

Where have the great passionate teachers gone?

The past few years have seen an explosion in the number of students enrolling into technical and management education in the country. In 2005 alone, India produced 200,000 engineering graduates, which was thrice the number produced in the United States and twice as much as compared to the whole of Europe in the same year. But in 2006, a record 450,000 students were enrolled into four-year engineering courses, meaning that the output would double by the end of year 2009. Such an unprecedented growth brings along with it the rapid growth in the number of colleges and thus, the increased demand for the number of teachers.

Worrying trends

The growing demand for teachers, particularly in institutes of higher learning has not been compensated by the supply. Not only is it becoming difficult to attract more teachers, it is becoming a Herculean task to retain the existing ones. Some of the worrying trends that may help explain these gaps are:

1. Unplanned growth

The growth in the number of institutions imparting technical and management education is not in tune with the available number of teachers who are the top most resource in any institution. There have not been any substantial measures taken to tackle this demand.

2. Compensation revision

Although compensation structures have seen a major change in almost all professions, it has not been commensurate in the teaching profession. The benchmarks for compensation restructuring need to be worked upon, to keep them on par with the industry averages.

3. IT salaries

Even fresh graduates from engineering courses sometimes get higher compensation when compared to teachers and professors in institutes of higher learning. This leaves the teachers with a sense of being underpaid and left out of the larger pie. As John F. Kennedy rightly said “Modern cynics and sceptics see no harm in paying those to whom they entrust the minds of their children a smaller wage than is paid to those to whom they entrust the care of their plumbing.”

4. Wrong focus on investment

Governments and colleges alike invest substantially in building the physical infrastructure needed for the educational set up. However, scant attention is given to investing in the intellectual capital primarily the teachers. Little focus is given on their training and development and colleges are not willing to pay competitive salaries to attract top talent. “Good teachers are costly, but bad teachers cost more,” said Bob Talbert and it’s about time we realised this fact.

Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, the architect of the Indian Space Program was one of those who realised the importance of having a world-class faculty. In the early 60's, he sent a group of teachers who had a tremendous passion for teaching and hand-picked by him to pursue their education at Harvard with the entire costs borne by the IIMs. Prof. MN Vora was one of them.

Prof. Vora came from a very modest background. Being a bright student, he pursued his education after Class X with the support of elders from his village. While studying, he distributed newspapers and also tutored school students to meet his expenses. He went on to complete his B.Com, M.Com and Cost Accounting degrees. Prof Vora then went to Wharton to do his MBA. On his return, he joined IIMC as one of its first faculty members. As soon as IIMA was established in 1961 he joined the institute and then went to Harvard for his DBA. He came back to IIMA where he taught for the rest of his professional career and even after retirement, he was associated with the institution, contributing in every possible way.

The pioneer of marketing education in India, Prof. Vora, who passed away in June this year, was one of the most distinguished professors to have taught at the IIMA. His contribution to education however went much beyond his teaching prowess and his academic publications. Prof. Vora was loved and respected by his students and peers alike for the passion that he put into his teaching. Henry Brooks Adams had said - "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops". Prof. Vora exemplified this fact. Most of his students have gone on to become successful managers, entrepreneurs and pioneers in the fields they have chosen. Nevertheless, they have done so, with a sense of empathy imbibed in them thanks to the likes of passionate teachers like Prof. Vora.

Nagananda Kumar, the MD of Global Business Dimensions Inc, US and an ex-student of Prof. Vora, was one of those who was touched by his compassion. Vora Saheb, he says, taught them about life and living as much as he taught them to think through business issues. Devendra Amin, another of Prof. Vora's ex-students, considers him much more than a guru – a 'rishi' he says, best describes the likes of Prof. Vora, who devoted his life to the cause of education.

But where have such passionate teachers gone? With education getting commercialised, coming across such passionate teachers is not so common any more. Teaching seems to have become more like a 'job' rather than a passion. Having said this, what have the schools, colleges and universities done for teachers who go that extra mile to impart the highest levels of education and virtue to their students? Have they been recognised? Have they been rewarded appropriately?

It is in the students of today that the future of the country depends on. No wonder then that children happen to be the muse of distinguished personalities like Dr. A.P.J.Abdul Kalam who rooted for the cause of empowering the youth of the nation. Teachers right from the school till institutes of higher learning have a very crucial role to play in shaping the minds of our future leaders. Excelling in education is not enough as educational institutions have the responsibility to groom mature individuals. Here again, it is the teachers who play the pivotal role. This article is a commendation of people like Prof. Vora who have inspired generations of students. The death of Prof. Vora, hopefully, does not mark the end of an era where teaching was more of a passion than a job. It's high time the society took more care of the gift called 'teacher'.

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