

### **India's missing educators - Teacher absenteeism continues, despite several studies conducted and reasons identified. Can something be done?**

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Another Teacher's Day has come and gone. Like the ones before it, we have had the usual combination of speeches (New Delhi), awards (Mohali), "felicitations" (Mangalore), blood donations (Ulhasnagar), walkouts (Shillong), food poisonings (Mumbai), teacher thrashings (Malda) and black badges (Ludhiana). Barely a week later, we are back to the status quo. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, on whose birthday the day is celebrated, must be doing a summersault in his grave.

Take the much studied matter of teacher attendance. Several reports suggest that India ranks poorly on this score. They also reveal that while there is wide state-to-state variation, absenteeism among government primary school teachers ranges from around 15-40%, with higher rates in poorer states. Combine this with a dearth of substitute teachers, and we have a problem on our hands.

Many reasons have been suggested for this state of affairs. Teacher absence has been studied against several variables—state prosperity, gender, age, graduate degree, toilet facilities, commuting distance, head teacher absence, whether the teacher is local or not, active parent-teacher association, school inspection, and so on. The results are baffling in their complexity and non-intuitiveness. For example, head teachers are more likely than regular teachers to be absent even after controlling for age and education; and higher pay is not associated with lower absence. This may be because there is little fear (or risk) of being sacked for absence. But then, so-called para-teachers, who work on contract and whose jobs are not guaranteed, are equally likely to be absent. So job security alone does not seem to be a reason.

Are private schools an answer? Paradoxically, attendance in unaided and government-aided private schools is only marginally higher than at government schools. There is a slight increase in attendance when the school is private and monitored locally.

The political climate is too hot for a voucher system that leaves the choice of public or private schools to individual households. But this solution must be piloted in at least one state to see if competition from private schools that are indirectly funded by vouchers improves the quality of government schools, including in teacher attendance.

Meanwhile, amid all the studies conducted and reasons identified, teacher absenteeism continues. In an attempt to release schools and teachers from their current plight, the government passed the Right to Education (RTE) Act last year. RTE comes at this from the point of view of the right of children. While it does discuss teacher training in some detail, it largely ignores the issue of teacher attendance. The jury is out on whether the mess will get worse or better.

Can something—anything—be done?

One area of consensus is that teacher absence is reduced if there is better infrastructure—better toilet facilities, reliable electricity supply, friendlier staff rooms and easier access to schools (particularly in rural areas). It appears clear, therefore, that one area of reform is to improve infrastructure for teachers. The government seems to be trigger-happy in terms of granting new "rights" every day. Perhaps the right of teachers to come to a comfortable and welcoming workplace should be enshrined.

Another is that credible, impersonal monitoring of attendance does help. In a postmodern world, this can be achieved through biometric and telecommunication technology in a systematic and affordable way. Using a combination of unique identification for each teacher and GPS technology, it is possible to (scalably) track teacher attendance in an entire state. If this can be linked to a system of monetary benefit for good attendance and/or monetary penalty for poor attendance, then we may be able to achieve material improvement. Of course, if variable pay is going to depend on this electronic attendance register, then it must be fool-proof. Prior systems administered by human beings and on paper have not been trusted. Newer technologies make this possible now.

All of this is to say nothing of student learning. If teachers do attend school, do they teach? If they teach, do students learn? Studies about this topic are less muddled about the results. There seems to be a clear correlation between improving teacher attendance and student learning.

From this point of view, a third solution to the teacher attendance problem points in exactly the opposite direction from RTE. Instead of insisting on uniformity of input (student/teacher ratios, size of classrooms, type of playground, training of teachers, etc.) a better alternative may be to measure the output in terms of student learning and have strict consequences if standards are not met. This allows creative, flexible arrangements in government, para-government and private schools with a focus on the outcome. Teacher compensation levels in different areas, the split between fixed and variable pay, staggered school hours and pooling of facilities with other institutions are some dimensions of flexibility that may mitigate the attendance

problem and refocus the debate on the real issue—student learning.

PS: Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous words in his essay on self-reliance, "foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds", might apply just as well to educational solutions.

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