

Exploring the Notion of Teacher as Counsellor in Municipal Corporation Schools of Delhi

Nitesh

Masters in Education, Primary Teacher, MCD School, Delhi

Abstract: *The paper aims to explore the possibility of every teacher in the MCD school system becoming a helping professional and counselor, in addition to being a teacher. It focuses on the mental-health and emotional well-being of children and growing adolescents, especially girls. The paper also develops an understanding of how teachers view counseling and guidance and their own roles in this regard. Further, it provides insights on what all teachers can do, drawing from the experiences of those who are already engaging in this role. The idea is to explore the ways and means through which guidance and counseling can become integral to a teacher's role.*

Introduction

The routine tasks that an MCD school teacher is typically expected to discharge can be quite mechanistic and dull since they involve very detailed and elaborate record keeping activities, community based activities, participation in different data drives and tasks commissioned by the government, leaving very little effective time for teaching and interaction with children. Teachers wishing to engage with children find very little time to do so since their work profile precludes this. This does not however mean that MCD teachers don't want to teach or engage with children. However, most often despite their best intentions, it is very large classroom sizes, excessive administrative work and inadequate number of teachers in the school that skew the teacher student ratio which pose major hurdles and challenges to their intentions.

While the developmental expectations are similar for all children, the public opinion about MCD schools tends to be very negative. The belief is that almost no learning takes place in these schools, most teachers are disinterested in their jobs, children come essentially to derive benefits like the mid-day meal, scholarship money etc. and not out of interest in Education. Worries about low achievement in MCD schools, a high rate of absenteeism and drop outs have been articulated in

different researches since the last twenty years. And yet what is lost sight of is the fact that since vast numbers of children enroll in MCD schools, especially since the implementation of the Right to Education Act 2009, and the efforts of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in the last decade, the challenge is even greater. Children remain children and

irrespective of the kind of school in which they are located, they need guidance and facilitation in dealing with their developmental needs. The transition from early to middle to late childhood is not automatic. It has to be facilitated. What compounds the problem is the secular trend in puberty wherein it is observed all over the world that there has been an acceleration in the age of puberty (Ranganathan, 2006; Vaidyanathan, 2012). Breast budding and menarche for many girls commence around the age of nine. Puberty is in any case a process marked by bodily changes, their psychological concomitants and rapid hormonal activity. The sense of bewilderment and awkwardness that accompany it, especially for the growing girl have been documented in many studies (Ranganathan, 2010; Andana 2010; Unger and Crawford 2000). Many life changes begin to mark the girl's life. There are regulations on dress, going out, social interaction and a long list of moral injunctions that the girl has to abide by. For many girls, especially in MCD schools, homes are not



supportive or sensitive to the problems of growing up. This makes it all the more imperative for teachers to play the facilitative role.

It would be important at this point to highlight some of the problems that arise from the socio cultural backgrounds from where most children enrolled in MCD schools come from. I have observed since the time that I joined the MCD system that most of the students enrolled in these schools come from the lower income group and their parents, either one or both, spend most of their time, earning their living. It is also seen that such parents are either partially educated or simply non literate. In a few of the cases, parents are not even able to exhibit good moral standards to their daughters, because they consume liquor or indulge in some form of substance addiction or the other. The mothers are usually completely pre-occupied.

Mental health concerns and the developmental needs of children do not find clear mention or explicit articulation in the role profile of MCD school teachers or in the in service training programmes. It appears as if the psychological well-being of children is peripheral to the process of their education and best left to individual teachers to interpret it in their own way. Most teachers thus do not consider guidance and counseling of children as their responsibility.

Since the number of trained helping professionals in Mental Health are few in number and grossly short of what the needs in schools add up to, the vision plan of school mental health services, vests the teacher with the major responsibility of taking on the guidance and counseling function.

The present study attempts to explore the readiness of MCD school teachers to take on this role. The intent is thus to know their views and perceptions, their notions about the learners whom they teach, their understanding of what counseling involves and map what they see as potential barriers, if any. The attempt is also to explore the problems, difficulties and hardships that students face with a view to identifying their counseling needs. Since parents are very significant persons in the schooling process of their children, an effort has been made to gauge their perspective as well and know from them what their expectations from the

school are regarding the development of their children.

Design of the Study

The study has been designed as a qualitative research where the main aim is to capture the voice and experiences of the different critical actors in MCD Schools. These include the teacher, the students and their parents. Since the nature of the study is also exploratory in terms of gauging the need and readiness of the school for taking on the guidance and counseling function, the perceptions and views of all the three participant groups have been given importance. Their narratives as verbatim are what have been compiled and analysed. To provide spaces and gather data from a multi participant approach, tools and techniques which were open ended were designed.

The study was undertaken in one large MCD school of Delhi. In terms of socio economic background, the population of the school could be divided into high, middle and low socio-economic groups. However, a very substantial portion belongs to the low-socio-economic group. Among the Hindus, the Gujjars are the dominant group because they are land owning and wealthy. Most of the Muslim families hail from the low-economic strata. The school is an all girls' school having three different mediums of instruction: English, Hindi and Urdu, a nursery class and a special Pratibha section. There are 65 teachers in this school, of which 23 are permanent and 42 are contract teachers. Out of 65 teachers, 35 are female and 30 are male teachers. All teachers belong to middle-class families and stay near to the school. Maximum teachers have B.ED+ JBT+ Master Degree and belong to Hindi or Urdu medium. There are 20 Urdu medium, 40 Hindi medium and 5 English medium teachers.

There are various activities that are organised for students in which children participate and get prizes also. These include: Celebration of Independence day, Republic day, Organising Gandhi-Mela, Bal-diwasi, Science-fair, Delhi darshan and Bhart dharshan, Sports and tournaments.

Teacher Participants

The teacher participants were 10 in number. I did



elaborate interviews with them and also observed some of their classes. Of these, 3 teachers were from the Hindi medium section, 3 from Urdu medium and 4 from English medium. All of them gave their voluntary consent to be part of the study. The following themes were covered in the interview:

- Teachers' perceptions about the nature of their learners.
- Their reflections on the areas in which they needed guidance and support
- Their views on whether they could assume the role of a counselor
- The ways in which this could be done
- Sharing of experiences of those teachers who are already performing the role of a counselor.

Student Participants

Approximately 240 girls were part of the student participants, covered through focused group discussions. They were distributed equally across classes 3, 4 and 5 and across the three mediums of instruction.

The Focused Group Discussion was organized on the following themes:

- Problems and issue area, where you want help.
- Problems and conflicts you have with your parents and teachers.
- Disagreement points with mother and teacher.
- What should your teacher do regarding your personal issues?
- You get angry on: teacher/parent/school?

Parent Participants

No specific strategy could be developed for parents since they all work and are not very forthcoming when asked to come to the school. I requested the students of my own class (5th standard) to ask their parents to come to school. 10 parents turned up and so I interviewed them. Since the sample size was small, I consulted teachers on the views that parents usually hold and share and they endorsed the fact that the views obtained from the 10 parents, typified the views of most parents.

Non participant Observation was used to gauge classroom processes and student related and teacher related behaviour. One month was spent on doing the observations. Broadly I did observations of the following:

- Observations of students while in class
 - Observations of students outside the class
 - Observations of teachers while in class
 - Observations of teachers while in the staff-room
- These were noted down as detailed descriptions and then analysed.

Conclusions

Perception of teachers about their learners

In the interview, when asked their views on the nature of learners, six teachers gave their views which in turn were very varied. In general what was seen was that most teachers used a lot of adjectives, phrases and metaphors to exemplify the nature of the learner. Some teachers felt for instance that the learners are children and therefore they are innocent, pure, 'mast' (carefree), good and pure at heart. Some other teachers focused on highlighting the high energy levels of their learners. The high energy is perceived in two different ways. On the one hand, the learners' energy makes them capable of doing anything but on the other hand, the energy is held responsible for the commotion that they create in school.

The narratives of a few teachers indicate that they perceive children as blank slates, who can be shaped and moulded. To define the relationship of a learner and the teacher, one of the teachers used the simile of wet mud and what a potter does with it. Similarly, other teachers also said that they can 'mold', 'paint' and 'polish' their learners.

Some of the teachers have used metaphors to characterize their learners, such as,

“Khalistan” (unfilled space), “Lotan kabutar”(Nuisance), “Kawwa” (Crow) etc. The use of these terms is to spell out that the learners according to them, are destructive, non-manageable and a nuisance. Interestingly, only one teacher has indicated that he/she perceives the learner as capable of doing whatever they want to



do. This teacher sees learners as having agency.

The narratives of teachers also provide insights about the ways in which they perceive the learning environment. They have used terms like: free, independent and self-exploring to describe the environment in school. Thus the perceptions about students are seen to be mixed. While some teachers do see students as repositories of potential and feel the need to facilitate them, some others perceive them as deficient in school readiness and in their behaviour and carry a negative attitude about their potential, capacity and propensity to study.

Problems and difficulties faced by students for which they need guidance and counselling

From the responses that emerged in this regard, what could clearly be seen was that the students report more of psycho-social problems. Since the participants are all girls, the school being only for girls, a gendered pattern has emerged in the nature of responses obtained. Most girls feel that their gender influences the way they are treated. The changes in the body make them more conscious of themselves and they start noticing that boys are staring or sometimes even following them. They also experience that there are too many restrictions that are imposed on them by the elders in the family. These include prohibition from standing at any place where there can be an easy interface with people of the opposite gender. Girls also regret the loss of their freedom because of the suspicion of their parents.

These reflections show adolescent characteristics like puberty, mental and physical change, mood swings etc. Many girls want that teachers should interact with their parents and make them understand their feelings. Here, the adolescent changes are clearly visible e.g. *“Baar baar meri comparison dusre bachchon se mat karo”*, *“Papa ko hamesha boy friend hone ka shak rahata hai”*, *“Mammi mujhe meri pasand ke kapde nahi pahanne deti”*. The girls also experience some kind of distress which is evident from such statements where they report feeling irritable, angry and also express a desire to cry.

The girls also want that their parents should allow them to study further. They have expressed the

need for assistance in speaking English. This signifies the social emphasis on learning of a language as an indicator of formal education. Probably from her experience of learning the first language the girl feels that if someone interacts with them in English they will probably learn better. So they want the teachers to interact with them in English.

They also have a strong sense of what typifies a 'good girl'. One of the girls said that she wants the teacher to assist her in learning good habits and refrain from bad ones. They have also named some of those habits which they classify as bad habits. Probably, they have developed this understanding in school only where the teachers constantly remind them of these habits. Another statement that indicates their sense of good and bad is the one that says that the teachers should protect them from bad people. Here the girl does not specify what kind of person is bad, yet it is evident that she has made such a demarcation.

The girls also want to reach out to their parents but do not know how to communicate their point. They want teachers to facilitate the dialogue between them and their parents.

Readiness of teachers to take on the role of counsellor

There are two dichotomous views that have come out from the responses of the teachers. Some teachers accept their role as a counselor while some are reluctant to take it up. The reluctance is voiced in the form of an apprehension because most of them feel that counseling requires special training and they are not trained for it. On the other hand, the teachers who are willing to take on this role, see counseling as integrated with the process of teaching and learning, although many of the willing teachers also expressed the view that an added training would help them to perform the role of a counselor. Perhaps, few teachers may be underestimating their capabilities which is why they have doubts about taking up something that they see as an additional role. A few teachers are uncertain about taking on an added responsibility. They feel that they already have too much work and do not want to take up another task. Counseling is therefore seen as an added burden by them. What



emerges clearly is the need to subsume counseling as part of the teacher's role at all levels: during pre-service training, during in-service training and as part of the role profile and expectations spelt out by MCD at inception point. Several myths and fallacies that shroud understanding about guidance and counseling have to be dispelled and the promotional aspects of mental health and how teachers can contribute to this need to be highlighted. Teachers have to also be told that as class teachers and in charges when they are expected to ensure the well being of every student and take action for it, they are anyways taking on the role of counselors. Thus the two roles have to be perceived in conjunction.

Experiences of teachers who counsel

The teachers who are already playing the role of a counselor perceive their role as one in which efforts should be made to reach out to those students who they feel are in distress. They also voiced the view that teachers who act as counselors must be patient and should try to understand the needs of their learners. By narrating anecdotes from their life they have made an attempt to explain the role of a counselor as they understand it. However, the emphasis of these teachers is more on students who are distressed and anxious due to some special incident in their life. Only one of the teachers referred to a common problem that most girls undergo and that is anxiety related to the menstrual cycle. They also feel that teachers have to maintain a demeanor that gives confidence to their learners to approach them in case of any difficulty. Another teacher also used a phrase 'learning hunger' for learners. The phrase may imply that she sees learners as essentially curious and eager to learn.

What appears from the teachers' narratives is the curative aspect of mental health.

Most of them are of the view that the counseling role of the teacher emerges only when students are facing serious problems. The promotional aspects of guidance and counseling for self and personality development and building resilience are not recognized as integral to the teacher's role. Likewise the everyday guidance and counseling needs of students are not recognized.

Expectations of parents from the school for the development of their daughters

Many parents want to make their daughter "Qabil" which can mean capable in English. However, the word 'qabil' ought to be situated in the cultural context in which they are located, for purposes of analysis. The statements that parents have made in response to the researcher's question indicate some of the probable meanings of the term. For most of them, school education is seen as a means to get better professional opportunities. Besides professional growth, parents also expect their children to understand social etiquettes that are associated with the notion of a good girl such as obedience to elders, deftness in household chores and ability to carry out day to day work. They also feel that school must teach their children good manners and should not make them argumentative. With respect to their girls' education, parents were especially concerned about their suitability for marriage. They felt that it would be easier to find a groom if the girls are well-educated. The term 'Qabil' is thus used in the context of gender expectations.

Most of the parents linked school education with the development of intelligence. A few parents associated it with other qualities like smartness, expertise, creativity and upgradation in life.

Specific area in girls lives, where they need counselling and guidance support

This was reflected through the girls' drawings which provided very valuable insights into the counseling and guidance needs of the growing girls. The feelings and experiences associated with their problems and difficulties found expression and articulation through their drawings. The main emergent concerns relate to body image and appearance consciousness, issues of growing up, the search for freedom, the need for friendship, the desire to have more understanding parents, the wish for more indulgence on their part, wanting to have a sense of feel good about oneself etc. These also helped to corroborate what emerged from the FGDs with the girls and interviews with them.

Educational Implications of the Study

Students' lives are getting more and more complex,



day by day. They are faced with a plethora of wishes, dreams and aspirations for which they require a lot of guidance and support. They have to make wise curricular and co-curricular choices, acquire basic study skills for optimum achievement, learn to adjust with peers and societal expectations. In its initial conceptualization, guidance as a helping activity, focused on problems relating to vocations. Now guidance and counseling have gone much beyond this. They are now concerned with the entire individual, covering all aspects of his/her growth, development and adjustments. The areas of guidance and counseling are very vast as presented below:

The school teacher cum counselor's first responsibility is to the students. The educational, academic, career, personal, and social setting, from nursery to grade 5, should be the focus in planning and delivering a developmental, comprehensive guidance and counseling program.

The diverse needs of students may require specific counseling expertise and so school teachers cum counselors must recognize their boundaries of competencies by providing only those services for which they are qualified by training or experience.

When students require specialized, intensive or

long-term counseling beyond, the role of the teacher is to make the referrals.

School should provide such opportunities for girls, so that they can flower and can identify their rights and develop their self-independence. Teachers must focus on their personal problems like early advent of puberty, bodily changes, relationships, sexuality and their security issues.

Guidance and counseling done by the teacher must aim at empowering the girls to learn to solve their own problems.

The focus should be on helping them to become more self-accepting and self-directed.

Teachers as counselors can provide education, guidance, and counseling to all students in the school/ classroom through activities such as:

- Direct instruction
- Guidance education
- Team teaching
- Group and individual counseling
- Student support team planning

There is thus no denying that teachers can be very efficient counselors.

