

Teacher Competency and the Needs of the Learner

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Abstract

In any educational system there are broadly speaking, five clearly defined components. They are: (1) students, their needs and expectations; (2) teachers, their competencies and commitment; (3) infrastructure which includes buildings, libraries, laboratories and classrooms; and (4) syllabi of courses, their framing and execution; and (5) most importantly a clearly conceived and unambiguously stated objective. Detailed discussions on the theoretical aspects of these components can go on ad infinitum. In order to make our discussions meaningful and relevant, it will, of course, be desirable to read our analysis of the related issues in the context of our own situation in the country. It will not be an exaggeration to assert that the area which attracted the least serious attention of those responsible for the governance of our educational system during the post-independence period is education. We may gloat over the unbridled proliferation of educational institutions and explosion of student-population flocking to these institutions. But the big question remains and that is whether our educational system as a whole is founded on any definite objective which alone can provide a sustainable direction. Flexibility in objectives is understandable but a radical deviation from the age-old purpose of liberal education meant for shaping humans into a worthwhile creation of God can only prove disastrous. Education should aim at primarily developing students' personality and chiselling those inherent traits in him with which he is born in God's own image. This assertion may sound too holistic to utilitarian ears. But it has stood the test of time since humanity came into existence.

Keywords- ELT, Teaching-learning, Competence, Infrastructure, Socio-political conditions

It is needless to emphasize that in the entire fabric of an educational programme the teacher occupies a central place. He is the potter for the clay that the student is and is certainly a sensitive chiseller for the burgeoning generation. There has been a recurrent wailing in our age over the incompetency of our teachers which have largely been held responsible for the sorry state of affairs in our present-day educational delivery systems. We will do well by first making it clear as to what we mean by teacher competencies. The lexical meaning of 'competency', is adequacy, sufficiency of knowledge, skill, experience for some purpose. Mistakenly, this term is taken to be synonymous with thoroughness in a subject. But

adequacy or thoroughness is relative and not an absolute term and is to be taken within a contextual parameter. For example a matriculate English language teacher for primary school classes may be as competent a teacher as a specialist postgraduate teacher for post-secondary classes. Here the parameter to evaluate is the total context of the teaching situation comprising students, their levels, needs and methodological strategies. The subject skill-both quantitatively and qualitatively- is, of course, of paramount importance. But when we talk of 'competency' in the plural, a host of requisite qualities in the teacher come up in our minds.

Let us take up subject competency first. It is thorough in a subject. It is both an extensive and intensive grasp of the subject. But how to judge or evaluate it before recruiting a teacher? Should the mathematical scores at the highest degree level determine a prospective teacher's adequacy or competence for a job. Within a defective examination system, where half of the syllabus can be ignored with ease, attainment of high scores fails to fulfil the criteria of any worth-while merit. Our purpose here is not to analyse the examination system in our present day educational programme, but to merely point out that score-dependence criterion is far from being truly valid and reliable. If we look at the prevailing scenario of the job market, the option for a teaching job occupies the lowest rung in the ladder of available opportunities. We today are totally immersed in the whirlpool of materialism and thoroughly sedated by high soaring ambitions of meteoric rises in grabbing power and pelf in the wake of tsunami waves released by the new demon of globalisation. Those who don't want or fail to be swept away by the new waves of materialistic opportunities are, as it were, destined to be teachers. Such teachers, who are a failed lot in the world of high opportunities, start their career with frustration and lack of motivation. They remain deficient in professional commitment. Unless a teacher is vocationally oriented the sense of professional commitment can't enter into his teaching conduct. The theme of vocation versus profession can be debated but the intrinsic merit of vocation as the prime source of competence cannot be denied. Our ancient gurus offer a testimony to the validity of vocational commitment as the prime source of a teacher's strength. Today when one is compelled to opt for a teaching profession because of his compulsive need for physical existence any talk of vocational commitment is irrelevant. It is needless to emphasize that in the entire fabric of an educational programme the teacher and the learner occupies a central position. The teacher is the potter for the clay that the student is and is certainly a sensitive chiseller for the burgeoning generation. The learners' personality is shaped by a number of agencies such as family, society, prevalent values and ideals of the existing socio-political institution, cultural heritage and above all the teacher's role as a builder of the students' personality is of paramount importance. The teacher should cease to be a mere transmitter of information and a robotic trainer in skills. He should try to analyse and understand the needs and requirements of his student. At the level of primary education, a teacher plays the most important role in creating an interest for learning in the student or killing the interest of the student forever. The young impressionable minds imprint every act and thought of the teacher. The teacher should first of all try to understand the psyche of the learner and his requirements. Psychological conditioning of one learner

differs from another. One blanket curriculum for 200 children of the same standard cannot cover the mental aptitude and liking of all the children. Each learner has a different area of interest. In making them sit in a classroom and learn the same course we are killing their creativity and freedom to choose and enjoy what they like.

Nowadays we are constantly witnessing a number of revolutions in the field of education. One more addition would be to completely do away with the system of bookish curriculum which lays emphasis only on rote memory. The greatest lacuna of our educational system is making the student cram information and reproduce it in the examination. Yet another loop-hole of the present educational system is linked to the first one. And this is the system of constant assessment. Right from the first day in the school, the emphasis of both the teacher and the parents is on examination oriented efforts.

Under the pretext of the times being too competitive, the parents over stress the children to realize their own frustrated ambitions. Even small children are under the medical problem of stress and anxiety, for fear of not coming up to their parent's expectations and the presence of peer performance. In the pursuit of examination oriented efforts, the pleasure of learning and the creative spark is lost somewhere. The child which has the potential of something novel in him, is reduced only to a cramming machine with no creative streak left fertile in him. This results in many problems. Absenteeism is one such major problem in higher education and therefore the chief concern of educators. Absenteeism adversely affects the overall well-being of classes and creates a dead, tiresome and unpleasant classroom environment. To tackle this problem many education policy makers keep debating the various aspects attached to it. One of the easiest solutions is making attendance compulsory, but one must keep in mind that compulsory education up till a certain age (high school) makes sense. The young impressionable minds do not yet have the cognitive development to understand forward planning. At the college or university level, the children are no longer kids, but are fully grown up adults. Now these autonomous adults have by now developed the insight and are capable to take their decisions, if an adult at the age of eighteen can vote for the country, then why not let him/her take decisions about their future. Here the teacher's role is of paramount importance. The need of the hour is creating a congenial and conducive environment for the students. They should wisely manipulate the students' choice and decisions to the best in the interest of the students.

Before discussing the remedies of the problem lets us go deep into the factors which have led to this problem of absenteeism or very low attendance. Many factors play a major role in deciding the student's decision or choice to attend the class.

- (1.) Some of them are the teachers' ability to deliver lectures with clarity and precision.
- (2.) Digital Media like video chips, blogs, webcasts etc could be a possible contributor to student absenteeism. Students skip classes and use digital media as an alternative to attending class.

- (3.) Class absenteeism can also be linked to extra-curricular activities.
- (4.) Many students miss their class as they work as part-timers in various shops, institutes etc. A large number of students are not able to attend classes due to employment commitments. They miss out on lectures and rely on library and computer facilities.
- (5.) Yet another reason for low or poor attendance is the students' assessment pressures. They are busy preparing to compete for the assessment.
- (6.) Students also miss out on their classes as they are busy meeting the deadlines for their assignments and projects. As these assignments and projects fetch them good marks or grades, they find it more gainful to be over involved in them.
- (7.) Stress is yet another reason for absenteeism: work overload, meeting deadlines, part-time jobs, performance pressure, attending coaching classes, extra-curricular activities, assignments etc. all lead to stress in the student. To ease off their stress they want to oversleep and hence normally miss out their morning classes.
- (8.) Low motivation and low self-esteem could yet be another reason for absenteeism. In the absence of strong motivation from both parents and teacher, the student suffers from low self esteem and has poor confidence in himself. He avoids the class, as he gains no inspiration to do better.
- (9.) Finally there are more reasonable causes for absenteeism such as prolonged or frequent illness, accidents, or some tragedy in the family. These are more legitimate reasons which must be considered and taken into account.

Now let us discuss the possible remedies for their ailment in higher education. Following are the ways through which we could possibly find some solution for the problem of absenteeism in classes.

- (1.) Some methods like taking attendance, taking surprise tests, quizzes etc are referred to as mean steps by the teacher. These methods may lead to high attendance but this is not earned by the teacher. A teacher plays a major role in motivating the student to be regular and punctual in the class. He should deliver well organized lectures, use relevant examples, engage the students, use demonstrations, involve the students in discussions. To make the lecture interesting is not the only job, the teacher must integrate it into what the students already know; so that the students can relate it to the existing knowledge. The student should come out of the class feeling how all the parts fit together. Disjointed pieces of information leads only to frustration and aversion from the class. The student should feel that he has gained something useful and fruitful from the class.

2. The primary factor involving quality and clarity of lecture needs, on part of the teacher to consciously seek creative and innovative teaching methodologies. The dearth in teaching methods and monotony of lecture leads to the student being bored easily. New digital friendly methods must be employed by the teacher. The present generation is techno-savvy, engaging them in videos, e-learning, smart board, power point presentation all can create and sustain their interest in the class. The lecture must be so engaging and interesting that the student must look forward to coming to attend the class, not for only attendance but for the pleasure of learning. The teacher should strongly encourage attendance with quality teaching and emphasizing the empirical relationship between grades and attendance.
3. Another essential factor which influences attendance in class is the behaviour of the teacher. If a class is enjoyable because of a lively, energetic and involved teacher, the students are more likely to attend the class. If the teacher offers just notes, then the students don't miss out much. They term such teachers dry and mechanical. The teachers' personality and pleasant behaviour plays a major role in motivating the students. By this we don't intend that the teacher has to be beautiful or handsome; rather his presentation has to be interesting, engaging and above all motivating.
4. We should not adopt a strict attendance policy. Strict adherence policy seems detrimental. At the university and college level we deal with adult students and not primary or secondary school goers. We should treat them as adults at their age. They are fully mature and can make rational decisions. They, by this time, learn to prioritize their lives and know the consequences of their choices and decisions. Giving them freedom, makes them more flexible, responsible and constructive. We must keep in mind that each student is a unique person who has a totally different family background and experiences in life.
5. The teachers can post their lectures on the website but then they only should convince the students that the web will only provide information. It is the teacher who will turn the information into a fruitful learning experience. Total reliance on books and e-learning will lead to confusion and lack of understanding on part of the student. No doubt today we are loaded with surplus facilities like new digital medium of instruction but nothing can replace a real teacher, pulsating with life, energy, vigour and above all practical knowledge and experience.
6. Finally, the most important aspect of assuring attendance in class is chalking out different ways to keep the morale of the students high. A teacher must strike a chord in the students' heart by quickly learning the names of the students. This establishes a rapport with students. They feel a part of the class and come up to the teacher with their problems. This also creates a class room that has a sense of community and mutual liking and respect where each one has something to

contribute and where disagreement is tolerated amicably.

7. Now, there are times when even if a teacher is intellectually stimulating, delivers with clarity, gives explanations and examples, relates to the students' problems, still some students are not motivated enough to come to the class. Then, under such circumstances the teachers must make the students cognizant of the benefits of attending classes. They must be told that there is an empirical relationship between attendance, grades and academic success.
8. The teacher instead of punishing and penalizing absences should reward perfect attendance. This will encourage the students. They will thrive to perform better under peer pressure. Rewarding leads to encouragement and penalizing can lead to further aversion.

Strict adherence to any attendance policy, stringent rules, pressurizing the student or penalizing the student can only lead to further low attendance or even in extreme cases, drop out from the university or colleges. We must realize that the rules are made for the students and not vice versa.

A teacher plays the important role in chalking out innovative methods to create and sustain the interest of the student. The Teacher's role as a builder of students' personality, of course the student's personality is shaped by a number of agencies such as family, society, prevalent values and ideals of the existing socio-political institutions, cultural heritage and the general norms and parameters of the nation's governance. But since the teacher is normally taken by his students as a model to imitate, his role as a shaper of his students' personality becomes of paramount importance. He ceases to be a mere transmitter of information and a robotic trainer in skills but a torch-bearer to show his student the path which makes him not only a skilled person in an area but also a good citizen and above all a good human being. He must be reasonable to the grievances of the students and lend a hearing ear to them. Each student is a unique individual, no blanket theory or set of rules can be applied to all students. The teacher has to be smart and innovative enough to keep on evolving new techniques every day. That's why the teacher is known as the greatest shaper of the life of the student. One of the competencies of the teacher is his capacity for creating human rapport with his students, which may-enable students to regard their teacher as a friend, philosopher and guide. Interactive teaching methodology is, in fact, based on this philosophy of creating a bond of fellow-feeling and forging the spirit of teamwork and cooperation for successful teaching. A teacher is an artist, a creative artist at that. He evolves himself into a 'competent' teacher under the stress of his teaching situations and demands. He is a born talent and a great experimentalist. He is a born creative actor. He does not need any formal training to enhance his competence as a pedagogue. It is self chiselling which shapes him into what eventually he is. This self chiselling is a continuous process and there is no terminal accomplishment. The teacher is a torch bearer who shows his student the path which makes him not only a skilled person in an area, but also a good human being. For this, one of

the competencies of the teacher is his capacity for creating human rapport with his students, which may enable students to regard their teacher as a friend, philosopher and guide. Interactive teaching methodology is in fact, based on this philosophy of creating a bond of fellow-feeling and forging the spirit of teamwork. But for this the numbers of students in a class should be so fixed that a teacher can give individual attention to all the students. Classroom, where the density of India is being shaped, should look like a platform for interactive learning and not a slaughterhouse, killing the fertility and creativity of the child.

A good teacher is not one who merely teaches. A good teacher should try to understand his students and their needs. Once identifying their requirements a teacher should be able to stir that latent power which would otherwise remain in the dark. He should galvanize that latent power. He must stimulate the students to think in new directions and encourage them to come up with novel and innovative ideas, then only the teacher fulfils his duty as a successful teacher.

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