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The Agency of School Teachers

Vijaya Varma



Experiments with reforms in school education in India, like the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme, have shown that teachers are critical to the enterprise of quality education. Whenever a teacher buys into the idea of reform, the reforms stand a chance of succeeding, but whenever a teacher is hostile or indifferent, the reforms are headed for failure.

The normal process of curriculum development or textbook preparation, particularly when steered by organisations like the NCERT, is a highly centralised activity characterised by a very hierarchical, top-down approach, in which most of the wisdom is supposed to reside in the organisation or the panel of 'subject experts' drawn up by the organisation, with (at best)

only a token involvement of some teachers who are chosen primarily for ease of availability. Such efforts usually ignore the fact that in developing a curriculum (that stands a chance of being successfully implemented), one must not only be responsive to the demands of the discipline, but also take into account the conceptual development of the children for whom it is meant, the resources that are available in the schools and, most importantly, the readiness and the preparation of the teachers who are actually going to do the teaching. The only way this can be done is if the team that is charged with the responsibility allows teachers from the field to be central to the process. The team should also not be so prescriptive in its approach that no space is left for the teacher to own the curriculum, by

incorporating his/her own views and experiences into the teaching process.

To appreciate what we have just said requires no great effort. So the question is why are these principles to be found more in the breach than in the observance? In the remainder of this brief article we will try and examine some of the reasons why this could be so.

One major reason that we have hinted at is the propensity of the system to try and retain control and not allow any significant decentralisation to take place. Consider the most recent exercise by the NCERT to draw up first the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and then develop the syllabi and school textbooks based on this document. Experts were flown in from all over the country in an attempt to spread the net of consultations countrywide. In my opinion, however, the effort would have yielded much better results had this not been centralised in Delhi but been carried out in, say four regional centres to start with, and allowing them to function more or less autonomously once the national framework was ready. This would have led not only to four independent sets of syllabi and textbooks, something that the NCF 2005 itself suggests as a desirable goal, but would also have given a boost to the development of regional competencies and promoted decentralisation. It would have opened up possibilities of greater involvement of practicing school teachers in the whole process of curriculum development and the writing of textbooks. One of the arguments against contemplating such a step is the assertion that there are not enough regional competencies available to make the effort worthwhile. But this is the classic chicken and egg problem. How will regional competencies develop unless they are specifically encouraged?

To some extent, it has to be conceded that the average competence level of school teachers, for a variety of sociological and educational reasons, is not what it should be. So what can we do about it? It is almost a given these days that only those 'who can do no better' end up as school teachers and the government doesn't help in the development of a professional cadre of school teachers by aggressively following policies like

the recruitment of para-teachers - policies which, at their heart, are meant to lower the costs of providing education, while simultaneously curbing the powers of teachers' unions. What is forgotten, in all this, is that the quality of school education cannot be improved without improvement in the quality of school teachers. And the only way this can be done is by making the working conditions - and I don't mean only salaries - more attractive in order that talented individuals are once again attracted to the profession. This would require providing better facilities in schools and a better working environment for school teachers - better surroundings, better infrastructure, better working conditions, better libraries and laboratories and taking proactive steps to freeing teachers from the widely prevalent hegemony of even the smallest functionaries of government departments of education.

It is becoming fashionable in seminar circuits to recognise the centrality of the agency of school teachers for imparting quality education in schools. What it would ensure, were it to be translated into practice, is to improve not only the academic quality of school teachers but also their commitment to teaching. The increasing incidence of teacher absenteeism in schools is a matter requiring urgent attention. I believe that it is very difficult to solve this problem merely by legislating teacher accountability. Clearly some action is required to ensure that teachers attend school regularly, but this is only a prerequisite, because those teachers who have no compunction about staying away from school are not going to start teaching merely by the government passing legislation that they be present in class. It may be tempting to hold teachers accountable for the performance of their students, but how do you do this in a regime in which there is less and less emphasis on assessment in the lower classes, where most of the damage is done by teacher laxity, under the pretext of not exposing students to the trauma of failure?

Clearly then it boils down to a matter of values - that one should perform one's duties to the best of one's abilities without being compelled to do so. There is

growing evidence in our society of a casual approach to the values of accountability to one's professional commitments, of which teacher absenteeism and lack of performance is but one manifestation. A possible reason for this is that with the steady break-up of family traditions and the growth of crass commercialism in the ranks of the middle-class, under the onslaught of modernism, children get fewer and fewer opportunities to imbibe good values at home. In schools, the other source from which children could pick up good values, the situation is bedevilled both by the bad example that teachers often set and also by the problems associated with formally teaching morals and values in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Whose morals and whose values do you teach? And because such questions have traditionally been rooted in religious discourse, there have been no commonly acceptable answers and we have ended up teaching none. I think the time has come to locate such discourses outside religion and develop a basis that is founded on reason and rationality for the teaching of such subjects in school. Hopefully, having to teach such courses and being exposed to such discourses, will bring about a change both among the teachers as well

as the general population, leading to a greater commitment to professionalism and accountability - ends which are much to be desired.

To summarise, what we have argued in this brief article is that good and committed teachers are central to a good system of education in schools. Teachers should have a greater role in the development of syllabi and textbooks and for this, these processes need to be decentralised. We must also attract better quality people into the profession and for this, we must not only improve salaries but also the working conditions of teachers and the facilities available to them. However, all this will come to nothing unless we simultaneously improve teacher accountability by both legislative processes as well as by inculcating a proper sense of values in our teachers and our students through our system of schooling.

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HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Journey Of Science Through Time

Nandita Narayanasamy



Trying to organise my thoughts about the history of science, the first thing that sprang to my mind was the current advertisement of a health drink for children. The advertisement states that Nature and Science are present together in the product which accounts for its superiority as a nutrient supplement! The company makes us believe that Nature provides the complex nutrients and it is Science that provides the minerals. If one applies logic, to this otherwise illogical advertisement, the outcome is that minerals are not

part of nature! Pardon my ignorance, but I was under the impression that Science has always been the study or enquiry into the workings of Nature! If one looks back in literature, both European and Asian, the close association of the awe of nature and mankind's quest to understand and harness its power is very apparent. This whole episode made me introspect on our understanding of science and how this perspective has changed with time.

The word science comes from the Latin word, "scientia", meaning knowledge. Science is the effort to