

Teacher Belief in Children's Potential is Important

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"If I summarise the core beliefs and pedagogic practices that we saw in these classrooms, the foremost would be the teachers' belief that 'every child can learn; the responsibility is ours.' These teachers try to make the learning experience interesting for every child and respect the existing knowledge they bring to the classroom, using it to build new knowledge... These teachers help children connect concepts with the world around them..." (S Giridhar, 2019. p122)

As I read through S. Giridhar's recent book *Ordinary People. Extraordinary Teachers* (S Giridhar 2019) one common thread that ran through the lives of extraordinary teachers is their belief that every child has the innate potential to learn. This belief made a huge difference to the way they worked, the pedagogy they used and most importantly their relationship with children.

My own research over the last thirty years has convinced me that teacher belief is important because it influences her/his attitude towards children, the pedagogy she/he uses in the classroom and most importantly, her time-management to ensure that she is able to reach out to every single child. In the same vein, teacher's prejudices, biases and attitudes can also be a critical barrier to learning. If teachers believe that some caste / class of children do not have the innate ability to learn, they are most likely to ignore the concerned children and focus only on those who they believe can learn. If a teacher believes that girls cannot learn mathematics, then he/she will communicate that feeling and girls may feel afraid to ask questions or clear their doubts.

At the outset, it is important to differentiate between teacher belief and the knowledge that teachers have. There are two kinds of knowledge – 'objective knowledge accepted by a community (e.g. official subject matter knowledge) and subjective knowledge. Belief represents individuals' subjective knowledge and is distinguished from objective knowledge...' (Turner, Christensen and Meyer, 2014, p 361). In a study on inclusion and exclusion that I led in 2011-12 for MHRD, GOI we

found teachers and school leaders who believed that children from very poor families – especially tribal and Dalit children – did not possess the innate ability to learn language, mathematics and science. As a result, they did not make any effort to reach out to children they believed could not learn (Ramachandran and Naorem, 2012). In the same study, we also came across teachers who genuinely believed all children can learn and that the home environment need not always be a barrier to learning. When we explored this further, we found that the subjective knowledge of such teachers was based on their experience of effectively working with very poor and marginalised children and enabling them to grasp basic concepts. Equally significant was that these teachers tried to build on the knowledge that children brought into the classroom.

For example, there was one teacher who made columns on the blackboard and wrote down the same word as used in different languages – in the main language of that area, in the dominant tribal language of that area, in the language of the minority tribal group in the classroom and also in English. By acknowledging and discussing how the same object is referred to in different languages represented in her classroom – she immediately included each child in the learning process. In another school, I saw a teacher using bundles of leaves and sticks to teach place value. Children of one of the poorest communities in that village were used to seeing their parents making bundles of leaves and counting them. Children often assisted their parents in making bundles of 50 leaves or 100 leaves. Linking mathematical concepts to real-life activities had a magical effect – the children found learning to be fun and identified with the activity.

We also came across some very interesting contradictions. 'Discussions with teachers from six sample states also highlighted a common perception: children from very deprived social

groups do not perform well in school. Interestingly, information from the same schools also revealed that this is a misconception and that many children from deprived social groups were actually performing well academically. There is a disjuncture between teacher' perceptions and reality, and it is noteworthy that teachers themselves pointed out the children who were 'bright' and keen on studies (many of them Dalit/Adivasi), and at the same time, they continued to hold on to prejudices and stereotypes..." (Ramachandran and Naorem, 2015 pp 25-26) When we pointed this out to the teachers, they talked about exceptions, attributing the 'success' to the extraordinary abilities of the individual child, even though he/she came from a social group or family type they considered incapable of learning.

Global evidence shows that 'some strong beliefs about teaching and learning hindered teachers' adoption of constructivist, or learning-focused, pedagogy. First, many teachers tend to consider both learners and content as fixed, rather than interactive and malleable. These teachers appear to believe that both development and individual differences, such as intelligence, limit their ability to teach the curriculum, so it must be adapted, by style or pace to "fit" students. A corresponding belief is that teachers may assume that if something is taught (i.e., explained or demonstrated), it should be learned (Nuthall 2004). If students do not learn, the problem is attributed to the inadequacy of the students' (stable) motivation, ability or persistence, but not to the instruction (Floden 1996). Such beliefs are in stark contrast to beliefs that guide an interactive approach...' (Turner, Christensen and Meyer, 2014, p 362; Nuthall 2004 and Floden 1996 quoted by Christensen and Meyer).

The problem centres around teacher beliefs that teachers need to focus more on classroom management, rather than ensuring that every child learns. This belief is reinforced when the government directs teachers to complete the curriculum – expecting teachers to adhere to schedules that are set by the respective state governments / boards of education. Discussions with teachers reveal that they are constrained by the time-table of completing specific sections of the curriculum each month. This becomes evident when students are asked why they take tuitions.

Students say that tutors focus on ensuring every lesson is learnt or committed to memory. Lessons and linked questions and answers are systematically memorised – in order to enable the student to take examinations. Passive observations or participation is not encouraged by tutors, while in the classroom, teachers tend to ignore children who are seen as not 'up to the mark', thereby encouraging passive observation or sitting in the back benches and ignoring what is happening in the classroom.

While rote learning has become a norm in both classrooms and tuition centres, teacher belief on the potential of children is the key to understand the teaching-learning processes in schools and tuition centres. As it was found in the 2015 study (Ramachandran and Naorem 2015) by the author, the expectations of teachers from some students or caste/gender or social class stereotypes that teachers bring into the classroom make a huge difference. These stereotypes are like self-fulfilling prophecies – neglecting those who are perceived as incapable of learning – that push such students into a passive and disconnected space inside the classroom. When children are marginalised inside the classroom, they switch off. As children move from one grade to the next, the prevalent regime of *no-detention* (as interpreted by the teachers as *no assessment*), adds to the cumulative burden of not-learning. Focus-group discussions with children who dropped out after enrolling in class IX revealed that they could not cope with the academic requirement and therefore had little option but to drop out.

Failure and inability to cope with the studies emerged as an important reason for children dropping out – the parents of children who dropped out said, 'There was a shortage of teachers, no studies happening in the school - so the children dropped out (*Padhai chhoot gayi*).'

In another group, the parents said, 'We wanted our children to continue after grade 8, but they decided to leave because they "did not learn anything much up to grade 8 and therefore they did not want to study" - they found studies difficult.' Interestingly, not interested in studies turned out to be a way of informing the research team that the children were not learning. (Ramachandran and Nagpal. 2019).

None of the above insights and information is new – the education community has known all along that teacher belief is perhaps the most difficult issue to address. Administrators, teacher educators and educational researchers are at a loss on how

to handle this issue. Despite this understanding, in-service teacher training has primarily focused on specific subject knowledge or conceptual understanding – referred to as *hard spots*. There is almost no systematic effort to address existing beliefs and prejudices. This has been a neglected domain – even though case studies of exceptional schools or teachers repeatedly point out that motivated and highly engaged teachers make a difference. Even when they have poor subject-knowledge, they are known to reach out to other teachers or other support systems (like teacher forums or subject forums) and seek help.

Periodic assessments – whether it is done by the government (NCERT) or private/non-government agencies (ASER, EI) – have told us that there is indeed a huge learning crisis across the country, in government as well as private schools. Yet, the pressure is on doing more assessments and (more recently) randomised control trial (RCT) studies. What India needs to do is take a lesson out of the Polish or Finnish example and turn the spotlight on teacher *beliefs*, teacher *confidence*, teacher *autonomy* and the knowledge and skills of teachers. While the draft NEP 2019 acknowledges the learning crisis, there is very little there on how this crisis can be addressed.

The issue of learning and quality of education is closely intertwined with social and economic inequality. It is now universally accepted that the *social capital* that children bring into the school is an important predictor of success – meaning that children who have educated parents, have access to books and other reading material, greater

exposure to the creative arts, media and live in resource-rich environments – seem to gain a lot more from the educational process as compared to those who come from resource-poor environments. Conversely, children from socially and economically disadvantaged communities, who face different forms of discrimination inside the school from their teachers and fellow students, leave school with poor self-esteem and confidence and very little ‘learning’.

Girls carry an additional disadvantage as they move higher in the academic ladder – they do not get the subject of their choice and in many states (especially in some North and Western states) girls’ secondary schools do not offer science, mathematics or commerce. Similarly, children in tribal areas and from the most disadvantaged tribal communities, not only experience discrimination but have far poorer access to schools beyond the elementary level.

Bringing teacher beliefs centre stage can help us create a dialogue on why it is important for every single teacher to genuinely believe that every child has the potential to learn. Maybe this is too much to ask in the times when social polarisation is increasing and our political and social leaders are busy promoting more prejudices rather than convincing people that education, if imparted equally and in a manner that all children get a chance to learn, can be the only way our country can move forward. Maybe it is a good time to start with teachers, their attitudes, beliefs and their knowledge.

References

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