

Teacher Identity Formation in the Indian Education Context

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Abstract

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, came up with a significant clause of 'No Detention Policy'. This was one of the most seminal clauses as it seemed to pose a challenge as to whether it is possible for children to learn even if there is no fear of failure in formal exams. Even almost after eight years the law came into effect, ensuring quality learning outcomes remains an enigma. Across the States, teacher unions have been blaming the clause for being the key reason behind the poor performance of students. The struggle to ensure quality teaching is resulting in new ideas being tried out by the education departments of different States. The discourse of change in schooling has a direct bearing on teaching practices in classrooms. This could be in the form of introduction of new textbooks, digital content and vocational education. Prior to becoming a teacher, a person's identity is influenced by one's own sociocultural upbringing. Once the individual becomes a teacher, the person extends one's sense of self within the larger context into the classroom, influenced by one's own location within the school culture and the experiences of functioning within the larger bureaucratic machinery. This paper aims to explore how the current interventions to reform education influence the identity of a teacher.

INDIAN EDUCATION SCENARIO

The Indian elementary education is witnessing tremendous changes. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act came into

force in the year 2009. There is a need to reflect on some of the significant changes introduced in elementary schooling, which have implications for teachers. Some of the major changes observed after the Right To Education

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(RTE) Act, 2009 came into force include introduction of a system of assessing students called 'Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation' (CCE). Besides, the Central Teacher Eligibility Test (CTET) was introduced in the year 2011 with the objective of doing a more thorough evaluation of teachers before they became eligible to join schools. The duration of B.Ed programme, which was one-year since Independence, was increased to two years and in 2014.

A closer analysis reveals that these changes aim at preparing teachers, their appointment mechanism, and efforts at regulating the way they teach and assess students.

Along with efforts as regards to introducing changes at the macro level, efforts have been made at evaluating the learning levels of students since 2005. Besides, it was that year the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) initiated the process of National Assessment Survey.

Other than the changes being introduced by the Centre, governments in various States and Union Territories have also been coming up with various initiatives in order to improve the learning standards of the students, for example, the annual assessment exercise called *Gunotsav* by the Gujarat education department. Likewise, the Gujarat government has introduced NCERT textbooks in government schools for select subjects as part of its State board curriculum.

NATURE OF WORK FOR TEACHERS

Teachers not only bring content knowledge to classrooms but also present their entire personality before children. This is so because a teacher is not only required to possess content knowledge relevant to students of a particular age group with whom one is engaging but is also expected to relate to children from diverse backgrounds, different capacities and orientations of mind. There is a strong moral dimension to teaching (Hansen, 1999).

Teaching entails looking at a variety of situations on a day-to-day basis, for example, some students would participate in classroom activities, while some would not; some would display a behaviour that may warrant teachers' intervention. Teachers may modify strategies to factor in varied pace of learning of the students.

However, response to all these conditions cannot be precisely determined by theoretical concepts only. How a teacher responds to such situations depends on factors like attitude towards students, the level of liberty given to teachers in the school culture, moral compass of the teacher, etc.

In order to relate to the subjects and students, the teacher needs to understand one's students. This can happen only when the teacher has an understanding of one's own self. It is only through self-reflection that one develops an understanding of the world around.

TEACHERS' IDENTITY

In this paper, the identity of a teacher is being examined in connotation with an individual's sense of self. The identity of an individual plays out in multiple ways. Identity is a shifting construct, something which evolves with time.

Identity formation has normative, contextual and relational dimensions. In the context of a teacher as an individual, normative forces include the voice of the textbook, school rules, government circulars replacing the voice of teachers as they strive to assert a certain homogenising control over the education process.

Schools exist within a larger social setup, which may also influence the teacher's identity. A teacher, who teaches students coming from families, where parents have received formal education, has to meet parents' expectations. Students from these schools also get more support at home, and hence, perform better in academics. Several schools also send their teachers to capacity building programmes and give them opportunities for growth, which boosts their confidence.

In low-cost private schools, teachers, generally, get a paltry salary. In the absence of capacity building opportunities, many teachers have a low sense of self-worth. Context also plays a crucial role in a school. If the teacher is expected to follow a given curriculum and not include one's own perspectives, the person's sense of agency can get greatly

limited. Thus, even within a given category of schools, there can be significant variables that can have strong influence on the teacher's own identity.

Identity is developed through four types of identity, viz., natural, institutional (also called I-identity), discursive and affinity (Gee, 2011). It is a relational phenomenon.

Natural identity emerges at the birth of an individual, on which the person has almost no control. I-identity or institutional identity is the one shaped by the institution to which the person belongs. Here, laws, rules and principles govern the day-to-day functioning and tend to provide a certain kind of social standing to the individual within the institution. Discursive identity means the individual essentially sees one self in the light of others' perspective. In affinity identity, the identity of the person develops in close association with a group, working towards a short- or long-term objective or a common cause.

Institutional setting plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of the teacher. According to post-structuralists, such as Foucault, the power structure within which the teacher operates has a significant role in shaping the sense of self.

The teacher's beliefs that develop over the years and one's sociocultural influences go a long way in determining how one relates to children. Pajarus (1992) notes that belief systems, by their very nature,

are inflexible and may not require an internal consistency. Knowledge is open to evaluation systems, while beliefs do not warrant that. Beliefs do not get altered by argument or reason and play a critical role in organising an individual's response to a problem against the knowledge that the individual may possess.

Yeung (2014) cites that teachers, who believe in entity theory, would have a different expectation from students against those who believe in incremental theory. In the former case, teachers may end up labeling students at a subconscious level, resulting in ignoring their development. Teachers, who come with an orientation to incremental theory, would accept their students as continual learners, who need to be taught in a certain way so that they could learn better.

Likewise, teachers with a teacher-centric approach, where one has to continually transmit information to students, would have limited expectations from them against teachers who have a child-centric outlook. Teaching based on constructivist theory would allow students the opportunity to construct their own knowledge under the teacher's guidance.

Batra (2005) points out the fallacy in expecting students to develop competencies, such as critical thinking, which the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)-2005 stresses on, without giving adequate attention to teacher preparation.

The fundamental question is that if teachers are not given the opportunity to exercise independent thinking, then how are they expected to develop this quality among students.

Batra further questions the central assumption that "teacher-trainees will be able to set aside their own social and cultural beliefs and assumptions about knowledge, the process of learning and their view of learners, once they enter the hallowed portals of teacher education".

Hargreaves (2001) explores the importance of emotions in the lives of teachers. These emotions arise within the context of relationships with children, parents and colleagues at school. Teachers' emotions, on account of their sociocultural upbringing, can immensely influence the way they understand their students. The expectations that teachers have from the students also get significantly impacted on account of difference between their sociocultural backgrounds. In government schools, teachers mostly attribute children's weak learning outcomes to their family backgrounds and that parents do not pay adequate attention to their studies.

Different professions imply different perspectives on emotions. In medicine, doctors are expected to maintain a psychological distance from patients. In case of teaching, the profession involves both cognitive engagement, as well as, emotional connect with students, parents and fellow teachers.

PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS' IDENTITY

Teaching, as a profession, has received homilies from various quarters. On one hand, teachers have been extolled through adages like 'builder of the nation', 'responsible for shaping of lives', etc., while on the other hand, the way the society looks at them contributes greatly towards their sense of self.

Sriprakash (2011) mentions about Bernstein's theory of re-contextualisation in the sense that teachers tend to recontextualise pedagogic discourses within their own contexts of work and the kind of sociocultural experiences they go through. Re-contextualisation is perceived as based on the sense of self of the teachers.

Out of the spirit of sacrifice or for nation building, many in India tend to join the teaching profession because of the job security it guarantees and to meet the economic needs of their families.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND TEACHERS

The significance of identity for teachers has to be seen in conjunction with the nature of profession, for it impacts the way one conducts oneself in class and the teaching-learning process.

The normative discourse on teaching, both at the school and larger structural level, tends to reduce teacher identity to the roles and functions performed by the

person. This, in a way, negates the essential difference that exists among individuals — their upbringing, ideological positions and beliefs on notions of learning, etc. As Britzman (1993) observes the role can be assigned from outside, while identity is created through social negotiation.

Administrative reforms initiated to improve the quality of education need to be juxtaposed against the central role that identity formation plays in teacher development.

The response of many teachers to trainings, which do not factor in their classroom experiences, is tepid as their own agency or experiences seem to matter little. They internalise things they find relevant and reject inputs that seem to be at a tangent to what they experience in the classrooms.

Sometimes, experienced teachers express a slightly supercilious attitude towards new interventions in the name of over-arching school reforms. This affects relatively new teachers, many of whom want to exercise their own agency as master trainers but are not received well by more experienced trainers. In States like Gujarat, block level trainings for transacting NCERT textbooks (which were introduced in 2018) were done by teachers, who volunteered to become master trainers. Many new trainers (teachers) cited instances of how some experienced teachers did not welcome and receive their inputs.

The life of teachers in government schools in India is different from those in private schools. They are

considered the last rung of the bureaucratic structure. Teachers have to fulfil a number of duties that go beyond academic roles. These duties include participating in recording the Census data, election duties, etc. But a teacher's voice is rarely given importance while deciding curricular content or designing training programmes meant for them. Departmental inefficiency can also de-motivate teachers when they are not provided with devices like computers or provided with defunct ones. In certain States, there are cases of how textbooks reach several months late after the academic session has already started, thereby, bringing down the morale of both the teachers, as well as, students. These emotions run deep in their psyche, adversely affecting the way they visualise their role and agency.

The system expects teachers to cover the syllabus in a stipulated timeframe, focus on students struggling at the upper primary stage and come to terms with new textbooks introduced by the State board.

TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the Indian context, teaching, unfortunately, is not one of the most sought-after professions. Some of the sought-after professions include medicine, engineering, law and commerce as they are directly linked with economic security and social standing.

As a result, people who choose to become teachers may not be sure of what they are actually getting into. Thus, the pre-service teacher education programme, to a large extent, has to shoulder the responsibility of developing teachers' perspective on self-reflection.

In a profession as challenging as teaching, self-reflection is necessary. As with most individuals, teachers, too, may have formed assumptions about learning, education, language and other issues. These assumptions often remain tacit, and are sometimes so ingrained that they remain unexamined (Nikalje, 2016).

The normative structure in teacher preparation can pose immense challenge for teachers, particularly, during their apprenticeship stage, where what they are expected to learn is predetermined.

For an in-service teacher, the supervisor needs to be aware of how the person sees oneself in the role — ability to understand students coming from diverse backgrounds, their relationship with parents, school norms, epistemic notions regarding discipline and the teacher's own professional confidence.

Once teachers develop their own set of criteria or standards of evaluating their success in classrooms, they would be in a position to respond to the role of a teacher's agency in the classroom process. It is inappropriate to expect any kind of intervention to regulate how a classroom session actually flows through.

CONCLUSION

Studies show how identity gets constructed within a sociocultural and historical context, and is under constant development. There is a difference between teaching and being a teacher — in other words, being conscious of one's space in education discourse and action. The teacher's background and professional experience accumulated over the years influence the way the person approaches students coming from diverse backgrounds of the society. Sometimes, perhaps unknowingly, a teacher may develop a sense of complacency, or slight cynicism in the system, or biases — all aspects that

can influence the teaching–learning experience.

It is in the pre–service phase that there is maximum opportunity to help teachers come to terms with their own beliefs, notions and values, and reflect upon them. This needs to be done within a larger framework of aims of education towards which the teachers are being prepared. It calls upon a suitable mix of theory and practice, where teachers reflect on their relationships with students, classroom teaching and the institution they are serving. Developing the sense of self in a teacher can serve as crucial guiding light to bring about a change in the teaching–learning process.

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