The Mirage of Assumptions

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I was one of the resource persons at a recent workshop for teachers of English. One of the sessions (not mine) included an audio–video presentation on 'Critical Reflection on Teaching', to be followed by a discussion. I had viewed the presentation thrice (when it was shown to other batches of participants) and could not help being a little inattentive to it. To keep my mind from wandering, I tried to gauge the responses to the presentation from members in the audience. The sound quality in the presentation was not clear, and in a few minutes, I could sense their thoughts wandering and scurrying around, finally, coalescing into a general impression — critical reflection is necessary and one is always glad to listen to the latest theories in language education. But at the end of the day, how does it relate to me, my work and students? Is there space for theory and reflection in classroom situation?

It is being increasingly felt in academia that caught between impatience, ignorance and shallowness, public space for reflection is shrinking. Teacher–trainers and most education researches have contributed to the syndrome by presenting theoretical enquiry in its most shallow and least informative form.

Yet, in a profession as challenging as teaching, self-reflection is a must. Some teachers would say they reflect as they teach, while some are reluctant to work on lesson plans, and yet another set blames the system and is content to leave it at that. The sad part is that all these experiences are transient and quickly forgotten. They are recalled only when a similar incident occurs either to oneself or a colleague. Educational experiences are rarely discussed. Yet, in the real business of educational activity, i.e., teaching children to learn, it is impossible to go far without asking questions of what we are doing, why we need to do it, who will benefit from it, and how and why some things are 'obvious' to us while some are not. Such theoretical concerns haunt us and demand our attention, enquiry and insight.

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Here, I am reminded of an orchestra playing western classical music. If you have watched the serial *Mr. Bean*, you may recall an episode, in which the lead character, Mr. Bean, takes up the music conductor's baton. Holding the baton in his right hand, he raises both the hands in a flourish — and the music starts. Stunned, he stops and so does the music. Delighted, he makes the same gesture, and the music begins again. Slowly, he twirls his fingers, and a single instrument starts playing.

To someone like me, who does not have much exposure to western music, it would be easy to believe that the music conductor has one of the easiest jobs in the world. There he stands, waving his arms, and the orchestra plays mesmerising music, with sudden bursts of sound that are seemingly spontaneous, but result of long practice. Hidden from the audience are the conductor's abilities to read and interpret all parts at once, the play of several instruments, recognise the hidden potential of sudden silence, organise and coordinate the disparate parts, and most of all, communicate with all orchestra members as one.

To students, a teacher is a revered figure with a strong presence in classroom, generally, talking and explaining, handing out papers, giving assignments, in fact, apparently not doing much. Invisible in performance are many kinds of knowledge, unseen plans and backstage moves that allow a teacher to purposely move a group of students from one set of understanding and skills to another, over the span of a year.

The point I am trying to make here is that people have assumptions about learning, education, language and a host of other issues. These assumptions often remain tacit and are sometimes ingrained so deep that they remain unexamined. For instance, 'mother tongue' is a familiar concept. It refers to the language one speaks at home — that is how a layman would put it. However, the concept of mother tongue has changed over the years. In these days of globalisation and floating population, the meaning of mother tongue is very different from what it was three generations ago. Indeed, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)–2005 prefers to use the term 'home language' to refer to the language(s) spoken at home, with a larger kinship group, neighbourhood, etc. The NCF–2005 goes on to say that "care must be taken to honour and respect the child's home language(s)/mother tongue(s)…which are closely tied to the thoughts and identity of the child. In fact, they are so closely bound with one's identity that to deny or wipe out a child's mother tongue is to interfere with the sense of self".

Not long ago, the pedagogical assumption in language learning was that the mother tongue 'interferes' with the learning of the second language. Hence, the stress on curbing the use of mother tongue in

English medium schools, 'English only' signboards and the fine that students had to pay for using a non–English word in the school premises. Multilingualism now has belated pedagogical recognition. It is a known fact that a child has innate language faculty and mother tongue acquisition does not impede the learning of other languages. Teachers' attitude towards learners' mother tongue(s) — as 'interference' or 'resource' — will impact the teaching–learning process.

Another assumption is that girls are denied education by their families who are 'orthodox' and believe that they do not really need to be educated. It is sad but true that for many girls in India, schooling is over by Class III. But even in families, where parents are ready to send their girls to school, other problems crop up.

The Hindu newspaper recently carried a story about two sisters from rural Maharashtra named Swati and Anita. Both face an identical dilemma. While the school up to Class VIII was in their village, the high school was located some distance away. Going to school was not such a problem. But after dismissal, they had to wait for hours before they could catch a bus back home. The newspaper records their woes: "If for some reason the bus was cancelled, which happened quite frequently, they would have to walk back to the village in the dark, something their parents would not contemplate. Hence, the only option was to drop out of school. In contrast, the brother of the girls faced no such problem — he would hitch a ride on a passing truck and make his way back. This was not an option open for the girls." The article further states that the girls were as bright as their brother and that theirs' was not a remote village.

Another assumption that people mostly have about school dropouts is that it is because of poverty and backwardness. People, generally believe that pressure of making the ends meet on children and parents belonging to marginalised socioeconomic backgrounds is responsible for the high dropout rate in the country. This belief gains support from the fact that child labour is widespread in India.

According to the Education For all (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2010, UNESCO, India is ranked at 105 among 128 countries, and continues to figure in the group of countries with low educational development index. According to the Global Monitoring Report, while the enrolment ratio in primary education has improved over the years to 94 per cent in 2007, the survival rate is appalling. About 94 per cent net enrolment ratio will have little meaning when contrasted against the high dropout rate.

Therefore, out of every 100 children who enroll in Class I, 37 stop coming to school sometime in the first year or do not show up at all in the second year. This means that 61 per cent of the dropout children belong to the youngest age group attending school.

Moreover, the Annual Status of Education Report 2014 points out a survey of learning outcomes of primary school children in rural India. It reports a declining trend in learning outcomes. For instance, only 25 per cent of rural children in Class III can read a Class III text fluently. Of all children enrolled in Class V, about half cannot read Class II textbooks. This has serious implications. If children cannot read, it affects their involvement in classroom activities, so much so, that it seems dull and meaningless. Such children begin to have irregular attendance, and finally, drop out.

This raises a pertinent question, "Why would a parent send a child to Class I but withdraw before Class II?" Thus, it is a myth that poverty is responsible for the high dropout rate. It is true that infrastructure in most schools leaves much to be desired. With funds and planning, infrastructure can be built. However, as pointed out by educationists, such as Rabindra Nath Tagore, more worrisome is the pedagogical atmosphere, which is mechanical and routinised. A child aged six years, irrespective of one's existential conditions, is curious about the world, and wants to understand and manipulate (touch and feel) different objects. But in a typical school, one would have to learn the alphabet and shape of letters. The child has to practice writing them over and over again. To the child, this appears meaningless, for it is totally de-linked from curiosity.

Education is not just about the number of children who get enrolled in a school. It is about what they actually do in the school. When children, finally, access the school, it should be able to 'hold' them, i.e., hold their interest and make them want to come to school daily.

There was a stirring in the room. The presentation got over and the sound of chairs scraping against the floor could be heard clearly as the participants got up. "I assume there will be tea," joked one of them. Hearing the welcome clinking of tea cups, I smiled. This was an assumption that was certainly no mirage.

REFERENCES

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