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'Professional Development for Institutional Excellence'

Situation Analysis

The last 75 years have seen dramatic changes in the human life in terms of concept of society, concept of economics and concept of interdependence of human beings.

The most significant events for India in the last 75 years have been - freedom from the "British Regime" and opening itself to the "process of globalization" in the mid nineties.

Today, we are a country of over 1.2 billion people - accounting for almost 16 percent of world population but contribute to only about 1.16 percent of the world GDP. Our ranking in important parameters such as the human development index, governance, transparency index, literacy and many other development indices is shamefully low.

Our development and growth pattern is acutely skewed. In the urban area there has been a reasonably rapid change due to semblance of "economic growth" and arrival of technology since late eighties. However, the rural areas continue to languish with inadequate infrastructure, abject poverty, uncontrolled growth in population and the "migratory" nature of economic development. Practically every rural person has to move out of the native place if he/she were to acquire higher education and the person is unable to return to the native place after acquiring such higher education owing to lack of corresponding vocational opportunity in rural areas. Thus two distinct classes are developing in our country - those who are benefitting from the globalization and economic development and those who are not. Incidentally those who are benefitting constitute a very small proportion of the population.

The most critical issues that are staring at us are "inequity" and "disharmony". We have inequity in every possible form - socio-economic, gender based, caste-creed based, urban-rural based, power based etc. There has been dramatic erosion in our values and in our social behavior - that was earlier based on three time tested values - truth, non-violence and tolerance. Many parts of our country have become "boiling pots" of discontent that is based on regionalism and religion or caste based animosity.

Education Context

Most education philosophers, starting from Aristotle to Tagore and Gandhi while discussing the purpose of education have stressed on three aspects of education - happiness in life, developing an independent responsible thinker and providing necessary skills to survive in life.

It is often said that India has had a very rich tradition of “education system” and in the ancient era, it was a fountainhead of knowledge in the world. The “gurukul” system is referred to by many as one of the ideal systems of education that stood for culture, relationship, wisdom of the teacher and rigour of learning process.

However, the current educational system followed in majority of our schools is more than 150 years old. It is based on archaic notions such as “child is an empty vessel and needs to be filled with knowledge”, “education happens only in the school”, “some children are clever and some are not” “all children have to learn the same subject within a fixed period of time” etc.

Lack of synergy in the educational objectives among various stakeholders is a serious problem. The teachers have different view on education since it is also their means of livelihood. It is not yet known why the children go to the school. Is it because their parents want them to be in the school or because they want to make friends or because they like playing with the other children in the school? For the educational functionaries, it is a part of the job. Majority of the parents want their children to become economically productive and self sufficient at the end of their education. The intellectuals and educationists consider education as a process of social change.

The results of our approach are evident - India is clearly a nation that is “receiver of knowledge” than “creator of knowledge”. Since our education is merely focused on “cramming” or “rote memorization”, our children are weak in thinking, analysis, application of their knowledge and challenging existing paradigms.

Though physical schools have reached to over 95 percent of our habitations, what happens in these schools is the most critical question that is vexing the educationists. Most people engaged with the education system are unfamiliar with the education goals and process enunciated in the National Policy for Education and the National Curriculum Framework.

The socio-economic diversity creates unique challenges for the teacher in the classroom. The demands on the teacher in the classroom are so complex that - as Prof Krishnakumar once said - “in today’s context, even if Gautam Buddha, Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi were to be rolled into one and made to teach in the Indian classroom, they would find it difficult to meet the requirements!”

In the context of formal schooling, there is agreement that it is the teacher who has the highest influence on the learner and the learning process.

If this is so, there are several questions that arise about the teaching profession:

- Why are some of our best people not opting for teaching profession?
- Why is a teaching professional not being treated on par with other professionals such as doctor, engineer, accountant and a business manager?
- Why has the teacher education curriculum not been revised to incorporate current realities of teaching?

- Why so many teachers are absent from schools and continue to pursue their side business?
- Why is the academic support system for teachers dysfunctional?
- Are enough teachers taking charge of their self development?
- If a teacher wants help in her pedagogy who does she seek it from?
- Since teaching is not equal to learning how does one measure teacher's accountability?

Teacher as a professional

There are close to 6 million teachers in India and it is the largest force of individuals that has the potential and power to transform the future generation of our country.

India has made a constitutional commitment to herself to develop a just, equitable and humane society with democratic, social and secular values. And teachers have the task of developing individuals who become responsible members of such society. Our national policy for education has set education goals such as to acculturate our children, refine their sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, develop scientific temper, develop independence of mind, further the goals enshrined in the constitution of India and develop manpower for different levels and purposes of economy.

Are we prepared to achieve these goals rather than getting lost in the mechanical ways of transacting education only through text books and assessments that measure primarily the rote memory of children? Are we willing to accept that children come to school with a reasonable knowledge base and are capable of making their own meaning and interpretation of the given facts? Do we accept that children learn differently at different times and different children learn differently? That it is important to view knowledge as integrated sum of experiences than merely as distinctive subjects?

Thus the responsibility of developing teachers as professionals has to be viewed at three distinct levels: (a) The way Teacher Education is designed, organised and carried out by our country (b) The way teachers are supported through continuous in-service development programs offered by the state (c) And above all, the individual efforts made by teachers for their self development.

A professional teacher is one who is acutely proud and aware of his/her responsibilities. He/She consciously develops competencies that contribute to:

- 1.** A vision of education that is consistent with that of our constitution, our policy and our curricular Framework
- 2.** Subject matter expertise and depth that enables the teacher the position of mastery in the classroom

3. Indepth understanding of pedagogy – what makes children learn better – that can enable a teacher to develop strategy to develop with children with different abilities
4. Enhanced social orientation making the teacher immensely aware of the social background of children to deal with them sensitively
5. Passion that keeps the teacher motivated even in the face of challenges and constraints faced by the teacher day after day

The constraints faced by most teachers are more or less similar:

- Poor teacher education curriculum and not so developed teacher educators
- Inadequate infrastructure in the school
- Poor teacher pupil ratio
- Illiteracy of parents
- Low ability of parents to contribute to their children's education – lack of home support
- Inadequate budgets for teaching learning material
- Lack of academic support during service
- Lack of people practices that motivate teachers

But the reality is despite such constraints – some teachers do a wonderful job of teaching learning.

A professional teacher focuses on his/her circle of influence rather than getting disheartened by the constraints. Within the four walls of the classroom, the teacher has almost unlimited authority to organise the learning process in a manner that can constitute a unique learning experience for every child.

Some pointers to Professional Development

1. Focus on leadership:

Teacher is a leader in the classroom not only for his/her students but also for the process of learning in the school. He/she also has to lead the parents on how they would best support the education process of their children. Do you know that it is possible to provide academic and pedagogic leadership to your peers based on your classroom experience and innovative strategies evolved by you? A learning teacher evolves through such sharing of experiences and becomes better equipped to assume greater responsibility in the academic field. This could be extended to providing solutions to the Government or participating in the curriculum development for the state.

2. Integrated Learning:

A truly professional teacher has a holistic view of the entire education process of child in the school. She does not view it as a fragmented – subjectwise curriculum. Illustratively, he/she recognizes the importance of language in maths and history and importance of rational thinking of maths and physics in geography. Further, he/she also blends theory with practice to enrich both. Probably the biggest benefit for teacher's development is when different kinds of teachers come together and discuss their experiences and challenges together. Given the routines of one's classroom processes some blinkers about how things happen in the classroom are bound to develop. These blinkers open up when you meet and listen to the experiences and strategies of other professional colleagues.

3. Experiential Learning

I always wondered why a teacher does not take the children out of the classroom and show them the cycle of development of silkworm than teaching it from the text book. The number of field visits and excursions are often eye openers and real learning experiences not only for the children but even for the teachers. Have we discussed in the classroom the real problems of the real world to draw learnings from that? Did we discuss the reasons of economic recession in the world and in India? Children would enjoy a visit to a police station or a hospital or a factory or an agricultural farm to learn by seeing, sensing and experiencing. Professional teaching is a double helix of theory and practice – connected with creation of several assignments and case studies.

4. Environmental and Social Responsibility

A professional teacher is of course socially not only aware but responsible. He/she would not hesitate in participating in village development committees, school development and monitoring committees or other local social organisations. One encounters different social perspectives by participating in such fora. For teachers it is critical to understand the issues related to environment, sustainability, social interlinkages, global and local issues etc. to be able to keep in mind the child as a future responsible citizen. Needless to say, these are self rewarding experiences and help develop our personality. It is important that teacher community has extremely cordial and symbiotic relations among its members – since in many ways, it would demonstrate to children the importance of such relationships. When an opportunity arises, teachers need to travel across geographies to expand their perspective. Also important is to understand the perspective of some of the global organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, World Bank, United Nations etc. to understand their influence on India. Evaluating current political, economic, social events at local, national and global level can help explaining the same confidently to the students.

5. Technology as an effective tool

Internet opens the whole new world of knowledge for teachers. At practically no cost, the world events, the encyclopedia and several other web enabled tools are available for learners across the world. You don't need to own a computer for this – you can just access 2 hour per week at the nearest cyber café at very little cost. In urban areas the penetration of internet is much higher.

Technology also enables to create knowledge e-groups that can widen the contacts to infinity. There are several specific portals devoted to subject knowledge, pedagogy and sociological issues. Remember the students are very quick in grasping and using technology and one day, they would be accessing the knowledge even before you access and would ask newer questions in the classroom. Technology offers among the most cost effective and easy to access tools for knowledge acquisition and establishing a network of professionals.

6. Continuous Education

I have seen plenty of managers in the corporate world, who try to survive on their past knowledge and past performance. The world and your teams demand newer solutions from you each day and nobody – even the most successful people can rest on their past laurels. You are in a profession where students change each year. During the year also the students are significantly changing by responding to various stimuli in the school and in the environment outside. The process of learning really never stops unless one chooses to get stagnated in life. If nothing else, just to make life interesting and enjoyable, we have to learn newer things and try doing existing rituals in newer ways. It is important that we make time to learn in a structured way. We must commit to do something new each week or month and learn from the same.

Professional development is a need of every professional and teachers being professionals cannot be an exception for the same.

The learner that we are dealing with in the school is unique and is capable of contributing to self and that makes the profession much more challenging and exciting. From the outside, the education system appears stable and static. In reality it is far from it. Take a school for instance. The students change each year, teachers and education officers change when transferred, the school community members also change – either because their children are no more in the school or because they fail to get elected on the committee.

All high performing institutions have two things common. They have very satisfied employees and they have very satisfied people who they serve.

If we view our role as of accountable and autonomous professionals, we would realize that we have the responsibility of being satisfied employees and most importantly ensure that the children that we serve are happy.

Professionalism is not about developing wonderful guides and handbooks. It is about developing a solid sense of what is required to be done. The deeper you develop your knowledge the more flexible is your approach. A truly developed teacher is conceptually so strong that even the rituals arising out of these concepts look very colorful, exciting and effortless. Mastery eliminates rigidity and provides flexibility.

As John Holt says “the most important task of a teacher - is to make or make accessible a part of the world or of human experience which is as interesting, exciting, meaningful, transparent, and emotionally safe as possible”. And this is not possible if the teacher does not have a complete professional mastery over what he/she is expected to do in the classroom.

Here is wishing all of you the very best in your endeavour of nation building!!