

Teachers Shape Individuals

Rishikesh BS

Teachers truly shape the future of our children - and, therefore, the future of our nation. It is because of this noblest role that the teacher in India was the most respected member of society. Only the very best and most learned became teachers.¹



Figure 1. Children look up to teachers not only to learn but also for support, guidance and care during their early years.

As Gowri helped her 10-year-old daughter with her maths homework, she was reminded of her primary school teacher, Yasmeen Miss. It was because of her that Gowri not only overcame her fear of numbers but went on to complete her postgraduate degree in maths. Her maths teacher had done much more than teach maths – she had given the confidence to Gowri that girls are as good as boys with numbers (contrary to what everyone else around her seemed to believe). Yasmeen Miss had encouraged her to even think of maths as a career option. She had done all this with a lot of patience by slowly building Gowri’s confidence through classes I to IV.

When Anjan gets stuck at any point while coding, D’Souza Ma’am comes to his mind – his go-to person all through school. She was his science teacher in classes VI and VII. Whenever a new concept was introduced, Anjan would feel overwhelmed, and because of this, he would not be able to grasp it properly. When D’Souza Ma’am realised this, she started the practice of spending 15 minutes with

him during the lunch break. During this time, she would patiently explain the new concept to him. A calm mind, she would say, is the first step, and the rest is about focusing on the problem. This mantra remained with Anjan even as he became a successful coder. The mentorship of his teacher deepened his interest in science, and he went on to pursue an engineering degree. Anytime Anjan was in a difficult situation, it was his science teacher’s gentle mentoring and guiding words that came to his mind.

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As she wrote her essay as part of her LLB coursework, Richa struggled to connect her law course with the issues people face in society. Immediately, her social studies

teacher, Ananthraman sir, came to her mind. He was the one who had instilled in her the desire to look at the problems people face, because of which she had chosen to study law after school. The stories Ananth sir shared in social studies in classes VI, VII & VIII were not only inspirational but also raised many questions, such as why there is so much disparity or discrimination in society; why do some people always remain poor; what are our duties and responsibilities as citizens, etc.?

These class discussions over three years of middle school came pouring back into Richa's mind, and soon enough she was able to get the disciplinary connections across law and societal issues for her essay. Silently, she thanked Ananth sir, who went beyond textbooks to introduce real-life conflicts and situations to make his students feel deeply about the various issues that social science presents.

These are just a few of the many such illustrations that we hear from colleagues, friends and family. Each of the above indicates that at many points in our lives, be it as a parent, an early-career employee or a university student, whenever we are faced with tough challenges, we look back at our early life and, often, there is a teacher whose wise words or caring actions come to mind and help us find the way out of our problems. Many times, we just recollect early school memories and cannot but think and be grateful for the teachers who have been supportive, patient, pardoning mistakes and, most importantly, being kind.

Why is it that a teacher's act of many years ago stays in our mind decades into our adult life? Psychologists and neuroscientists have scientific explanations, but as teachers, it is clear to us that children in school look up to us not only to learn but also for support, guidance and care during their early years.

School education, particularly elementary education (classes I to VIII), is fundamental in many respects. Not only is it the foundational platform to construct our learning, but it also provides the ingredients that shape our identities and the basic skillsets to deal with life's complexities, which often include the values our teachers themselves demonstrate. Teachers, therefore, play a role that is far greater than 'completing the syllabus' year after year.

There is nothing new in teachers shaping individuals. In ancient and medieval societies, the elite had teachers for their children to help them get a holistic education. However, since the establishment of mass primary schooling a few centuries ago, beginning in Prussia in the latter half of the eighteenth century, it spread across Europe and through the colonialism route to its

colonies across the world. Since the last few decades, most countries across the world have made school education, particularly up to the elementary level, compulsory and a fundamental right of every individual. In India, we arrived at this landmark after nearly a 100-year struggle – from the time Gopal Krishna Gokhale petitioned the British Government of India in 1910 to the introduction of compulsory education through the landmark legislation – Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, also known as the Right to Education (RTE) Act. This guarantees free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 and 14 years.

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Shaping identities at each stage

Given the criticality of school education in an individual's life, we, who have the opportunity to contribute to this domain, must consider ourselves fortunate as we have been bestowed with the greatest of responsibilities in modern society – that of facilitating the development of individuals. This development occurs across multiple stages of school education, and the facilitation differs at each stage, but also has some fundamental principles that govern all the stages equally.

The draft NEP 2019 (Kasturirangan Committee Report 2019) states that, 'educational opportunity is created when students and teachers engage in purposeful learning experiences that help students develop in various ways.' The document articulates the development that is expected at each stage and the appropriate pedagogy aligned to it to ensure the optimum progress of each student. Teachers are the experts who create these experiences differently at different stages of a student's school life. If we are where we are today as a society, the contribution of every teacher is paramount in this developmental journey. The gaps that exist are those that are there despite what teachers have accomplished in challenging circumstances.

Though the role of a teacher comes with multiple challenges, the complete satisfaction that a teacher derives after a fruitful engagement with their students is an experience that is hard to describe and one that every teacher desires all the time. To this end, the teacher goes beyond the call of duty – beyond the call of their teaching role. This manifests differently at different stages of school education.



Figure 2. All teachers are significant contributors to the well-rounded and holistic development of their students.

At the Foundational Stage, where children between ages 3 and 8 years are enrolled, teachers primarily use 'play' to engage with these students as they focus on multiple aspects, 'Physical Development, Socio-emotional-ethical Development, Cognitive Development, Language and Literacy Development, Aesthetic and Cultural Development' as represented in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023. A good teacher uses play-based pedagogy with an 'emphasis on nurturing and caring relationships focusing on all of the above as well as developing foundational capacities in literacy and numeracy.' (NCF 2023). Thousands of teachers are daily engaged in this manner, ensuring that children enrolled in schools across India are provided with the required foundations.

The next stage of school education, as per NEP 2020, is the **Preparatory Stage** – the stage corresponding to classes III to V, where NCF states that the pedagogy should be 'activity and discovery-based, gradually encouraging students to be active within a formal classroom arrangement'. There are lakhs of teachers across the country who help students at this stage to get adequately prepared for the middle classes, irrespective of how strong the Foundational Stage has been for them. The biggest challenge for teachers at this stage is that students arrive at this stage with varying levels of learning. It is an extraordinarily difficult task to ensure that students grasp foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) and then go on to get prepared to tackle concepts across middle and high school. It is an enormous responsibility that teachers at this stage take upon themselves to accomplish.

The last three years that make up the elementary level are called the 'Middle School' in the NEP 2020. This is the stage where disciplinary boundaries become stronger, and there is a specific set of subjects that students study, and many abstract concepts are presented across the syllabi. Till this stage, teachers engage with students on topics across all subjects. However, at this stage, subject teachers are the key, given the deeper concepts that the syllabus in each subject presents. The vast number of high-quality teachers ensures that there is 'a balance of direct instruction and opportunities for exploration and inquiry' (NCF 2023).

The teachers focus on students gaining 'conceptual development and becoming fluent in methods of inquiry' as stated in the NCF. This pedagogic effort requires a professional approach that is of the highest quality, which a large number of teachers in our country display at all times. It is these teachers who guarantee the fundamental right of every child in the country to receive high-quality elementary education as stated in the RTE Act.

All teachers, irrespective of the stage of school education they teach, are significant contributors to the well-rounded and holistic development of their students. Every teacher I know wears this 'badge of honour' with pride, and they show other stakeholders that the desire to perform this role with the highest integrity and uphold values that are important for human civilisation is the

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sole motivation to do so. This exemplary behaviour is a very good example of what the Dutch popular historian, Rutger Bregman, calls ‘moral ambition’ in his latest book by the same name. This is the ambition not merely to succeed for one’s own sake, but to make a difference to the world we live in. Finally, this is what most teachers I have met have, and that which every stakeholder working in elementary education ought to have!

References

¹Teachers, National Education Policy 2020, p. 21

https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf



Rishikesh B S has been working in the domain of education for over two decades. He is currently part of the administration at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

Contact: rishikesh@apu.edu.in