TESS
India

Networks: effective professional development for educational change

Teacher Education
through School-based
Support in India

The Open University

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from the British people

TESS-India (Teacher Education through School-based Support) aims to improve the classroom practices of elementary and secondary teachers in India through the provision of Open Educational Resources (OERs) to support teachers in developing student-centred, participatory approaches. The TESS-India OERs provide teachers with a companion to the school textbook. They offer activities for teachers to try out in their classrooms with their students, together with case studies showing how other teachers have taught the topic and linked resources to support teachers in developing their lesson plans and subject knowledge.

The TESS- India OERs are supported by a set of guidance documents for teacher educators aimed at all those tasked with educating teachers, including initial teacher training and continuing professional development. These guidance documents offer teacher educators further practical guidance on key practices to support them in their work to embed the pedagogy modelled in TESS-India OER and Indian education policy. They include ways of organising networks and facilitating teachers' meetings, guidance on running participatory workshops and developing reflective practitioners, as well as how to use action research to improve practice. Further resources will be added later. These guidance materials will be available on the website for teacher educators or other educators.

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TEGN_Networks

Networks involve …

Networks involve interactions between professionals such as teachers and teacher educators at face-to-face or virtual meetings. Such meetings provide opportunities to meet colleagues from different institutions and districts or states. Networks differ from courses: the aim of networks is to share ideas and be mutually supportive of each other. They are not one-off events but run over a longer period of time.

The topics and the materials you engage with at a network session address the interests and concerns of you and the other participants and develop over time. Networks allow people to innovate in flexible ways that are appropriate to their context. Sometimes you receive recognition for participation in a network, for example a certificate.

Why networks are a good model for working on change in professional practice

The TESS- India OERs support teachers to change their teaching practice: to make their classrooms and learning become more participatory for all students. Changing professional practice happens gradually and integrating new ideas and practices is not simple or straightforward (Clarke and Clarke, 2005). It can come with a sense of pain or loss, which Eraut (2004) explains as:

> The pain of change lies in the loss of control over one's own practice, when one's tacit knowledge ceases to provide the necessary support and the emotional turmoil is reducing one's motivation. Hence the need for time and support is an order of magnitude greater than that normally provided.

Research literature also says that changes should be sustained and ongoing (Harwell, 2003). Sustained change in practice for teachers requires a change in teacher knowledge and in beliefs. This takes time, continuous effort and input.

Networks run over long periods of time. They focus on providing mutual support for the participants, and topics to be worked on can be flexible, fitting the interests of the participants. They can be offer a 'safe' environment where participants feel happy and confident enough to share their concerns and disagreements. That is why networks can be an excellent model for working on change in professional practice. The TESS-India OERs can be used in these networks as a focus and as a bank of ideas for the teachers to learn from at their own time, pace and place to make their classrooms and learning become more participatory for all students.

How networks for professional development fit within the Indian context

Knowledge sharing in education tends to follow a cascade model in India. This is an approach often used throughout the world, but it is often ineffective. The problem with the cascade model is that it fails to take local contexts into account, and often the teachers at the bottom of the cascade only get to hear instructions about what to do. Professional dialogue and any sense of passion and ownership frequently gets lost.

Using networks at different levels or across levels of the system could offer a solution to this problem: networks allow participants to engage and explore the ideas in a setting that is mutually supportive.

When developing professionally, teachers and teacher educators must become learners themselves, learning and reflecting on their teaching practice. A network model fits well with the NCFTE (2009) view of seeing learners as:

> active participants in their own learning and not as mere recipients of knowledge; need to encourage their capacity to construct knowledge; ensure that learning shifts away from rote methods. Learning is to be viewed as a search for meaning out of personal experiences and knowledge generation as a continuously evolving process of reflective learning.

Case Study 1: Simi talks about setting up a network and running a first meeting for colleagues at the SCERT level

I work as a teacher educator for SCERT. For years, every time I met colleagues from the SCERT for meetings we lamented how we could not change the 'chalk and talk' teaching that we know goes on in the Indian classrooms. At times, when we came across some materials that we thought could be helpful, we engaged enthusiastically, telling our colleagues and the educators we worked with at other levels in any training we do. But somehow there did not seem to be any change at teacher level. When I saw the TESS-India OER I thought it really could work in the schools and the classrooms – the only question I had was would we be able to get not only the OER but also the enthusiasm and passion to the classroom and in the interactions with children. The cascade model just had not worked for me in the past. I discussed this with Atul and Anju, two colleagues I see quite often. We reflected that instead of 'passing down' information on teaching methods and materials, we actually could do some more ourselves to keep our passion and enthusiasm going, to help us make think more creatively and actively about solutions, and to keep us energised and focused over a longer period of time.

We thought of setting up a network for SCERT colleagues to work together on this. Because we felt we could not focus on all aspects of teaching at the same time, we wanted to come up with a focus that was pertinent, and also that would work well for enticing colleagues to join us. We looked at the list of TESS-India Key Resources. In our state, we have a lot of students from tribal areas, but many teachers do not recognise the languages and knowledge that these students bring to class. We therefore decided that our first focus would be on 'Involving all', also because most of the other key principles of practice such as questioning or talk for learning flow from this principle.

We proposed this to the SCERT Director, who was very supportive. She suggested that the network would meet every six weeks. We put out a call for participation and held our first network meeting. We were pleased with the turn out – many colleagues attended and although three could not, they asked to stay informed. We made it clear that this was not a course, but a meeting that would be one of a series. The intention was to share ideas and support each other as ideas were discussed and tried out. We started the meeting by showing one of the TESS-India videos. I think that was a good choice – it helped to frame in people's mind the practice we would like to see in schools and to create an energy to work on achieving that change. We all agreed to focus on using the TESS-India OER and discussed and planned how to go about this, including a timeline. We shared ideas, worries, limitations and possible solutions.

> Not all of the plans were the same for every area or every subject, as the plans were realistic and suited to the local situations. We all agreed to report on progress made, or not, at the next meeting.

Virtual networks and mixed networks

At times there might be barriers to setting up face-to-face networks that are difficult to overcome – for example, if geographical distances are too big, the only time convenient for participants to meet is in the evenings when it is not safe to travel, no times that are convenient to all can be found or travel costs cannot be reimbursed. Online networking can offer an alternative solution. It can create a creative virtual networking community. It can also be used in combination with face-to-face networks to offer more opportunities for sharing, supporting and encouraging each other in between face-to-face meetings. Social networking tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook are easy for people to use on their phones and can keep up momentum in between more formal events, such as meetings.

Networks come in many shapes, forms and sizes. They can involve teacher educators, teachers, headteachers, support staff from different phases all mixed or in more homogenous groups. They can be set up through official channels or through a more grassroot approach.

Case Study 2: From a 'grassroot' virtual network to a more formal, flexible, blended network

I am a teacher educator working for a DIET in a rural area. My subject specialism is mathematics. I tend to work in one block. Travelling from one school or area to another takes a long time. In the months of monsoon, there are places I cannot reach.

My maths colleagues in my DIET and the neighbouring DIETs, and many of the teachers we work with, have been working hard on making maths lessons more engaging and interactive. That is not easy to achieve because there are so few teaching materials around that are easy to use in the classroom. We therefore wanted to use the TESS-India OER because they offer activities that fit with the curriculum and textbooks, and can be used in the class easily. We wanted to learn from each other how to go about introducing and sustaining this change, so we started up a network among mathematics colleagues from three DIETS to support one another, almost by accident at first. Because of the distance, we started by having virtual network meetings using Skype once a month to discuss ideas.

It was after our second Skype meeting that it became clear there might be a need to make the structure more formal, and use a blended approach: some of the teachers wanted to join the network as well, and two of the DIET colleagues, Jyotsna and Walid, wanted to turn their activities into action-research projects. Jyotsna wanted to focus on documenting and reflecting how working with colleagues at DIET level improved her professional practice. Walid wanted to work with two teachers on researching how classroom practice changes by working collaboratively and using TESS-India materials. We discussed in our Skype meeting whether Walid and Jyotsna should go their own way because it might become rather complicated. However, we all wanted to know how they would be getting on, and maybe more of us could be inspired to start our own action research networks. Jyotsna and Walid also wanted to stay because they liked the mutual support and the sharing of ideas, so we decided to change the set-up of the network but still keep it flexible.

We now have a network that has the support of the DIET principal and headteachers. We have face-to-face network meetings every two months for DIET colleagues and teachers that are interested in using the TESS-India materials. We change location every meeting. Not everyone can make it to those, but when we have any written documents we email them around. We also have virtual meetings to offer each other support and share ideas and discuss problems we have come across. They are more ad hoc, and people in the network can request and set up such a meeting by email. Sometimes we use Skype, sometimes we use free software for web conferencing. Jyotsna and Walid have their own action research networks and they share their stories with us. Sometimes colleagues from other subjects join us. We are happy for them to come and see how we are running the network, but we have decided that it will stay as a mathematics network.

The risk of running such a 'flexible' network is that people will drop out, or that too many people will want to join – making sharing ideas harder because there is less time for each member to contribute. However, so far that has not been a problem. Sometimes people cannot join, or drop out for a while, but they also come back. Although that means the continuity is not always steady, the whole group thinks this is important: it means people keep thinking about developing professionally and it can fit in with their private lives better. On one occasion about 40 people turned up for the face-to-face meeting so we just split into four groups and then reconvened at the end.

What do we know about the characteristics of effective in-service teacher education and running effective networks?

There is a body of research about characteristics of effective professional development (see for example Joubert and Sutherland, 2008). Some of these are listed in the table below, along with how these ideas look like in an effective professional development network.

Characteristics of effective professional development for the teaching profession	In an effective network, this means …
Encouragement of *purposeful* networking among teachers	Making sure the network has a clear aim of what it is trying to achieve, and a pedagogical focus that it focuses on at each meeting
Is grounded in classroom practice	That the foci have to be closely linked to what goes on in the classroom and to the professional practice of the participants
Is based on sound educational practice	Suggestions made are based on evidence, preferably from research, which may come from the TESS-India OER
Supports reflection and inquiry by teachers on both their own learning and their own classroom practice	Having agreed activities to try out in between meetings and asking participants to report on these at the next meeting (in a structured way)
Builds on what teachers already know, taking into account the voice of the teacher in a supportive 'safe' environment with room for dissent	Ideas discussed grown out of participants' concerns. Participants have enough time to share ideas in a mutually supportive environment where participants feel valued and free to share their concerns
Commitment to the enterprise by both institutions and teachers	If possible, getting the support of senior management for those who are involved in the network

The case study that follows describes how a headteacher of a primary school set up a network for fellow headteachers in her block, some of the challenges she encountered and what she did to overcome these.

Case Study 3: Running networks can be stressful

I am Veena, a headteacher of a primary school. Through the teacher educators of the DIET I came to know about the TESS-India OER for School Leadership and I really liked them. I knew some of my fellow headteachers in the block would also be interested in them, so I contacted them, and the teacher educators of the DIET we work with, and we agreed to set up a series of network meetings to work collaboratively on the ideas suggested in the units.

After having three of these meetings I realised that organising, leading and even attending these meetings really took a lot of my time, time that I could ill-afford, and there were other reasons that I became stressed. My colleagues were so critical, seemed to expect me to know the answers and solutions for everything, and blamed me if things did not work out as planned, and would comment on the timings of the meetings and even the chai I provided! Honestly, this really was not working, I felt we were not getting anywhere and it was not worth the hassle. But I still wanted to work on improving my

leadership skills and I knew I would find it hard to do it 'on my own'. I was also sure that my colleagues had the same dilemma. So I started thinking carefully about the set-up of the network and discussed it with one other headteacher and the teacher educator from the DIET.

I started compiling a list of what was happening now that I thought did not work, and what could be changed in the network to improve this. Actually, the list turned out to be not that long: the main issue was that my colleagues saw me as the 'leader and expert', perhaps because I was organising the meetings. The topics we discussed at the meetings were not well focused, which resulted in superficial engagement and discussions. The lack of focus meant that we were not using our joint expertise and we were not as supportive of each other as we could be because there was not enough detail. The changes were quite easy to introduce:

- The network meeting is organised and hosted by one of the headteachers in turn.
- The participants say at the end of the meeting what they would like to work on next, and the hosting headteacher decides and selects the TESS-India materials that will be used to start off the meeting, based on these discussions.
- All participants have a joint responsibility to make sure discussions are of a high level.
- All participants have a joint responsibility to support one another.

Since then, the network has run much better. Sometimes not everyone agrees on the focus of the next meeting, but people are happy to go with it. Now I look forward to the meetings again and I feel that I am learning a lot.

References

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An action plan for starting and participating in a network

When setting up or attending a network, this action plan might be helpful to:

… think about …	… and ask yourself …
The aim of the network	What is the aim of the network? Who is invited to join? Why are they invited (and not someone else)?
The focus of each of the meetings	What is the focus of each meeting? How are the foci linked to what goes on in the classroom? How are the foci relevant to the professional practice of the participants?
The materials used in the network meetings	What materials are being used? How do the materials fit with the focus of the meeting? Are the materials based on sound educational evidence?
In-between meeting activity	What activity/activities have been agreed on to try out in between meetings? How does the in-between meeting activity fit with the focus of the meeting and the aim of the network? How will the participants report back on the in-between meeting activity at the next meeting?
Ethos in the network meetings	Is there enough time to share ideas? Is the environment mutually supportive? Is there a 'safe' ethos where participants feel valued and free to share their concerns? What will be done to ensure this ethos will prevail?
Getting support	Does the senior management support those who are involved in the network? If not, do they need to? Can anything be done to get support from senior management? Is support from any other people (e.g. family) required?