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Widen purpose of teaching

SHUKLA BOSE, JUL 12 2017, 08:41 IST



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There seems to be some traction in the realm of education in India of late. More reality checks are being made in government schools and some attention is being given to assessing learning outcomes of students rather than just celebrating enrollment and attendance.

It is through the Annual Status of Education Report reports that we have become aware that the percentage of children in Grade 2 who still cannot recognise numbers from one to nine has actually increased from 11.3% in 2009 to 19.5% in 2014. And this is a common phenomenon in other areas of competency in all the government primary schools.

While it is easy to criticise the public education system, the scene in the low budget private schools is no better. The poor actually pay fees that they can barely afford, to admit their children in the so called English medium schools just to get away from the perceived dysfunctionality of the government schools.

This puts greater onus on the private school managements, which they are either unwilling or incapable to fulfil. I have witnessed a Grade 5 English class being conducted entirely in Kannada and that I am told is quite common across many such schools in Karnataka. Why has our education system reached such abysmal depths of incompetency? The answer is simple.

While we have spent years and crores of rupees on infrastructure, curriculum and technology, we have not paid enough attention to the real game changer - the teacher.

Over the last three decades, the position of teaching as a profession has fallen in the eyes of society. The question I often ask is while a doctor inspires and encourages his own children to follow medicine or an architect his profession, why is that a teacher actively discourages his/her children from being a teacher?

I am saying this with several years of observation of the teaching fraternity. And we see this trend as we walk through classes in several schools, both government and private. Most kids want to be astronauts, engineers and doctors but only one timid tentative hand will go up for teaching.

Is it because children are no longer inspired by the teachers they are interacting with everyday or is it because they think that this profession is not well paid? I have come across many people who think that the government schoolteachers are not interested in their work because they are poorly paid. That is total fallacy.

The Seventh Pay Commission has lifted the entry salary of a trained teacher to a similar salary structure of a new entrant to a mid level company in the IT industry. The teachers have even been given a hike of nearly 24% in their pension, which a software engineer rarely gets. So it is not the salary that is the problem.

Recently, 7.53 lakh candidates took the Tamil Nadu Teachers Eligibility Test and 95% failed to get through. Most of them failed in science and mathematics as the success rate of candidates from these streams was only 2.72%. While some claim to be shocked with this news, I am not a tad surprised.

After all, these teachers too are products of the same school system. There are several thousand colleges in India providing B Ed degrees. The National Council for Teacher Education under the Ministry of Human Resource Development has approved 144 of these colleges that have produced about eight million teachers in the country.

So one wonders who is exactly responsible for the poor motivation and talent in the teaching fraternity? The best talent never wants to take up teaching because of wrong perceptions of salary and right perceptions of the work place climate. There have been several attempts to fill in the growing vacuum of good teachers by providing quality content through ICT. This has shown moderate success in some states but we have to admit that ICT in education has failed to match the investment that has been made in this sector.

We can give teachers many digital tools but till they begin to use them, the impact will never be seen. Many believe that technology can never replace teachers and till teachers are ignited and

inspired to teach, no change will happen. So what can be done in this scenario?

Culture of pride

We need to resurrect pride in the teaching profession and have teachers aspire for that profession. This is possible only if the management, and in this case both the government and the private, spend time, effort and energy to build a culture of pride in the schools.

More time has to be invested in getting the teachers find a purpose that makes them feel proud of what they do everyday. I have worked with schools where there is a vision for each class, each school, which leads to the vision for the entire institution. And all teachers work towards that collective vision.

Good teachers know that they are not into creating consumers but citizens. They know that they are special because their focus is not their income but the outcome. Teachers should take equal share of pride and responsibility when their students do well. They need expertise, caring and a lot of patience. They must realise that they are not just teaching but building a nation of creative and critical thinkers.

In today's world of speed, scale and importance of the tangibles, we have lost out on the essentials. These essentials of teaching include building relationships with students and their world, of empathising with the turbulence that the students face.

And that is what makes teaching, a life-changing and meaningful exercise. The moment we widen the purpose of teaching, the faster will teachers be proud of their profession and look at it not as a job but a mission of change. That is when the best will become teachers.

(The writer is founder of NGO, Parikrma Humanity Foundation, Bengaluru)

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