

Why School Teachers Are Demotivated and Disheartened

Increases in enrolment rates, attendance figures and midday meal distribution do not convey the true picture of the state of the education system in our country. Equally disturbing is the high dropout rate from primary to upper-primary levels, the blame for which lies partly with educators, especially teachers who in government schools and in more rural areas appear demotivated and disheartened.

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Reviewing the progress in the elementary education sector on February 21, 2005, the prime minister of India said that he was pained to note that “only 47 out of 100 children enrolled in class I reach class VIII, putting the dropout rate at 52.79 per cent.” This, he said was “unacceptably high” and attributed the high dropout rate to “lack of adequate facilities, large-scale absenteeism of teachers and inadequate supervision by local authorities” (*The Hindu*, New Delhi, February 22, 2005). This is not the first time that teachers and local authorities have been blamed for India’s poor performance in elementary education; civil society organisations and the media have highlighted the issue of accountability for over 20 years. Yet, it is only in the last three to four years that political leaders and administrators have begun to openly admit that motivation and accountability among teachers and local administrators is a big problem and that while data on enrolment is impressive many children leave primary school without learning the basic skills of reading and writing.

In one district of north India I asked a group of teachers who, according to them, was a motivated teacher. After thinking for a while, one of them said: “A ‘motivated’ teacher comes to school every day, does what he is told and provides information the higher-ups want!” I was puzzled with the answer. I probed further. Almost all teachers believed that daily attendance and complying with orders and requests for information were reasonable indicators of motivation. Administrators at the district

level described a motivated teacher as one who was regular, did what she or he was told and was, by and large, compliant. Children were nowhere in the picture, nor were the teaching and learning processes. Learning was incidental to the mountain of data they gathered and fed into the system. Enrolment, attendance, midday meal distribution and participation in training programmes and workshops – cold figures – had become the indices of education. Administrators at higher levels associated motivation with low absenteeism, maintaining discipline, proper record keeping, collection and reporting of data, utilisation of funds allocated for teaching and learning material and giving exercises in the classroom and correcting them.

It is worth noting that the notion of ‘quality’ is linked to efficient management. As a result, obedience and predictability become pervasive values sought in the system. Actual transaction time, classroom processes and learning outcomes of children do not figure in their first response. However the percentage of children clearing the terminal examination is an important indicator of quality.

Parents had a different view. For them discipline in the school and regular teaching served as clinchers. A teacher who came regularly, stayed in the school for the stipulated time, did not use excessive force (beating, abusive language, shouting and punishment) and taught with interest was, for them, a motivated teacher. The ability of their children to learn to read and write and pass examinations was another important indicator.

Educationists, on the other hand, argued that a motivated teacher was one who

could communicate with children. He/she drew energy from his/her interaction with children, was concerned about what and how much they were learning and his/her ability to attract and retain children in the school. They also believed that only a motivated teacher could build a rapport with the parents and the community and go beyond the call of duty to ensure that every single child attended regularly, even if it meant visiting their homes and persuading the parents to send their children to school.

Discussions on motivation, invariably, led to comparisons with private schools. Teachers, administrators and parents quickly pointed out that private schools attached great importance to discipline, regularity and successful results in yearly as well as public examinations (classes V, VIII, X and XII). Almost all the teachers I interacted with sent their own children to private schools. They admitted that irregular attendance of teachers was uncommon in private (aided and unaided) schools and that teachers taught for the stipulated hours/periods. But when asked why government schools were different, most could not give us any convincing answers. They ended up blaming the system where the dice is loaded against teachers in primary schools.

India is a large country. It is possible that the gap between the educationist's perception of motivation and that of teachers, administrators and the larger community may be lower in educationally advanced states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh. Yet, administrators and the general public agree that there is a definite problem with the education system as a whole. Lay persons and the media squarely blame the teachers – citing absenteeism, bad behaviour, politicisation of teachers' unions and, most importantly, lack of professional ethics. Teachers, on the other hand, argue that the system has pushed them to a point where they have to cultivate politicians to avoid frequent transfers or pay huge bribes to get a job. Administrators, sympathetic to teachers, argue that the obsession of the system with data and targets pertaining to enrolment and retention has deflected attention away from the children. The more sensitive among them admit that no one is really interested in government schools that cater essentially to poor children. Poor parents and communities do not have a voice. Those who have an option and the

resources to exercise it, simply send their children to private schools.

Complexities of the Education System

The answer to the question of poor motivation lies buried, perhaps, in the labyrinth of a complex education system. The issue of teacher motivation is framed in an intricate matrix of cause and effect where one cannot really discern a clear, one-to-one linear correlation.

First, the education system has expanded rapidly and enrolment rates have shot up. But growth rate in the number of teachers has not kept pace with this rise in enrolment. The classroom has become very complex. Children from extremely poor families and first generation school-goers account for an overwhelming majority of students in government schools. Most rural schools are multi-grade with one, or, at most two, teachers managing five classes. Teacher-pupil ratios are also high in such schools.

Second, the social distance between teachers and children is wide in government schools (which cater to the very poor). Social attitudes and community prejudices play an important role in determining the ability and willingness of teachers to empathise with children. Recent press reports (especially in the last six months) reveal cases of sexual exploitation of girls in rural as well as urban (municipal) schools. For instance, on February 18, 2005, a headmaster and three teachers were arrested in New Delhi for raping a 14-year-old girl and another teacher was arrested for sexual abuse of young boys. Senior police officials said teachers used abusive language when they talked to children from very poor or socially disadvantaged communities. It was as though they were doing a big favour by teaching children from erstwhile 'untouchable' communities or very poor migrant communities from other parts of India and Bangladesh. Studies on classroom processes done under the aegis of the District Primary Education Project (DPEP) also confirmed the prevalence of caste and community prejudices.

Third, teachers lack the skills to manage so much diversity in the classroom. Training programmes for teachers are designed keeping in view the situation in large urban schools where one teacher manages one class. The problems faced by teachers in multi-grade situations, where teacher-pupil ratios are high, are rarely covered in training programmes. Labels like joyful

learning and child-centred learning do not mean anything to teachers who have to deal with social diversity, different levels of students and most importantly, children who are undernourished, hungry and frequently ill. Focus group discussion with teachers in several states in the last few years revealed that teachers wanted subject-specific training for multi-grade situations. But most training programmes focus on generic skills. The mismatch between the problems faced by teachers inside the classroom and training programmes designed by administrators and teacher educators (who have very little idea of a multi-grade class) is stark.

Fourth, systemic issues dealing with corruption (payment for transfers/preventing transfers, depositions, appointments, promotions and special assignments) have vitiated the larger teaching environment in the country. Teachers say this has politicised the environment and actual teaching is rarely monitored. Building networks with patrons and supporters is more important. Teachers, who are in leadership positions in trade unions or affiliated to political parties in power, rarely attend school. Continuation in the job and/or in preferred posts depends on the teacher's ability to strike the right chord with the people in power. As a result, a highly motivated and honest teacher is one who is transferred to difficult areas. He/she is saddled with a number of non-teaching duties and made a scapegoat when the need arises. So even though there may be no incentives for performing better, it certainly pays to build networks and cultivate godfathers.

Non-teaching Tasks

Fifth, teachers' unions and block and district-level administrators claim they are asked to do a range of non-teaching tasks which take them away from the classroom. For example, the Rajasthan government had asked teachers to motivate couples for terminal family planning methods. This led to a series of protests by teachers in February 2005. In 2001-03, the state government directed them to maintain the books of women's self-help groups and also monitor if loan repayments were made on time. District magistrates rely on teachers to distribute drought or flood relief supplies, and identify beneficiaries for government welfare schemes. Discussions with teachers revealed that while the task of meeting family planning targets may be given to all the teachers, the more difficult and

time-consuming non-teaching duties go to teachers seen as dedicated. Teachers with political links or the ones active in trade unions are not given additional duties.

Both central and state governments contest this. Senior administrators in the government of India point out that less than 5 per cent of the teaching days are taken up by non-teaching duties. Recent DISE data collected information on non-teaching duties and the days spent therein. While statewide data has not been made public, a recent presentation made by Arun Mehta (NIEPA, January 2005) indicates that non-teaching duties accounted for only 1.6 per cent of working days. Teachers' unions and local administrators disagree. They argue that the government may expect teachers to do such work after school hours, but invariably the teachers spend teaching time performing non-teaching assignments. The problem gets particularly severe during January-March when annual targets (especially, family planning) are reviewed by the district administration.

Sixth, teacher training has picked up since 1994 with almost all teachers expected to attend a range of training programmes every year. Many of these

workshops are held during the academic session. Teachers are eligible for compensatory leave if they attend these workshops during vacations. This reduces teaching days. While the training programmes are intended to improve knowledge levels as well as skills – especially in child-centred teaching processes – teachers claim that these programmes add little value when the overall teaching environment, the examination system and other aspects of the school remain unchanged. Nearly all the teachers I interacted with in several states said training was a burden – it was neither planned well nor did it cater to their needs. Another disturbing issue came to the fore. Teachers in several states revealed that training is a ritual – often they reach a training venue by 11 am and leave by 3 pm – after attending two or three lectures. In some remote districts, where the state government is not able to monitor if the training programme actually happened – teachers reach the venue, collect their travel allowance and asked to disappear for three to four days – ticking off the activity as done.

Seventh, teachers and administrators are continuously embroiled in court cases to do with promotions and placements,

claiming arrears due to them and disciplinary action-related issues. Administrators explain that a lot of their time is spent attending to court cases filed by teachers. Teachers argue that they have no option but to go to court for justice. Teacher cadre management is highly politicised – both administrators and ordinary teachers are caught in a web of allegations and counter-allegations. This has affected recruitment of new teachers in several states.

The silver lining is that in the course of my research work I came across teachers who loved children and were highly motivated regardless of where they were posted. These were exceptional people. It was, indeed, humbling to meet teachers who worked hard despite all odds. I came across situations where good teachers received tremendous community support that led to improvement in their teaching and overall results. The reverse was also true. There were villages that had a wonderful teacher in the past but could do little to motivate/support a new teacher who just refused to teach.

The issue flagged by our prime minister is indeed important and timely. Political will at the highest levels can indeed make

a difference. India cannot hope to make a critical breakthrough in enhancing the capabilities of its people without concerted efforts to address the issue of teachers – who are the cornerstone of India’s education system. A coordinated effort is needed if we are serious about addressing the complex issue of quality education. A demoralised, unmotivated and burdened teacher cannot turn the system around. ❏

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[This commentary is based on research studies done by the author in elementary education during the last five years, but more particularly is based on a recent study on teacher motivation in India, which is part of an international research project covering 12 countries in south Asia and Africa. The project coordinator is Paul Bennell, senior partner, Knowledge and Skills for Development, Brighton, UK. It is being funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) as part of its support for policies, programmes and projects to promote international development. The view and opinions expressed are those of the author alone and not of DFID.]