

## In Search of a Professional Identity

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Teaching is one of the most arduous and demanding professions. Many teachers enter the profession brimming with ideas with the aim to inspire young students and to realise their potentials. What makes teaching particularly challenging is the diverse nature of classrooms and the expectation that every child will be brought into the fold of learning. Diverse classrooms often demand that teachers play varied roles-ranging from a counsellor, storyteller, actor, writer, orator and many others. Despite this many teachers enjoy the complexities of their work.

Teaching in a primary school for the past several years, has been the most rewarding and satisfying experience I have had. I have enjoyed every aspect of my work: selecting and designing subject content, developing exciting ways of engaging students with new and complex concepts and issues, reaching out to quieter and disinterested children, telling them animated stories about the worlds of fantasy and reality and making sure they learn.

During the past couple of years however, I have been witness to changes introduced in school education under the guise of 'reforms'. These reforms we were told are necessary to become 'efficient professional' teachers. Soon after one such experience claimed to take us through 'the process of becoming professional', I realised that my role as a teacher- a decision maker-had been reduced to that of a mere 'implementer'. As teachers, we were expected to teach according to preplanned lessons and activities. Only did this impose on me a style of working that did not come naturally, it created in me a strong dislike towards the profession of teaching itself. I felt immensely so pressurised to follow specific steps in organising my teaching that I wondered whether I had made a correct career choice about a profession I lovingly chose for myself more than a decade ago.

The reforms being instituted in schools claim to improve pedagogical approaches with the aim to shape teaching into a more professional

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activity. As a result of these reforms, several 'private' high fee charging schools expect teachers to use pre-planned curriculum materials under the guise of enhancing capabilities and skills of learner. These pre-packaged materials provide readymade lesson plans for most of the concepts contained in school textbooks. In effect they 'tell' teachers what to teach and how to teach. School administrations emphasise the use of pre-packaged materials as it gives them the opportunity to increase school fees. The market sector of pre-packaged materials is seen as a step towards making school 'technologically advanced'; School managements seek to increase their 'businesses' by catering to children of particular socio economic classes.

These changes in the name of educational reforms can be ascribed to the rising neo liberal ideologies in the field of education. Redefined as a commodity, education and the related issue of quality are being directly associated with the commercial activity. Consequently, in the neo-liberal era, the wider aims of education are seen in economic terms with a focus on continuous monitoring of student learning and teacher accountability. Teachers have become the object of reforms (Batra, 2012); their professional worth is now discussed in terms of the measurability of the outcomes of their efforts (Kumar, 2011). The underlying assumption of such initiatives is to raise student performance in the

desired 'academic' tasks by controlling the curricula. Hence, students' achievement can be increased through detailed prescription of teaching through scripts.

I will elaborate in this short essay area of critical concern that has been thrown up as a result of these reforms. First, teachers are now expected to simply implement predetermined content and instructional procedures and follow blindly the given curriculum material foreclosing any scope or need to adapt or modify to suit changing contexts and student needs. This has led to the stifling of teachers' autonomy and the virtual disappearance of any role of the practicing teacher to develop and plan curriculum and teaching learning process. The role of teacher gets reduced to a technician who can implement the given content rather than seeing them as a thinking humane professional. Second, the attempt to homogenize curriculum content and transaction diminishes the NCF (2005) emphasis on socio-historical and cultural diversity as a key starting point of providing meaningful learning experiences. Generally the scripted material is designed to meet the needs of a particular class. The content, its presentation; the language reflects a social setup of a specific group. The material intends to instill certain values and attitudes that are appreciated by that culture. There is hardly any scope for discussion about existing inequities and issues of diversity are usually ignored. In a way, the materials maintain the

existing inequalities and hierarchy that students observe in their surroundings.

Third, the predesigned lesson plans contain inbuilt exercises for assessing student learning via multiple choice and other objective questions that actively disallow nuanced engagement with subject matter. It is evident that such appraisal mechanisms do not provide space for students to think critically and in fact limit the possibility of exploration and the application of concepts in varied contexts. Last, control over matters related to teaching guarantees a standardised system of teaching. This further widens the gap between those who control the schools from the outside and those who actually deal with curricula and students on a day-to-day basis, leading to a greater bureaucratization of schools as well as of teachers' work.

My experience of being a teacher suggests that teaching is a spontaneous activity rather than a planned activity as the direction of 'reforms' propose. There were rare instances where I have found myself successful in transacting a lesson planned in terms of its content and methodology. While teaching, I have often had to take quick and spontaneous decisions to modify my teaching plan in case I found that it was not going according to preconceived ideas. Overcoming my own despair of a lesson gone bad, I had to constantly infuse optimism and liveliness in my teaching so as

to maintain learner's engagement in class. I had to work with learners who came with varied interests and knowledge. I had also to cope with the intensity of their emotions that would change with every passing hour. I realized that with every teaching experience, I improvised the content I had planned to engage students with and developed new insights that enriched my pedagogy further.

Before I was exposed to the series of workshops that claimed to make me into a 'professional teacher', I enjoyed the freedom of teacher in selecting and transacting a concept drawing upon my knowledge and expertise. We would plan at the beginning of the academic term by selecting broad topics that would form the syllabus outline for the year. Before introducing a concept, I with my colleague would discuss the themes in terms of content and pedagogic communication. As teachers we had the flexibility to approach the concepts using our own unique pedagogical style and knowledge. We were not compelled to select the same stories, ask similar questions and expect uniform answers from our learners.

For me teaching was a flexible and open activity wherein a teacher designs or chooses appropriate activities keeping in mind the varied abilities and potential of learners in her classroom. For instance, some children engage more enthusiastically with activities that involve making models or charts whereas others may

enjoy activities that involve building stories or poems related to the concept learnt, or read about it before visiting a museum. A teacher who observes learners is able to develop a reasonably accurate picture of their strengths, weaknesses and orientation towards learning. Besides this, interaction with learners assists teachers in balancing the task of combining group work while also focusing on individual learners. In doing so, a teacher transforms personally as well as professionally. She explores and discovers the world again with her learners and in this process learns much more. Undergoing through a cycle of planning diverse activities for learners and reflecting on her own pedagogy, a teacher becomes more creative and reflective in her teaching.

With the introduction of scripted materials, there is far greater control on the process of teaching and a constant focus on the efficient management of human 'resource' (students and teachers) with virtually no scope for developing thinking and ideas. The real problem with this "effectiveness and efficiency" discourse, and readymade materials is that these are being positioned as tools for 'empowering' teachers. Teachers are being given the impression that this approach will ease their teaching and reduce their workload by taking away the 'mundane' tasks of planning and transacting curricula. The reality however is that most teachers find prepackaged materials rigid as they are unable to adapt to suit the

diverse needs of the classroom and learners. In effect, the power and authority of teachers over curricula issues is minimised. In fulfilling the expectations of instituting reforms as a teacher, I have found myself struggling in the absence of power over matters related to teaching. Pre-packaged materials introduced in the name of 'assisting' teachers now govern their pedagogy. At a deeper level, these 'reform' measures also reflect a deep mistrust in the teacher's capacity to choose and design developmentally appropriate content and learning experiences for learners.

A scripted lesson on plants and seed germination also takes away the prospect of outdoor activity. The charm of having a class under a tree and planting a seed in the school garden has virtually disappeared as a pedagogic activity. Opportunities to talk about nuanced aspects of plant life led by outdoor activities are thing of the past. Often such activities become the starting point of discussions that might or might not be related to the concept undertaken. These learners led 'diversions' help in enhancing their understanding. A teacher creates that space where these diversions are given a direction. Outdoor activities that provided expression to learners' enthusiasm and quest for knowledge are no longer indicators of learning. The intimate bond between the teacher and learners has been replaced by a 'business model' where 'performance' on standardized test and learning outcomes are considered

as the only parameters of a system of education. It would not be incorrect to say that teaching and learning as a nuanced pedagogical process has been consciously reduced to a mere mechanical exercise. In other words, the complex notion of teaching is put simply as an easy and standardised task.

Telling teachers to follow a schedule or teach in a particular way with stated content is contradictory to the notion of strengthening and building teachers as professionals. Teachers feel a growing loss of power around the basic conditions of their work and consider themselves disempowered rather than autonomous professionals. In addition, such approaches grossly undermine the cultural specificity of a school as an institution and treat all schools as uniform organizations devoid of a geographical, historical, socio-economic and cultural context. Moreover, these readymade curricula materials are suggested by 'experts' who may neither have the experience of working with children nor engage with educational theory. Often, they are crudely unaware of the multiple realities and experiences learners from different socio-cultural and lingual background bring with them. In this scenario teachers' roles too have been reduced to the dictates of 'experts', removed from the context of classrooms and the children they inhabit.

It can be argued that teacher's work has now become more controlled and structured under the provisions

provided by the administration of their respective organisations. Informal talks with teachers reveal the perplexed situation they are in especially with the introduction of continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE). Teachers have to provide evidence for the work they have done in order to justify their professional existence. Hierarchies are introduced at each level in form of subject coordinator, class coordinator, and primary head to ensure that teaching goes according to prescribed plans. For teachers, the sole intention of teaching has become one of finishing the designated weekly plan and to provide evidences of successful completion of the tasks assigned to them. Most of the teaching time goes into preparing reports that need to be submitted to different "coordinators". Delays or failing to follow planned schedule demands "valid" reasons and severe questioning. It can be said that stress has been laid on objectifying the whole pedagogical process.

This does not mean that teachers are free from any accountability. Teachers are accountable to their students and parents however, high stake accountability and putting every aspect of teacher's work into scrutiny is what makes teaching troublesome. The argument is that teachers need to have adequate power in the day to day classroom matters for learning to become effective. Teachers' autonomy should be viewed as a mandatory aspect so that teachers feel content and responsible about their work. Enough freedom and flexibility

opens up new avenues for learning and makes teaching more humane endeavor.

While most teachers do not express their concern or raise a voice against the changes being instituted in the schools. Mass media is being used to propagate the idea that anyone can teach. The advocacy of prepackaged content and its aggressive marketisation has trivialized the need for professional qualification to become a teacher. Thus, several factors seem to work together against the teacher especially since teachers are rarely seen as a collective agency to reclaim their space in school education.

To conclude, it can be argued that teachers are a crucial factor that influences learning of the students. Each one of us is likely to remember a teacher who may have changed or influenced our lives deeply. It is usually the human aspect of a teacher that touches our lives and leaves an ever lasting imprint on our mind. Dedicated, loving, knowledgeable and reflective teachers can foster critical and creative thinking in the students. No other factors such as materials and curriculum can substitute the way in which a teacher increases a student curiosity and keeps the teaching

process lively. A teacher not only selects content of a lesson but plans it in a way to meet the different level of learners, their interests and needs. She customizes and balances the task of making each child learn through her qualifications and experience. Keeping in mind the varied needs of a learner, she constructs an environment where learning is supported and challenged too. This is why teaching remains a human endeavor. The ability to decide, select and choose content is the primary right of a teacher and taking away this would erase the very soul of teaching. It is important to view student's achievement with respect to the product of teacher's effort rather than focusing on other factors such as curricula and content. To disseminate quality education, teachers need to be seen as an active agency that can think, decide for her students and take into cognizance the multiple socio political and cultural locations of the learners. Instead of limiting the authority of teacher the focus should be on empowering teachers so that they can devise the best way to face the challenge of multi cultural classrooms and to achieve this, a serious rethinking of teachers' professionalism needs to be worked out.

## REFERENCES

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