

## Teachers mustn't be blamed for India's poor learning outcomes

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They get unfair criticism for a problem that could be traced to larger systemic and societal causes

In my last column, I asked, 'Why are children not learning what they should in school?' It examined issues relating to children—the very basics. This week, let us similarly explore the range of possibilities in how teachers are said to cause or contribute to a lack of learning in our classrooms.

First, perhaps what the teacher is supposed to teach is too difficult. Since we are talking about basic language and math, the matter itself is not difficult. However, for a child aged 6, a lot of it may be as complex as cutting-edge number theory is for most of us. Two related challenges make teaching harder. The first is the language that children speak at home and in their neighbourhood is often different from the medium of instruction. Second, the textbooks, which is what most teachers think is their mandate to teach, are often awful. Basic language and math are in themselves not complex for teachers, but these factors complicate matters.

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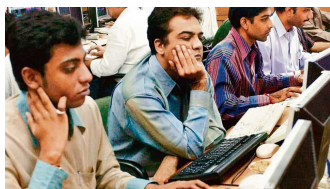
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Second, perhaps teachers do not have the capacity to teach what they must. A teacher's capacity has multiple dimensions. Consider two important ones: There are the pedagogical capacities for how to teach any subject matter; and there are capacities to handle children effectively to ensure curricular learning. Both capacities are complex and challenging. Becoming an effective teacher requires persistence and preparation, and then an appropriate set of conditions to be able to put what one has learnt into daily practice. But India's dysfunctional teacher education system leaves our teachers ill-prepared; so, they are neither adequately equipped with the pedagogical capacities nor have they learnt how to effectively handle children. Moreover, a supportive environment for effective practice is lacking. We will come to this last point a little later.

Third, perhaps our teachers have a poor attitude. But this is categorically untrue. We have roughly 10 million teachers in India, a huge number. Unless we have deliberately picked people with a poor attitude to teach, their attitudes would be the same as in the general population of our country. The other possibility is that Indians on average have a poor attitude. Neither is true. In reality, some teachers are extremely positive, some are deeply negative, but most are average—lying in between these two extremes. Much like any large group of people in our country.

Fourth, perhaps our teachers are not motivated enough. Motivation is a function of several complex factors. The matters that are broadly classified as 'attitude' we have already dealt with. What that leaves is a large of set of factors which have to do with an individual's circumstances that influence motivation. This includes the physical environment in the school; for example, a lack of toilets. Even more importantly, it includes what kind of treatment the teacher receives in the school and in the community

more broadly. This treatment of teachers is deeply embedded in the culture of the school and the overall education system, which determines how supportive, empowered and valued teachers are. Despite the fact that they are central to education while being most disempowered, our societies and culture, including the education system, make teachers the 'whipping boys' for all the ills of education. How then can we expect our teachers to be motivated? Ill treatment is even more demotivating than the lack of toilets in your school. And still, teachers go on.

Fifth, perhaps teachers don't have adequate resources. This is true. Not only do they have inadequate resources, but many of the resources they do have are of poor quality. From textbooks to infrastructure, the list is long.

Sixth, perhaps teachers are over- burdened. This is also true in many ways. Most teachers have to handle groups of children who are in many classes, at the same time. Other administrative demands on their time distract them from their core task of teaching. Moreover, given that the vast majority our children come from homes in poverty or near poverty, children from these households have no academic support at home. This leaves teachers to compensate for that gap. These are just a few examples of the many burdens teachers face. The essence is that the role of a teacher is already extraordinarily complex and challenging without these additional onuses that inevitably leave many of our teachers over-burdened.

There is a complex interplay between all six of these factors. For example, poor teacher preparation contributes to a teacher's inadequate capacity, even as she is expected to be the sole agent of education because the child cannot get help at home. And as she stands in front of her students every day, year after year, unable to teach effectively, she becomes demotivated; she becomes the target of a great deal of the blame even when the roots to the problem are found in larger systemic and societal causes.

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Our teachers are just average Indians. They are just a subset of the many people around us who mean well and do not shirk their responsibilities, but are struggling to make do in a situation where the odds are stacked against them. It is not because of teachers in themselves that we have a crisis of learning in this country. My next column will explore the systemic and societal problems that are at the heart of our poor learning outcomes.

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