

Editorial

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Declining respect for teachers: a concern for the society

The success of an education system regardless of the level of education or sophistication depends to a very large extent on the social attitudes towards it. And if this universally accepted statement is anything to go by, then the recent pictures of a lady police officer manhandling a lady principal of a school for removing a few ropes tethered to the school fencing for setting up sheds by a bunch of fruit vendors who are not authorized to set up shop at the very premise which incidentally is one of the busiest thoroughfare in the heart of the Imphal City tells a very damning story about how the society and its protectors perceive the teachers of the state. While the perception towards education has changed for the better during the past few years, it still remains, to a large extent, a meal ticket to competitive material success. The importance of education not only in broadening the knowledge base of a student but also in developing the overall personality of an individual has yet to take shape, and perhaps such an outlook explains the attitude of the state security forces towards the lady principal who happens to be a national award winner in the field of imparting education.

While the incident might be just another day at the office for the police personnel, the attitude displayed leaves many question unanswered, and a bitter aftertaste for many in the state. The declining respect for teachers in the society has been a cause for concern for a long time now, and there have been more than enough instances where students caught using unfair means during examination or even reprimanding unruly students inside the classroom by the teachers are physically assaulted.

The sad story does not end there. Teachers, considered soft target in general, have been at the receiving end for a while now, and the higher authorities, assisted in no small measure by the opinionated section of the society, have condemned them, scapegoating them for ills arising from political mismanagement and flawed policies and programs. Besides, there also is a sharp decline in parental respect for the teachers which further aggravates the situation and lends credence to the decline in respect for teachers by the students.

But have we ever given a long serious thought to the repercussions to such social attitudes being meted out to the teachers and the teaching profession? While the world unites in condemning the decline in educational performances across parameters especially among state-run institutions which inadvertently always points to the teachers, the policies and management have been left off the hook.

A socially derisive and contemptuous attitude only helps in keeping away bright, young and enthusiastic talents from taking up the teaching profession which is what is exactly required at the moment if the age old system of learning by rote is to be replaced by a new system of inquisitive and rational teaching where students are encouraged to question the traditions and think out of the box.

Until and unless a society can respect and give due regard to the teachers and the teaching profession, progress and inclusive development will always remain a tantalizingly close dream.

Perhaps the lady officer and the other personnel involved in manhandling the lady principal can set an exemplary and beautiful example of educated humility by apologizing for the excesses. The state authorities can also do their vital bit by conducting periodical assessments and inspections for any opportunity to improve and upgrade the education system in the state and work from a position of positivity.

Problems faced by Indian teachers in the classroom and outside

By Yasmeen Hossain

Each year as India celebrates Teacher's day with fanfare and epiphany by glorifying this noble profession with expressions of gratitude, I simply wonder why this admiration dies down for the rest of the year.

Poet Kabir narrated the importance of teachers in his couplet:

Guru gobind dou khade, kaake lagoon pay, Balihari guru apne gobind diyo batay

(Guru and God both are here to whom should I first bow? All glory be unto the guru, path to God who did bestow).

Unfortunately these gurus have become the scapegoat for all lacunas that our education system is plagued with. This brings to an important question as to why teachers are not respected in India and what daily battles they wage for survival irrespective of whether they are working in a government school or an international curriculum school.

As a teacher these are my reflections to this question based on my personal experience and my interaction with my colleagues.

Professional status of teaching

Teaching is not considered as one of the most sought after career in India; hence the primary challenge is to raise the status of teaching as a career choice. This stems from the general perception that people harbor about this profession which is, that anyone can become a teacher as it takes minimal skill and is nothing but glorified baby-sitting.

Well, to some extent it is true as a non competitive teacher really has minimal skills whereas a good teacher has leadership skills which can even challenge a senior manager of a company. This status can also be attributed by our hiring process in B.Ed programs.

Professor Geoff Masters, Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) states that the top performing countries in PISA test like Finland, Singapore, Korea and Hong Kong consistently attract top 30 per cent of school leavers.

In fact in South Korea and Finland teachers are selected from the top 10 per cent which means in such countries competition for entry to teacher education program is intense. Only one in 10 applicants is accepted to study to become a primary teacher in Finland.

This shows the respect that teachers possess in these countries as only the best and the brightest of the lot are in this profession, naturally conferring it to be one of the most highly regarded professions.

In India this tradition of hiring the best is practiced by Teach for India, Gandhi fellowship etc by recruiting the best college graduates or even corporate honchos with exemplary leadership skills as teaching fellows in their fellowship programme.

In my social circle whenever I mention my profession, my friends respect me not because of my profession but because I chose to be a teacher instead of what my fancy college degree expected me to become. My degree made me a good teacher by default.

This I feel is the greatest disrespect to the profession and to all those teachers out there who are there by choice and are doing a great job. The day when everyone understands that a good teacher is one who is not only a fountain of knowledge but also an agent of change and leader, would lead to a breakthrough in this existing perception.

Financial compensation

As mentioned in my previous article teaching is one of the most underpaid jobs barring some schools which strictly adhere to pay commission of scales. Even appreciation in form of financial incentive is not a very popular culture.

These problems are not restricted to government or low cost private schools but also to posh international schools where the average annual fee structure of a student ranges from Rs.6 Lakhs to 10 Lakhs. The school management and board of directors

mostly prefer cheap labour.

Again this is because of the low professional status of teachers in our society. The teaching profession is dominated by women and we see very less men who prefer being a teacher. Women are not considered as the primary breadwinner of a family and hence their compensation is abysmally poor compared to the fee structure that these international school charge.

The biggest irony lies in the fact that these schools celebrate Women's day with great pomp and splendour even though more than 90% of the women workforce in these schools are financially dependent on their husband for expenditure like car loan, education loan etc as their salary is almost one tenth of what their husbands earn in MNC. The school salary is just like pocket money for them.

It's high time that teachers need to value their self esteem and take control of their situation rather than contributing to this vicious circle. One should always update their networking skills to be placed in the best of the organization rather than compromising on self respect and injustice.

Commercialisation of education

The general Indian mentality believes that privatization is the solution to everything dysfunctional in our country. This public perception stems from the status quo that an Indian family enjoys when they send their children to these 'Modern temples of education' which have air conditioned classrooms, buses and infrastructure equivalent to a five star resort like tennis court, swimming pool etc. It gives immense pride to parents and an opportunity for them to gloat about the fact that their children go to school where students are well dressed, their classmates come from the elite strata of the society and most important they are 'English medium schools'.

So how do these superficial markers affect teachers?

Most of these elite private schools are established by real estate developers or politicians who do not have an iota of idea what education is all about. For them education is nothing but a means to amass a huge fortune.

They forget the golden lines of Padma Shri Dr. D.B Pathak who said:

Education should not be a business but it should be run like a business. Goddess Lakshmi is more venerated as compared to Goddess Saraswati which means these schools are open to year round admissions whose parents pass the merit of possessing a hefty bank balance. Entrance test are generally not conducted and academic merit is not the driving factor for admission.

The responsibility falls on teachers to churn the best out of the non performing students and it is their responsibility to raise a student's performance and to equate it with the rest of the class if the student joined the school in the fog end of the academic year.

Most of all, VIP treatment and excessive molly cuddling is expected from a teacher which also includes malpractices like promoting students even when they have failed in major academic subjects to retain admissions and prevent financial loss. This is really detrimental to a teacher's moral who believes and practices idealism, honesty and fair practice.

Lack of motivation and support

Teachers don't have a voice and have no say about educational policy. The concept of motivated teacher is also a flawed one because most of them feel that a motivated teacher is one who is regular to school every day, follows official protocols blindly without questioning and if necessary provide information that management team wants!

The real focus shifts from student learning outcomes to complying orders as found fit by the administrative department relegating teachers to a mere stature of puppets who have no voice.

Ms. Seema Bansal of Boston Consulting Group mentioned in TED

Talk that one of the issues faced by teachers in Haryana is not that they are incompetent but they were expected by supervisors to supervise the construction of classrooms, toilet, mid day meal or depositing scholarship money in students account etc.

Hence teachers were in schools but not in classrooms. The same can be extrapolated to private schools where a lot of instructional time is lost to rehearse high profile school events like annual day, sports day etc and with the time that is left over teachers are expected to finish the curriculum with finesse.

By the way an important observation, in all these high profile events the chief guests generally happens to be a politician, sport star or someone glamorous who holds a position of power. I still need to come across school functions who have invited prominent educationists or senior teachers in these school functions.

As teachers have to comply rather than pitching in their ideas, the whole process seems like a mundane task leading to disheartened and demotivated teachers. The issue of teacher motivation also lies in the labyrinth of our complex education system where steep growth rate in student enrolment has not kept in pace with growth rate in number of teachers.

To cope up with this teachers end up teaching a class of say 40 to 80 students in government schools. Of course, international schools can boast about a harmonious teacher student ratio, not because they really care about healthy student - teacher ratio but because the vast majority of Indian population cannot afford the overpriced fee structure.

Sometimes teachers are thrust with grades and subjects that a teacher is not equipped to handle or interested to teach. Most of all the blame game that teachers have to suffer when management and even parents question them if a student's result is not up to the mark, even though the results are based on an archaic examination system which stresses importance on textbook learning with little to no scope of critical thinking. Hence teachers are not motivated because they are not empowered and there is no support for them.

Professional development and teacher's needs

Education sector is a very dynamic industry. A good teacher needs to be constantly updated with the best practices practiced across the world. This means reevaluating and reflecting one's pedagogical skills by adopting rigorous study, practice and self-improvement.

The high performing countries keep professional development and training as the top most priority and they conduct in-house trainings every month in addition to regular classroom observations and feedback by peers and line managers.

Observation is considered as an instrument of development by scaffolding and developing the teachers and not as a weapon to terminate their services which nowadays schools are adept in doing.

Unfortunately professional development and R&D cell in these elite private schools is starkly absent and even if there are such workshops they are numbered to say 10 or 15 PD sessions per year, leaving teachers unequipped to manage the rapidly changing milieu of education sector.

Very few schools like Aga Khan Academy Hyderabad, Indus school Bangalore, TISB etc have their in-house professional development cell. At the end of the day a teacher is just a human being who herself has studied in the same dysfunctional system which means most of her teaching practices stems from the belief and experiences acquired during her school days.

To change or even transform her belief system requires redesigning of professional development modules to a cutting edge quality.

For example, after the implementation of RTE (Right to education), which again many private schools have not

wholeheartedly accepted, the classrooms have become more diverse and multi ethnic and multi lingual.

Teachers lack the skills to manage such diversity in class. Training programmes are designed keeping in view the situation existing in urban schools and problems faced by teachers like high teacher student ratio or multi grade teaching are hardly discussed.

An elementary school teacher attends the same training programme as that of a senior school teacher leaving no scope for differentiation and discussion on age specific issues. Most of the sessions are nothing but heavy dose of theory with zero planning to implement those ideas. Sessions like joyful learning and student-centric learning sounds hollow to teachers who have to deal with social diversity, different levels of students and most importantly, children who belong to the bottom level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs which means children who have low self-esteem as they are hungry for love and a sense of belonging.

In general there is no subject specific training for multi grade situations as most training programmes focus on generic skills. Hence there is a complete mismatch between the problems faced by teachers inside the classroom and training programmes designed by administrators who have very little idea of challenges of a multi-grade class.

Even if a teacher takes the whole pain to educate herself, at the end she is supervised by department head or principal who themselves have stereotypes and mindset that are even more outdated.

For example, if a language teacher is doing a listening task then she would be questioned by her coordinator as to why there is focus on listening and speaking skills rather than writing skills.

For the coordinator it is a Eureka moment if the teacher writes something on the board and students copy them like mute sheep increasing the volume of pages filled in the notebook which is a tangible product that can be shown to parents.

Or let's say a Maths teacher, who wants to implement an activity that she has learned from one of the workshop session by asking the students to sing a rap while teaching statistics, would be promptly intervened by the management by scolding her in front of the students for not maintaining discipline.

Lack of intellectual liberty and academic freedom is what teachers miss in this profession and this failure of implementing something new curtails their motivation to learn, innovate and update their practices.

Finding the Holy Grail: Work life balance

As mentioned earlier teaching can be demoralizing for many reasons — demotivated students, helicopter parents, disorganized administration, lack of financial incentive, lack of prestige in our society for teachers, etc.

Add to it the fact that most teachers return back home and spend their quality personal time and weekends marking notebooks, planning lessons, grading answer scripts etc. This means by the end of the day a teacher is mentally and physically exhausted leaving neither any time to pursue a hobby nor any time to socialise with friends except to recharge themselves during summer holidays I presume.

A person who is physically and psychically drained has no time to even enjoy the little pleasures of life, forget about imagining how to upgrade one's career skills.

If a teacher is smart enough to strike the right cord of work life balance, that teacher is branded as lazy and not hardworking as the myopic thought process of most of the coordinators make them feel that a good teacher is one who carries work at home.

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