

Education and Teachers | The Need to Understand Ground Realities

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The first and foremost step towards bringing about positive change in education is one's own thorough preparation. This preparation has two parts. The first is building connections with teachers, children, parents, and the community, and understanding them and their contexts, while the second is academic preparation. For everyone engaged in education, whether they are part of the government system or a non-government support structure, such preparation is essential. This article is about this preparation and the clarity of understanding that must come with it.

There are many people working in the field of education who are not teachers themselves but visit schools to support teachers, let us call them 'supporting teachers'. What is their preparation for this? What are the schools' expectations of them, and what expectations do they have from schools? These are some fundamental and crucial questions, especially for those who intend to work within the government education system, whether as government officials or through non-governmental organisations.

We can broadly classify people who are in this field into two categories. The first category comprises government officials, including education officers at various levels, such as Block Resource Coordinators (BRCs), Cluster

Resource Coordinators (CRCs), and those associated with District Institutes for Education and Training (DIETs). The second group consists of those (supporting teachers) from voluntary organisations who visit schools and wish to support teachers in their teaching-learning efforts. Both categories of people work towards improving education in government schools. But the question remains: Is there clarity of purpose when they visit schools? Here, I will present some points about the preparation of both these categories of people, as well as the expectations of schools from them.

For meaningful change in education by focusing on government schools, preparation has two important parts. The first is connecting with and understanding teachers,



Figure 1. To support a school, it is important to understand its ground realities closely.

children, parents, and the community. This includes understanding their economic and social circumstances, their culture and their language, among other things. Such an understanding will provide the sensitivity, the appropriate language, and approach through which meaningful communication can be established with them. Remember: meaningful communication that is mutual and not one that imposes one's point of view.

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The second part is academic preparation. If you truly want to work effectively in this field and make an impact, then you must first strengthen your own subject matter knowledge and then learn how to teach and explain it to others.

The first step in bringing change in education is not about trying to change others, but to prepare oneself. This is especially important for those who are new and just entering this field. It is critical that they experience the ground realities of schools themselves.

One needs to know and understand schools from the inside. This cannot be achieved through a few visits or meetings. One must stay and teach for an extended period in at least three types of schools because this experience will be worthwhile only if one works in a variety of schools. One of these can be, say, a Navodaya Vidyalaya, a model school, or an inspiring government school. The second can be an average-performing state school. And finally, a school that people usually dismiss, saying, 'Nothing happens here!'

In reality, it takes more than six months to understand any school in depth. I am not saying every person must teach for six or seven months in each of these three types of schools. If one can, it is excellent. If doing this is not possible, then at least two to three months of continuous teaching in one such school is essential.

You will then see that some teachers are so committed that wherever they go, they connect with children, teach, and keep experimenting with new things. They are constantly striving to learn and teach. On the other hand, you will also find teachers who, year after year, do the same things; nothing changes; no matter how hard you try, they will not change. What is the reason for this difference?

There are deeper reasons behind the attitude of the latter set of teachers that must be understood. How is their self-confidence? What is their family and social situation like? What are their attitudes and beliefs, especially regarding caste, religion, gender, and marginalised communities?

For instance, what is their attitude towards women colleagues? How is their behaviour towards the poor, marginalised, and Dalit children in their own school? Do they genuinely believe that these children can learn and progress? Or, deep down, do they consider them weak, inferior, and 'incapable'—a hidden belief that reflects in their behaviour, teaching methods, and communication. Government schools are where children from disadvantaged sections study. In such a scenario, the deeper a teacher's or colleague's understanding of caste, class, gender, and society, the more effective their role will be.

Now, let us talk about students. In the same classroom, some children are active, answer questions, and can read and write, while others remain silent, sit at the back of the classroom, and perhaps do not learn much at all. Yet, they come to school every day.

However, many times, comments are made among teachers or colleagues about these children: 'They come just to eat the food', 'They cannot learn', 'They are slow' and so on. At times, these comments are made in front of the children themselves, which is humiliating.

In reality, education is a living process that emerges from a continuous dialogue between teachers and students, whether inside the classroom or in any corner of the school. Education is what takes place in this relationship. If we do not understand this fundamental relationship, this living bond, then no matter how good our plans are, they will not have a real impact on the ground.

When we try to truly understand a child, we need to know why they do not like attending classes. Did they have food before coming to school? Did they eat the night before? Perhaps something happened on the way? Were they teased, threatened, hit, or insulted? It could be that they have walked a long distance to reach school. How much do we know about them? As teachers, it is our responsibility to thoroughly understand their circumstances. So, while observing them, it is important to go beyond external displays of behaviours—who answers questions and who remains silent, who listens attentively and who sits withdrawn, who speaks a lot and who does not speak at all—to try and understand the reasons behind these.

For those of us who come from outside and wish to work in this field, even if not as teachers but as friendly supporting teachers or on-site resource persons, some fundamentals are essential:

- Know your subject deeply and develop the ability to explain it to others in simple, clear, and effective ways.
- Build the capacity to communicate with others and to listen with patience, understanding, and sensitivity.

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- Develop an understanding of schools, and the students—their learning processes and their contexts. Teach them, spend some time in classrooms with them, and try to understand their backgrounds.
- Try to understand the circumstances of the school and the teachers, too. It is essential to understand their families and social backgrounds, their mindsets, behaviour, challenges, and the potential that exists in them.

If you do all this, you will be able to answer the question: What am I going to do in school when I go there? This question will arise only when one has a deep understanding and adequate preparation.

Anyone supporting the education system must also understand the basis and the objectives with which the textbooks used in the school have been selected. These objectives are usually stated clearly at the beginning of the textbooks. If not, they are certain to be found in the curriculum documents. These documents are primarily for teachers, but those who help them must also read them.

It is often seen that teachers merely read the lessons in the textbook that are to be taught to the children. But the ‘preface’ at the beginning of nearly every book is written for teachers. Nowadays, it is even published under the clear heading ‘For Teachers’. However, unfortunately, it is often ignored. If teachers read it, they will understand why the lessons were chosen, how they are structured, and what competencies they are meant to develop in children. While visiting schools, one can have informal discussions with teachers about this, so that the important link missed due to their busy schedules can be restored. However, this is possible only



Figure 2. Collaborating with teachers to explore new ways of learning is also a form of supporting them.

when supporting teachers themselves have such an understanding.

Now, let us come to teaching methods. A lesson can be taught in many ways. Education experts can suggest some effective methods based on certain principles. However, it is not necessary that the same methods will work in every context. Everyone has their own experiences and understanding. They can develop their own methods suited to their contexts. Children’s backgrounds, their learning styles, and supporting teachers’ own understanding of subjects can help them develop their own methods.

Now, let us talk about those teachers who frequently seek assistance from their supporting teachers, ‘I keep trying, but some children still do not learn. What should I do?’ At times, those coming from outside, like us, are also asked for help: ‘Sir, please suggest another approach.’

It is important that outsiders do not rush to give instant solutions to teachers’ challenges. First, they must understand the challenges properly, and then, along with the teacher, try to find solutions in the context of that school and community. Such solutions will be more sustainable and acceptable, as they will be suggested by teachers themselves.

However, to do this, supporting teachers should themselves know some experience- or evidence-based approaches. If they have their own work experience, it is most effective. For example, if they say to the teacher, ‘Sir, when I was working in a village, I faced the same problem. None of the children there could learn anything, either through my first or second method. Then I tried a third and fourth method, and they finally understood.’ Sharing

such real experiences carries weight. The authenticity and practicality of experience affect teachers. They get a few more ideas and think, 'Let me try these methods as well.'

Teachers come from the same background as we do. Sometimes, some very important things are neglected. As conscious supporters, we can remind them of these.

One important point remains: How do teaching methods develop? Can someone with only a superficial understanding of a subject teach it in multiple ways? This is not possible. Only when you understand your subject thoroughly, understand why specific content has been included in the textbook, and what is expected from it, can you successfully teach it in multiple ways. That is why it is imperative that both teachers and their supporting teachers have sound subject knowledge. Learning for oneself never ends. They must keep reading about their subjects because, without being aware of new knowledge in the subject, they can neither do justice to its content nor create new ways of teaching-learning.

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Now, let us talk about government functionaries from the district to the school level, who have long been associated with school education and work in supportive roles towards quality school education. Their work is mainly administrative and, therefore, should be seen as distinct from direct teaching. For example, the role of a CRC (Cluster Resource Coordinator) or *Janshikshak* is not to teach children, but to organise meetings for teachers, provide academic support, collect school data and send it to the Block or District Resource Centre. Often, their role remains limited to the administrative level, while academic duties and academic support remain neglected.

Another crucial point to understand is that functionaries are not meant to teach subjects themselves. For example, a CRC is not expected to teach in classrooms. Their role is to organise academic dialogue, create a collaborative

space for teachers, and foster collective thinking. Since they have been teachers themselves, they may be able to teach, but their main role is to prepare the platform for teaching-learning and enable the space for dialogue.

A positive attitude and outlook towards schools and teachers is important for everyone. Even if an official stays in a school for just an hour, they can observe many positive things. For instance, cleanliness in the school, children's uniforms, the quality of the mid-day meal, a beautiful kitchen garden created by children in the school compound, and so on.

Government school teachers are usually posted in remote villages. They, too, have family lives and challenges, but no one sees that or asks them about their lives. In such a situation, one simple sentence like, 'You are doing good work. The children's circumstances are difficult, but you are making sincere efforts,' from an official can be the greatest motivation for a teacher.

What is needed is for officials to try and understand the conditions at the school during their visits. For instance, where the school is located, what kind of families send their children there, what their circumstances are, and so on. At the same time, they should try to understand the teachers and their family situations. Very often, they live far away from their hometowns or villages, often without accommodation, and do not know the local language. Working in such places is very challenging, especially for women teachers who face many additional difficulties ranging from access to clean toilets to personal safety. If officials cannot do much about their problems, the least they can do is encourage the teachers to stay there, if they consider the teacher as the most important person in their department.

The main work of the education department is to provide education, and it is the teachers who actually do this. Teachers, despite all adverse circumstances, are engaged in the department's most important work, and hence they must be appreciated. If officials appreciate teachers' work, understand their problems, and show empathy, much change is possible. If they criticise, it should be constructive, polite, and solution-oriented. Not just criticism, but a spirit of cooperation and support is what can bring real change in the education system.

This article is based on a conversation between Gautam Pandey and Siddharth Kumar Jain.

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