

We have often heard this said, 'पेट में नहीं होगा अन्न तो पढ़ने में कैसे लगेगा मन', loosely translated, it means, 'when the stomach is empty, how will the mind focus on learning?' What else do such aphorisms tell us if not that, surely, survival comes before any formal schooling? Children from the families whose primary concern is to quell the hunger in their stomachs or to look for a livelihood to silence this hunger are often called 'first generation learners' in academic circles. Who knows why they are called first-generation learners? Perhaps because schools are considered to be the sole dispensers of learning. Perhaps because their parents are not able to deduce that, if their children learn to read and write now, they will be able to reap the benefits of their learning in 15-20 years by working in better and less physically taxing conditions. Who knows if it is the lack of an ability to think or an effect of it that prevents one from considering this option? Be that as it may, the consequence remains the same: education is always a secondary priority.

Whereas homework for children usually consists of cursive writing, memorising poems and answering questions, the 'homework' of these children is of a strange kind. On returning home from school, their homework, by default, consists of - fetching firewood, cutting grass, caring for cattle, caring for their younger siblings, looking after the house in the absence of their parents, cutting, threshing and sorting grain and so on. And of course, if it is a girl, then preparing dinner is a must. They find these tasks more natural and necessary than the homework their schools assign to them. Homework assigned by the school seems too artificial and too far removed from their reality. They have to put in a great deal of deliberate effort to complete it. They have to adopt new patterns, moving away from familiar patterns of thinking and self-expression. And this new pattern is so complex that they cannot establish a connection to it with their everyday lives. Most children hailing from these backgrounds study in government schools, at least at the primary level. That is why the government is liable to ensure that education is made available to everybody.

Popular perceptions

Oh! I got swept away by roles and liabilities. Let us come back to the topic of concern here. I was trying to tell you that it is often said about the children from the aforementioned backgrounds, that is, the children who study in government schools, that they do not meet the expected learning levels. Children in classes V-VII cannot even decode letters. Various organisations produce research that shows this. National seminars are organised to address this. The government also undertakes research in this matter. Various research articles are devoted to proving that the learning levels of the students are not at par with their grade levels.

This entire process tries to assign the blame solely on teachers. It is said that teachers do not take their work seriously; they take too much leave. Our research on teachers' absenteeism shows otherwise. It shows that though teachers are often out of schools, it is due to various administrative tasks. When teachers are asked about low learning levels, they assign the blame to the children's background, their poverty, and their irregularity. This too seems to make sense at some level. They also blame the policies and schemes of the government. But my long-term experience and observation paint another picture, which is, despite these circumstances, there are many government teachers who are working in a better and efficacious manner. This is not my belief alone, but the belief of many village people and communities. It is due to this belief that they come forward to either stop the transfers of such teachers or to bid them farewell. At this juncture, it is pertinent to note and understand that some teachers are able to work well, and some teachers are not able to do the same under similar circumstances. What exactly are the teachers who are performing better doing to deliver better? If we understand the processes of these teachers, it may provide a ray of hope that we may yet yield better results.

Whenever I conjure up a picture of these effective teachers, I can see certain similarities in their

routine practices in school. When I think about my own teaching practices now, I also recognise myself as one among the community of these teachers. I undertook many of the processes they do. Therefore, when I further try to elucidate these processes, I find it hard to completely dissociate these from personal bias and experiences. It is possible that I may not present these teachers' common or similar practices fittingly, however, the practices that I understand, I have attempted to explain here.

Taking part in others' happiness

I have noted that teachers who perform well often visit their students' homes during happy occasions, for example, when there is a birth, a marriage, a birthday or a *mundan* ceremony. They even visit their houses when a cow gives birth to a calf. If they cannot attend, the children's families often send some *khees* (first milk produced after giving birth) to the school for them. In taking part in their happiness, not only is a sense of kinship formed between teachers and children and their guardians, but teachers are also able to sense the chemistry between children and the members of their family. By chemistry, I mean the kind of relationship that exists between a child's parents, between the grandparents, between the aunts and uncles and between parents and the child, that is, all the relationships that affect a child's emotional, cognitive and motor abilities. The knowledge of this chemistry greatly impacts a teacher's work strategy. It impacts the way a teacher envisions the kind or amount of hand-holding they need to provide, how sensitive they have to be, what is the kind of motivation required. This helps them analyse the reason why a child is not able to understand something and to find solutions to these issues easily. They do not have to make deliberate efforts for the same, in fact, it is their attentiveness that naturally leads the way.

When a teacher respects the parents by taking part in their happiness, they shower the teacher with love. This love presents itself in a myriad of forms - sometimes as a bag of pulses when the harvest is done and sometimes as a vine of vegetables presented to the teacher, sometimes in the act of saving a plant's first fruit for them and sometimes in a bowl of *khees*. This relation between the love and respect shown to teachers and the teaching practices is an intricate one. It demands to be felt, not made sense of. Here, reason falls short.

Being there for them during sad times

Another quality of teachers who perform well is that they not only take part in the happy moments of the guardians but also stand with them during sad and difficult times. If someone in the family is unwell, they visit their house or talk to them over the phone. If there is a loss in the family, they listen, no matter what kind of loss - that of a family member, cattle, land or farm. They also care about family feuds and quarrels. What is it about the simple act of talking to someone or listening to someone that causes the fibres of relationships to weave in such a manner that our outlook completely changes? The funny thing is, this does not require any special effort. When a connection is felt, enquiries do not need to be made deliberately, they happen naturally. These teachers keep in touch with children even during the lockdowns, empathise with the problems in their homes and remain ever ready to help them out. Perhaps this quality does not have a linear relationship with teaching, but it certainly makes a teacher better and more effective.

Taking part in village affairs

I often find that such teachers make these connections not only with the guardians but with the village community at large. They participate in the prayer meetings and religious festivals of the village in some way or the other. The women of the village often share their marital woes and stories with these female teachers. They also share their health concerns and ailments with them. Teachers also do their part, be it by procuring medicines or offering advice. Perhaps this kind of kindred relationship does not impact a child's learning directly, but it certainly plays an important role at the level of the community's relationship with the school. People in these villages consider the school as their own and endeavour to make the school better in every possible way. They take part actively in school events and even extend their labour for the school if the need arises. In places where such kindred relationships have not been established, we often hear stories of things being stolen from the school, of damage to school property, of drunken messes being created in the school and so on. We often see that the school and the community look at each other through the lens of distrust and suspicion. Matters escalate from protests to even formal complaints.

Relation with children beyond the confines of school

I have found that such teachers are not able to confine themselves to the work-week or the working hours in building a relationship with children. They remain in contact even on the days when school is closed. They are naturally inclined towards knowing the daily routine of children. They often make charts for children after school and procure stationery items like colours, pencils, notebooks and books. They prepare materials and activities for their lessons. A teacher once told me, 'I carefully collect the pieces of chalk, pencils and notebooks tossed aside in my own children's school and use them in my school. What is thrown aside there is easily used in my school. The pencil just has to be pared down a little and it works just fine. One just has to get used to gripping a smaller pencil or piece of chalk.'

Readiness to teach and learn

I have also recognised another common strain among these teachers: all of them are, in some way or the other, constantly concerned about teaching children. If children are not able to learn something, they look for answers. This concern motivates them to learn more. This also leads them to participate actively in various forums. It seems like habits, either good or bad, are woven together like threads. One bad habit evokes another, and one good habit germinates another. Something similar happens with these teachers. Their readiness and dedication inspire them to learn.

Looking through a wider lens

I am not saying that these effective teachers adopt all these practices. However, they are often seen trying. I doubt that only progressive and innovative classroom practices can yield better results for the children from the backgrounds that we are talking about here. Or, should I say that I have not seen this happen yet. However, those who see themselves as a part of not only the teaching process but also of the above-mentioned roles and tasks, certainly yield better results. Looking at education beyond serving the role of literacy and bookish knowledge into the role of shaping a person is imperative. This kind of understanding is built only by interaction with people. Interaction with guardians and a cordial relationship with them not only leads to understanding but germinates the seeds of thought on how to work with children and what kind of work to do with them.

Secondly, it is imperative to understand that a school is a part of a society, not a separate, disparate entity with a distinct identity of its own. Better education is only possible when we stay connected and understand each other. Schools cannot be understood in isolation. Building an understanding like this seems like digging an elephant's grave with a teaspoon. A child is also part of a family and society at large. To truly understand a child, one has to look at the nexus of children, family and society. If we disregard this nexus, we will not understand things as they are. If we are unable to understand things as they are, the interaction between teachers and children will fail to lead to effective teaching. If someone just wants to do their 9 to 3 job, that is fine. However, for effective teaching, this process needs to be understood in its entirety. When we build cordial relationships, we do not need to make deliberate efforts to understand; it just comes to us. This does not only refine a teacher's sensitive and affective side but opens avenues for the furtherance of teaching skills as well.

A Teacher speaks

The day Priyanka came to seek admission, she hid behind my saree pallu. Her maternal grandmother (Nani) had come with her for admission. As we proceeded, I realised that her reading level was below the class average; if she was scolded even a little, she would go quiet; her attendance was also low. When I tried talking to her, nothing much materialised. I thought I should visit her house. Perhaps that would reveal something. When I went to her house and talked to her grandmother, I felt the ground slipping from under my feet. Her grandmother told me that Priyanka's aunt had lost her husband so her parents gave away Priyanka to her to soothe her loneliness. After a while, her aunt began working in Chandigarh so she left Priyanka with her grandmother. I cried profusely on hearing that story. The next day in school, I was about to scold her when my eyes welled up with tears. I quickly went to the office to compose myself. Then, I went back and hugged her and talked to her. I began talking to her whenever she didn't complete her homework. She began coming to school more regularly and began to improve in her studies also. Her grandmother often shares everything with me and even tells me to fetch things for them from the market. She often sends me seasonal vegetables and grains.

Another teacher recounts

Radhika would often come late to school. The issue was often addressed with her, but her tardiness continued. We even announced during the morning assembly that everybody must come to school on time. When I talked to other children, they revealed that her father often wakes up late in the morning. I thought it would be best to go to her house and talk to her family members. When I went to their house, I found out that Radhika's mother had immolated herself and died. Her father was in the habit of drinking till late and waking up late and therefore, Radhika came late to school. When I talked to her father, he sent me off to her aunt's house. When I thought of Radhika, it pained me. I became more vigilant and more kind to her. I often visited her at her house. One day, when I went to visit her, all the children scattered hurriedly. They hid whatever they were working on. Papers and little balls of dough were scattered everywhere. I believed it best to not probe too much into it and address it at another time.

Another day, all the teachers were sitting together and checking notebooks after an exam. When I went to the classroom, I saw Radhika along with her aunt's sons quietly making paper bags. As soon as they saw me, they hid them. When I enquired calmly, they told me that they make these paper bags and sell them in the market. I set up a crafts class for the children and began to teach everyone the craft of making paper bags. Radhika and her cousins were experts. They began teaching the other children. The next day, I brought old newspapers from home. The children gave all the bags they prepared to Radhika. Radhika, who was once hesitant to reveal her work to anyone, was now taking pride in teaching others. Her studies improved as well and so did her attendance. She wrote to me one day that she wishes I were her mother. She sees her mother in me.



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