

# Ending regressive ideas

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The young woman looked like a school girl. She was a teacher, who had recently joined a government primary school. Her cheeks reddened and voice quivered. She was responding to a preposterous statement by a man with more experience as a teacher than her age.

In an even, self-assured tone, he had said that without punishment children don't learn. In his view, unless there is fear in children, they do not listen. A tight slap was the most effective pedagogical tool. The new-fangled idea of no corporal punishment was at the root of deterioration of learning. This was just another instance of complete loss of common sense from society, like women being told that they were equal to their husbands. This confident teacher was confronted in the meeting by the girl and some others.

Let's consider his views beyond the issue of corporal punishment. His statement about women is representative of his generally conservative world view. Whether he represents the average Indian today needs a more informed answer than I am capable of providing. I think that he does represent one kind of an average Indian, of which there are millions. It's a safe guess that tens of thousands of teachers belong to this broad group with staunchly conservative views. This matters deeply for education.

This man was merely a vocal representative of what many teachers feel. These beliefs and value system are expressed in action in their classrooms, everyday by these teachers, both in obvious and in subtle ways. And we know that children learn from their overall experience, not merely from what they see on the black board. We need to keep in mind that the same children would be encountering similar behaviour often outside the school as well. So I am not particularly putting such teachers in the dock.

Now let's consider what education is supposed to be doing for our kids, which means this is what the teachers are expected to do. Let me quote from the National Curricular Framework, 2005 (NCF). "Seeking guidance from the constitutional vision of India as a secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society, founded on the values of social justice and equality, certain broad aims of education have been identified in this document," it says. "These include independence of thought and action, sensitivity to others' well-being and feelings, learning to respond to new situations in a flexible and creative manner, predisposition towards participation in democratic processes, and the ability to work towards and contribute to economic processes and social change." NCF has become the

basis for most curricula in our country. It has its limitations and can certainly be improved, but on the whole, can only be saluted for its comprehensive vision, and for its decisive push towards good education in this country.

What that man and others like him do as teachers is the anti-thesis of this vision and aims of education. While similar behaviour may be commonplace in the village and the town, in a school, such behaviour directly subverts the stated aims of education. Schools are intended to achieve these aims, and thereby be catalysts of change, taking the village and town in the directions pointed out by our Constitution. But, when the apostles have no faith, how will the kingdom of heaven arrive? The vision of NCF is everyday grounded with a thud in the classroom.

The intent of this piece is not to beat up teachers. On the contrary it's to highlight the dire helplessness of a teacher. The teacher is from within us, this very society. So he/she carries the same value system and worldview as the rest of us. But we expect him/her to be an agent of change by the means of good education, for a society that we want to build. How realistic is that expectation?

This is only one dimension of our expectations. She/he is certainly expected to have sound subject knowledge, with relevant pedagogical capacity, and other social skills to be an effective teacher. In short, we expect the teacher to be an apostle, a scientist and a manager, all rolled into one. We provide him/her an apology of a pre-service education, no in-service support and a disempowering work culture. How much more contradictory can we get?

If we want to give ourselves even a remote chance of achieving some of the aims of our education, we need to construct a completely new system for the education and management of teachers—a system that is liberated from commercial vested interests, academically rigorous, deeply embedded with a social vision and culturally empowering. This system would develop and support the capacities and dispositions in teachers that are needed for the vision our education to be converted to reality in the classroom.

The onus is with all those who can change our system, not just with the teachers.

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