



# **Mentoring Of Students Is Important In Schools Especially In Government Schools For Disadvantaged And Marginalised Children**

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To understand why mentoring is so important in schools for the disadvantaged and the marginalised, one must examine the lives that the students from these segments lead and therefore the challenges they have to overcome. In fact, the author would go to the extent of saying that government schools where these children go, need more mentors than teachers. The irony of the situation is that there is no competition here because in these government schools, there are barely any teachers anyway.

There are 1,083,678 government schools in India, 84,614 aided schools and 325,760 private schools. As per the Education Ministry, 65.2% of all school students in 20 states go to government schools. These include schools run by the state and local government as well as the central government. 27 million children attend aided schools and 83 million go to private schools. Nearly 400,000 schools have less than 50 students and a majority of schools have a maximum of two teachers per school. Although the government has mandated 1:30 teacher-student ratio in their schools, in reality, there is about a 1:100 teacher-student ratio in most schools. What makes it even more complicated is the multiple age and learning levels in one class. Around 115 million children in India study in such unviable schools.

The UNESCO report, titled '2021 State of the Education Report for India: No Teacher, No Class', reveals the huge shortage of over one million teachers in schools. In fifteen years, the report found that about 30 per cent of the current teaching workforce will need to be replaced. And there is no constructive plan to fill in the existing gap as well as prepare for the attrition that will happen in the coming years. Today around 1.1 lakh schools in India are single-teacher entities and this is likely to increase if urgent action is not taken soon. A total of 19%, or 11.16 lakh teaching positions in schools, lie vacant in the country. In rural areas, the number is as high as 69%. It has been surmised that the teaching profession has more than 50 per cent teachers as women because it is considered to be the most suitable as well as more convenient job for women in urban cities. The ratio changes in rural parts of the country where women do not go out for work. But the early childhood education, special education, and the private unaided school sectors see more women.

Private school and early childhood education teachers are vulnerable, with many working without contracts at low salaries, with no health or maternity leave benefits. "Teacher workload is high -- contrary to public perception -- although invisible, and [is] a source of stress. Teachers value being given professional autonomy, and disregarding this is demotivating," the UNESCO report said. The pupil-teacher ratios get worse in secondary schools where there is perineal shortage of teachers. This is a dangerous zone where adolescent children are vulnerable and need constant supervision. In schools for poor children particularly the ones coming from slums, if children are left unattended, unsupervised, or not counselled, they are likely not just drop off school, but actually get into wrong company and bad habits.

This kind of situation in the education system in India leads to demotivation of students and dysfunctionality of the school system. This obviously leads to drop outs. The findings of the 2016 Annual States of Education Report (ASER) which included over 560,000 children between 3 to 16 years, in 589 districts of India, a household survey of schooling and learning levels in rural India, that around 3.5% of children between the ages of 11 and 14 years, and 13.5% between the ages of 15 and 16 years, were dropouts.

"We are in a severe learning crisis because a large percentage of students in elementary schools have not attained foundational literacy. If action is not taken soon, over the next few years, India itself will lose more than 10 million students from the learning system and to illiteracy." (National Education Policy 2020). Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) shows that 13 out of every 100 Indians between 5-29 years did not attend school or dropped out because they did not consider education "necessary" or a "good experience".

The children coming from disadvantaged and marginalised homes living in the slums have to deal with issues that sometimes are life threatening (because of abuse, bullying by antisocial elements in the slums) and therefore find it difficult to "survive" in the family, the community and even in the schools. They have to deal with various kind of deprivations which often gets broad-brushed by policy makers as mere poverty. While economic deprivation is definitely a key factor in deprivation, there are other forms of deprivation as well like i) the physical; the living conditions and neighbourhood of the students, (ii) the biological; the health and energy condition of the students, (iii) the intellectual; understanding of world view and critical thinking abilities and (iv) psychological; levels of self-esteem and wish to break the cycle of poverty. The author is submitting that just by giving money to these disadvantaged families is not going to dramatically change the living pattern of these people. Quality of life is also dependent on the health of the people in question, dietary patterns, approach to new ideas, access to good education and improved psychological well-being. All these factors play a significant role in shaping the mental make- up of the children and therefore their attitude to learning and living. The biggest challenge these children coming from the slums called "first generation learners" face, is that they have no role models and no footsteps to follow. This is where the concept of mentorship comes in.

National Education Policy 2020 aims to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education including vocational education from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035. The policy envisages broad based, multi-disciplinary, holistic Under Graduate education with flexible curricula, creative combinations of subjects, integration of vocational education and multiple entry and exit points with appropriate certification. Under Graduate

education can be of 3 or 4 years with multiple exit options and appropriate certification within this period. In addition, an Academic Bank of Credit is to be established for digitally storing academic credits earned from different HEIs/industries/R&D so that these can be transferred and counted towards final degree earned. Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), at par with IITs, IIMs, is proposed to be set up as models of best multidisciplinary education of global standards in the country. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisages equitable and inclusive education for all, with special focus on children and youth, especially girls, from socially and economically disadvantaged groups. The policy's focus is important because despite effort to educate women, the dropout rate for girls is still high after secondary education. The enrolment ratio too dips at the secondary and higher secondary levels

These plans are great, if not grandiose. But first we have to get the foundation right. If massive drop outs take place in the school level because of the issues cited above, then the admissions into higher education will be skewed towards the privileged alone and the poor children will be left out from the education system and the gap between the poor and rich will be an ever growing problem. The gap of education status between the girls and boys will also keep increasing. So we need to take urgent steps to correct the system.

The stark reality of the status of girls in education in India needs to be addressed. Nearly 40 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15-18 years are not attending school, while 30 per cent of girls from the poorest families have never set foot in a classroom (Right to Education Forum and Centre for Budget Policy Studies report in collaboration with UNICEF). The recent Covid19 pandemic has exacerbated the gravity of the situation. As the economic crisis with loss of pay and unemployment is experienced, it is estimated that girls' education is feeling the impact. When faced with limited resources, households are prioritising sending the boys to school rather than the girls. The reason for the discrimination against girls is multifold, which is both social, economic and cultural.

The schools have been unable to break the stereotypes because enough sensitisation of the teachers has not happened. India has 120 million adolescent girls, accounting for nearly 10 per cent of the country's population. Many of these girls, not only in the rural and tribal areas but also in the poor slum and low middle-class communities in cities, live their life without being able to make independent decisions about their future. Nearly half (47.9 per cent) of Indian households with five children are severely deprived of shelter, health, nutrition and education compared to 7.8 per cent of low-income families without children, according to the latest Indian Human Development Survey released on May 11, 2019. A household is 1.6 times more likely to be deprived of access to basic necessities if there is an illiterate woman in the family. According to this study, it reduces by 1.4 times if the woman is educated till middle school and declines further by 1.3 times if the woman has attended secondary school. The more educated a woman is, the better equipped she is to keep her household from deprivation.

To address all these problems that keep the poor and the girl child out of the education equation, the policy makers need to work out an implementation plan that will ensure that this cycle of exclusion is somehow broken. First, it is vital to hire teachers and ensure that the schools have adequate teachers in each of the classes. Karnataka has a vacancy for 1.41 L teachers, Uttar Pradesh has 2.98 L and Bihar has 2.53 L vacancies

for teachers that needs to filled in quickly. Unfortunately, Karnataka needs to hire 35000 teachers in the primary school alone against which 13,000 teachers had been appointed but could not be engaged because of a stay order from the Karnataka High Court. This is a common story in most states that stop the government school children from getting proper guidance and learning from teachers.

While that is the reality, as citizens, we cannot sit and wait for things to happen. It is important for us to find solutions in the interim period. The author recommends that schools build a network of mentors either through corporate volunteering or through senior citizens' network or through students doing their internships, to come and be with the students and help them tide through school.

A mentor is "Anyone who offers knowledge, insight, perspective, or wisdom that is helpful to another person in a relationship which goes beyond duty or obligation." In a school environment, the mentors need to have the ability to teach basic subjects like Maths, Science, Social Studies and Languages. In the junior schools the ability to just sit with the children and read from story books is valuable. If the mentor has the skill to teach music, art then that is an added benefit. Mentors are also needed in the middle school where the children need to get focussed on studies and start mentally preparing for examinations. Getting the children to read their text books and discuss various topics will go to build their self-esteem and confidence. The author has experienced that many a times mentors have actually been able to reach out to the students and get them into a learning mode quickly, is because they do not follow the structured method from text books but offer more practical way of solving problems. If the mentors can convert the learning space into a fun environment, a great deal of learning can take place.

Mentors are most crucially required in the senior secondary school because this is when the maximum drop outs take place both amongst boys and girls. This is the period when the children go through several changes both physically and psychologically and therefore need to be guided so that they don't go off track. In 1950 the German-born American psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson described adolescence as a "moratorium," a period of freedom from responsibilities that allows young people to experiment with a number of options before settling on a lifelong career. Such a moratorium may be appropriate in a culture marked by rapid changes in vocational opportunities and lifestyles. If young people are excluded from responsibilities for too long, however, they may never properly learn how to manage their own lives or care for those who depend on them. It is therefore essential that the schools pay adequate attention to this age group. Government schools that cater to the disadvantaged and marginalised adolescents must be even more careful.

Adolescent children, both girls and boys, from the slum communities, are exposed to a great deal of violence and aggression on a daily basis. They see domestic abuse and sometimes feel a great deal of helplessness, they see youths indulge in drugs and alcoholism which seems more exciting. Adolescence is a critical period in which exposure to adversities such as poverty, family conflict and negative life experiences (e.g. violence) can have long-term emotional and socio-economic consequences for adolescents, their families and communities (Knapp *et al.*, 1999; Knapp *et al.*, 2002). Substance use, including alcohol, is typically established during adolescence and this period is peak risk for onset and intensification of substance use

behaviours that pose risks for short- and long-term health (Anthony and Petronis, 1995; ) This is when these children need to be provided with an alternative behaviour pattern for dealing with stress and failures.

Girls are looking for escape from the drudgery of home and become susceptible to undue attention from youths from gangs because it seems more flattering and exciting. They feel safe from rival gang members and are desperately looking for a family. They are looking for an identity and want to feel cared for. The influence of local movies that display love and romance to unrealistic heights are partly responsible for detaching the girls from mundane studies and delve in to risky and exciting relationships. A study by Dara Greenwood, Angelique Ribieras and Allan Clifton explores the psychology behind identifying with anti-heroes. Their research discovered that the characters are more attracted to individuals with higher levels of antisocial traits, such as aggression and Machiavellianism. This is where some amount of counselling and mentoring is required. Girls need to be provided with an alternate model to feel good and cared for. In these days, teaching adolescents the risks and dangers of social media is becoming critical. Both girls and boys need to be told that they are good and can definitely think of leading a better quality life if they start preparing for it. Good mentors can do that.

A good mentor can identify the potential of the students and guide them. They become the role models and point out to other role models. A good mentor must have patience and a great deal of tolerance. They have to teach these children resilience and grit and must not give up themselves. They have to be inspirational and motivational and share with the students the bigger picture so that they can establish their own goal posts. They can do that by sharing their life experiences and should be available to listen to the children when they are in distress. Mentors are better at teaching the children survival skills than even trained teachers, because they come with an open mind and are not bogged down with completion of academic portions which plague the teachers. The author has observed that age is not necessarily a boon or a constraint to be good mentors. In fact, young students can be good mentors because they can relate with the children quickly. It is important the mentors don't do the work for the students but instead just guide them to do it. In the role as a mentor there is an expectation that the mentor offers purposeful guidance based on the mentee's self-vision. Most importantly the mentees must trust the mentors and then listen to them. Apart from academic guidance the big role that mentors have to play is to be available when the mentee is in crisis or about to take a wrong decision. The researcher has experienced how a few mentors have been able to avert suicides of adolescents by just intervening at the right time. It is therefore very important to create a relationship of trust, mutual respect and non-judgemental responses.

It is very interesting to note that the concept of mentorship is not new but was a part of education system in ancient India. It was a residential schooling system whose origin dates back to around 5000 BC. It was more prevalent during the Vedic age where students were taught various subjects and about how to live a cultured and disciplined life. Gurukul was actually the home of teacher or Acharya and was the centre of learning where pupils resided till their education got complete. This relationship between guru and shishya was so sacred that no fee was taken from the students. However, the student had to offer a *gurudakshina* which was a token of respect paid to the teacher. It was mainly in the form of money or a special task that the student had to perform for the teacher.

We need to look at how we can create more *acharyas* in the present education system because what today's children need is not just knowledge but the skills to lead a life with wisdom. And mentors or acharyas can play a role in that.

Overall the idea of inculcating a Gurukul system in Indian education is just to assist the children in understanding the concept of a balanced life. This very ideology of balance should be taught to the kids from a young age so that they make informed decisions about work, food, exercise and the way they wish to live their life. As such, the teachers of government schools catering to the disadvantaged and the marginalised children, need to do more than teach to ensure that their students survive and thrive in the education system. We need to invite more mentors or acharyas in our schools.