

Keerthana Paulraj

## The complex work of a teacher

Teaching is a profession that is bound by ethical conduct, complex practice, sound theoretical understanding and higher-order learning (Shulman, 1998). This often leads to 'high occupational stress' that could, in turn, potentially result in job dissatisfaction, burnout, and finally leaving the profession. These were the reasons enumerated by teachers in one urban alternative school where 10 out of 26 of them quit the same year; a phenomenon that the school has experienced every couple of years.

Teachers are often perceived as 'self-sacrificing' who, for the good of their learners, put their own needs and wellbeing behind those of their learners. The Global Teacher Status Index (2018) showed that teaching was seen as being most similar to the job of a social worker. The association of such service-oriented notions with teachers is reflected in their pay slips, in the respect accorded to them, and in the normalisation of their workload. On average, a primary school teacher in India earns INR 16,000 a month (barring teachers who fall under the 7th Pay Commission and draw a salary to the tune of INR 1,00,000 a month by the end of their careers).

Within the teaching profession, head teachers are ranked higher than secondary school teachers who are, in turn, ranked higher than primary school teachers (GTSI, 2018). This discrepancy is possibly tied to the perception that working with children in the age group of 5 to 12 years is a simple, unchallenging job that does not require skill or specialised knowledge. It often plays out in two ways – one, as neglect by higher authorities in offering support and resources to teachers; and two, as an unconscious conditioned response on behalf of teachers themselves where they may underestimate their work and, consequently, fail to see their mental, emotional and physical needs as valuable and worthy of attention. Since this workforce is primarily comprised of women, their gendered view of caregiving may further obscure their thought process.

## Importance of teacher wellbeing

Teachers who are physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally healthy are more likely to demonstrate an emotional intelligence that allows them to think positively about the demands of the job and apply realistic coping strategies to effectively manage demanding emotional situations that may arise in working closely with children and adults (Vesely, Saklofske, & Nordstokke, 2014). Aside from this, studies have also shown that flourishing teachers also positively impact students' outcomes and achievement – psychologically and academically (Briner and Dewberry, 2007). Teacher and learner wellbeing are two sides of the same coin (Roffey, 2012). A school teacher with over 25 years of experience rightly stated that if we as a society truly cared about children's education, we would place teachers' wellbeing at the centre of our educational endeavours.

## An actionable approach

*How are you? What do you need to support your wellbeing?* These are critical questions that head teachers, school administrators, block-level officers, policymakers and all other stakeholders can ask teachers to identify areas of intervention and support in the short- and long-term to promote their wellbeing. This can be done through feedback forms, one-on-one interviews, or even focus group discussions to begin understanding teachers' professional experiences around workload, organisational support, sense of belonging with the school, handling stressful issues, job satisfaction, physical health, student interactions and relationships.

Wellbeing emerges from nourishing the physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual dimensions of a person's health. None of these work in isolation, hence, it is imperative to implement a multidimensional approach to planning, implementation and evaluation of practices for teachers' wellbeing.

## Physical wellbeing

The work of improving the wellbeing of teachers

begins with ensuring equal treatment of teachers, irrespective of their gender, type of employment, working hours, or duration of service. Providing teachers with equal support and treatment lays the foundation for a positive school environment. This is closely followed by adequate monetary compensation to meet the rising cost of living, which should include the fulfilment of their basic physical needs and enabling them to have a savings plan. Workshops to understand financial management, and one's relationship with money would further empower teachers to make informed decisions.

At an operational level, one must take into consideration a teacher's time, that is, the time spent in teaching, preparing, assessing, attending meetings, carrying out administrative tasks and attending to their professional development. Having teacher representatives on the administrative board can enable a more nuanced decision-making process as they would be able to highlight the needs and realities of teachers and prevent the pitfalls of top-down leadership models.

In one urban private school, the coordinator got every teacher to list the number of teaching hours they would need to finish their syllabus, and the number of hours they would require for the preparation work. This then acted as a guide for the preparation of the timetable. In another instance, a school offered a teacher more paid sick leave than was permissible in the leave policy just by virtue of their care ethic that did not permit a systemic process to overrule a human need for which it was created in the first place. Such steps enable teachers in their journey of finding a balance between their personal and professional lives, but which can often be blurred in the teaching profession.

A primary school teacher once reflected, 'I always have lunch in the classroom with my students. I don't get any time away from them.' It is important to keep in mind the physical space in which a teacher has to work, breathe, reflect, and interact with colleagues and students. One way could be to arrange furniture imaginatively in staffrooms to accommodate their need for both 'quiet time' and conversations. For instance, having a small circle of chairs in the centre, as well as desks turned towards the windows. Curating conversations around these initiatives may enable more effective use of the space and allow for the emergence of new ideas.

To have respect for teachers is to see their need for time and space and take action towards co-creating workspaces that foster their wellbeing.

In a few schools, staff meetings often begin or close with physical activities of different kinds - a game of badminton or throwball, some movement and stretches or even warmup indoor classroom games. These are great ways to unwind and build connections.

### *Cognitive wellbeing*

As Leiter and Cooper (2017) said, 'It is not good enough to do no harm; responsible employers design work to enhance employees' health and fulfilment at work'. One way may be to co-create a list of roles and responsibilities for each teacher with the teacher at the start of every academic year to enable them to work with a greater sense of ownership and passion.

Consistent opportunities for professional development to enable unlearning and relearning often fosters a teacher's cognitive wellbeing. Professional development sessions are most effective when they are in alignment with teachers' needs. Aside from asking teachers directly, it may be useful for school leaders to notice patterns in questions and concerns arising in meetings, informal conversations and classroom observations. This may then form the basis for designing professional development workshops for them.

The workshops must also take into consideration teachers' autonomy in terms of content, methodology and logistics, like giving them the freedom to make informed choices about which workshops to attend as this is often a sign of trust and confidence in their professional practice. Autonomy in their work-related practices may include independence to make decisions regarding the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, classroom management, parent interactions and self-development.

Professional development can also be made fun and accessible through the use of films, storybooks and case studies on classroom teaching-learning. Teachers can read or watch and discuss together what they observed – collaborating, exchanging ideas and sharing expertise and, as a result, also attempting new methods and ways of teaching.

Another professional development opportunity can be using *Post-its* with distinct prompts on the walls of the staffroom or common staff areas. For example, 'Attending a lecture', 'Writing a reflection

about a class', 'Observing a colleague's class', 'Sharing a lesson plan and eliciting feedback', 'Offering book recommendations', among other interesting possibilities. Teachers may be encouraged to make time to do at least two of these fortnightly or monthly and share their experiences on a pin-up board.

Group and one-on-one mentorship programmes empower both newcomers and experienced teachers to observe and repair specific aspects of their classroom teaching-learning engagement. For instance, a novice class-teacher of a group of twenty 10-year-olds expressed that she would often be overwhelmed with the volume of content preparation and classroom management. The space her mentor offered her to process her stress, and then move towards taking action, enabled her to improve her confidence, level of satisfaction in the classroom and ability to feel good. Her mentor would share insights, and pedagogic tools in the form of stories, songs, exercises, and concepts to meet differential student needs and create an overall transformative classroom teaching-learning experience.

In the weekly meetings of one rural alternative school, time is allotted to any one teacher in every meeting to share challenging experiences they may be having with a particular student or group of students. This is then followed by an open discussion where other teachers, voluntarily, ask further probing questions and offer suggestions or even additional support to help them address the issue.

Communicating decisions with clarity, transparency and compassion and allowing teachers to counter question will help to create an environment where teachers experience freedom in being an individual as well as a member of the community. It is also essential that a culture is built with regard to the mode of communication. For example, setting up norms for *WhatsApp* or email groups to ensure that messages are not sent after a certain time on weekdays and weekends, unless very urgent. It is observed that an open, two-way communication with school leaders that includes demonstrating respect for teachers' professional judgments, recognising and celebrating professional expertise and achievements, allowing autonomy and trusting professional decisions made by teaching staff are crucial for their wellbeing (Le Cornu, 2013).

### *Emotional and spiritual wellbeing*

Making teachers feel important and respected for the work they do sets the stage for promoting a teacher's emotional wellbeing. Simple *thank-yous* and can go a long way to show them that their work is being recognised.

An alternative-school teacher highlighted an exercise followed at their official meetings: They would begin by asking about each-others' wellbeing and sharing a philosophical or psychological perspective as part of a reflective discussion. This would then be followed by discussions on the matters at hand. Such practices lean towards viewing 'teachers as people, whose teaching is bound up with their lives, their biographies, with the kinds of people they have become (Fullan and Hargreaves).

In the emotional and spiritual wellbeing sphere, consistent reflective socio-emotional exercises offer teachers the space to find the grammar for their emotions, learn to regulate them and thereafter be more present for themselves and their loved ones from a more aware and expansive space. This would include practices to articulate their trauma (if any), need for connection and belonging, conditioned responses, strengths, weaknesses, different emotions, values, sense of purpose, or even opinions; and to strengthen their capacity to understand their loved ones through the lens of these different aspects. The practices may also focus on deepening their ability to communicate in conflict, build resilience, practice self-compassion and kindness towards the world, explore different means of self-care, relax with movement, music or poetry; or even express the self through art and literature. Self-care strategies, such as mindfulness meditation, exercise, or even setting personal goals are skills that can and need to be taught and practised.

This deep dive into bringing teachers' wellbeing to the forefront may begin with getting teachers to reflect on questions about how healthy they are, and what is affecting their health positively or negatively. It may also be done through worksheets with statements related to their wellbeing. For instance, asking them to think about what steps they can take to protect or enhance a particular aspect of their wellbeing or even what dreams they have as a teacher. One may also incorporate journaling exercises that help teachers explore their conditioning about teaching and education itself, followed by small group conversations around

what comes up, will help to initiate the process of accepting oneself before working towards altering narratives.

### *Social wellbeing*

The presence of professional communities where teachers can interact with fellow teachers to share the joys and difficulties of teaching-learning experiences, build connections, offer each other support in learning and in finding inspiration, fosters teachers' social wellbeing. Sharing each other's experiences can help them arrive at behaviours and strategies that are effective (best practices).

A teacher commented with joy about the pleasure community gatherings brought to parents, children and teachers. However, these events are enjoyable as long as they do not fall on teachers as just an additional responsibility but are a convergence of enthusiasm from all stakeholders. They give teachers a sense of ownership and belonging, and of being partners in the growth and development of each student.

### **In summary**

Wellbeing practices open up the space to negotiate with social structures and emotional patterns that may otherwise lie in an unattended space. However,

being realistic in this journey would mean being acutely aware that macro-processes and structures determine some of our private experiences. Having said that, wellbeing is a shared responsibility which means that, alongside systemic intervention, it also requires efforts on the teacher's part (Mercer, Gregerson, 2020). This latter aspect can be a slippery ground since wellbeing itself is not a skill or theme that is often taught or talked about in Indian households. Initiatives at an institutional level may never penetrate the minds of some teachers, by virtue of their own conditioning.

Offering data or research studies on the impact of physical, socio-emotional and spiritual wellbeing practices may help to challenge their beliefs and nudge teachers towards seeking wellbeing for themselves. It may also be useful to start the engine with a few teachers who may be mildly receptive to the ideas of self-care and use them to build momentum through peer encouragement.

It is necessary to begin this work of change at a pace that feels steady, enduring and resilient based on the resources available. After all, it is only through small steps that one can make a difference in the lives of teachers, and therefore, children.

### **References**

- Dolton, P., Marcenaro, O., Vries, R. D., & She, P.-W. (2018). *Global Teacher Status Index*. ISBN 978-1-5272-3293-8
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (1993). The teacher as a person. In *Teaching and Learning in the Primary School* (1st ed., pp. 67–72). essay, Routledge
- Shulman, L. S. (1998). Theory, Practice, and the Education of Professionals. *The Elementary School Journal*, 98(5), 511–526. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1002328>
- Mercer, S., Gregerson, T. (2020). *Teacher Wellbeing*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press



**Keerthana Paulraj** is an educator, mindfulness practitioner and advocate of socio-emotional learning. She has an MA in Education from Azim Premji University, Bengaluru and has almost three years of experience in teaching middle and high school students and developing curricula. Her interests lie in understanding the connection between the body and mind, and in promoting wellbeing practices with the hope of building safer, more equitable and compassionate learning spaces. She is currently co-creating a Teacher Wellbeing Community and curating wellbeing workshops as a part of her start-up, The Centre for Mindful Presence. She may be contacted at [keerthana.p19\\_mae@apu.edu.in](mailto:keerthana.p19_mae@apu.edu.in)