TO BE OR NOT TO BE

A Case Study

Dr. Geetha Gopinath
Former Principal & Associate Professor
Mar Thoma Teacher’s Training College
Edakulam P.O., Ranny,
Pathanamthitta Dist. Kerala State, India

ABSTRACT

A teacher’s life involves the family, school, extended relationships and society in general. However, in Kerala some teachers have to travel distant places for teaching, with multiple responsibilities at home and school taking a personal toll of their lives. This can especially occur when the husbands have transferable jobs. The excessive stress due to unfavorable circumstances can lead to loss of health/relationships, inefficient professional performance and resultant blame. This results in situations that finally leave the teacher helpless and even depressed. Teaching entails a high investment of time, intellect, and emotion, in fact the involvement of the whole person. Striking a balance between the various dimensions can be tedious and stress producing. This case study, based on the life of a teacher experiencing the dilemma of straddling two worlds considers areas like teacher effectiveness, the personal dimension, a teacher’s experience to rethink, finally tries to develop a plan of action for the home and school to deal with the areas of pressure. Suggestions include family therapy for differentiation, tough love for substance abuse, resource management, and use of modern amenities. School strategies include teaching children reflective thinking and use of reciprocal and collaborative teaching strategies. A teacher as a motivator of change should also change his/her life philosophy.

Key words: teacher effectiveness, teacher dilemma, strategy

To be or not to be: A teacher’s dilemma

To be, or not to be, that is the question—
Whether ’tis Nobler in the mind to suffer
The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune,
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? (Hamlet)

’To be or not to be …’ is the opening phrase of a soliloquy in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The short poem above conveys the totality of a teacher’s pain as he/she traverses two separate world’s one in school and the other at home.

This case study is based on a personal narrative as told to me by a teacher who is the wife of a state government employee who gets transferred between different districts, who has three ‘growing up’ children and whose mother in law is old and needing 24x7 bedside care. She
is caught between her family needs, the job that provides her the additional income to supplement her husband’s salary which is insufficient for the family, and the desire to be sincere to her students who look up to her as an ideal. She teaches her students to be punctual, put in their best effort and stand strong. Yet, she is not able to maintain punctuality, efficiency, and remain strong. She is sandwiched between the ‘home making’ responsibilities like cooking, washing, cleaning giving her best to her children, keeping her mother-in-law clean and cared for, her duties to her husband as a wife, and school responsibilities which includes preparing lesson plans, question papers, corrections, marking them and doing the innumerable other programs that get assigned to her. Her son has been masquerading as a person, who he is not, her husband has been drinking and coming home late, most important of all her teenage daughter is not getting her attention. She says in desperation, ‘I travel all the way nearly forty kilometers every day to school as my husband has been transferred to another district. My mother-in-law’s condition has deteriorated and my children are turning delinquent. I get up at four in the morning and work till twelve at night. I get no rest. My husband has started drinking heavily... possibly as he does not get attention from me, though I would say that he had a drinking problem even before marriage.’ She continued with a huge sigh, ‘I did not start off like this. I was enthused with energy and wanted to be the best a teacher could be, I wanted to teach the children so that those under my care would learn and grow and become people of worth in society. I wanted them to imbibe values that made people into Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Madam Curie, Louis Pasteur, Rabindranath Tagore and others... Reality is that faced with the tremendous pressures of life I do not have the energy to teach children anything beyond my subject, and that too only the routine stuff without any creativity... I feel guilty and helpless... I want to be... but I cannot, I am resigned to my fate.’ To be or not to be,’ that is my dilemma.’

The life situation of my friend a teacher of nearly twenty years standing, a sincere, committed and honest person of worth, fills me a teacher trainer with pain and fear. Pain because I see her helplessness and her sincerity, and fear that the pressures may finally result in a total breakdown and my friend may disintegrate. My heart goes out to her and many others like her who are the vanguards of our educational system. In this paper I try to develop a plan of action for overburdened and distraught teachers with multiple responsibilities, who do the balancing act between school and home, to save some of their energies for themselves. This plan of action will empower them and in turn their students can get the best in terms of the education and values such gems have to offer.

The plan of action involves the development of a basis for teacher effectiveness which defines the recognition of teacher identity formation, development of the personal dimension of a teacher’s life that relates to how well persons in the teacher’s family are differentiated, a teacher’s story of rethink and finally the development of a new paradigm for my friend that can be a model for others in similar situations.

TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

In a study on teacher effectiveness Day, Stobart, Sammons, Kington, Gu, Smees and Mujtaba (2006) found that teachers’ capacities to sustain their effectiveness in different phases of their professional lives are affected positively and negatively by their sense of professional identity. A teacher’s identity comprises the interactions between professional, situated and personal dimensions. The professional identity reflects social and policy expectations of what a
good teacher is and also the educational ideals of the teacher at a personal level. The situated dimension is located in the specific school and context where the teacher is teaching and is affected by local conditions (i.e. pupil behavior, level of disadvantage), leadership, support and feedback. This situated dimension will be determined to some extent by the attitude of the school management and is also mainly based on policies of the government from time to time. The personal dimension is based on life outside the school and is linked to family and social roles. The personal dimension is important and can be a very critical factor in the life of a teacher. This study also found that effective teaching requires emotional and intellectual investments from teachers which draw upon personal and professional capacities and experience, knowledge and skills. In addition, teachers’ well-being and perceived effectiveness at work were affected by life experiences and events in the life of a teacher, both positively and negatively. A teacher’s commitment and resilience was mediated by personal values, life experiences and events which the authors termed as the personal dimension. Smith (2001) quotes Knowles (1992) stating that teachers’ beliefs develop throughout their lifetimes and are influenced by a variety of factors, including events, experiences, and the other people in their lives. In the same study Smith (2001) also quotes Clark (1992) and states that ‘teachers’ life experiences and background affect what they believe, and consequently, how they teach. It can be seen that ultimately teacher effectiveness is also determined to a great extent by the personal dimension.

THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

The aspects discussed above point to the importance of the personal dimension in the life of a teacher, in addition to other factors that mediate the effectiveness of teaching, which in turn affects the value education received by the student. At the personal dimension the family has a crucial role to play in the life of a teacher. An important factor that is of relevance in the life of a teacher emerges from Bowen’s family system therapy. Bowen (1978) systems understanding of the family states that some people accommodate others and take too much responsibility for the distress of others and in the process ‘absorb’ the anxiety of others resulting in that family member becoming most vulnerable to problems such as depression, alcoholism, affairs, or physical illness. The excessive and inappropriate accommodation of others is because of poor differentiation of self. The differentiation of self is the ability of a person to be emotionally controlled while remaining within the emotional intensity of one’s family. It reflects the extent to which one can think objectively about emotionally loaded issues within the family (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). It is the ability to separate feelings and thoughts. Undifferentiated people cannot separate feelings and thoughts; when asked to think, they are flooded with feelings, and have difficulty in thinking logically and basing their responses on that. Further, they have difficulty in separating their own from other’s feelings; they look to the family to define how they think about issues, feel about people and interpret their experiences. Differentiation is the process of freeing oneself from the family’s processes, to define one’s self. This means that the person has developed the capacity to have different opinions and values than the family members, and at the same time is able to stay emotionally connected to them. It means being able to calmly reflect on a conflicted interaction afterward, realizing one’s own role in it, and then choosing a different response for the future (Bowen, 1978). It can be seen from this that the personal dimension reflects the personality of the person as it has developed, as also the environment in which the person develops which in turn affects and to some extent determines the personality of the person.
A TEACHER’S RETHINK

Kate Mather (2013), a primary school deputy head, had taught for twenty years, diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening illness was forced her to take a new look at her own life. She realized that the words, ‘work-life balance’ put the emphasis on work ‘inspiring us to try and fit out lives almost apologetically around our jobs.’ She suggests a change in perspective on how ‘you think about your job.’ She says that we need to fit the work around the personal life rather than the other way around. Some suggestions include:

(a) Make time for yourself and your own interests: The dictum, ‘all work and no play makes jack a dull boy,’ also applies to teachers.

(b) Make a timetable: A timetable makes a difference where time and resources are a luxury.

(c) Your time is precious: Most people take you for granted and make demands on your time.

A reflection on the above three dimensions suggested by Mather (2013) indicates that for a teacher to be effective whether at home or at school the teacher has to show the same dexterousness in practice as making a good lesson plan. Also, this plan should be put into action with mechanisms for feedback, review and revision so that all round proficiency is the end result. After considering the various aspects and collating the home/school/personal life aspects of a teacher’s life I have tried to develop a paradigm for my friend. The paradigm is divided into two parts: a). the home strategy.  b). the school strategy. These are typical for my friend but for others similar paradigms can be developed based on their needs and contexts.

Developing a new paradigm

THE HOME STRATEGY

A home management plan that considers the social/emotional/practical needs of the family has to be put in place. This plan has to be realistic and the emphasis is that family is a total unit and all are equally responsible for its proper functioning. In addition, where outside help is important it should be taken and all family members should be called to cooperate in the process.

i. Seek family therapy so that a systems audit could help rearrange the family structure and involve all members in the constellation to take responsibility family activities to remove the emotional fusion and adopt means for differentiation of self.

ii. Take a tough love attitude to the husband’s alcohol problem avoiding the co-dependence trap and insist on his entering a de-addiction program.

iii. Plan using all the resources of finance, personnel, and facilities and provide time for leisure and rest. Distribute the work and chores so that there is equal and equitable involvement of the children and husband. Appoint a home nurse or a part time help for care of the aged and supervise the care with empathetic involvement. Get help from extended family in emergencies.
iv. Modernize using facilities like the washing machine with dryer (a lot of time can be wasted in the ritual of manual washing merely based on personal inhibitions), inverter (time spent without electricity can be a limiting factor in Kerala), microwave oven (a lot of time can be saved with the microwave oven).

THE SCHOOL STRATEGY

The school strategy may be more difficult to implement, however, there is no harm in trying as if implemented it will not only help the teacher but also the students in getting quality education. Innovative research based teaching designs are available for implementation and it is about convincing the management about their utility. The teacher needs to research the subject and seek cooperative colleagues to do the same before approaching the management.

i. At school teach the students’ reciprocal learning strategies and reflective thinking. Reciprocal teaching strategies reduce teacher stress and improve quality of teaching. In addition, reflective thinking can help students to use time and resources creatively making it easier for the teacher to help students develop academically.

ii. Suggest to the management the benefits of collaborative teaching (Smith, 2001) where teachers collaborate with each other to teach, and finally involve the students in the collaborative experience of learning.

CONCLUSION

My friend the teacher has already started the process of realignment of the family, and the family has started family therapy. The rest of the processes would follow in time. Already she is feeling stronger and a new confidence is visible. I told her that there is no need for a teacher’s dilemma. We live in a world where we know that it is the community of the world, society, family, and the self that makes life purposeful and we do not need to be the lonely martyr. A teacher has to set the pace for change, in her students and in her/his own life. My friend has taken the first step and hopefully this is a journey into the future, if not how can teachers be the motivators of change and how can we at least survive in the world, if not exist?
REFERENCES


