

Teachers' Identities and Mental Health: Reflections in Times of COVID-19

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Abstract

The present paper is set in the context of COVID-19. One of the impacts of the changing dynamics in educational processes has been the blurring the demarcation between professional and personal space for teachers and students. While spending several hours together on school days, there is little that students and oftentimes, colleagues get to know of the personal lives of teachers. Scholars in the field of education are scrambling to document the challenges that this sudden advent of online teaching has brought with itself. As professional and personal spaces overlap, teachers are required to redefine themselves and cope with the physical and psychological challenges that this time of lockdown imposes. This paper focuses on dimensions of identity and mental health within these novel experiences.

Keywords: *teacher's identity, mental health, COVID-19, online teaching*

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a sudden change in the way educational institutions function in India. Till early 2020, schools, colleges and other educational institutions were running with the usual complexities of heterogeneous classroom spaces, preparation for impending examinations, parental anxiety over admissions, and the like. In the middle of the senior secondary school examinations conducted at the end of twelve plus years of schooling at the all India level, the pandemic reached a proportion where a sudden nationwide lockdown was declared. Examinations were halted, classes in higher education institutions were suspended, and all teachers and students were asked to stay at home. The need for online teaching emanated from this lockdown and the realisation that the lockdown was unlikely to end anytime soon. At the time of writing this paper, the Prime Minister of India declared an extension of the lockdown till early May 2020; it is likely to be extended further.

Schools and colleges that had little exposure to technology for teaching in classrooms were forced to explore the possibilities of teachers engaging students through online classes. Most schools had little over a week to prepare before the beginning of the 2020-21 academic session. Higher education institutions were thrust into the world of online teaching overnight. The dynamics and complexity increased as students who were visiting their home or their relatives

on the festival of colours, Holi, could not return to home or their hostels as the lockdown was declared immediately after vacations.

The present paper is set in the context described above. One of the impacts of the resultant changing dynamics in educational processes, has been blurring the demarcation between professional and personal space for teachers and students. While spending several hours together on school days, there is little that students, and often, colleagues get to know of the personal lives of teachers. Scholars in education are scrambling to document the challenges that this sudden advent of online teaching has brought with itself. As professional and personal spaces overlap, teachers are required to redefine themselves and cope with the physical and psychological challenges that this time of lockdown imposes. This paper reflects on teachers' identities as they redefine their sense of self during these novel times.

Context

The reflections shared in their paper are located within the specific context of New Delhi. The experiences of COVID and the changes emanating from the world-wide pandemic are far from universal. New Delhi is the capital city of the second most populated country of the world. The city is characterised by a metropolitan culture. The young are aspirational and engaged in building a meaningful life through exploring higher education opportunities within and outside the country. This however, is true more for those belonging to the middle and upper class

population. The contrast is apparent in the struggles of the lower socio-economic class to access two meals a day, sometimes not even that.

The last pan India census survey conducted by the government of India shows that Delhi hosts 1.39% of the country's population. It has a literacy rate of 86%. About 16,00,000 people live in urban areas within Delhi while the rest 4,19,000 live in rural areas. Roughly 2.5% of the population in Delhi lives in rural areas. (GoI, 2011) Delhi sees the highest share of inter-state migrant population among other states in the country. (Kawoosa, 2019) The heterogeneity is reflected in the lifestyles of Delhiites. On the one hand you would be able to witness youth who discuss international series they watch on Over the Top (OTT) media platforms, a culture of visiting high end cafes, lounges and bars is seen alongside a different group of people enjoying their lives with the delicacies of street food.

The diversity is equally reflected in the school system within the country and the city. The city has a vast network of privately funded and state funded schools. The state funded schools are themselves divided into those funded by the central government and the state government. Further, there are state run schools for the gifted (Rajkiya Pratibha Vikas Vidyalaya, loosely translated as State school for promotion of the gifted), and most recently Schools of Excellence, admission to which is on the basis of an entrance examination. Diversity within the classroom extends to the various domains of class, caste, gender, religion, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A similar diversity can be seen in the teacher population as well. Teachers in government schools are likely to be better paid than private schools with the exception of a few private schools charging extremely high fees. While infrastructural facilities were likely to be better in private schools, reforms in the last few years have been working towards levelling the playing field.

The diversity in contexts lends itself to the assumption that the experience of each school, student and teacher will be different. In this paper, thus, there is only an attempt to reflect on the experiences of teachers and not to draw conclusions. In writing this paper, conversational interviews were conducted with about fifteen teachers teaching in state run and private schools at various levels of education, in New Delhi. The

interviews were focussed on but not limited to the following questions:

- In what ways do you think your personal and professional lives have changed, together and separately, as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown?
- What are the influences of the new work pattern on your role as a teacher, teacher-student relationship, and your sense of self?
- What do you think is likely to be the impact of the lockdown on your role as a teacher in the future?
- How has the experience of lockdown had an impact on your psychological wellbeing?

Teachers' identities and mental health

Orders of closing schools came weeks before the declaration of the nationwide lockdown. (The Economic Times, 2020, March 06, The Economic Times, 2020, March 25) At that time, schools were busy preparing final assessments. Examinations were cancelled and the school administration had to make a sudden decision about whether to ask teachers to be present in schools. Schools worked independently till further orders from the government that followed soon after. In a city like Delhi, where distances are large and teachers sometimes travel from neighbouring states, this could mean delay in assessment and the declaration of year end results.

During the interactions some teachers shared that they were asked to visit schools and collect answer scripts of students, if they had failed to carry them home before the lockdown. Navigating police personnel on duty to ensure implementation of the lockdown provided several insights about teachers' identities. One of the teachers shared being intercepted by the police several times, while commuting to school. In tackling transgressions of lockdown rules, police personnel are known to have occasionally taken an aggressive stance. However, his experience was in sharp contrast. Manish said: "हवलदार आया और थोड़े गुस्से में बात कर रहा था। कि बाहर क्या कर रहे हो? मैंने बोल स्कूल में ड्यूटी लगी है। तो पीछे से उसके सीनियर ने आके बोला टीचर है। थोड़ा आराम से बात करो। डंडा नीचे करो। (*Constable came and was talking to me aggressively. What are you doing outside? I said I am on duty in school. So his senior came and said, he is a teacher. Talk*

politely. Put your stick aside.)” The mention of his being a teacher immediately softens many of the enforcement officers, even before he could justify his not being at home. The external recognition is evidence to the sense of dignity and respect accorded by the society to teachers. Government school teachers have also been assigned rotational duties to monitor and supervise the work in their schools. Many schools have been converted into shelter homes and food distribution centres for the homeless, migrant population and other citizens in need of help. Teachers shared that despite the difficulties in performing their duties, they derived a sense of pride from their work at these temporary shelter homes. They felt that they were in a position to work closely with the community. Alok said, *“all said and done, whether I teach or I distribute food, I am serving the society. I feel good that I am able to help people in need.”* Here, the professional identity takes precedence over personal identity. Self-esteem is derived from the professional identity of being a teacher.

Pertinently, there was a sharp contrast in the nature of work that government and private school teachers undertake. Besides being asked to engage with students over WhatsApp, there is little else that government school teachers have been asked to do. It is too soon to arrive at generalisations about the effectiveness of this mode of teaching, in the absence of systematic research. However, teachers shared that not more than twenty to thirty per cent students were able to join the groups. Many of these did not respond to tasks and reading material being shared. Teachers shared their concerns about the lost time in effective teaching. They also felt that many of the children would have returned to their home towns in remote villages in various states across the country. They wondered if these students, particularly those in primary classes, would ever return to Delhi. Alok said, *“Many students will not return. They called me before leaving and said that their father has told me that they will take admission in a school in their village only. My class will completely change by the time the school reopens.”* Their concern for students and their wellbeing is an indication of how strong a bond they share with their students and the important place that students hold in the lives of teachers.

The role profile of teachers in private schools varied greatly from that of government school

teachers. Private schools found online platforms to conduct classes in synchronous mode. Some schools had already purchased software and subscribed to platforms for asynchronous teaching and management of learning resources. These were extended to synchronous teaching. Other schools made use of free platforms for conducting online classes. Most teachers were required to upgrade their technological skills. Some of the teachers, particularly those in the middle or end of their teaching careers were not able to keep up with the pace of online teaching. They sought assistance from their younger colleagues. This also meant that the younger colleagues had greater work in training their seniors besides taking their classes. Pankhuri shared how she has become the assistant for all her senior teachers. She said, *“I understand how difficult it is for senior teachers to suddenly keep pace with so much technological intervention. However, when they repeatedly call, I also get frustrated in trying to explain simple things to them. In such situations, I just tell them, you tell me the work, I will do it. So, I end up doing all their work also.”*

In conducting synchronous classes, teachers shared concerns over security of the platforms. Further, greater involvement of parents often translated into interference, during and after the classes. Teachers shared that parents could be heard prompting answers to their children or commenting on teachers’ appearances. Teachers also engage in what is known as ‘upper half dressing’ or ‘waist up dressing’ to appear presentable to students. Teachers feel that even more so than regular classroom teaching, they are judged for their appearance, by students as well as parents. Gauri shared one of her colleague’s experience. *“My colleague was almost in tears. One of the parents came online and said, देखना ज़रा कैसे कपड़े पहने हैं। बेकार लग रही है। (Just look at her, what kind of clothes she is wearing. She is not looking good.) It is so humiliating that parents would criticize us in front of our students. These are primary school children. They get influenced by what is said to them. Nobody pays attention to the effort we are putting in.”*

Some of the teachers also shared the joys of online teaching. They felt that this abrupt change provided an opportunity to them to learn and explore more. The excitement of learning something new every day infused energy in

teachers. The younger teachers also find working from home as more enjoyable as it accords greater flexibility of time. Like the government school teachers, private school teachers also felt a sense of disconnect with their students. Although most students from their classes were able to access infrastructural and technological facilities that pre requisites of online learning, the intimacy of teaching within the shared physical space of the classroom was missing. Not being able to gauge learning from students' faces, or monitor their pace of learning, teachers felt a sense of meaninglessness in engaging in online teaching. Akshita particularly reported missing the expressions of her students when they came across a new poem. *"The joy of revelation, of understanding something complex, online teaching has taken away the only thing that was enjoyable in school. I feel as if the purpose is lost. What is the point of doing all the administrative work if I can't see my students' faces!"*

Interactions in physical classroom spaces extend beyond academics. Students' conversations provide insights into their lives and concerns. Classrooms serve as spaces for addressing these concerns, providing support, perspective building, peer learning and promoting mental health. With greater surveillance by parents, and schools, communication on online platforms is often one way and teacher dominated. Students are often asked to keep their mikes on mute to avoid simultaneous talk and disturbance. The spontaneity of responses, asking questions, and expression is missing. Even when group work is organised online, the joy of huddling together towards a common purpose is missing. Teachers felt that much of the spontaneity in teaching has vanished with increased planning and structuring of their lessons. This marks for them the need to redefine their identities as teachers and the nature of engagements with students.

The possibility of an early burnout cannot be ruled out. This is particularly true for women teachers. All teachers, men and women, shared that they were happy about being able to spend a greater amount of time with their children. In the absence of domestic help, however, the primary responsibility of completing household chores, fell on women. The deeply patriarchal social set up has not left teachers untouched. Women teachers thus felt burdened with the new pace of work. They were also required to organise home

set ups for classes of their own children. Teachers also shared that given the special circumstances where work was still in the process of being streamlined, there are no longer any office hours. The time for professional and personal work overlaps. While the schedules for teaching are fixed, school administration schedules staff meetings at off hours and on short notices, sometimes stretching late into the night. Teaching and assessing students' work online has increased screen time. The boundaries of time and space for personal and professional work are no longer tightly drawn. With these fused spaces, families, teachers said, have already started complaining about being relegated to the margins in their lives. This was reported by Manish who has a young child, and also by Akshita and Gauri.

Most of the teachers said that they look at their personal and professional identities as closely interwoven. They felt that being a teacher changes the way you think and respond to the world. Yet, in the interviews conducted, teachers unanimously complained about not finding time for self-care. They were acutely aware of the distance that exists between them and their students. In private schools, where students were sometimes from families more financially affluent than their teachers, the teachers hesitate in appearing on camera in their classes. They feel that their home spaces will be intruded upon. Teachers are also conscious of the background home noises that provide opportunities to students to take a peek into their personal lives. In small apartments, teachers struggle to find quiet spaces within their homes in order to take classes. They resign to taking classes in their bed rooms, in an attempt to block the background conversations of their family members. However, this is a level of privacy invasion that teachers were not prepared for. Although they maintained that they did not see their personal and professional selves as different, there were indications that they wanted to maintain demarcations of how much they wanted their students to be privy to their personal lives. Mansi joked, "मेरे घर में मेरी क्लास के टाइम पे ही किचन में से सब से ज़्यादा आवाज़ आती है। एक दिन तो स्टूडेंट ने पूछ ही लिया, क्या बनने को रखा है गैस पे! (In my house, kitchen is the noisiest at the time of my class. One day one of the students asked, what am I cooking!)" This appears to be a one-way phenomenon. Mansi added that this was not

because students are concerned about her but because they wanted to point out that they now know what is happening in her life. Teachers are often aware of the smallest details of the mental, emotional, physical and financial health of not their students as well as other members of their families. The relationships between teachers and students are thus intimate, albeit one sided.

The impact of fusing together of personal and professional spaces is compounded by the shared physical space with their families. There is little time for the teachers to be alone. This, teachers feel, is likely to be a bigger cause of burnout than the increased workload. Teaching is seen as a reflective exercise. Quiet deliberation is important for better teaching, but also to think about the highly engaging classroom sessions. Adding to the stress was the issue of a government order asking schools in Delhi to not increase the school fee in these financially stressful times. (The Economic Times, 2020, April 17) School administrators raised concerns about meeting expenses if the fee was not paid by all students. Teachers are thus worried about not being paid salaries and facing financial constraints.

Teachers were also acutely aware of similar stressors that students would be experiencing. Given the heterogeneity of students' backgrounds, it would be an oversimplification to not be conscious of the home dynamics that students witness. Students may be borrowing phones and laptops from their parents or other family members to complete school tasks. They may be conscious of the anxious voices and hushed tones of their parents and grandparents about financial difficulties. Watching news of increasing numbers of infections and deaths and not being able to step out to play with friends, not having access to supplies of essentials are some of the concerns that students may be facing. Education that continues to be restricted to textbooks and syllabus is detached and does not alleviate students' anxieties. The absurdity of presuming that the only change required in education is the shifting of engagement from physical to digital spaces has left teachers feeling alienated. (Pathak, 2020, April 28)

What lies ahead?

The paper has been an attempt to document the state of flux that makes teachers' lives in contemporary times. Teachers are so busy in

making sense of the changes around them that they are barely able to pause and reflect on the meaning of the whole phenomenon. It is a bit ironic that the imposition of a lockdown has brought about a flurry of activity that rather than slowing things down. This requires that teachers take a pause to reflect on what teaching will mean post the lockdown.

The change in work spaces for instance can have many ramifications. For instance, would the ability to conduct classes from home, translate into more women entering the workforce? Schools are already contemplating asking teachers to teach during periods of long leave. This may translate into changes in terms and conditions of work.

The blurring of boundaries is also visible between various institutions. Teachers are collaborating with each other to conduct online sessions in their institutions, sometimes across continents. Barriers of time, space and economies are thus no longer applicable to garnering educational experiences. This has the potential to reduce the number of full-time teachers required by schools. Content based teachers may be separated from teachers in roles of mentors and counsellors. This may lead to a lack of an institutional identity for teachers. Teachers will thus have to redefine a change in their roles as well as their sense of self.

Harari (2018) pointed towards the need for greater adaptability in the 21st century. This is as true for teachers as for any other profession. "In such a world, the last thing a teacher needs to give her pupils is more information. They already have far too much of it. Instead, people need the ability to make sense of information, to tell the difference between what is important and what is unimportant, and above all to combine many bits of information into a broad picture of the world." (Harari, 2018, 261) Changes in pedagogic approaches will be required as an increasing number of students are able to connect online. Learning may shift towards asynchronous engagements. There will be lesser synchronous teaching and students will become academically independent. "So what should we be teaching? Many pedagogical experts argue that schools should switch to teaching 'the four Cs'- critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity." (Harari, 2018, 262) The engagement of teachers with students may

become less personalised in the absence of real time, and face to face engagement.

To reiterate, it is still early to conclude what lies ahead for teachers. However, this is the time

when teachers will have to redefine themselves in their engagements with schools, students, and themselves.

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