

Handicapping the Teacher

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Parents are free to choose their parenting style, and they can independently decide what and how they will teach their own children. However, this is not the case with classroom teachers. Their freedom of choice is significantly limited by institutional or organisational factors, since teachers are members of an organisation whose norms, rules, policies, and job descriptions strongly influence how they respond to students and how they teach them.

When teachers are perceived as being ineffective in their interactions with students, it would be instructive to consider the influence that the organisation has on the teacher-student relationship. Very often, when teachers are ineffective in motivating and facilitating learning, their failures can be attributed to constraint factors within the organisation that define and limit the role of the teacher. In many ways, this very common reality contradicts the basic educational philosophy that if we are to free students in the classroom we must first free teachers.

Clearly teachers are not free; like students, they are controlled and directed by power and authority. Their own rights are often not honoured; they are not given the chance to participate in decisions that they are expected to carry out or enforce; their administrators often do not listen to them with empathy and understanding; and they constantly work in an atmosphere of evaluation, judgement and, sometimes, even fear. Therefore, teachers almost always find themselves in a position where they are expected to meet the needs of students even though their own needs are not being met.

While all schools are not alike, there are some common characteristics found in most, if not all, schools that are responsible for placing teachers in what is frequently an uncomfortable and inhospitable work environment.

Teachers are subordinates:

Almost all schools are organised along hierarchical lines, with teachers as subordinates to principals and assistant principals. In turn, principals are subordinates to members of school boards and ministry officials. In many respects, most schools are organised very much like the ancient model of a military organization. Inherent in this model are such principles as unity of command, control, power, and authority where directives come from the top with very little emphasis on respect and courtesy, and an overemphasis on obedience, punishment, and subservience. Despite all claims that schools are democratic institutions designed for democratic societies, most schools are anything but democratic, and no one is more aware of this than teachers. In reality, most schools are places where conflicts are resolved by power and authority!

Teachers do not participate in decision-making:

In most schools teachers are expected to implement decisions but are seldom given the opportunity to participate in making them. School administrators generally reserve the right to independently make decisions on important issues without any “real” input from

teachers or parents. This means that, very often, rules and policies in schools are laid down unilaterally by administrators and many times do not reflect the wishes or meet the needs of teachers.

Rigidity and resistance to change:

Most education critics agree that schools are exasperatingly resistant to change. While significant efforts have been made to encourage and promote change in schools and classrooms, the expected reforms have not materialised. In fact, when it comes to what goes on in the classrooms, most schools are run like the schools of decades ago.

In light of these negative characteristics, there are many positive actions that teachers can take to make the school in which they function a better place for teaching.

Assertiveness:

No other person in the school has as much potential for influencing students as the teacher. The student's primary relationship in school is with his or her teacher, and it is from this relationship that the student will experience growth and fulfilment or be stifled and damaged. Despite appearances to the contrary, teachers are not really at the bottom rung of the school at all, but at the top. It all starts and ends with them and what they do with their students. Education is about what is done in the classroom and the relationships teachers develop with their students. It is not about buildings, programmes, systems, curricula, or budgets. These are supposed to exist only to help teachers to do a better job with their students in the classroom. Once teachers begin to realise this and to accept the importance of their role—to value it strongly, to protect its integrity, and to defend it against erosion—more of them will walk proudly through the corridors of their school as professionals.

Sensibility:

Teachers have relationships with many different people in authority, and each is capable of behaving in ways that may harm the teachers' relationship with their students, or cause problems that interfere with the teaching-learning process. Among these individuals are deans, vice-principals, principals, supervisors, school board members, school counsellors, PTA members, and parents. It is important that in relating to these individuals, teachers make every effort to understand their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. This is not always an easy task, but it is crucial when responding to such individuals that teachers do not send any roadblock messages, especially if differing views are being expressed.

Teachers are frequently perceived as being timid in dealing with authority figures, especially if these figures are the ones responsible for evaluating their performance. Principals and senior teachers not only have some of this power, but they traditionally use it, and so many teachers feel that the risk of displeasing their bosses by standing up for their own needs is simply too great. Many teachers choose to give in or give up, and quite predictably they feel resentful, hostile, and miserable in their work places.

To effect corrective measures, it is extremely important that teachers realise that they have a right to operate in a professional manner and to have a satisfying job with decent

working conditions. To achieve this, teachers need to challenge the system whenever it appears to stand in the way of effective teaching and learning.

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