

Teaching Children in a Post-Earthquake Situation: Chetan Kumar Timilsena's Experience

Source: Timilsena, C. K. 2015. 'Teachers' anecdote: teaching children at post earthquake situation'. *ELT Choutari* (June 2015). Online: <http://eltchoutari.com/2015/06/teachers-anecdote-teaching-children-at-post-earthquake-situation/> (Adapted by Richard Smith, with the author's permission)

This reading and associated prediction questions were prepared as sample material for ELT teacher preparation programmes.



In the devastating earthquake and its aftershocks which struck Nepal at the end of April 2015 thousands of public and private schools collapsed or were damaged. A large number of children became orphans, homeless and also schoolless.

Chetan is an English teacher at Shree Ratna Rajya Higher Secondary School, a large public school in Kathmandu Valley which was heavily damaged in the earthquake and aftershocks. His school was closed for more than a month and finally, when classes could resume, there were many challenges confronting the teachers

[Qu 1. What challenges faced the teachers, do you think?]

The major challenges included how to manage the classes when so many classrooms were damaged, and how to deal with students' as well as their own fears and other psychological effects. Both teachers and students were still in a state of psychological trauma after the earthquake and its aftershocks. Despite the challenges, the teachers knew it was important for them to seek solutions and find strength to re-establish daily school routines.

[Qu. 2 What would you plan to do on the first day back at school, in such a situation?]

Chetan himself had an idea that he would share some of his experiences and try to create some fun and friendly activities.

The first day, the school seemed to be like a railway station. Students were at school with parents or guardians and there were not enough classrooms even though only a quarter of the school population was present. There was silence despite the big crowd. To break the silence, the teachers started to share some of their own feelings and experiences with everybody. Chetari shared what he had done during the rescue and relief process. After that, some of the students also started sharing their experiences. This broke the ice due to the similarity between teacher and students' experiences. However, students were so sad that they frequently cried as they spoke.

The teachers did not teach the students' course books or even refer to them but they did engage the students in different activities such as telling stories and jokes, reciting poems, singing songs and leading different games. Everyone was happier after these activities. There was also some teaching in separate groups. Students seemed happy that multiple teachers were teaching at the same time. The teachers ended classes at 1 PM. Then, they had a staff meeting, sharing experiences and discussing how to deal with the students the next day in such a traumatized situation. They decided to try to create an optimistic atmosphere by playing games and sharing jokes.

[Qu. 3: How do you think the teachers modified their behaviour or activities for the second day, if at all?]

On the second day one of the main focuses was music. Music was played for about ten minutes before school assembly. More students attended that day, and the students seemed happier than the first day. The teachers involved the students not only in talking about their experiences but also in writing about it in a few sentences.

The lower classes were taught all together, with awnings being hung so they could all sit outside together. Teachers sat together with the students and got involved in different group work activities, which gave the teachers themselves a lot of satisfaction and pleasure. They felt they were better prepared that day and had gained in experience about how to face unforeseen problems.

The teachers continued to try their best to convince the students to share their personal experiences. And some of the teachers shared their own bitter experiences of the world and aspects of their personal morality, for example telling students to love people and feel pride in being a human being. More practically, they also made pupils aware of what should be done if a disaster were to re-occur.

The teachers felt a need to get to know their students personally as they had been so traumatized by the disaster. Teachers found that some students were still not feeling safe and comfortable, and the teachers got involved in some personal counselling. Classes ended at 2 pm that day, and were followed by another staff meeting. After sharing the experiences of the day, the teachers also shared new ideas regarding how to prepare students better for learning. Teachers decided to try to teach with their own individual plans but relating classes more to the curriculum.

The third day was happier and much more comfortable than the previous two days. Most students were in a happy mood. Chetan had already planned to teach using a strip story. Therefore, he prepared the strips of paper. Classes

started with the national anthem and Morning Prayer. The school administration had become better prepared for managing the classes. He had two classes merged into one, sharing it with another teacher. First, they started the class with a language game based on yes/no questions. Then they engaged pupils in learning the strip story. The activity was continued until the period ended.

Overall, in Chetan's experience, negative effects of the earthquake on school children included loss of concentration and energy, inability to sleep, fear of different objects, frequent changes of mood, headaches, lack of interest in sharing anything or in studies, anger and short temperedness, and feelings of loneliness. However, following the earthquake, children also developed positive abilities to help and cooperate with each other, curiosity to know about natural calamities, awareness of the environment, natural disaster and its effects in daily lives, and a greater ability to frankly share their experiences.

Chetan feels that, on the basis of his experience, the following activities can play significant roles in healing the pain of students affected by earthquake:

- Proper counselling and motivational classes should be held regularly;
- Teacher Talk should be kept short and simple and reduced to the minimum while problems are being dealt with;
- Teachers should play the role of a good listener. A good listener can be a good counsellor;
- Participatory activities encouraging self-expression should be prepared;
- Encouragement to engage in every classroom activity should be provided to the students;
- Students and teachers should share real life experiences and contextualize them;
- Temporary classrooms should be created as far as possible.

The earthquake brought disastrous effects, but it also created many opportunities for people to rebuild a better and quake-resilient Nepal. According to Chetan, it also gave teachers valuable lessons which will inform their future work.