



Empowering Teachers through Development

Bhavani Raghunandan

I became a teacher quite by accident when I went into a school in Hyderabad to admit my son and found I had to wait for him to finish and then take him home. So I thought I may as well contribute while I was there. And so began my 32 year tryst with education.

And I choose the word 'education', as opposed to mere 'schooling', very consciously. Having got in, I found I was actually drawn to the process of educating children with all its nuances. I realised the enormity and importance of what the vocation was all about. It was not a job, it was not just a career- it was more than a commitment- it was indeed a calling.

Although I was very confident I would be able to teach children—what with my excellent post graduate qualification and a B.Ed. degree to boot - I soon started wondering whether it actually qualified me to teach. I had no idea what all it took to become a professional teacher, for instance, patience – something I had never had, tolerance - low, communication skills - which, although my basic English speaking skills were good, needed to be honed; the list was endless. I could see that a lot needed to be done for the lesson to be conveyed. So what began with mild over confidence was now becoming almost a fear of facing my students, ending up as a depression of sorts.

Discovery - I really needed to work on my teaching skills!

And so started reading. It must be remembered here that this was the pre-internet, pre-Google, pre-teacher-training era. Reading meant whatever articles I could find which were in any case few and far between. People were still not critical - teachers were considered to be the sages on the stage –they 'knew' everything. They spoke and the children followed but were they saying the right things? They also believed that one size had to fit all.

In the meanwhile, society was changing. Fathers and mothers were more educated and specialised, consequently their expectations from teachers were increasing. They knew what they wanted.

They were ambitious and were learning what they needed to get their children, getting a lot more exposure from their families which were earning, reading and travelling. Gen X had arrived: children of people born in the 60s. Both parents were working and many of the children had become latchkey kids. They were home alone, independent and creature comfort. They were impatient, had no time to read long paragraphs, wanted everything in bullet points, wanted, and got, information at the click of a button on their computers, had developed a cut-paste culture and the arrogance that went with this.

In this scenario where was the sage on the stage? He/She had not moved with the times. They had been trained by teachers in ways which had been tried and tested, within a society where kids were taught to obey whatever the teacher said. Asking questions meant arrogance or was taken as doubting the knowledge of the teacher.

It was time to change that attitude. Teachers could no longer 'blame' students and say, 'oh in our time...'. There were three fingers pointing right back at them. They were now dealing with a different set of parents and students that they had not been trained to handle, notwithstanding the fact that they had themselves changed!

It was only when I took charge as Principal of a well-known school could I implement what I thought was right. In other words, teachers needed to learn all over again.

So the first thing I did was to get trained myself. I always felt that at least 10 percent of one's salary must be set aside for one's own improvement- in terms of buying books, enrolling for courses and such like. So every year I would attend at least one course with my own money. On my return I would occasionally make my learnings and readings into slides and make short presentations at staff meetings. I expected a 10 percent hit rate, which I knew would influence another 20 percent.

The first training that I aimed at for the teachers in this school was the realisation that they

needed to get over the fear of technology, a fear that manifested itself in various ways, such as resistance ('oh why do we need it—we managed without it all these years'), to reluctance ('it is laborious, cumbersome' and 'how can we learn at this age'). Further, there was a strong perception that computers belonged to the Computer Science department. I had to change that by saying the computers belonged to the school and that while the computer science students got priority of use, any teacher could use it when free. This was followed by a notice saying that the following teachers would submit their question papers on a floppy, ready-to-print. I first chose subjects like English which did not need special characters and pictures. The notice also said that the computer science teachers would teach the others after school. There was pandemonium. 'We can't learn, we can't type, we can't..can't..can't..!' I just shut my ears—I said, 'If I can do it so can you'. Despite all the initial misgivings, it did get done, though, perhaps at the cost of my popularity! However, when the papers were printed they were so excited— they were clearer, neater and used much less paper than hand written ones. I saw that there was also a sense of pride, both because they felt empowered and also because there was ownership. They had learnt, and were doing something that many others could not, exactly what I had been hoping would happen. Next term a few others offered—they got loud appreciation from me. More joined—I just sat back and watched. The language teachers were not to be left behind. They wanted the software for the various scripts. Then came the demand for more computers.

Then we moved slowly towards teaching with audio visual aids. An audio-visual room with a projector and a screen was developed. There was a resistance to use it as it was located far away. I started conducting staff meetings there so that the perception of distance decreased. Then the room started getting used for senior classes. Today the room is booked in advance and there is a fight and mad scramble for its use!

This was the time I felt that the classrooms needed separate smart boards and projectors. There was a need for a lot of money which was generated by building it into the fees. Today, the school has boards in all the classes upto 8th standard, from LKG onwards. I was also invited to make a presentation to the senior officials of SMART as to

how the notebook software – as it is called - had been incorporated into our pedagogy.

The important thing was that the teachers had realised what they were capable of and felt proud that they had become the trendsetters in the city. My first vision and the strategy had worked. I was thrilled to watch the teachers and students in action. It was a giant leap into the future of the school.

Now began my foray into the personal development of teachers. In 1998 I had attended a training programme in New Delhi conducted by the Center for Educational Management and Development (CEMD). The resource persons were extremely competent and committed and the course design and content were excellent. This programme had three modules - dealing with personal development, instructional design and institutional management. Such a course had never been heard of before. Once the resource persons were convinced that this course had to be brought to Chennai, our school hosted the event and we had 35 participants. I was a resource person for the programme and conducted some sessions for them. The assumption and thought that one is selected to become a Principal because one had 'arrived' and knew more than the teachers was now being questioned. One's learning just begins I thought. The skills required to become a Principal are very different from that required by a teacher. Many schools make the mistake of taking a good teacher and making a bad Principal out of her/him. Secondly no organisation existed for training Principals. The Principals also felt they were above all training and learning and would keep sending teachers for training. Today Principals have to run to stand where they are. That would not do. After the year-long programme, for which I sent two of my senior teachers, I had two more who understood what I was trying to do. Then I found an organisation to sponsor the programme and now I am proud to say that the 9th batch of senior teachers is going through the programme.

Another of my visions had been successful. The job of a Principal is to give direction and to make the teachers feel they have done it themselves! In the meanwhile the then Director of Academics of the CBSE had made me a resource person with the CBSE for training Principals. With him, I trained Principals in Trichur, Calicut, Hyderabad etc., learning a lot about the challenges faced by Principals in these areas.

Around this time, I had been invited by Microsoft to be on a couple of panels at their Education Summit in New Delhi, dealing with incorporation of technology in teaching. The conference widened my knowledge about the use of technology in the developed countries of the world. My hopes and ideas went into a different dimension and I came back with my head full of hope.

Among the slides that I have showed the staff is one on the Gen X who they are now teaching, need for learning continuously, passion for teaching and need for motivating the new teachers. The message is – ‘You don’t have to teach the subject; what you need to convey is your passion for the subject and the students will learn themselves’. There have been training sessions on Communication, Emotional Intelligence, Differentiated teaching, Team work, lesson design, types of questions, setting a question paper, formative and summative assessments and lot of other skills required to remain in teaching.

After about a decade I felt that we were ready to set up a training centre for teachers. Over a year I

designed and developed a two week programme on the lines of a finishing school for teachers. Twenty new teachers attended the programme and worked in the school with us. Unfortunately, this venture had to be discontinued as the school decided to start a branch in the suburbs, which needed more time and attention. This branch started off where we had stopped and went way ahead. The teachers were more experienced and the Principal herself had been trained to use technology and was very technology savvy. This school started as an almost paperless school with all teachers on an intranet and all parents being on the mobile application or in Whatsapp groups and so on.

I retired after 17 years of being a Principal - a very satisfied one - having contributed my two bits to teacher development. I continue to be called for conducting workshops for various schools. This is my calling in life I think, because it lets me continue to learn and read and am very happy.

The process of teacher development has indeed come a long way.

Bhavani is the former Principal of Vidya Mandir Senior Secondary School, Chennai. She retired after 17 years as the Principal. She is on the boards of several educational institutions and is a resource person and advisor. She may be contacted at bhavarag@gmail.com or bhavani1954@hotmail.com