

Focusing on education culture instead of the system ([Web link](#))

Tanay Sukumar

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Having completed my Fellowship with Teach For India, it would be a grave injustice to my work if I do not share my learnings with the outside world. Having observed the municipal school system in Delhi for two years, I feel that what many of us tend to see as issues are not actually the primary problems.

A myth that most concerned citizens have is that government school teachers do not teach and that they are the reason behind the poor levels of public education in India. Once you blame the teachers, it's easy to think that solution lies in good skills training and good monitoring/ inspection – but these solutions would work only if teachers were the problem in the first place. To shatter myth number two - if being an amazing teacher is magic, then knowing your subjects well is not the wand that will perform it. If each factor that contributes to being a teacher of impact were to be ranked in order, two items would be at the top - belief in the child and belief in self.

Teaching is a job fuelled by inner mind-sets - much more than self-motivation, salary, intentions, love and concern for children or knowledge of your subject. And that's why real teaching is hard. A teacher who does not believe in the child but knows the subject well will spend hours explaining things to the class but won't take more than a few seconds to give up on an unyielding child. A teacher who loves kids but does not believe in them will succumb to emotions and hence lower her expectations from them – thus never letting the child reach his or her potential.

Belief breaks more barriers than love, intelligence, concern and intentions. Belief empowers you to make yourself accountable - to innovate and research better methods to ensure that the child learns and to go to the child's parents and change their mindsets. Belief keeps you away from punishing the child and becoming impatient with difficult children. Belief makes you find ways.

Government school teachers usually cater to disadvantaged children - belief in whom is more important than anywhere else. A teacher who does not believe in a child going to an international school does him little harm; the child is likely to end up well anyway. A teacher who does not believe in an underprivileged child tends to make sure that he/she doesn't even put the effort.

Once we counter the belief problem, other factors inevitably come in:

1. Teaching Time: Teachers in municipal schools are part-time clerks - the system requires them to meet parents of all students inside the classroom multiple times a year to distribute various funds and scholarships. Teaching ends up being a nice escape from an otherwise highly clerical job: signatures, stamp pads, registers, and cash.
2. Teacher–Student Ratio: This is a big problem in our country. It ends up being a cultural problem - a teacher with fifty kids tends to lose her grasp on the children who need her the most, leading to a widespread national culture where we teach the brightest and ignore the weakest.
3. What is a good education? 'A quiet classroom'. Most municipal schools in Delhi consider this as an accurate definition of a good education. A principal who walks around the school is likely to be looking for quiet classrooms and angry teachers instead of busy classrooms and teaching teachers.

Such medieval expectations are again a socio-cultural problem. We have been conditioned to believe: 1) good education is being able to score good marks, 2) discipline means being quiet and obedient without reason, 3) respect means the art of not questioning an adult, 4) children are lesser individuals - adults know

more and yet if the child fails to achieve, the mistake is his and not the teacher's, 5) there is only one way to learn: the verbal and linguistic way; a hyperactive child is spoiled and can't do anything and 6) there is only one way to correct a child - be angry and punish.

Other Challenges

(a) Teaching is thought of to be a student-teacher relationship whereas it consists of four parties: school leader, teacher, student, parents. The role of parents is more important because the teacher needs to fight mindsets and economic divide in order to make her teaching fruitful in the long run.

(b) There is little or no training for school leaders and principals.

(c) While most teachers have received formal training before they start their job, there is little on-the-job teacher training. Even if there is, a proactive monitoring system is found non-existent. Inspections are limited to (1) checking if children can wish the inspector 'good morning', (2) checking if fourth grade kids can recite a memorized poem, (3) checking if the school administration can provide them good tea and snacks. This colonial, hierarchical treatment of inspection is ensuring that we are satisfied with too little. Inspection immediately needs to be replaced by a continuous-feedback-and-improvement mechanism where, trainers not inspectors, are involved in student learning as much as teachers are and are not seen by teachers as objects of fear but partners in education.

(d) There is a widespread lack of purpose among our teachers. Our culture regards teaching as an easy complement to child-rearing for young women. Without a passion for teaching, it's needless to say that it's not going to work. I hope the next time we seek a revolution in Indian education, we know that we must work towards a change in Education Culture and not the Education System. Reforms in the Education System will soon follow.

(The author is a 'Teach For India' alumnus and founder of 'News That Matters Not')

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STUDENT LEADERS

On the occasion of 'Teach for India week' (December 14-18, 2015) we present this piece. The week is dedicated to celebrating student leadership.

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