

Who Wants to be a Teacher?

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I have often heard it said that a good teacher is a rare find. My experience has been completely different. In my entire academic career there have been very few teachers whom I did not like. Apart from these, all my teachers were inspiring and effective. This must be the reason why I chose to be a teacher and taught for almost 25 years in an age when teachers were the lowest paid professionals. I remember when I made this decision friends and relatives would find it very amusing. “You want to become a teacher? But you have a strong academic background; you can become anything you want!” I found it hard to explain to them that this was exactly what I wanted to do! So what if the best students were opting to become doctors and lawyers, teaching was what I wanted to do.

I loved my teachers so much because they loved me. At the time when I was studying, taking tuitions was not so rampant as it is nowadays. Students who absolutely needed to take tuitions would do so and that too secretly. Nor would their tutors openly announce that they were taking tuitions. It was just not considered to be a proper thing to do.

If I needed help in understanding any concept my teachers would tell me to visit them and give me help for any length of time. They would give up their time of rest in order to be of use to me. My teacher Sir Khwaja Muhammad Nawaz helped me go over the entire FSc course in mathematics before I had even entered college. My teachers did all this for no payment, at least not for any cash payment: I did pay my dues in the currency of respect and by trying to emulate them when I myself became a teacher.

As a teacher I felt eye contact was very important; I would look at my students’ faces for signs of understanding. Looking at their expressions told me when to ask a question, when to invite discussion.

My first teaching assignment was at Punjab University, Physics Department. Some of my students had been my class-fellows in the past, too. I was a very young lecturer and people would often ask me if the students took advantage of that. My answer always used to be, ‘If they did, it was an advantage I wanted them to take, so my classroom would be abuzz with interaction and discussion.’

During years and years of teaching, I realized that my university students had significant gaps in their learning, that something was amiss somewhere. That was when I decided in 1996 to work for the Ministry of Education to bring systemic change in science and technical education. Improving curriculum and infrastructure is important but it is the teacher who is the lynch pin; it is the teacher who makes all the difference. That is why I wanted to work to improve teacher quality. A teacher has to have a balance, a mix of some key elements.

I think of the balance in my own teachers; they were strict disciplinarians but they did handle us with kid gloves sometimes. This reminds me of an incident.

When we were in grade seven, we were more than a little noisy one day and got a good scolding from Sir Nasim Arshad. A group of us were hurt and angry at being yelled at by our teacher. Our entire group stopped talking to the teacher or participating in class. Two three days passed and we continued to sulk. Things normalized only after our teacher asked us one day why we weren't talking; although our teachers were extremely strict by today's standards, yet our teacher did not consider it beneath his dignity to ask us why we were angry. A lot of times teachers are strict with students for the sake of their own ego, but not our Sir Nasim Arshad. It was never about him, it was about us, his students.

And this is the biggest truth for an educator: That it is all about the student.

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