professional Development Activities for Promotion and Other Benefits

During the pandemic, a large number of teachers across India attended several online professional development programs. But the majority of the teachers attending such programs were having one question in common, *'will this program be counted or*

considered for my promotion or other benefits by concerned agencies? No one, including the organizers, was having a definite answer to this question. Only a few programs, organized by a handful of organizations receiving government grants were able to claim that their programs fulfill this criterion. Considering this doubt about the status of the offered online professional development programs, the teachers were not able to attend the programs wholeheartedly. In fact, after the initial euphoria, teachers have been seen stating that there is no benefit to attending these programs.

As discussed earlier, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations help teachers to continuously engage in professional development activities. In this materialistic world, where a majority of human activities are carried on the principle of 'return gift', extrinsic motivation plays a significant role for teachers to engage in professional development activities. Therefore, if policymakers want that teachers must keep attending and benefitting from such programs, they have to recognize and attach value to such activities. To make it happen, policymakers may come-up with a notification that 'any online teacher professional development program, certified by the devised procedure (as mentioned in Lesson4#) and assigned a program number by the authorized agency will be eligible to offer all envisioned benefits to attending teachers. The notification may also make it clear that professional development programs that will not be differentiated based on their mode of delivery (e.g., online, offline, blended) and will be treated equally for promotion and other purposes.

CONCLUSION

The success of online teaching-learning is hailed as a positive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education sector. Unfortunately, the use of online medium for teachers' professional development activities has not been given proper attention in these discourses. To fill this void, this paper has attempted to discuss the teacher professional development offerings in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis reveals that, in general, the pandemic period has witnessed a surge of online teacher professional development activities in India, and the majority of teachers attended such programs while confining to their workplaces or homes. In a way, it can be said that the pandemic period had a positive impact in terms of the teachers' professional development program offerings and attendance via online mode. These observations offer some lessons for policymakers regarding popularizing and taking the benefit of online teacher professional development activities. We can hope that policymakers in India, and in other countries, will learn these lessons and act-upon.

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BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESS of AUTHOR



Dr. Pradeep Kumar Misra is a Professor of Education in the Chaudhary Charan Singh University, India, and previously served as Dean, Faculty of Education and Head, Department of Education. His research specializations are teacher education, educational technology, and lifelong learning. Dr. Misra has received several prestigious international research scholarships that includes-Commonwealth Academic Fellowship of CSC, UK; Erasmus Mundus Visiting Scholar Scholarship of European Commission; Doctoral and Senior Researcher Scholarship of DAAD, Germany; National

Scholarship of Slovak Republic; MASHAV Scholarship of Israel Government; and Research Exchange Scholarship of FMSH, France. Dr. Misra also served as a visiting scholar in Arhus University's School of Education, Copenhagen, Denmark for the International Masters in Lifelong Learning: Policy and Management Programme in the year 2009. Dr. Misra has to his credit many publications in journals of international repute, authored reference books, completed research and development projects, developed educational media programs, and supervised Ph.D. scholars. His academic visits include Germany, UK, France, Denmark, Nederland, Sweden, Spain, Slovakia, Austria, New Zealand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Israel, and Japan. Dr. Misra is also a member of several organizations like IPDA, UK; DSA, UK; IATE; AIATE, and FITE.

Email: pradeepmsr@yahoo.co.in