

Emotions, Identity and Mental Well-being of Teachers: Some Lessons from 'Divaswapna'

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In India, it is systemic to link the learning outcome of students with the performance of teachers. Hence, the current reports (NCERT's National Achievement Survey, 2014; ASER, 2014) which have highlighted low learning achievement levels in primary grades, have led to a vehement societal attack on teachers, particularly government school teachers. *'Why teachers are not performing'* has become the central issue of serious discussion and debate all over, including among the community of teachers, themselves. The standard line of thought is that the problem lies in the system, so nothing can be done. But, if we really uncover the layers in which this issue is embedded, then we can find that it has a deep connection with the emotions, identity and mental wellbeing of a teacher, which were never acknowledged as the key dimensions of the teaching profession. They have never been accorded space in teacher education curricula. In addition to this, the image of the 'professional' teacher places much more emphasis on *'What teachers do'* and not on *'What teachers feel'*. Human emotion has been one of the most neglected dimensions of research in the practice of educational change for a long time (Hargreaves 1998a). Contemporary discourse on teachers has also failed to recognize teachers' emotions, identity and mental wellbeing as crucial factors in teacher development.

To begin with, there is an urgent need to perceive school as an emotional site for teachers, which nurtures their identity and mental wellbeing and also to understand the complementarity between emotions, identity and mental wellbeing. This is being attempted by drawing from the classic book *Divaswapna*, written by *Gijubhai Badheka* during the early twentieth century. The book is the imaginary story of a protagonist teacher who

rejects the traditional approach of teaching, and does his unusual experiments to discover new approaches for learning. At first sight, it seems that the story is a romanticized script for highlighting various child-centered pedagogical approaches. But, at a deeper level, the story is full of emotional situations where a teacher is struggling with his identity and searching for ways that accord him a sense of mental wellbeing. The school practices to achieve these are set in a time frame of about a hundred years ago. However, they continue to have contemporary relevance. A few group discussions on *Divaswapna* as a treatise for teachers in this regard were conducted with some participant teachers. They have also been woven into the text of the paper.

The story of *Divaswapna* begins with an emotional grounding where a teacher-*Laxmiram* is keen to do his experiments in school because he is upset with the traditional school practices. No one has forced him to teach in school, neither was he a formal teacher, but his emotional commitment drove him to school to practically understand the impact of his experiments on the learning of primary grade students. During the group discussions with teacher participants, many of them personified him as a teacher on a mission, full of emotion and positive energy to transform the school. However, some of them were of the view that this was his fantasy. According to them, at present, even teachers are not allowed to do their professional work peacefully, then how would it be possible for a person who is not a teacher to have the freedom to teach in a school. This kind of response is an example of the emotional crisis that teachers are currently facing in schools, on account of being distanced from their profession and instructed to accomplish the imposed educational changes, whether they believe



in them or not. They are seen as 'deliverers' in the system. According to Sikes (1992), the work culture of teachers can be significantly influenced by imposed changes. To some extent, it can be argued that the non-performing attitude of teachers is the result of various imposed changes in school. One recent example is the poor implementation of the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) System in schools. A large number of teachers are attitudinally and emotionally resistant to this change because it has been imposed on them without understanding the ground realities. As a consequence, the learning achievement levels of many schools are dipping because the teachers are not emotionally bonded to this change.

The story of *Divaswapna*, focuses on the emotions of both: the one's who have the will to change and the others, who are resisting it. Both sides are full of emotions but in oppositional ways. The enthusiastic teacher is keen to do experiments in teaching. But, the headmaster is advising him to teach the pupils as the other teachers do. This is because, the headmaster is himself undergoing a kind of emotional turbulence in which he automatically resists a new comer from breaking the conventional style of teaching. During the group discussions, many participant teachers have linked this to the controlled environment of their schools where they have no agency to transform themselves. This they feel gradually kills the zest in them and renders them into becoming disinterested professionals. So, while physically, they are present in school, emotionally they remain uninvolved.

However, the emotional disturbance within a teacher is not just the result of school practices; it is also affected by the social norms of the community. *Divaswapna* has various instances where the protagonist teacher has no option except for surrendering before the will of community, anticipating adverse consequences. For example, when the teacher notices that the caps of students are very dirty, he tells them to come without caps. The school administration does not take this well and asks him not to interfere with the social practices. He is asked to restrict himself to what the school stands for. The teacher still appeals to students, but their parents do not relent either. His

efforts thus fail. This specific incident points to the importance of preparing teachers for negative experiences as part of their training. They need to be emotionally ready for things that don't work out. During the group discussions, the question about whether 'avoiding failure' was better than 'facing the failure,' came up. The views were divided. In *Divaswapna*, facing the failure is advocated. The underlying notion is that this will incentivize future efforts for success.

What was also discussed by the group was recognizing the continuous pressure to perform that teachers live with. The protagonist teacher of *Divaswapna* was no exception to this. In the story, the education officer and head master of the school continuously remind the teacher about his responsibility for getting good results or suffer the consequences that follow. Thus there is no scope for a teacher to escape the conditions of worth that schools impose, not even in an imaginary story, like *Divaswapna*. It shows that the driving assumptions of our school reforms are grounded in a punishment oriented, rather than a positive psychology- a view fixated on weaknesses and deficits rather than on learning and growing. What is recommended in *Divaswapna* as the mechanism that can build resilience towards professional pressures is the emotional readiness of a teacher.

With respect to teachers' emotions, two basic perspectives can be seen. According to first perspective, emotions are primarily conceptualized as private components of the personality structure of an individual. This perspective frequently reduces emotions to little more than internal personality dynamics, most often divorced from social and cultural contexts. It assumes a teacher's emotions to be problematic for the school and thus supports the image of a teacher who is emotionally void. The second perspective in contrast, conceptualizes emotions as socially or culturally constructed, within the dynamics of the school system, giving shape to teachers' emotional experiences and expressions (Hargreaves, 2001). A synthesis of the two perspectives, leads to the emergence of the concept of identity.

Identity is the way we make sense of ourselves to ourselves and the image of ourselves that we



present to others. It is culturally embedded. In much educational literature it is recognized that the broader cultural, policy and social structures in which teachers live and work, the emotional contexts and the personal and professional elements of teachers' lives, experiences, beliefs and practices are integral to one another, and that there are often tensions between these which impact to a greater or lesser extent upon teachers' sense of agency, which in turn affects their sense of professional identity. Previous researches suggest that identity can be stable (Nias, 1989), affected by work contexts (Beijaard, 1995) or fragmented (MacLure, 1993). The story of *Divaswapna* establishes that teachers' identities are neither intrinsically stable nor intrinsically fragmented, and it depends upon the capacities of teachers to manage a number of influences, within a number of scenarios or sites of struggle. The protagonist teacher of the story initially bears a *soft* identity as a teacher. But, the experience of struggles in school transforms his identity fundamentally into an *accepted* teacher. In the views of the teachers who participated in the group discussion, the pedagogical challenges in teaching are also central to a teacher's identity. When the teacher learns to use appropriate strategies, his acceptability among students also improves. This provides affirmation to his sense of identity.

But the identity formation of the protagonist teacher is not just limited to his students. His colleagues also have a crucial role to play. In *Divaswapna*, he initially lacks the support of his colleagues, recounted as, "*My colleagues, the teachers, have no faith in me. They look down upon me as an out and out, impractical person. Maybe, I am rather. Besides, I have no experience*". About this, the view that came up in the group discussion was that even today, many teachers feel that often they work in isolation, with little or no support from colleagues. They attribute this to the growing sense of individualism in today's world and the communication gap between older and younger teachers. The result is loss of a sense of collectivism and community. *Divaswapna* provides ways of dealing with this problem.

The protagonist teacher tries to compensate for

lack of colleague support by strengthening his emotional bonding with students. He thus moves towards affirming the stronger part of his identity. His inner reflection brings to him solace in that, "*My boys don't run away from me. They love me, respect me and obey me, whereas the boys of other classes run away from their teachers. I have seen them mimicking their teachers behind their backs. Not a single boy approaches his teacher with a smile or with affection.I have given reasonable freedom to my boys in this respect*". This then becomes the source of his identity and mental wellbeing. If we analyze this more carefully, then the clear learning is that every teacher must be in search of sources and experiences at school which can give them feelings of self-worth and intrinsic happiness. The teacher in *Divaswapna* finds this in his students. Many teachers may find it in the appreciation that they receive from senior officials or the community.

Usually the concept of mental wellbeing is understood very narrowly. Teachers link it to economic incentives or lessening of their work related burden. In reality it needs to be looked at more holistically and located in the school culture. The school culture through its ideology and the environment that it creates, must kindle a sense of hope and happiness. This must be a permanent feature of it. Also the receptivity to change must be a part of it. Accepting change and innovation brought in by individuals and having the readiness to incorporate these themselves, are also important components of a dynamic and supportive 'hope and happiness' school culture. The school in *Divaswapna* is no exception to this. So even when the older teachers saw the impact of the new pedagogy practiced by the new teacher as being successful, they were reluctant to accept it and showed no semblance of happiness. In fact, some teachers of the school countered the experiment of the new teacher, with the argument that he could afford it because he did not have to worry about money, nor was he bothered about the results. Another argument to legitimize their own inertia was that they have no time to think and prepare for all this because they have to report at the Education Officer's Office every evening, look after their children, fulfil their social commitments and so



on. While such arguments are not baseless, they distance teachers from deriving a sense of intrinsic joy and happiness in the very act of teaching. Thus what is required is some re-definition and re-thinking about one's experiences since these then become the sources of one's mental well-being. This in turn helps to create a readiness for change which also contributes to mental well-being.

Fullan (1997) argues that hope is crucially important for educational renewal. Under the current social, economic, and work pressures that teachers work with, how they can be helped to avoid disenchantment and to remain or become more hopeful themselves is a challenging issue. In *Divaswapna* it comes through the feeling of happiness inside a teacher. This happiness can be achieved by having a relatively high degree of control over one's own work life, rich and loving relationships with those one teaches and works with, and being supported in pursuing highly valued ethical goals.

As a conclusive point I would like to emphasise that the development of self and identity of teachers and not just their academic and cognitive functions in the educational process should find space in their training, development and lived experiences in school. Teachers' voices and agency, their initiative and innovativeness must all find articulation. The micro universe of the school is the legitimate space that they have and even if they can make a difference to the lives of a few children, a lot can be achieved. There is thus a need to go beyond the issues of low achievement of students and the complaints and critique of teachers without recognizing dimensions of their self and identity. *Divaswapna* by Gijubhai Badeka is thus both a simple story and a profound self-reflective text. It demystifies what it means to be a happy teacher and helps all teachers to discover the power within. It also draws the attention of policy makers towards important issues and concerns in teachers' lives and provides a framework for teacher education and development.

Note: The story of *Divaswapna* has deliberately not been summarized since it is a must read for all teachers. Only excerpts and incidents have been drawn from it to build up issues for contemplation

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