

Everyday Dilemmas and Challenges of a School Teacher

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Abstract

It is often a popular perception to consider a school teacher's job as unchallenging, monotonous and repetitive. The authors, using the framework of Berlak and Berlak (1981), found out that in the perceptions of teachers themselves, their job is extremely stressful, involves critical decision-making and resolution of dilemmas on a daily basis, and it is often a non-rewarding endeavour. The majority of teachers' dilemmas centered on the issues of control mechanisms, curriculum transaction and societal concerns.

The present study explores four research questions: (1) what are the daily dilemmas faced by the teachers while transacting curriculum, (2) what are the underlying reasons for the most stated dilemmas from the perspectives of teachers, (3) besides teaching the prescribed content, what are the expectations and responsibilities from the teachers, (4) how do teachers perceive their role as agents of change and transformation in a school? The sample of the study comprises 30 teachers from two government schools and two private schools teaching the middle grades. The data has been collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions over a course of two months.

INTRODUCTION

As Teacher Educators, it has been the authors' common observation that many teaching aspirants join

Teacher Education programmes (such as B.Ed., B.El.Ed, D.El.Ed) with certain perceptions and assumptions about the teaching profession.

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Some of them include—to teach is to learn certain skills to deliver the content of the textbooks; teaching till elementary grades is a simple and non-challenging task; teaching young children is ‘fun’ as they do not ask and question; the teaching profession is ideal for young women as it is a half-day job; once a school teacher, one does not need to read any more as the same content will be repeated every year. However, for those who are practising teachers or associated with the education system, the act of teaching is not as simplistic, but instead, is full of challenges and dilemmas on an everyday basis. The authors attempt to contextualise a few of these dilemmas arising out of the hierarchies in a school system, such as the status of a teacher in decision-making, the voice and agency of a teacher and interface of educational policies, and everyday practices of teaching and learning.

Many scholars perceive teaching as an art, science and craft. It is representing a metaphor to understand the complexity of the teaching and gain insights into the nature of teaching.

The metaphor of ‘art’ emphasizes the affective and creative aspects of teaching and learning as well as use of intuition in forming judgments. The ‘science’ of teaching conjures an image of the application of tested knowledge, whilst emphasis on the teachers ‘craft’ affirms the particular significance of practical experience (Pollard et al. 2014, p. 12).

Teaching is also perceived as an intricate and multifaceted activity by many scholars, which requires teachers to utilise their judgment in deciding how to act. Teacher’s professional expertise is required for quality teaching and learning. It requires teachers’ personal and professional knowledge and skills for taking the daily classroom decisions. Moyles (2007, quoted in Marsh) refers to the desirable personal attributes such as empathy with the students, respect for individuals, positive outlook and attitude, approachability and sense of humor. The professional attributes that are desirable include good organisational skills, professional relationships with the staff, parents and students, and appreciating others’ skills.

Berlak and Berlak (1981) have given a powerful framework to represent the difficult dilemmas that teachers face in a school. They have taken into consideration the ‘micro’ and as well as ‘mega’ world. The ‘micro world’ is a classroom whereas the ‘mega world’ comprises the major factors, beliefs and influences in society as a whole. These factors give rise to teachers’ dilemmas, ultimately putting an impact on the actions, choices and decisions of the teachers. They identified sixteen dilemmas of teaching practice which represent the complexity of teacher’s actions. They have divided them into three sets—control, curriculum and societal. The ‘control’ set represents the tension over the locus and extent of control

over students; the 'curriculum' set represents the contradictions and controversies over transmission of knowledge and the ways of knowing and learning whereas the 'societal' set focuses on contradictions in schooling patterns related to equality, justice and social relations between ages, sexes, ethnic and racial groups. These dilemmas are briefly discussed as follows.

Control Dilemmas

- *Whole child vs. child as student:* It refers to the realms where the teacher has a dilemma over the responsibility of the child. A teacher with whole child emphasis feels that she has the responsibility of children's aesthetics, intellectual, social, emotional, physical and moral development, whereas a teacher with child as a student emphasis focuses only on the intellectual and cognitive areas.
- *Teacher vs. child control of time:* It refers to the dilemmas capturing the control given to students or teachers for the initiation of activity and duration of activities in the teaching-learning process.
- *Teacher vs. child control of operations:* It refers to the control that the teacher exerts on the student's behaviour in the various curricular domains, whereas child control means that the child is exercising control over one's behaviour.
- *Teacher vs. child control of standards:* It refers to the dilemma over the monitoring of teaching standards that is, whether it should be done by a teacher or a student.

Curriculum Dilemmas

- *Knowledge as public vs. personal:* Teachers also often face the dilemma on whether to emphasise the experiential knowledge that is useful to learners or to focus on knowledge that has evolved with time as a part of the culture.
- *Knowledge is product vs. process:* This dilemma is regarding the take on knowledge that is, whether to view knowledge as a fixed, organised body of information, facts, theories and generalisations, or to view it as the process of thinking, reasoning, and testing to establish the truth of the body of knowledge.
- *Knowledge as given vs. problematical:* It refers to the dilemma whether to consider knowledge as given by the teacher that is, to perceive it to be the truth which is present out there or to understand knowledge as being constructed by the learners, taking into consideration their social, cultural and political influences.
- *Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation:* It refers to the dilemma on motivation that is, whether the motivation to learn comes from the student (intrinsic) or from teacher action (extrinsic).

- *Learning is holistic vs. molecular:* When we are taking learning as holistic, then the learners arrange the bits of information into a whole giving meaning to the elements; whereas learning as being molecular means that the learner has mastered over the carefully sequenced bits of information and ultimately, automatically grasped the whole.
- *Each child is unique vs. the member of a category:* The dilemma is to choose students' interest or society's perceptions that is, what the society expects the students to learn for the formulation of curriculum.
- *Learning is social vs. individual:* It shows whether the learning takes place between the child and the subject matter or the child and teacher. Learning as social refers to the interactions and discussion among learners for effective learning.
- *Learner as person vs. client:* Learner as a person means the teacher is treating the learner as a fellow human being whereas learner as a client means the receiver of needed professional services.
- *Equal vs. differential allocation of time, materials and resources:* It represents the dilemma over time, materials and resources that is, how should the teacher distribute the mentioned resources, whether equally or differentially among learners.
- *Equal justice under the law vs. ad hoc application of the rules:* It shows the dilemmas over the implementation of rules and regulations in the school that is, whether rules should be the same for all or there should be flexibility in it according to the situation.
- *Common culture or sub-group consciousness:* It portrays the dilemmas on the development of a shared culture or the culture of sub-groups among students.

The authors have used this framework and the dilemma language to construct the open ended interview questions and cues for the focus group discussion in the discussed research study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study is exploratory in nature as our aim is to achieve insights into the chosen subject. Here, the researchers start with a general idea and use research as a tool to identify the issues that could be the focus for further research. It provides an opportunity for clarifying and defining the nature of the problem.

Societal Dilemmas

- *Childhood is continuous vs. unique and separate:* It refers to the dilemmas of treating childhood, that is, whether to treat childhood as a time to prepare for adulthood or a time to treasure and set aside.

Statement of the Problem

To understand and contextualise the dilemmas of teachers in the everyday life of a school

Research Questions

The present study explores four research questions.

1. What are the daily dilemmas faced by the teachers while transacting curriculum?
2. What are the underlying reasons for the most-stated dilemmas from the perspectives of teachers?
3. Besides teaching the prescribed content, what are the expectations and responsibilities from the teachers?
4. How do teachers perceive their role as agents of change and transformation in a school?

Sample

Thirty teachers from two government and two private schools teaching the middle grades were included in the sample of this study. The teachers were selected on the basis of their willingness and availability to participate in the research study. Teachers from different subject areas and type of schools (private and government) were chosen to normalise any bias introduced due to the subject area of the teacher and to explore the dilemmas in the wider dimension of the education system.

Tools of Data Collection

The most common sources of data collection in qualitative research are

interviews, observations and review of documents. The present study makes use of semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions done over a course of two months.

The preferred method for collection of data is to record the interview if the interviewee allows; otherwise, the interviewer must maintain notes simultaneously and expand on them immediately after the interview, as the information is still fresh in the interviewer's mind. Patton (quoted in Best and Khan 2006) observed that 'the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer' (p. 341). Patton (2000) in the book *Qualitative Education and Research Methods* explains the strengths and weaknesses of semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview consisted of open-ended questions. Its purpose was to access the perspectives of the person being interviewed. The questions for the interview were developed, drawing inspiration from the framework of Berlak and Berlak. Some questions which were asked included—how would you describe the children you are teaching, how should students behave in the classroom and why, whether the curriculum allows you to incorporate students experience in the teaching-learning process or not, do you find any difficulty in such incorporation, can you share some ways or activities that you use in your teaching besides chalk and talk, what are the issues involved in it,

can the answers given by students be included in the notebook/exam work, why or why not, etc.

Powell, Single and Llyod (1996) define a 'focus group' as 'a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment from personal experience, on the topic that is the subject of the research'. In it, an interactive environment has been built where participants are free to talk to each other. The researcher can take notes or record it as per the convenience of the participants. However, the researcher has to be cautious regarding the selection of participants of the group for effective responses. For the study, focus group discussions were carried out by giving few hints and eliciting responses from the teachers. Some of the hints given to teachers were— what are the issues/challenges that you face the most while teaching? Who takes the decisions related to structure, organisation and pacing of the curriculum? Define/locate your role in these decisions. How is your interaction with the higher authorities, peers, students and parents like? How do you resolve the issues of behaviour, irregularity and non-participation by the students? Do you think these issues should be your responsibility— why or why not? What are your aspirations and expectations from your students? What is the non-teaching/administrative work you do in the school? To what extent is this work justified, etc.

During the focus group discussion, one of the authors used to keep a written record of the discussion. These notes were later systematically written and organised.

DATA ANALYSIS

Based on the responses given by the interviewed teachers, the data has been analysed under the following discussed themes:

The Burden of Non-teaching Work

Almost all the fifteen teachers interviewed from the private schools stressed that besides regular teaching, participation in the administrative, extra-curricular and bus/recess duties took most of their time in the school. In the words of a young teacher, 'I have morning duty at the foyer to check students' uniforms, recess duty in the school corridor to make sure students are not running and hurting themselves, and bus duty when the school closes. This leaves me with no time to know my students very well or interact with my peers. I feel like a guard or watchman with the duty of disciplining and minding the students'. Krishna Kumar (2011) also argues that teaching, as part of government service carried with it considerable clerical work, such as maintaining records of admission, attendance, examination and expenditure, making the teacher a meek subordinate. The situation was no different for the government school teachers who were involved in the distribution of Mid-Day

Meal, textbooks, uniforms, notices, forms, medicines and sanitary napkins. They were also involved in election duties, for conducting any government survey and opening of bank accounts for the students. Section 27 of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 prohibits the deployment of teachers for non-educational purposes. Section 27 states that 'No teacher shall be deployed for any non-educational purposes other than the decennial population census, disaster relief duties or duties relating to elections to the local authority or the State Legislatures or Parliament, as the case may be' (p. 8).

I have to reach school before 7:40 AM or else I am not able to sign the attendance register on time. For this, I catch the school bus at 6:45 AM and my official duty starts while taking attendance for the students travelling on that bus route. Out of eight teaching periods, I have five periods on a daily basis and I am given one or two substitution periods depending upon the number of absent teachers. Besides that, I have recess duties and afternoon bus duties. We also have two staybacks in a week, and let us not forget the countless notebooks to check. I feel numb, tired and mechanical at the end of the day. Teaching is just a job where I try to finish the prescribed syllabus as I have no energy left for anything else.

– *Jaya, middle grade teacher in a private school*

Agency and Voice of Teachers

All the interviewed teachers stressed that they have been excluded from the decisions regarding the content, organisation and pace of the syllabus. Also, the decisions regarding the methodology of teaching and teaching-learning materials are taken by the people who have never entered the teacher's classes or interacted with the children studying there. For instance, reflecting on such dilemmatic decisions about her class, a private school teacher shared that there are times when she wants to spend more than the 'prescribed' time on a given topic, as students find it interesting or it is more difficult but she cannot do it because the dates for exams and assessment are prefixed.

Poonam Batra (2005) in the article 'Voice and Agency of Teacher-Missing Link in the National Curriculum Framework 2005' stresses the need to acknowledge the crucial role of agency of the teacher in Indian classrooms to attain NCF's vision of schools as site of social transformation. It is important to recognise teachers as more than the dispensers of knowledge and acknowledge them as independent, rational and critical thinking beings who can address the issues of marginalisation, inclusion, multiple identities and diversity with the children. These concerns, if addressed in accordance with popular perceptions and personal

beliefs of the teachers can lead to the formation of biased partial views of social reality. Hence, there is urgent need to equip teachers with multiple perspectives to bridge the gap between the existing realities and proposed possibilities.

Many government school teachers praised the recent government policies and schemes which are aimed at curbing the dropout rate of students and improving the quality of education, with special focus on students weaker in studies. However, they also criticised that such crucial decisions are implemented on a very short notice and with a sense of urgency. Many a times, the schemes have such unrealistic and impractical targets that it becomes very stressful for the teachers to achieve their aims.

We are expected to do creative reading and writing with children when they can barely recognise letters; we are not blaming the children as it is not their fault and many of them are first generation learners. But to expect that we can do wonders in school when we have enormous administrative and non-teaching duties is unrealistic. On top of it, there is never an incentive and appreciation by the higher authorities. The learning level of children is judged by filling up of answer sheets which are not true representation of children's learning.

– *Maya, middle grade teacher in a government school*

It was anticipated by the government that the teachers mapped and identified weaker students on the basis of their intellectual ability and scores. Students were then divided into three groups—*Pratibha*, *Nishtha* and *Vishwas* in the time span of two months only. It was expected from the teachers to develop the basic reading, writing and speaking skills till 14th November 2016 that is, within a period of four months and it was a burden on us to turn the non-readers into readers in a short span of time.

– *Jyoti, middle grade teacher in a government school*

Giroux (2004) stresses on making teachers as 'Transformative Intellectuals', which means that the teachers act as a change agent by making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical. Making the pedagogical more political means to overcome economic, political and social injustices by developing critical reflection in the teachers and to further humanise themselves as part of this struggle. Making the political more pedagogical means utilising those forms of pedagogy that embody political interests that are emancipatory in nature that treat teachers as critical agents, utilise critical and affirming dialogue and make the case for struggling for a qualitatively better world for all people. It helps the students to develop into active citizens and engage in social change.

Status of a Teacher in the Hierarchy of a School System

The authors found contrasting views about hierarchies in different school set-ups. The concept of hierarchy was very prominent in everyday decisions to be taken by the private school teachers. Issues such as misbehaviour, physical fights, non-completion of homework, student absenteeism, etc., have to be immediately reported to the higher authority. The teacher does not have the liberty to take any action on her own. Even students and parents are aware about the position of teachers in such a hierarchy, and they use this understanding to complain against the concerned teacher on matters of syllabus completion, notebook checking, engagement with the children, etc. There is always a fear of losing the job among the private school teachers if they are not able to work upto the expected levels or there are continuous complaints about their behaviour, professionalism and teaching style by parents or students. Padma Sarangapani (2003) also asserts that in her observed school, 'the headmaster exercised authority over all the teachers. Among the teachers, there was no institutional hierarchy' (p. 104).

The government school teachers shared that although, they have the freedom to take decisions on their own about the routine activities such as non-completion of homework, low academic performance, long absenteeism, etc., but they have to consult the higher authority for the

major issues such as extreme physical fights, aggression, suicidal tendency, eve teasing, etc.

Krishna Kumar in his book *Political Agenda of Education* highlights that many aspects of the education system are derived from colonial legacy; the teacher can no longer decide on one's own, or on the basis of one's convention what to teach and how to teach. The colonial education system has drastically changed the status of the teacher where the teacher has become a mere functionary of the state, working for the salary. The prescribed syllabus, textbooks, and impersonal examination meant that no teacher could pace his pedagogy to suit his pupils. It became the responsibility of the 'subject experts' and 'external examiners' to educate and assess the students.

Interface between Policies and Ethical Concerns

Policies are implemented at the government level with the intent of improving the quality of education system. But various aspects of the policies make it difficult to be implemented in the classroom and thus, create a stress on teachers. We will see how the ethical dilemmas are arising among teachers w.r.t implementation of policies.

Section 16 of the RTE Act (2009) states that 'no child admitted in the school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education' (p. 6). This section of the RTE Act has raised

many eyebrows of both government and private school teachers who have shared their concerns about the children's actual learning level and their ability to perform in the teaching-learning process.

With the introduction of Non-Detention Policy, there is a difficulty in maintaining discipline in the classroom, and children have non-serious attitude towards studies as students are very well aware that they will not get failed till Class VIII.

– *Rekha, middle grade teacher in a private school*

When students come in Class IX, they are not able to cope with the academic pressure because they are not in the habit of continuous habit. They end up repeating or dropping out of the ninth or tenth grade.

– *Sudha, middle grade teacher in a private school*

How do you expect us to pass a student when she is submitting a blank answer sheet with incorrect spellings of even her name. We end up filling the answer sheets ourselves so as to pass them...

– *Pooja, middle grade teacher in a government school*

We also write answers to the questions asked in the examination so that students can “copy” them and are able to pass the examination, otherwise also we cannot fail them.

– *Uma, middle grade teacher in a government school*

Section 17(1) of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) prohibits the use of physical punishment or mental harassment. Studies have found consistently high levels of reporting of corporal punishment by children in schools with little difference between private, state government and central government schools (Portela and Pells 2015).

Representation of Knowledge in Classroom

All government school teachers emphasised that the ‘textbook is the only source of knowledge in the classroom’. Behavioristic approach is mostly followed in the classroom, where student is seen as the entity where change is expected in terms of memorisation of the content. Mostly, information is getting transmitted in the classroom. The teachers also shared the lack of resources and strength of students in the classroom as major obstacles in the effective transaction of content. Although many initiatives have been taken at the governmental level for the inclusion of experiences of students in the teaching-learning process like the ‘Pragati’ project which was started with the vision of ‘learning from experience’, but it created little ripples among students. Students consider such workbook as ‘extra’ or ‘supplementary’ due to which they are not actively engaged in the teaching-learning process.

Private school teachers have a scope of including many strategies and approaches such as exploration, use of activities, technology, peer work, field trips, educational excursions, etc., for the active engagement of the child's mind in the process of transmitting knowledge. But many teachers also shared that it does not come naturally. Various workshops have been organised in the school setting which equip them with such skills but it is a time consuming task as the schools increase their working hours for participating in the same. There is expectation from the teachers to exhibit innovation in various aspects of the school system like pedagogy, assessment strategies, classroom environment, etc., along with all routine work in the system.

CONCLUSION

From the conducted research, it is quite evident that teachers are not mere dispensers of knowledge, and a conducive work environment can act as a crucial catalyst for social transformation. Teachers have to be empowered for making judgments

best suited to their teaching contexts and catering to the individual learning requirements of the children. The teachers do not perceive the act of teaching as monotonous and routine, but feel that it is full of challenges, dilemmas and decision making on an everyday basis. The challenges and dilemmas while teaching arise due to the multidimensional and pervasive concerns and responsibilities of teachers. The concerns shared by the interviewed teachers range from defining the objectives and aims of teaching duties, choices and freedom to exercise autonomy in the existing hierarchies and the effect of government policies and schemes on the teaching-learning environment of their classrooms. Some of the dilemmas were common to both the private and government school teachers like non-teaching work vs. teaching work, lack of choice and freedom to take decisions by the teachers, government rules/policies vs. ethical concerns. However they did differ in their dilemmas about their voice and agency in the school hierarchy. The private school teachers depended on higher authorities for even trivial decisions.

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