

# What teachers believe about their students matters

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Construction has been slow. That is usual on these steep mountainsides around Almora. And this is a big campus. A medical college is coming up with large buildings. In the mountains, labour is local, but large projects often use labour from outside the state. The labour force at this site is mostly from Bihar and Odisha. Many of the labourers live in shanties near the site with their families, including young children. All children aged 6 and above attend the government primary school in the nearby village of Lama Singh.

Children of migrant labourers grow up in the most difficult of circumstances. The economic hardships they face are compounded by the frequent uprooting of their lives. Most of these children don't get to attend school. Those who do usually find the school an alienating place. Age-appropriate curricular learning is impossibly distant. For teachers and schools, teaching and handling these children is one of the biggest challenges.

Radha Ballabh is one of two teachers at the school in Lama Singh. He and some of his students were at the Baal Shodh Mela in Syalidhar, which I wrote about in my last column ([goo.gl/G8LQKu](https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/T2cnyrAPEjb6bjy8X2GShP/What-teachers-believe-about-their-students-matters.html)). In the past few months, the number of students in his school has gone up from 50 to 70. All the new students are from the construction site. Ballabh and his colleague visit the shanties regularly to ensure that all children are enrolled and attend the school. They have also arranged for two people from the village to accompany the children every day from their homes to the school.

In the melee of playful children around us, he lists the achievements of his students. His greatest pride is in the students from the shanties. He says they are wonderful. They learn with interest, behave responsibly, and live with good cheer. That is his experience with scores of these children in three years. He calls out to two of his students, who are passing by. We talk, and they are all that he claims.

Why is his experience with migrant children different? Why are they doing well in his school while other teachers find it difficult to handle them? His response to these questions is precise. "Working with these children does require more effort from us in the school, because of the hardships they face in their lives. But then there is nothing else that is different. I believe that all children are good and can learn, while many other teachers believe that these children are not 'normal'. And that is the only reason."

Those few sentences capture the gist of both the accumulated wisdom and decades of research in school education. There are multiple influencers and determinants of the learning of children in schools. Teacher characteristics, learning resources, school culture,

peer groups, and home environment are some of the factors that deeply influence learning. While a precise model of the interaction of these factors and their influence on learning is impossible, their contributions and interrelationships are reasonably well understood.

One of the most important of these factors is the belief of teachers in their students. If a teacher believes that every child can learn well with appropriate interventions, despite being different in many ways from one another, it has a significant direct positive impact on learning. On the other hand, if a teacher believes that some categories of children, or an individual child, are less capable of learning, it has a direct negative influence on actual learning. This phenomenon would be unsurprising to any observer of human behaviour and relationships.

This is not just a pernicious Pygmalion effect. After placing the onus of failure to learn on the students' inability, the teacher absolves himself of his responsibilities. This often directly affects his efforts, triggering a negative spiral.

Unsurprisingly, not much has been done about this. Educational theory discusses this a great deal. However, the reality of schools is that efforts to work with teachers, for them to examine their beliefs and thus change them, are very rare. And since the vast majority of our teacher education programmes (bachelor of education) are in shambles, nothing can be expected at the stage of teacher preparation until a quality revolution happens.

Many kinds of teacher beliefs impact student learning. Gender, caste and class prejudices are some of them. But the belief that some children cannot learn or cannot learn as well as others has an effect on every dimension of learning. There are two kinds of such false beliefs. One is the idea that children are either "smart" or "dumb" and the latter can't learn. The second is a specific manifestation of group-specific prejudices—that children of the economically poor, of Dalits and tribal communities, and of minorities, are incapable of, or very bad at, learning.

These beliefs about children, which have not the flimsiest empirical or theoretical basis, are among the most intractable issues that we confront when we work with teachers across the country. Relentless, patient dialogue is what helps. Demonstration by us that children learn equally is better. But the best solution is a teacher like Ballabh, demolishing these myths through his actual work. There are thousands of teachers like him. They need to be celebrated and emulated to make a real difference to this ignored but critical matter, while we await the revolution in teacher education.

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