

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11th Year of Open Access

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue-3 (June 2020)

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Teachers: The Silent Warriors

Lovely Dutta Prusty

French-American historian Jacques Barzun had once said, *‘Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition.’* This couldn’t be more accurate than in the present times. Teachers in the post- modern era have not truly enjoyed indisputable applause. They have been somewhat relegated to the background in the face of a deluge of information that’s taken over our quest for knowledge. The internet has moulded us into short term ‘information’ seekers and less of long term ‘knowledge’ seekers [whether information can give us true knowledge is debatable]

To survive in the teaching profession in this information and technology driven world, teachers have to really push themselves to go the extra mile and burn the metaphorical midnight oil to stay a few steps ahead of their students. They have to equip themselves with all the right answers for all the questions posed in class by super smart students of the 4G generation. Besides they have to continuously upgrade their knowledge on changing pedagogies to cater to rapidly changing learning objectives. All that is fair enough since we have been conditioned to adjust in a competitive society where the idea of survival of the fittest still holds water.

What is unfair though is that teachers have not yet earned the absolute respect of the society, and the Teaching profession is still looked upon as something that one takes up for lack of better job opportunities. The dedication of teachers is disregarded and at times people have no qualms in writing them off as busy nobodies. Their zeal for their work is taken for granted too.

Social media is over flowing with torrid comments by disgruntled, ‘all knowing’ members of the parent community and the society at large, who do not hesitate to paint their children’s teachers in derogatory terms, making them look like monsters waiting in their den at school to devour and torture innocent children. [Excuse me for using such descriptions but I have actually borrowed words from real posts and messages].

Into this pathetic scenario enters our celebrity virus Covid-19 and all hell break loose. People scamper helter-skelter to put themselves far away from ‘The virus’. Lockdown happens and suddenly people realise that it’s not money but food, health and education that tops the list of human needs.

This is when health workers, doctors, nurses, food suppliers, including delivery boys, come into the limelight. They are the fearless warriors who position themselves on the battle front, helping the people fight the virus, saving lives, saving families. Candles are lit, bells are rung and prayers are chanted to applaud the selfless work done by the 'Covid Warriors'.

Inside their homes, people struggle to adjust to the new normal- social distancing, wearing of masks, meticulous hygiene and of-course living without the domestic helps. Life as we know it has suddenly taken a 360-degree turn. In the course of the lockdown, celebrities have become commoners and commoners have become celebrities. Everyone has become busy learning something new, playing games, posting videos, dancing, singing and of course cooking!

Amidst all this there were the teachers. Out of the blue, their world has changed. From concrete classrooms they have been hurled into digital classrooms and the work from home culture that so far only IT professionals enjoyed, was thrust upon them. It was a huge transition for them and the teachers took it in their stride, learning how to conduct classes on a digital platform, how to make their lesson plans more fun so that they could engage all those super smart students sitting on the other side of the screen. From teaching in a class full of noisy students who were constantly asked to 'keep quiet', the teachers have shifted to asking the students to 'speak up' in-order to keep them focused and also to reassure themselves that they aren't fools talking to themselves.

While the world slept after their hard day's work, teachers would sit up late nights, working on their lesson plans, doing endless research, looking for right information to create amazing videos and presentations that would enable their students to comprehend complex concepts in simple ways.

Following up on every student to ensure they are at par with the class is a teacher's routine job. Virus or no virus, teachers have always worked silently, behind the scenes, rejoicing in the success of their students, knowing fully well that none of them would ever aspire to follow in their footsteps and become teachers. Knowing fully well that their students would go on to earn much more than they can ever earn and that they may never receive the appreciation for the hard work that they have put in so selflessly and silently.

It is a fact that the centre of a school's eco system is the student but we have to agree that the student cannot reach his or her potential without the guidance of a good teacher. The teachers are the pillars of an educational organization without whose presence a school or a

college is just a building with no essence. It is the teachers who keep their focus on the academic milestones of their students and pave the path for them to reach their goals. On them lie the onus of moulding the students into efficient individuals who are packed with good values, critical thinking abilities and a sense of social responsibility. It is quite an uphill task but teachers across the world have made it an integral part of their life. For them the student's success is a reflection of their own achievement.

Teachers are thus the nation builders and there is no two ways about it. It is time to look through the magnifying glass at the list of what teachers truly want! Yes, their demands are that tiny- organizational support, parental and community support, better pay packages and above all respect!

Organizational support:

teachers expect support from the organization in terms of infrastructure, regular training and adequate access to resources. These are the tools that support them to work in an effective manner. Besides, teachers want encouragement and motivation from the organization. School and college managements can achieve this by providing honest, accurate evaluations of their faculty members and empowering them according to their calibre. Appreciation of teachers' work is also the magic word. Like all professionals, teachers also feel motivated when the management notices their good work and appreciates them in some way or the other. Above all, teachers need emotional support too as their profession is very different from all other professions in the sense that they are dealing with 'human' products and not some inanimate objects. They need to have a sense of emotional security that they can fall back on the system when they go through rough phases, whether it is a personal tragedy or having to face a difficult parent. They too may make mistakes while at work but all they need is for the authorities to hear their side of the story without judging or penalising them.

Parental support:

Teachers look towards developing an open trusting relationship with the parent community. They want the parents to complement what they teach in class by involving themselves in their children's education. Parents need to monitor their children at home, ensuring that home assignments are being done regularly and projects submitted on time. Just as parents are concerned about the ambience in the classroom and the attitude of the teacher towards their ward, teachers too are concerned about the ambience at the student's home. Children often carry a psychological baggage which hampers their emotional, mental and

intellectual growth if the atmosphere at home is not conducive enough for them to pursue learning in a healthy and focused manner. Overly strict parents or vice versa may have negative impacts on a child's personality and this may be a huge obstacle when a teacher reaches out to a child. A child who is wary of his parent's reaction may never have the courage to tell them the real issues they face at school, making it difficult for the teachers to help them. Therefore, teachers need the support of the parents to work towards the holistic development of the children.

Teachers also need to be trusted and appreciated by the parents in exchange for the innumerable ways that they guide and care for their children. It is always a good idea to keep the communication channels open between parents and teachers and together they would form a formidable team with a common goal- the future of the students.

Community support:

The community plays a vital role in motivating teachers and keeping them happy and productive. Respect for the teaching profession is something that has diminished over the past few decades. The psyche of the society is steeped in hypocrisy. While on the one hand people insist that teachers should be perfect in every aspect- be it knowledge, intelligence, communication skills, subject delivery, adaptability, overall personality, on the other hand, rarely does anyone aspire for their children to take up teaching as a profession. It is not considered very lucrative, for obvious reasons, and not very respectable. Every community should respect their teachers and acknowledge their contribution towards society and nation building.

Better Pay packages:

Needless to say, financial security is a huge motivating factor for any professional. Teachers are human too. They need to feel secure that they have adequate finances to lead a comfortable life and also contribute towards the upkeep of their families. Lack of better pay packages sometimes compel many teachers to take up private tuitions and this adds to their work load. There are hardly any government schemes to benefit the teaching community. Besides teachers in private organizations have to negotiate well to get a decent pay package that would do justice to their years of experience and capabilities.

It is sad that during these difficult times, when teachers are leaving no stone unturned to reach out to their students and conduct classes online, there are endless messages doing the

rounds that teachers are simply giving homework instead of teaching anything substantial. There have been open suggestions that teachers should not be given their salaries because they are at home since educational institutions are closed. Apparently, thousands of parents across the country have not paid the school fee quoting difficult times. This may pose a problem for teachers, especially those who may not have any other source of income.

Respect:

Over and above the support that teachers need from school managements, parents, and community and better pay packages, teachers, especially in India, crave for R-E-S-P-E-C-T. It is sad that in this land where Guru was considered to be above God and Parents, the status of a teacher is reflected in snide comments on facebook walls and whatsapp messages.

Whether in a virtual classroom or a physical classroom, teachers expect students to respect them. Parents can also contribute in this area. How a student perceives a teacher is influenced a lot by how the parents show their regard towards the teacher. If parents indulge in unsavoury discussions about the teacher at home the student is bound to develop an indifferent attitude towards the teacher. This could also be vice versa and parents may also be influenced by how the student projects the teacher and his/her teaching abilities at home.

Whatever a teacher's calibre may be, she/he touches a child's life in so many positive ways keeping self-interest at bay and that is reason enough why a teacher deserves respect from all quarters. The future of the nation lies in the hands of our teachers and therefore these hands must be treated with care, love and respect.

[The author is an educationist and teacher trainer]