

TEACHER TRAINING



Prashika talks of an open and flexible curriculum. Only its broad outlines are defined. There is no particular set of exercises or specific steps laid down that will enable the child to learn reading or acquire arithmetic skills. The teacher can and must develop activities, exercises and provide informational input necessary at a given time. In a sense all the textual material is not given in the book. The expectation is that the teacher will be able to function as a partial source of information and knowledge expected to be covered through the textual materials. It is expected that the teacher will be able to plan a multiplicity of activities, observe carefully their implementation and analyse the feedback to modify and change the activi-



ties. As in the case of the child, Prashika has a deep-seated faith in the creativity of the teacher. He is expected on the one hand to assess the general needs of the learner and on the other provide suitable opportunities for individual growth.

The programme expects the child to be active and participate in decisions regarding classroom activities. The teacher needs to be a participant-cum-leader of the learning process and thus should necessarily be able to get away from the usual inhibitions (regarding painting, singing, playing, mimicking, etc.) afflicting adults. He needs to be sensitive to the moods of children and should be able to make learning a joyful and meaningful activity even in difficult situations.

THE REQUIREMENTS

The concept of primary education in Prashika indeed makes very severe demands on the teacher. Teachers are expected to continuously participate in the pro-

A PRASHIKA MEMBER REMARKED . . .

The training model had to be different. Not the one-shot injection model. But a gradual, ongoing, interactive and collaborative process of change.

cess of innovation and re-examine their views regarding children, the learning process and the curriculum.

They should have an *understanding of the child* involving

1. a certain kind of relationship with the child, one of greater equality than is usual for adults in our society;
2. the openness to make use of the child's knowledge and look upon the child as a responsible being, as well as a sensitivity towards her/his language and culture;
3. understanding of children, their learning process and the importance of articulating that understanding; and
4. appreciation of children learning on their own through the discovery method.

The teacher should have *curricular understanding* which would involve

1. some basic insights into children's cognitive development and their learning processes;
2. enough understanding to allow her/him to match the level of the child and the activities to be undertaken;
3. insights to be able to relate the educational process to the environment;
4. an understanding of language and maths and the steps in acquiring them. Also a certain conceptual base in different components of the curriculum, such as fractions, measurement, motion, friction, growth and development, etc.;
5. an ability to create exercises and activities that would be enjoyed by the children and also help them to acquire specific skills like comprehending a text, counting, observing carefully, recording data, making connections, etc.;
6. an ability to identify and develop moments where practice of certain ideas is possible, emphasize difficult concepts and skills by creating sufficient opportunities for their practice; and
7. an ability to use available material judiciously by extracting from it the part that is relevant to the classroom and can be of interest to children.

The teacher should be *creative*. Prashika helps teachers to overcome their own inhibitions by promoting

1. an ability to use materials creatively within the confines of the classroom situation;
2. the capacity to take part in activity-based/experiential learning; and
3. creativity and various skills such as drawing, singing, role play, etc. It is not necessary that each teacher should do all this to begin with. Two things are important: every teacher should overcome her/his inhibitions; second, it is not the quality of drawing or role play that is important in the early stages. Anyone, teacher or child, can discover her/his potential only if (s)he gets an opportunity to explore it.

To this must be added the flexible curriculum and its own requirements: essentially the ability to perceive the needs of different children in the class(es) and adapt the skeleton curriculum according to circumstances.

THE TEACHERS' BACKGROUND

It is unfortunate that the state does not provide any opportunities for the continuous training and enrichment of primary school teachers. Most of them come

from a very poor background and cannot afford higher education. In fact, instead of helping them in any way, the state often entrusts them with additional responsibilities, generally of a non-academic nature. A lot of their time is taken by these activities and by their efforts to add in some way to their extremely low salaries. For example, several teachers are also farmers.

Treated shabbily by the clerks and officials of the education department (and the tribal welfare department), they find themselves at the lowest rung of the government hierarchy, ignored, bullied and frustrated. It is usually not long before the most enthusiastic teachers are demotivated by the system.

At the same time, most teachers are ill-prepared for the job, either never having been trained, or having received government training. The latter, most often, refuses to face facts such as a teacher handling more than one class or a constantly shifting student population, or vast numbers of children not being able to understand the kind of Hindi which is given in textbooks and is used as a medium of instruction.

Compounding this is the fact that the only educational model is the one teachers themselves have been through as students. Unfortunately, it is one where memorization is emphasized, and where the teacher

is looked upon as the dispenser of *gyan*. Most of all, teaching in Prashika requires the teachers to think on their own, devise the curriculum for their class, sing, draw, write stories and poems for children, etc. all of which is considered either impossible or undesirable in a typical state educational model.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ORIENTATION PROGRAMMES

The major objectives of the Prashika teacher-orientation programmes are to

1. create an awareness of the learning process and bring about attitudinal changes,
2. cultivate skills and confidence,
3. help teachers acquire knowledge,
4. develop those operational skills that are needed to put the curriculum into practice, and
5. help teachers in a sense to become their own informal researchers.

FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE ORIENTATION PROGRAMME

Training vs self-learning. As against the word 'training', the word 'orientation' is more commonly used as regards the interaction with teachers. Training seems to imply trainers imparting a complete set of

skills and knowledge to the trainees. Prashika tries to do away with this patronizing relationship with teachers, nor does it look upon training as something that can be completed in the five 20-day interactions over

ACCORDING TO A PRASHIKA MEMBER . . .

One of the most important aspects of this orientation is that there are no lectures. Instead, everyone, including the resource person, participates in activities. Therefore discussion follows experience or reliving experience (such as childhood memories), or a depiction (as in role play).

five years. In reality, it is only by being in the teaching situation, trying out various things, and learning from experience that the teacher gets 'trained'. Our programme only serves to 'orient' the teacher to self-learning from experience. Thus, even though the word 'training' is being used here, it is more in the nature of orientation.

During orientation, then, people can be found working on activities and making things, followed by discussions and analyses. This includes gathering things, collecting information, measuring, participating in games that exercise their minds, solving maths problems and puzzles, reading stories and poems,

hunting the library, doing language exercises, games that give them a chance to exercise their language and expose them to possible activities involving expres-

A PRASHIKA MEMBER REMARKED . . .

The spirit of Prashika is the spirit of HSTP. As in other areas, HSTP created models for teacher training also. In terms of their spirit, philosophy and structures, teacher-training programmes of HSTP and Prashika show commonalties. There are important departures as well. For example, the HSTP training is unit-based, Prashika's is far more open-ended.

sion, grammar, quantification, etc.

Along with this there are other inputs. For example, the writings of educationists, including position papers and narration of experiences of other experiments, are read, discussed and analysed in the context of the schools that they are working in.

All this requires on the part of the resource group an understanding of when to give information, where to leave gaps and encourage people to think.

Triggering off creativity. Prashika encourages mutual appreciation of efforts people make in creating new ideas and materials for actual classroom use.

This leads to developing possible activities for children, what can be learnt through them, devising activities for specific points, and thinking of the manner in which these activities can be organized in the classroom. This brings to the fore the importance of working in small groups and informal sessions.

Equality. Prashika makes sincere efforts to bring about equality between resource persons and teachers. There is a need for intensive full-time interaction during the day, both inside and outside the 'classroom'. Both the resource person and the teachers carry a mental baggage in which university teachers and researchers from urban centres are thought to be naturally superior to local schoolteachers. It is not easy to overcome these barriers.

It is not only difficult to convince teachers that they know a lot from their experience and knowledge; it is equally difficult to convince resource persons that they may have something to learn from these teachers. Language can be a very important variable in this context. Most discussions about education are conducted in English in the academic world and the resource persons are hardly aware of the idiom that would enable them to communicate effectively with the teachers; nor do they often have the necessary

humility and skills to understand and assimilate the experiences of schoolteachers. It really takes a very long time to break these barriers.

Once these inhibitions are overcome and equality is effortlessly and demonstrably established in different spheres of activity, the results of resource persons, group members and teachers interactions can indeed be phenomenal. In fact, Prashika teacher-orientation camps have evolved a variety of activities that help all the participants in a particular camp to overcome these barriers.

Brewing vs Boiling. Prashika prefers the brewing model of orientation, where you try to create the right atmosphere, provide the appropriate inputs and let things take their own course, rather than put pressure and force opinions on people. Thus the plans for the orientation programme have to be very flexible. They may have to be modified continuously in response to the specific needs of a given group.

Feedback. Prashika collects feedback, largely informally, from a variety of sources on its orientation programmes. The feedback comes from teachers themselves and from resource persons and observers.

Follow-up. Monthly meetings, classroom visits, post-orientation discussions, etc. are an essential part of Prashika teacher-training programmes. It is in these meetings and visits that the agenda for the next camp is prepared and important feedback is collected for revising teaching materials.

A REVIEW

The Prashika experience has helped in drawing a few conclusions.

1. Teachers by and large accept participation of children as an important element for learning.
2. Teachers do give children a chance to sing poems, relate stories, play occasional games, count and add with concrete materials on occasions, get them to work on things suggested in the work-book. They are also able to get them to occasionally participate in language activities.
3. Teachers try and conduct discussions in the classroom. They also demonstrate a few simple experiments.
4. Teachers agree about the advantage of using the language of the child. They also realize that reciting numbers up to hundred is not counting and that knowing the letters of the alphabet is not reading. They also agree that the present curricu-

lum is too loaded and must be reduced. They admit that even in Class IV many children cannot read, and writing or expressing ideas of their own is simply impossible for the children. They have difficulty with concepts like fractions, meaning of if-so-then, square root, LCM, HCF, etc. Yet it is very difficult to persuade the teachers to reject the old curriculum and the methods and materials used to teach it.

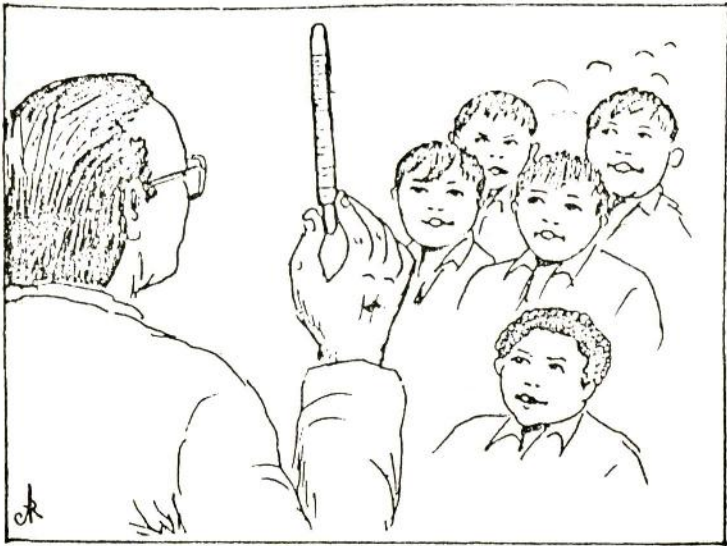
If we look critically at what has been happening in the average schools of Prashika, some generalizations with regard to training and its realization in the classroom emerge.

1. Activities that the teachers have done and enjoyed are more likely to be done with the children, even if they are not really intended for children. The likelihood of doing a particular activity increases if the activity involves very simple instructions, is interesting for the child and does not require any elaborate materials. In spite of Prashika's best efforts to the contrary, the teacher is most likely to sustain her/his central role and insist on absolute discipline in the class.
2. The choice of activities, the number of times they are repeated and their duration is largely dependent on the mood and means of the teacher and

rarely on the needs of the children. This is because of many reasons:

- a. Teachers find it difficult to accept the validity of students contributing to the choice of the direction of the classroom process.
 - b. It is very difficult to elicit an opinion from children in an open manner mainly because they are seen as recipients of rather than as contributors to the process of learning.
 - c. Children can be quite noisy in such situations and the teacher does not understand how (s)he can allow this unruliness, either as a part of the process of acquiring sensible behaviour or under any other garb. Her/His patience is worn thin and evolving consensus or a dialogue process seems impossible.
 - d. Interaction between children and adults is often one-sided, particularly in schools. In such situations it is extremely difficult for teachers, who rarely listen to children carefully except in response to their questions, to be sensitive to and informed on the learning levels of the children and what they need to do to learn.
3. Socially, both inside and outside school it is not acceptable that children be articulate, alive and active in the classroom. There is a pressure on

- children to reproduce facts and kill their creativity and the desire for action of their choice. The teachers find this pressure difficult to resist.
4. It is possible for teachers to feel free and participate in some activities usually shunned because of inhibitions. This participation does not come so easily to children.
 5. It is very difficult for teachers to formulate what children need, both in content and in method.
 6. Teachers like the idea of being responsible for the school and the children and their learning but do not actually have the confidence to define that responsibility or work at the required pace.
 7. Creating new activities and planning contextual learning are not easily understood by teachers.
 8. In terms of mathematical abilities there is consensus that most children end up disliking and not understanding maths. A lot that is stated in the curriculum is not achieved in the classroom. Children have problems in understanding numbers, place value (not abstract place value but functional use of *Ikai-Dahai*). Teachers are of the opinion that children appear to understand and are able to do all the sums at the time a certain topic is being done in the classroom but have difficulty in doing the same sums later.



Teachers are themselves shaky regarding many things in maths. A large number of them know rules and formulas, but they are often incapable of handling questions like why and how a particular algorithm works.

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In spite of some of the limitations discussed above, Prashika seems to have achieved considerable success in changing teacher attitudes and in sharing new insights with them regarding the learning process, the role of errors, attitudes to local languages, using

local materials, planning new activities, etc. The most satisfying outcome of Prashika's teacher-orientation camps is that some teachers do undergo a kind of minor transformation. They begin to evaluate the learning process and their own role in it more critically.