**A for Attitude: Behaviour Change and the School Education System**

**By Swaha Sahoo: December 6, 2023**

In 2015, India adopted Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which seeks “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, launched a few years later, defined a framework to help achieve this goal. The NEP advocates for an education system with a safe and stimulating learning environment that would offer a range of experiences that creatively engage students and help them become critical thinkers.

**Behavioural Change in Education:**

Behavioural change in school education is a relatively young field. It involves changing the behaviour of teachers and school administrators through a series of small but sustained techniques, or behavioural nudges, anchored in feedback, reflection, and action planning which are the key design elements of behavioural change. The long-term objective of this approach is to radically improve education through systemic change.

Centre for Intrinsic Motivation (CIM) works closely with the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), the body in charge of teacher development and training in every state, to enable implementation at scale. CIM sets up a core design and implementation team at the SCERT, co-creates content for the programme with them, and trains them to run it in that state. Their interventions in Delhi, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu offer valuable insights into how these techniques can positively impact the attitudes of district officials, teachers, and students, leading to better classroom environments and sustainable change within the education system.

1. **Facilitate self-assessment for Teachers:** Research has established that teacher beliefs determine teaching behaviour. If teachers believe that students can learn irrespective of their social and economic backgrounds, they bring that belief to their classroom practice. But how can teachers’ beliefs be assessed?

We begin with a module on self-reflection, which involves several open-ended discussions that attempt to understand what teachers think. We ask them a series of questions and present them with a range of situations, and the teachers’ responses to these prompts tell us about their mindset. Once we identify the connection between teachers’ attitudes and what they practice and spot the gap between practice and desired outcomes, we develop further modules.

The insights from these sessions are funnelled into action plans that teachers take to the classroom to test. This evidence from the classroom aids the creation of follow-up sessions on cultivating a growth mindset among teachers. Mentoring teachers, supporting them to engage in deep conversations, and nudging them to reflect on their biases and their approach to teaching have contributed to a shift in attitudes. This attitudinal shift is key to teachers imbibing new pedagogies and technologies in their classroom practices.

1. **Build self-esteem:** One of the main impediments to exemplary teacher performance is low self-esteem. Their low motivation is driven by the poor quality of teacher education, inferior service conditions, lack of teacher autonomy, and few avenues for continuous professional development and support. Teachers lack the confidence to share, question, and think out of the box.

One of the ways we boost their confidence is through a module called ‘Building Connect’ that fosters a culture of trust and positive communication between teachers and their mentors. We made the mentors aware, first and foremost, that their teaching methods were good and that there was merit in sharing them with others. Realising that they were adding value not just to their own professional development, but also to that of their colleagues, boosted mentors’ self-esteem and confidence. We used the same method to identify teacher coordinators at the school level.

The next step was to improve collaboration and engagement between mentor teachers, teacher coordinators, and district officials to create a sense of ease around asking questions, making mistakes, and appreciating effort.

1. **Recognise and Celebrate:** Teachers crave platforms that recognise the difficult work they are doing. Creating communities of practitioners at the cluster and district levels has created avenues for them to be celebrated by both peers and government officials. Teachers who become part of the teacher network meetings are motivated to apply for the role of teacher coordinators and mentor teachers.

The recognition they receive motivates them to continue conducting network meetings and supporting their peers, irrespective of the state mandate. This evidences the genuine need for teachers to learn from one another. State governments can focus on identifying best practices and develop and diffuse these innovations within the system.

1. **Encourage critical thinking:** A central component of driving behavioural change is asking ‘why’. Nudging education officers to think about the ‘why’ of their policies and actions has sparked critical thinking. CIM closely supports district officials through regular coaching calls and in-person meetings. We accompany them on teacher feedback sessions and classroom observations and offer feedback on the kind of questions they ask and the support they provide the teacher.

The focus of officials during school visits and classroom observations has also changed. After several cycles of behavioural nudges, district officials now provide teachers with feedback on their lesson plans. They ask more open-ended questions, focusing on the quality of the teaching–learning process, challenges the teacher might face, how much of the lesson planning and execution the teacher was able to do on their own, and how often they collaborated with other teachers.

**Behavioural Bottlenecks:**

Behaviour change interventions are slow to execute because they necessitate attitudinal shifts. Facilitating such shifts in the education system isn’t easy. Education officers are tasked with multiple monitoring duties. Providing developmental feedback to teachers is time-consuming and requires the officers’ presence in the classroom. Officials would have to engage more deeply with teachers to obtain this information; this would take them and the teachers into deep and uncomfortable territory.

Teachers, on the other hand, were defensive and resistant to feedback on their classroom practices. For example, all teachers undergo a prescribed number of hours of teacher training, but the implementation of that training in the classroom is unaccounted for. Now, to be questioned on student engagement and be told that students are losing interest wouldn’t go down well with them. After a series of behavioural change sessions, he says he now feels comfortable about acknowledging his mistakes and is open to feedback from not only his peers but also from his students.

**Work in Progress:**

Building trust is a major step in overcoming these challenges and takes several years. But it can be achieved. Strong political and administrative will, along with educational leadership at both state and central levels, can galvanise long-term systemic change. It can do this by embedding key elements of behaviour change within district empowerment initiatives, policies, and professional development programmes.

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