

Research Articles and Perspective Papers

Attitudes of Teachers: Striving Towards a Positive Teaching-Learning Environment

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Abstract

Every society believes in education as a potent instrument of social change, and thus attaches a lot of importance to its schools. In developed and developing societies like India, school is the only means through which children may begin to acquire the education which will help develop their intellectual, emotional, and social selves, and shape their adult characteristics. The attitude of teachers plays an important role in helping a child grow holistically. The teaching and learning styles in the schools are seen to be quite traditional in nature, with very low involvement of teachers within the classroom and outside. An educational approach that includes improving the perception and attention of students through age relevant exposures from observations and experimentation, helps students attain analytical and inquisitive nature, and higher order mental skills. In lieu of this, it is imperative that teachers should be willing to reflect upon their attitudes, behavior, temperament and teaching mode. This brings about a transformation within the whole teaching-learning atmosphere.

Introduction

Attitude is a psychological construct; a mental and emotional entity that characterizes individuals for who they are. Change in attitude does not happen overnight and neither it happens when one thinks it should. This change can take months and even years to happen and will only occur if the concerned person tries to inculcate it within him/her.

The present paper, thus, is an attempt to strive towards creating an awareness for the need to change and draws its basis from my own experiences of being a teacher educator in an international school and supervising the fourth year students of the B.El.Ed program during their school internship in NDMC schools. This tryst provided me an opportunity to interact closely with pre-primary, primary and elementary level students as well as with teachers and institutional heads.

The Setting

From my experience with different schools, I would be discussing about the change required in these schools from an academic and administrative perspective. Before I begin by listing down my thoughts, I want to present an overview of these schools in general.

An academic institute always aims for achieving the best for its students. The international school, that I had an opportunity to work with, is located in a posh locality of Hyderabad, and mainly caters to pre-primary students. The school has the best of equipment and resources for children and teachers together. The classrooms are nicely clad with an eye for detail so as to include the best possible ways to educate children and are aesthetically and kinesthetically appealing. The parents walk

into a fresh ambience, the highlight of which is its playground with the child-friendly swings and play material.

This school invests a lot in the faculty they select to disseminate knowledge. A core team is formed to prepare the curriculum and yet another team focuses on the trainings of the teachers and other staff that are recruited. Continuous training is provided to teachers on classroom management, time management, team work and leadership and curriculum transaction. These trainings help the educators to unfold their thought process, shed their inhibitions, view children as learners who not only learn about the curriculum but also skills that help them develop holistically. These trainings take place every three to four months and last from one to four days. The head of the institute is strong headed but lacks the motivation that she can provide to her faculty.

In contrast to the above, the NDMC schools in Delhi are usually located in and around an upper-middle class residential area. Children from nearby jhuggis and urban slums take admission in these schools. Many of these children enter the school for the very first time, do not recognize any written language and are totally naïve to the school environment. The education, thus, becomes a burden and several related issues emerge. Within this turmoil, the attitudes of teachers and higher authorities, classroom dynamics, usage of school resources, and the school ethos create havoc in the minds of the children.

The teachers tend to struggle with this disparity within the classroom. Stereotypical notions prevail (what boys and girls can and cannot do), with children being the target. They are taught according to a set syllabus. Lack of sensitivity in teachers is quite evident here as they do not focus on children who can neither read nor write. These students have to either fend for themselves or don't bother to question the lack of attention at all.

The Classroom

Teachers identify themselves by the small universe of the classroom that they are responsible for. When one observes teachers within the classroom, a not very different situation is encountered in contrast to the other classrooms within the same or a separate setup. Teachers struggle towards maintaining class decorum, managing children and completing the desired level of curriculum. A little talk or sound is considered 'noise'. Major focus is on disciplining the class and not on the fact that this noise can lead to some or the other kind of development of the child(ren). Distractions during sessions happen mainly due to 'energetic' children (teachers label them as hyperactive; I prefer to call them energetic) creating havoc in class, others having low attention span and yet others not interested in what the teacher attempts to accomplish in that session. Comparisons also tend to take place between teachers and their classes. Teachers worry about what is happening in the other class, how things are shaping up, what material the other teacher is preparing, and how she is achieving the objectives of the lesson plan, if at all. Needless to state, they mainly never bother to assess the other teacher on their teaching abilities.

In the global school, during a few training sessions, there were many crucial questions that teachers had put forth as hindrances in their classroom transaction. A few of them are as below:

"Sunte hi nahin hai bachche. Kaise inhe control karna hai samajh nahin aata" (Children don't listen at all. How to control them is something we cannot understand)

"Planning karke jaate hain. Sometimes, it just doesn't work" (We always plan and go for our class. Sometimes, it doesn't work)

"Bachchon ko control kaise karen? Disciplining techniques se bhi kuch nahin hota" (How to control children? Disciplining techniques are also not effective)

Hardly one or two teachers voice out their anxiety

by quoting “*how can we improve our teaching so that students gain the best out of it?*”, “*how do we ensure that the students are receiving what we want them to*”, “*assessing students becomes difficult, even though we know how to assess them because they are careless and do not pay any attention*”.

The above verbatims draw attention to the fact that teachers point towards students for their lack of classroom teaching skills. Teaching and learning has always been based on certain assumptions; children are deficient and schools fill them; learning takes place in the head; every child learns in the same manner; classroom teaching should be given more weightage than the co-scholastic attributes of the curriculum; and there are smart, not-so-smart and dumb students in the class who should be categorized and graded according to their comprehending ability (Rai, 2013). These attitudes persist in any school irrespective of its stature.

The teachers of the NDMC schools also orate in a similar manner.

“*Ye bachche aise hin hain. Aap inhe padao ya na padao, ye hamesha aise hi rahenge*” (These children are like this. Whether you teach them or not, they will always remain like this)

“*Do-char thapad maaroge, apne aap sudhar jaenge*” (Give them 3-4 tight slaps, they will then understand)

“*Kya padenge ye bachche? Maa baap ko bhi kuch nahin aata, koi support nahin hai ghar se bhi, to hum kya kar lenge*” (What will these children study? Parents also do not know anything, there is no support from home also so what can we do?)

The teachers and principals, alike, do not give support to children for curricular or other difficulties in life. They do not pay heed to the circumstance or background the students come from; blame them and their families for their inefficiencies and use

harsh, submissive language with them. Humiliating a few select children during the assembly is quite common. If that does not work, a few senior children are given the responsibility of disciplining the others. Within the classroom, the scenario is not very different. The children are split into groups based on their capabilities and class performance.

“*Curriculum hi itna tough hai, to bachche kya seekhenge? (Curriculum is so tough, what will the children learn?)*”, exclaimed one teacher when she saw the curriculum guides for planning her sessions. A few others remarked, “*isko kaise deal karen? Ye sab banane ke liye kitna time chahiye hoga! (How to deal with this? To plan all these things, a lot of time is required)*”. Looking at the story books, a teacher remarked, “*ab ye bhi? Kab time milega ye padane ka? Itni books to humse hi handle nahin honggi! (Now these. When will we get time to read all this? We ourselves cannot handle these books)*”

It is very ironical that teacher characteristics, as they enter teacher education, are heterogeneous and include: gender; background in terms of location within a country (urban/rural); educational experience and qualifications; teaching experience; attitudes and beliefs around teaching and learning (Lewin and Stuart, 2003, Pryor et al., 2012). Such characteristics have implications for the kind of training that will meet their heterogeneous needs (Pryor et al., 2012). The theory of andragogy or adult learning suggests that adults build on these characteristics, and in contrast to children, have their own developed self-concept, have greater learning readiness and can take on practical, problem-solving approaches. Prior experience may also, however, block out acceptance of new concepts or content. Experienced teachers routinise much of their practice, making it habitual and automatic, built on tacit, situated knowledge (Eraut 2000; Knowles et al., 2005). Novice teachers, on the other hand, need to learn their practice consciously, while avoiding cognitive overload (Abadzi, 2006).

My learning from the above experience highlights the fact that irrespective of the kind of school, the teachers and their attitudes remain unchanged.

Meeting the Challenges

Almost every child, on the first day she/he sets foot in a school, is smarter, more curious, less afraid of what she doesn't know, better at finding and figuring things out, more confident, resourceful, persistent, and independent. How long drawn would these characteristics be depends on the experiences children gain from school.

Pedagogic strategies

Pedagogy comprises of what teachers do in the classroom and also their ideas, knowledge and attitudes in relation to the learners, the teaching and learning process and the curriculum. The teachers are in effect the principal role-players when it comes to planning and imparting curricular knowledge. Mostly, the curriculum is handed down to the teachers by the authorities. This top-down approach becomes detrimental to the development of teachers and students. The curriculum usually focuses on the dissemination within the classroom and fails to recognize its possible benefits that the teachers can unfold outside the classroom setup. More than training, I feel the attitude or conviction of the teacher towards that subject or the way it needs to be dealt on the part of the teacher is highly important. If the educator herself is not convinced of what is being taught, she can never deliver the knowledge fully.

There is no limit to where and when the curriculum implementation will achieve its level of improvement. Curriculum transaction, as a process, is open to many possible interpretations, but it primarily is an encompassing and continuous process during which any form of planning, designing, implementation and assessment of curricula may take place. It is a continuous ongoing process that reaches its effectiveness through the

combined effects of the teacher and her students. It is within this process of curriculum development that the teacher and students can and should be involved.

Teacher-centered, dominated strategies are the common discourses that voice ineffective pedagogic practices (Ackers & Hardman, 2001; Alexander, 2001; Hardman et.al., 2012). These practices include being over-reliant on transmission of knowledge, recall, rote learning, memorization, repetition, recitation, copying and chalk and talk (Lewin & Staurt, 2003; Moloi et.al., 2008). However, pedagogy that is active and student-centered positively influences the learning environment.

Teachers' own positive attitudes towards their training and their students is important, but it is when teachers see pedagogy as a kind of communication with students that their teaching practices become meaningful, leading to positive outcomes for their students.

It has been widely researched that children tend to construct their own ideas and knowledge when given an opportunity and exposure to do so. This idea of constructivism or constructing one's own knowledge stems from Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Piaget has intricately talked of 'Active classroom' (Elkind, 1976), a method which enhances the child's power or ability to work upon one's knowledge or existing skill to create more kinds of similar or new information. The concept involves learning styles to be more flexible, classroom having a lot of ambulatory space, students being taught through both homogenous and heterogeneous grouping to achieve holistic development.

A teacher needs to be flexible in her planning for classroom teaching. Following the plan to conclude a session is the foremost aim of the teacher educator. In doing so, they fail to recognize

whether the children are receptive to what is being taught or not. Sometimes, stopping a lesson in the middle and talking of what interests the children seems to work wonders with them. In this activity based learning environment, a key aspect is the closure of the activity. Many of us do not have the ability to conclude a session we have been dealing with. Sometimes, we ask for the responses of students or give ours but fail to put it all together in the end. This delimits our thought to reach to the children. The closure of the activity takes place when the teacher puts together the children's and her own views to summarize a concept.

Another very important learning mode of 'co-constructivism', a term coined by Lev Vygotsky, is a method of learning which reinforces the fact that children do not learn or construct their knowledge alone. Social constructivism sees knowledge as socially constructed and learning as essentially a social process. Learning involves students gradually internalizing this social activity with higher order cognitive development or thinking directly developed and structured by their external social speech. Children's natural or 'spontaneous' concepts meet with and are further developed by the scientific or more abstract concepts they are taught in school or by an adult through guided instruction (Vygotsky 1986). Such scaffolding or guided support requires a skilful mix of teacher demonstration, praise, minimisation of error, practice and direct instruction (Wood et al., 1976).

A more recent technique being used by teachers in most schools is that of Howard Gardner's 'Multiple Intelligences'. He focuses on the nine intelligences present in a human being. This strategy requires creating various corners within the classroom, with each contributing to the learning of a specific skill. The students are to be assessed on each skill through daily monitoring and observation. If one child lacks or is little inefficient in one skill, then that child needs to be sent to a corner of the class which has material to develop or enhance that learning in the child. It becomes crucial and also

complicated for the teachers to tap all intelligences in a student. Here, a few questions need answers to: Are the teacher educators aware of the significance of the learning centers?, how can these various learning corners be put to use in the classroom?, how much and how well can the students benefit from it? and how should teachers monitor the movement of children from one corner to the other? These questions need deliberate thought and the trainings should incorporate such learning for teachers as well. We should aim at making our teachers competent in understanding the usage of this brilliant technique to enrich students' learning. The truth, however, cannot belittle the fact that teacher attitudes shrug away the possibility of learning through these approaches.

David Wood (1998) proposes that adults, social interaction and communication play a far more formative role in the development of children's thinking and learning. He further believes that learning is not synonymous with schooling. A great deal of what children learn occurs spontaneously outside the school walls as they play, ask questions, observe, experiment and make sense of the world around them.

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

Learning, unlearning, relearning

Learning to speak and learning to listen are two very important skills. As John Holt (2005) in his book 'The Under-Achieving' School expresses that "teachers talk too much, starting from demonstrations, explanations, corrections to criticisms". One of the reasons of too much teacher talk is that children, who used to be turned on all the time, tend to or learn to turn themselves down or off.

In addition, the students, even the very young ones, are aware that teachers have all the answers with them. They know that if they patiently fish for clues, most teachers will rise to the bait and give a really pointed question – the one that would

give the student the right answer. The pre-primary students also look for the right expression from the teacher. Teachers feel that they have tactics to invoke right answers from students, but they fail to understand that students can tap the teachers' body language, voice intonations and expressions to guess the responses. This invariably leads to teachers getting more predictable in their teaching. Also, many a times teachers want children to be engaged in discussions. They ask the students questions which the students are expected to answer quickly. In our exasperation and impatience, we do not give time to the students to think. We tend to rebuke them, demean them and consequently provide an inefficient label to them.

The above argument leads us to a very important aspect of teaching. Reflective action entails a willingness to engage in constant self-appraisal and development. It involves flexibility, rigorous analysis, and social awareness as its main components. When a teacher engages in introspection of her actions and analyzes ways in which she can grow as an educator, she tends to refine her thoughts, plan her classes, and focus on each child by understanding their individual needs and strengths.

Reflective teaching should be personally fulfilling for the teachers, but should also lead to a steady increase in the quality of the education provided for children. According to Stenhouse (1971), teachers should act as 'researchers' of their own practice and should develop the curriculum through practical enquiry. Teachers are principally expected to plan, make provision and act. Reflective teachers also need to monitor, observe and work on their own as well as the children's intentions, actions and feelings.

According to Dewey (1933), reflective teaching requires attitudes of open mindedness, responsibility and whole heartedness. One should be willing to reflect upon oneself and challenge

our own assumptions, prejudices and ideologies, as well as those of others. Dewey (1933) also points out that responsibility is a prerequisite to reflective action.

Reflective teaching, professional learning and personal fulfillment are enhanced through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues. Vygotsky (1978) stresses that wherever and whenever it occurs, collaborative, reflective discussion capitalizes on the social nature of learning.

Reflective teaching enables teachers to creatively mediate externally developed frameworks for teaching and learning. In a study of change in primary education through the 1990s, Osborn et.al (2000) identified four different kinds of 'creative mediation'. Protective mediation require strategies to defend existing practices which are greatly valued. Innovative mediation is concerned with teachers finding strategies to work within spaces and boundaries provided by new requirements. The need is to find opportunities to be creative. Collaborative mediation refers to teachers working closely together to provide mutual support in satisfying and adapting new requirements. Conspirational mediation involves schools adopting more subversive strategies where teachers resist implementing those aspects of external requirements that they believe to be particularly inappropriate.

The role of reflection in altering and improving practice has strong currency in teacher learning for overcoming ritualisation, and can be seen as moving teachers from just thinking about how a lesson went, to more immediate 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1983), to the more radical approach of getting trainees to reflect critically on their own developing practice and on the societal context in which they find themselves (Zeichner, 1987).

Teachers should develop into more critical, reflective professionals and should view themselves

as agents of change in relation to socialization and learning processes (Brownlee et.al. , 2012).

Hence, reflecting on one's own thoughts and actions is significant for a positive development of self and consequently of the students.

Conclusion

There is no fixed recipe for teaching and learning. There are nearly as many successful styles as there are successful teachers. Teachers know their work. Due to paucity of time and patience, the educator nullifies the effect of the above in the learning process of children.

Conclusively, teachers are the sole responsible beings for the holistic development of children. Whatever the stature of the school, whatever the resources available, and whatever be the background of the students, it is the difference in the teachers' attitudes which help reform children.

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