

The Position of Teachers in Our Education System¹

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I have been wrestling with the ‘teacher’ question for over fifteen years. Unfortunately the debate on teachers and their centrality to the public education system is highly polarised. There is a large community of administrators, researchers and writers who have taken to regular ‘teacher-bashing’ and there are an equally vocal community that takes a contrary view. The purpose of this short article is to try and understand the way teachers are positioned in our system and why and how this is an important cause for concern.

We all know that, in the struggle between quantity, quality and equity, the role of teachers is a key factor to turn the public system around. The experience of the last three decades and a huge body of research has shown that it is not a matter of numbers any more – and that teacher effectiveness is ‘the most important school based predictor of student learning and that several consecutive years of outstanding teaching can offset the learning deficits of disadvantaged students...’ (Vegas and Ganimian, 2011²). Globally, one of the key challenges being faced by many countries is related to teacher effectiveness: this includes competency (qualification / knowledge), motivation and management. Ultimately the tug-of-war is about the rights of children (to quality education), the rights of teachers (working conditions) and the ability of the system to balance the two (Cream Wright in Chikondi Mpokosa and Susy Ndaruhutse, 2008³).

In the last three years I have travelled extensively and talked to many teachers and administrators in connection with a research study on the working conditions of elementary and secondary school teachers. The overwhelming message that came through was that the public system looks at teachers as government servants whose primary

allegiance is to the administration. She/he is not seen as a ‘teacher’ who is engaged in educating and caring for children. The unique status that teachers enjoyed in society has gradually been eroded and teachers across the country tell you that their professional identity has been lost. Equally, the way they are recruited, transferred and managed makes them vulnerable to the vagaries of administrators and politicians. Most importantly, teachers across India tell you that they have almost no autonomy and their superiors in administration are happy if they follow orders. This is indeed tragic, especially in the light of compelling global evidence that teacher autonomy, identity, motivation and accountability are intertwined.

Is this the case in all countries? Perusal of the experiences of countries like Poland, Finland, China, Singapore and Chile tell us that the way teachers are positioned in the system is the key to success. Some core principles are followed in countries that have been able to rejuvenate the education system – namely:

- attracting the best into the teaching profession through a mix of strategies aimed at enhancing the professional identity and working conditions. Increasing teacher salary alone is not enough.
- preparing teachers well, focusing equally on knowledge and skills needed in the classroom. Provide opportunities for need-based continuing education and training. Supporting teachers to identifying their learning needs and providing timely opportunities is considered important.
- setting clear expectations for teachers and keeping this constant. Frequent changes in expectations can have a detrimental effect on teacher morale. Equally, set up a transparent system to enable teachers, headmasters and

¹This article is based on a recent study led by Vimala Ramachandran, T Linden, T Beteille, S Goyal, S Dey and P G Chatterjee. 2015 forthcoming. *Teachers in the Indian Education System*. NUEPA. New Delhi. This study was done in NUEPA with financial support from the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, under the aegis of the RGF Chair on Teacher Management and Development

²Vegas, Emiliania Vegas and Ganimian, Alejandro J. August 2011. *What are the teacher policies in top performing and rapidly improving education systems? SABER-teachers Background Paper No. 3*. Washington DC

³Chikondi Mpokosa and Susy Ndaruhutse, 2008. *Managing Teachers: The centrality of teacher management to quality education. Lessons from developing countries*. CfBT and VSO, UK

administrators to appraise and review their performance.

- matching teacher's skills with student's needs – with a strong headmaster or principal who has the professional autonomy to plan for her/his school. Teachers who are led by strong and highly motivated school heads and given autonomy to innovate and experiment can do wonders in the classroom. They are motivated and also take great pride in their work.
- finally and most importantly involving teachers in tracking the learning of their students and support them to make sure each and every child is able to make progress.

The public system in India is unfortunately riddled with problems. Teacher recruitment policies are ad hoc and there are long delays and gaps before a successful candidate can assume teaching duties (with the exception of states like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu). Most states do not have a systematic or routine process for calculating how many teachers are needed, and what their specific qualifications and characteristics should be. In a handful of states, recruitment is aligned to political interests, making teacher recruitment resemble political strategies rather than recruitment policies. The timing of recruitment is also opaque. A significant number of court cases related to teacher recruitment and this causes insecurity among potential teacher candidates. Even in the states where recruitment is relatively less transparent and merit-based (like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu), there are considerable delays in the actual deployment of teachers in schools.

Transfer policies are rare in India. Where they exist (as in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in our study), they are recent. The general situation in majority of the states is disturbing – they are mostly ad hoc. In many states teachers report needing powerful connections and paying bribes in order to get a transfer of their choice (or impede one against their interest) or to get a transfer relatively quickly. In some states political leaders are formally represented on transfer committees and some transfers are given as rewards to politically helpful teachers. In some states mass transfers are done – setting in motion a tizzy of activity among teachers.

The RtE Act says that all teachers should perform the following duties: (1) maintain regularity and punctuality in attending school; (2) conduct and

complete the curriculum; (3) complete entire curriculum within specified time; (4) assess the learning ability of each child and accordingly supplement additional instructions, if any, as required; (5) hold regular meetings with parents and guardians and apprise them about the regularity in attendance, ability to learn, progress made in learning and any other relevant information about the child; and (6) perform other such duties as may be prescribed. However, translating these duties into practice in spirit is a challenge that is yet to be addressed fully.

The inspection, feedback and support systems in most states are dysfunctional. The numbers of schools have expanded far more rapidly over the past two decades than the inspection and support system. There are very few officers with limited resources for such functions. The system expects teachers to show that all chapters given in the syllabus for the year have been 'taught' – and this is seen as completion of their primary responsibilities. Teachers are not empowered to perform the roles that children and parents expect of them. Induction or orientation programmes are not a regular feature in any of the states. Though all positions seem to have a 'probationary' period of two years after which the teacher is to be confirmed, in practice this has no relevance. The officials and the teachers are unable to state any difference between what happens or is expected from the teacher during the probationary period and otherwise.

Approximately 42 per cent of government elementary schools have only one or two teachers for the elementary grades. However, the teachers are not equipped to effectively conduct multi-grade teaching despite clear policy directives at the national level. The NCF 2005 suggests considerable planning is required on the part of teachers to address multi-grade situations – however, the teacher education process still treats multi-grade situation as an anomaly.

Most teachers have yet to come to terms with several provisions stipulated by the RtE like 'no detention' and 'no corporal punishment'. Teachers in the nine states said that such provisions have impinged on their professional rights and have made their tasks more difficult. Teachers and senior officials critique the no-detention policy. They say that this takes away the imperative from students to actually study. On the other hand, educationists argue that it is the interpretation of the no-detention policy that

is the problem – because no-detention is equated with non-assessment of learning outcomes. Though teachers have cut down on corporal punishment, it is more out of compulsion than any real belief in the concept.

The position of the head teacher is particularly difficult. All states under the study have significant number of vacancies for the positions of headmasters / teachers. Maintaining student, financial and administrative records of the school; periodic and non-periodic reporting; and liaising with the education department are some of the tasks that the headmasters do. For the last decade and a half, activities like mid-day meals and construction of buildings have emerged as major activities of school heads. All of this leaves obviously little time for academic support and supervision. This problem is further compounded by the fact that most schools do not have administrative, accounting or support staff.

The school team consisting of the head and teachers do not have any say in who should be posted to their school. In many states the teachers told us that when they need a mathematics teacher, they are given a language teacher! As a result – especially at the elementary level – teachers are expected to teach all subjects. They are not part of any decision-making process – but given orders and asked to perform their ‘duties’.

The most tragic feedback was that those who managed our schools, provided resources and actually taught in them had little faith in the government school system. Not one teacher or administrator or teacher educator we met sent their own children or grandchildren to a government school! There is a sense of disquiet across the country, a sense of despair when we talk about our schools, our teachers and the learning of our children. And yet, in most states teachers report that they had seen improvements in their overall status and working conditions. The last twenty years have witnessed significant developments in school infrastructure as well as general infrastructure (roads, communication, electricity, water). The

government has also paid attention to pupil-teacher ratio, provision of teaching and learning material and availability of libraries and books. Salaries of teachers have also gone up significantly since the Sixth Pay Commission. Many states have reversed their contract teacher policies and are now on the track to regularise all teachers.

All these are important and significant issues – but the most significant is that the status of the teachers has been eroded. Across all levels we noted that teachers are seen as a government servant at the bottom of a hierarchical system. By virtue of their administrative role, officials exuded a sense of superiority. The relationship between teachers and administrators is contentious, with both trying to work the system in their favour. It is perhaps not surprising that teachers eagerly seek promotions to administrative posts.

At one level, it seems as if a lot has changed. All states have adopted the RtE recommended Teacher Eligibility Tests (TET). But it was not possible to understand whether this helps the government recruit teachers who have mastery over their subject knowledge and their pedagogy. Moreover, in none of the nine study states was there any effort to use TET results to inform pre-service training practices, curriculum reform and the assess pre-service teacher training institutions. Very little is known about the quality of the TET itself in the different states: whether the tests unambiguously written, if the TET accurately measures the knowledge and skills it claims to, and whether it does so consistently over time.

The ultimate test of the effectiveness of teachers is whether all the children they teach are able to reach their educational potential. Whether teachers teach in the most effective way is determined by a complex set of policies and practices. Blaming teachers is perhaps easy – what is more difficult is to work with the system to ensure greater autonomy to schools while at the same time set in motion a process whereby teachers, headmasters / principals and administrations can evaluate their performance and held accountable to children.

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