

March 2022

Learning from Indian teacher expertise

A policy brief for educational organisations in India

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Introduction

This policy brief offers key findings and policy recommendations from an empirical study into the practices, cognition and professionalism of teachers identified as experts working in Indian schools.

Eight expert secondary teachers of English working in government or government-aided schools participated in this study: five from Maharashtra, two from Telangana and one from West Bengal. Their teaching practices, cognition and professionalism were compared and found to have much in common, both with each other and with expert teachers studied in other contexts around the world. Nonetheless, there were also important differences due to the particular circumstances, conditions and challenges that Indian teachers face; these teachers found ways of overcoming these challenges and remaining effective despite less than ideal conditions in their schools and classrooms.

This briefing offers recommendations for policy and teacher education practice, particularly of relevance to the three states involved in the study, but also for teachers working in secondary education across India. A longer **Policy and Practice Report** is freely available from the author.

Key findings

Teaching: All eight expert teachers demonstrated warm, supportive relationships with their learners. They were inclusive of all learners in their classrooms, offering differentiated tuition when appropriate. Most balanced between teacher-led whole class interactive teaching and learner-independent seatwork and groupwork, when they were able to provide support to individuals and groups through active monitoring. As teachers of English, none had an 'English-only' policy in their classes; all made use of a combination of languages, although in different degrees, and also allowed learners to use languages other than English in the classroom.

Cognition: All eight teachers were found to have well developed pedagogical content knowledge and high proficiency in Indian English. They believed in building learner self-confidence, engaging learners in class and promoting learner understanding over rote memorisation. They were able to plan lessons quickly, usually without written notes, and adapt their teaching in class based on learner needs and challenges.

Professionalism: Most engaged in both critical reflection of their teaching and lifelong learning, underpinned by motivation driven primarily by care for their learners.

Policy and practice recommendations

Pre-service teacher education

- Raise trainee teacher awareness of the relative merits of both learner-centred and teacher-led instruction during pre-service teacher education – both are important. Help trainee teachers offer individualised support during learner-independent activities.
- Focus English language teacher preparation on foreign language (FL) rather than second language (SL) teaching. Reduce the emphasis on English literature studies, and increase teachers' understandings of how to develop learner oracy and literacy in English as a foreign language.

In-service teacher education

- Learners benefit more when teachers are flexible and inclusive in their language choices, using multilingual approaches themselves and encouraging learners to do so if required. 'English only' policies often exclude the most disadvantaged learners.
- Particularly in rural contexts, where curriculum progress is often too ambitious for learners, encourage teachers to simplify this content and take more time to teach it, particularly by getting learners to work together in pairs or small groups. This is likely to be more successful than rushing through the curriculum to focus on rote learning of answers to exam questions, as sometimes observed in less effective teachers' classes.

Teacher recruitment

- Pre-service teacher tests (e.g. the Teacher Eligibility Test) may benefit by focusing in part on the testing of characteristics such as teacher empathy and care for learners alongside the testing of teacher knowledge.

Future research

- Future studies of expert teachers in India are likely to increase our understanding of Indian teacher expertise in ways that can usefully inform policy and practice, particularly in subjects other than English.

Further information

This briefing is based on:

Anderson, J. (2021). Eight expert Indian teachers of English: A participatory comparative case study of teacher expertise in the Global South. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Warwick]. Warwick WRAP. <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/159940/>

Anderson, J. (2022). The translanguaging practices of expert Indian teachers of English and their learners. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2045300>

Funding

This research and brief were supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK, under grant numbers ES/P000771/1 and ES/T502054/1.



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