

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS: STRATEGIES

FOR

SAFE and SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE

Sharad Chandra Behar

In a vast country like India, it is difficult to characterize the workplace of educators. There is a broad spectrum of environments and unimaginable variations in their workplaces. At one end are educators working in small habitations located in dense forests, snowbound Himalayan areas, or the deserts of Rajasthan in single-teacher schools. At the other end are educators in five-star, air-conditioned private schools, ironically called public schools, located in metropolises. Their problems are varied and vastly different, making it impossible to capture them in a brief statement.

Equally problematic is identifying factors that challenge the safety of these workplaces, as they vary widely depending on the circumstances in different areas. In fact, in the context of educators, "workplace" is a narrow and inappropriate concept. Would you call the classroom or the school the workplace? If so, how could these places be unsafe for educators? Teachers are the most powerful people in the classroom, leading one educationist to call them "**little dictators.**" Principals also hold significant authority in their schools. Issues of safety may arise in areas facing insurgency, Naxalism, dominance of Hindu extremists Or prone to national disasters like flood, earthquake etcetera. In urban areas rowdy elements particularly parents and unaware of the school cultures and processes of education may come with

unjustified, and the case the lead justified, grievances and create problems. Such specific issues have to we have taken care of case by case and making any general recommendations would be highly inappropriate.

A common workplace for all educators, where there is a need for empowerment and a supportive, safe environment, can only be the education system. In the current system, educators are numerous but disempowered. The imperative need is to empower them in a system where, for historical reasons, they have remained disempowered for centuries. Historically, educators were highly empowered in many civilizations. Let us trace the origins of their disempowerment.

Since human beings started living in large groups in stable habitations, the need for education to promote and strengthen social cohesion and continuity has been recognized. When the education system was designed to serve these purposes, educators were powerful and respected in society. Problems arose when an educational system was designed to serve purposes other than the needs of society at large. The modern education system, prevalent in India and globally, is a product of the industrial society. The industrial production system revolutionized mass production, and the modern education system was designed on the conveyor belt model of the factory. Its limited purpose was to educate only a limited number of people to the level of knowledge and skills required to work as skilled labor in the industry, overlooking larger social purposes.

The system was not concerned with how many children joined schools, how many did not, or how many dropped out, if the number of successful graduates met the manpower requirements of the industries. Ironically, when the system faced criticism

from wise leaders, it was presented as essential for a democratic country, leading to most European countries making education free and compulsory by law, without major changes in the system. Therefore, it remains a system serving the economy, not the larger society.

As a result, the quality of educators was not a major issue for society, as they were seen as easily replaceable cogs in the machine. A system put in place in 18th-century Europe continues in the 21st century, when democratic societies aim to provide high-quality education to every child to make them enlightened citizens, contributors to national progress, and agents of social change, by challenging age-old irrational customs, outdated values, and highly unequal, unjust and outdated social structures.

The conceptualization of educators as replaceable cogs is at the root of their disempowerment. They are placed at the bottom of the hierarchical education system, with many layers of policymakers, educationists, administrators in the public sector, and advisors, consultants, owners, and managers in the private sector above them, who, not infrequently, unaware of the realities of the local situation, set impractical boundaries and issue unrealistic instructions, instead of providing support. These disempowering structures and processes have to be challenged and alternatives put in place.

The critical need for empowering educators is to bring about a revolutionary change in this conceptual design of education. The educator should be seen as the hero of the play. Ironically, all policy documents and reports of education commissions and committees recognize the need for this Copernican change. They eulogize and highlight the vital role of educators in

implementing recommendations to ensure proper functioning, improvement, and reform of the education system. Yet, in practice, these words make no impact and prove to be mere lip service. The status of educators remains the same—they are still replaceable cogs in the machine. The theoretical understanding of their critical role and the desire for system transformation remain confined within voluminous reports.

Let us take an example of the laudable declarations on the aims of education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the most authoritative and recent document, outlines the purpose and aims of education:

“Contributes directly to transforming India, that is Bharat, sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, by providing high-quality education to all, and thereby making India a global knowledge superpower...”

“To develop good human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy, courage and resilience, scientific temper and creative imagination, with sound ethical moorings and values... Engaged, productive contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by our constitution...”

“The aim of education will not only be cognitive development but also building character and creating holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with key 21st-century skills.”

Nobody can dispute or disagree with these objectives. But the problem is that the system of education we are operating has been designed primarily to serve economic purposes. Almost all parents and students, except the rarest of the rare, perceive education and the resultant degree as a passport to a highly

remunerative job and a means of climbing up in the economic ladder and consequently in the social status too.

In the prevalent education system, final assessments have little to do with rational thought and action, compassion and empathy, courage and resilience, scientific temper and creative imagination, or values and commitment to an equitable, inclusive, and plural society. Instead, assessments focus on bookish information, not even true knowledge. Skills are hardly considered. The entire education process focuses on students doing extremely well in the final assessment. Naturally, what is not assessed has no place in the school and educational processes resulting in all these highly desirable goals and purposes set by the policy documents being ignored. The assessment system is so faulty that it does not even adequately respond to the needs of the economy. That is why their leaders are perpetually unhappy, complaining that the products of the system are not equipped enough to perform available jobs without substantial training.

For the empowerment of educators, a two-pronged approach can be adopted: one futuristic, focusing on systemic change, and the other involving attitudinal change within the existing system towards teachers.

Empowerment of educators can become a high-priority, realistic agenda only when the education system is transformed to seriously and genuinely achieve the declared aims and purposes of education. In the first stage of this transformation process, industries can play a critical role by demanding and insisting on graduates with the attributes mentioned in the National Education Policy 2020, that are relevant to them. In the current economic scenario, where the government's ability to provide

jobs is far below demand, most of the youth in or entering the job market look more towards the industry than the government. This positions the industry to call the shots, if necessary, by mobilizing the youth.

The second approach is to change the attitude of administrators in the public sector and managers and owners of educational institutions in the private sector. Educators must be trusted, respected, and provided with substantial autonomy to ensure quality education, which should be articulated in practical terms along with practical methods of assessment.

One major frustration for educators is being held accountable without the autonomy to work in their own way to achieve the tasks entrusted to them. Autonomy and accountability are two sides of the same coin. Making someone accountable without giving adequate autonomy is unjust.

The **lack of trust** built into the system is highly demeaning. There is an increasing trend of monitoring classroom teaching through CCTV by private sector management. This is a dramatic example of a lack of trust, but there are many others in administrative practices in both government and private sectors. Such practices must stop if we seriously believe in providing a supportive space for educators.

Attitudinal change towards teachers has another critical dimension. In a system designed to develop skilled workers for the industry, the educator was a cog in the machine. In the envisioned transformation, the educator must be conceptualized differently—not as a mercenary moving children along a conveyor belt without any stake in their learning and

development, but as a facilitator of their all-round development with all the tools and characteristics mentioned in the NEP 2020.

The educator in the transformed system must embody the qualities the NEP wants every student to have. This requires transforming the teacher education system, which has become mercenary at worst and ritualistic at best. The teacher education system will have to be reformed To develop ideal educators for the educational institutions.

Instead of cataloguing all the characteristics of a good teacher, let us focus on the most critical ones.

First of all, an educator should have a genuine, **unconditional**, and abiding love for children. Such a person will have the highest stake in the interests of the children. Secondly, an educator should have assimilated knowledge from all disciplines that research and focus on child development and the sociocultural and political ecosystem affecting the child. The term "assimilated" is used deliberately because it is vastly different from merely possessing knowledge. Assimilated knowledge can be converted into practice effortlessly, while dry knowledge remains theoretical.

Thirdly, and extremely importantly, the teacher must be an artist. Those who consider teaching a skill fail to appreciate the true nature—the soul—of teaching. Teaching is a fine art, finer than classical dance, music, or painting, because in these arts, you create vibrant life out of something, but in teaching, you have the most unusual and extremely delicate task of attempting to influence a living being with his own identity for which one has to first understand a human soul, its vitality, vibrance, and potential. One must influence students unobtrusively and

imperceptibly to become what they may not yet be, helping them move toward their potential and connect with their purpose in life.

In mundane terms, the teacher has to achieve the almost impossible task of influencing a living being with their own identity to take a shape desired by educational aims while respecting the student's identity. Such an educator must be respected, trusted, and given full autonomy to achieve educational goals through continual loving and compassionate interaction with students.

To sum up, empowering educators with a supportive and safe environment requires urgent transformation of the education system and re-conceptualization of the educator's role. Educators must be given full respect, unconditional trust, and autonomy, while being fully accountable. They must have an abiding and unconditional love for children, assimilated **multidisciplinary** knowledge, and a unique artistry in influencing the development of children into rational, creative, compassionate, and empathetic beings capable of questioning and challenging the established order.