

Teachers Then and Now: Are They Truly Attuned to the Needs and Emotions of their Students?

Babu Ram Bishwokarma

Assistant Prof. Sanothimi Campus, Bhaktapur

E-mail: brbkbj@gmail.com

Abstract

Student-teacher relationship is crucial in the process of imparting quality education which requires teachers to understand the emotional needs, interests, and, realities of the students. This auto-hermeneutic study was carried out with an objective of finding whether the teachers in the past and now are aware of the emotional needs, interests, and realities of the students in the context of Nepal. The study was conducted reflecting my own experiences as a school student, school teacher, and guardian of a school going boy. Analysing the three representative stories used as the primary information, the study concluded that there seems no substantial shift in the teachers' attitudes and behavior in the Nepalese classrooms. Teachers appear to be insensitive regarding the emotional dynamics of teacher-student relationships in the Nepalese context. Thus, it is imperative to follow a holistic approach to teacher professional development that includes not only the transfer of content knowledge but also the cultivation of empathetic and emotionally aware educators.

Keywords: Teacher-student relationship, Emotional intelligence, Emotional dynamics, Teachers' behavior and attitude

Introduction

'Child is a book which the teacher has to learn from page to page' - Rousseau. This profound statement by Rousseau, 'A child is a book which the teacher has to learn from page to page,' reflects the intricate teacher-student relationship. It emphasizes that a teacher's legitimacy is intricately tied to understanding and connecting with each student individually. In the academic arena, teachers' professional existence is inseparable from the students they teach. This assertion emphasizes that teachers derive their purpose and construct identity from the dynamic interplay with their students. It affirms that teachers are not just dispensers of knowledge but interpreters of the unique narratives written by each student, shaping their educational journey collaboratively.

Teachers play a central role in the educational process, serving as the most valuable asset within schools. Standing at the interface of knowledge, skills, and

values dissemination (Day, 1999), teachers are instrumental in shaping the connection between themselves and students. The relationship between teachers and students is pivotal in transmitting knowledge, skills and values to the students. To establish a cordial relationship between teacher and students, teachers are expected to actively engage with and cater to the students' needs and interests (Kaplan, 2018).

Misalignment in the interests of teachers and students can create challenges to the teaching and learning dynamic. Congruent to this understanding, Waller (1965) mentions...

The teacher-pupil relationship is a form of institutionalized domination and subordination. . . . The teacher represents the formal curriculum, and his interest is in imposing that curriculum upon the children in the form of tasks; pupils are much more interested in life in their own world than in the desiccated bits of adult life which teachers have to offer (pp. 195-196).

Education is mainly about getting the next generations ready for the future. It is like the main tool to bring about changes in students and prepare them for the future. Teachers, as the main agents, play a key role to introduce changes among the students through teaching. If teachers can't understand the different facets of their students, including how they feel, introducing changes in them becomes almost impossible as emotions are at the core of teaching (Hargreaves, 1998). Good teaching is full of positive feelings and good teachers are emotional and passionate, connecting with their students and making their classes enjoyable, creative, challenging, and joyful (ibid).

Teachers' feelings, emotions, and the ways they express them really affect how students feel in class (Keller & Becker, 2021). When teachers transfer positive emotions such as enthusiasm, passion, and encouragement, students are more likely to feel engaged, motivated, and comfortable with the learning environment. Conversely, if teachers exhibit negative emotions, it can hurt the feelings of the students resulting to an unproductive learning environment. Thus, the teacher-student relationship is an essential factor, as the way teachers relate interpersonally with their students deeply impacts the emotional tone of the classroom (Mainhard, et al. 2018).

Emotions, whether good or bad, are a big part of the identity of teachers, and the not-so-good feelings can have a strong impact in students' achievements (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012). All these information suggest that how teachers feel and how well they understand and deal with their students' feelings are really important

for teaching to be effective. Aligned with these ideas Frenzel (2014) alludes that recognizing and comprehending the emotional dynamics within the classroom is imperative for improving the quality of teaching and overall well-being in a school setting. The emotions of students have a vivid impact on their interest in learning, engagement, and academic performance (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun et al., 2011; Tze et al., 2014). Similarly, the emotions exerted by teachers play a critical role in influencing their teaching behaviors and shaping the relationships between teachers and students (Chen, 2019; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016).

The literatures mentioned above point out that the connection between teachers and students plays a crucial role for effective teaching and learning, influencing both academic achievements and overall well-being of students. Effective teaching is closely tied to the professional development of teachers. Regarding the teachers' professional growth, three prevalent models exist, namely the craft model, applied science model, and reflective model (Wallace, 1991). The craft model, the oldest and more traditional approach, perceives the teacher as an authoritative figure, an expert who instructs students on what to do, shows how to do it, and expects students to replicate the actions. Teachers, following this model, often replicate the teaching strategies they experienced from their own teachers and may not care about the latest trends in the field or incorporate their own evolving experiences.

In contrast to the craft model, the applied science model emphasizes the use of a body of both theoretical and practical knowledge (Schön, 2017). Teachers adopting this model integrate research findings derived from scholars and researchers into their teaching practices. Similarly, the reflective model views teaching as a reflective process, a complex and highly skilled one, where classroom teachers exercise judgment in deciding actions based on evidence-based inquiry and insights from various research sources. Reflective teaching requires attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholehearted commitment (Pollard & Collins, 2005). Considering these principles, I wonder about how school teachers in Nepal present themselves in classrooms; if they actively utilize evidence-based knowledge and draw from their own experiences, or they adhere strictly to the practices inherited from their own teachers. Subsequently, I remained curious how school teachers in Nepal express their emotions to students and whether they engage themselves in a thorough understanding of their students.

Therefore, this study aims to exhibit the past and contemporary practices of emotional expressions and behaviours of teachers, as well as their efforts to comprehend various aspects of their students within the Nepalese context. The focus of this paper is on exploring whether there has been a consistent way or any changes over time in how teachers express their emotions and behave to their students. Additionally, this article seeks to determine if teachers actively strive to assess and comprehend the diverse dimensions of their students in the context of Nepal.

Methodology

I carried out this qualitative study drawing upon my own personal experiences to build up a subjective understanding (Creswell, 2015). Specifically, my exploration focuses on the dynamics of how teachers transferred their emotions to students and their corresponding behaviors both in the past and in the present. To address these issues, I employed auto-hermeneutics as the methodological approach, which offers a systematic means of delving into and articulating the ontological essence of my own lived experiences (Gorichanaz, 2017).

The groundwork of my study is based on three representative componential experiences I have collected: first, as a former school student; second, as a school teacher myself, and third, as a guardian of a school-going child. These diverse experiences serve as the primary sources of information, making a substantial contribution to enrich the depth of this qualitative inquiry (Sahhar et al., 2022). To communicate the study findings effectively, I presented various sections of these experiences in the form of narratives. Each representative story was precisely analyzed through a descriptive lens, connecting the supplementary insights obtained from a desk review which enriches the analysis and contributes a broader perspective to the study.

My Experience as a School Student

I have encountered with many experiences which seem to be so obnoxious to me in my school life. To mention one as a representative event, perhaps the oldest of such memories, let me narrate the story.

Over three and a half decades ago, during my fourth-grade year, I experienced a horrible incident that was vividly imprinted in my memory, marking a turning point in my attitude toward school. As one of the top-performing students, I had earned the position of being the first in class, and I would feel pride on my regular attendance.

This incident was directly associated with our Nepali subject teacher, who also happened to be the head-teacher, was very strict. Even his presence would be very terrifying to almost all the students. There was none being thrashed by him except me till that day.

The incident happened during a lesson on '*Pashupatinathko Mandir*' in our Nepali textbook. As a prelude to the lesson, our teacher, in an attempt to engage us in a warm up activity, asked for a unique name by which Nepalese Hindus regard *Lord Pashupatinath*. We eagerly told him various names such as *Mahadev*, *Shiva*, and *Shankar* but in vain. Despite my enthusiasm to participate and give the correct answer, I failed to provide the intended answer i.e. '*Aaradhya Dev*'.

Finally, I told that Nepalese Hindus regard *Pashupatinath* as '*Ishwor*'. To my dismay, the teacher rose from his chair and gave a forceful slap to my right cheek. My world plunged into darkness, and I found myself in tears, enduring additional thrashes. The rest of that school day became a plight for me and I got back home with a swollen cheek.

I reported the incident to my parents which yielded their little sympathy to me, but they dismissed it as a commonplace occurrence. I was reluctant to go to the school the next day but I was compelled to go due to the threat of my father. Since then the once heavenly school environment turned out to be a nightmare for me. From that day onward, I held back from speaking not only in Nepali class but also in other subjects. The joyful school life I once experienced had transformed into a traumatic reality which is still fresh in my memory.

My Experience as a School Teacher

I started my career as a school teacher (now I am a university teacher) over two decades ago, in Kathmandu, which was then the only metropolitan city in Nepal. During my early teaching years, there was a prevailing culture in the institutional schools that emphasized the importance of strictness among teachers. Unintentionally, I found myself adopting a strict way of dealing with the students to gain recognition as a good teacher.

As my career proceeded, I became the founder principal of an institutional school, where I further reinforced the culture of strictness, ranging from students to even teachers and staff as part of my administrative style. This strict conduct became a defining characteristic of my leadership.

Subsequently, I shifted to a public school where my status as a strict teacher persisted. I presented myself with an attitude of perfectionism, and even my name alone was enough to evoke a sense of (so-called) discipline among students. I was affectionate enough to them and kept on counseling to encourage and inspire in their studies and personal development. And, I also resorted to corporal punishments when counseling proved ineffective.

In this public school where I worked, the students primarily consisted of individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of them were domestic workers facing helplessness and vulnerability. Each student had a pathetic and often heart-wrenching story to share. This realization instilled in me a deep commitment to improving their academic performances thereby prompting me to employ various means to fostering their well-being. As an attempt to proceed towards this direction, I tried out different ways and means. Punctuality, regular attendance, completion of assignments, proper use of language, and proper use of uniform were recurring issues that demanded attention.

There was a student named Nishma (pseudonym), a seemingly mature 18-year-old girl in grade ten. She was frequently irregular, unpunctual, and consistently missed the assembly. Additionally, she often failed to complete her assignments. Despite my repeated attempts to explore the reasons behind her irregularity, Nishma remained silent and did not share her struggles with me. All of my endeavours remained futile; there was no improvement in her academic performance, attendance, and punctuality. I felt like a failure in her case and tried out even corporal punishment a couple of times, but in vain. Consulting with other teachers revealed that they had faced similar challenges with Nishma.

Frustrated and unsure of how to proceed, I transitorily ignored Nishma. It was during her speaking test, I decided to approach her once more with the intention of understanding her difficulties. With tears in her eyes, Nishma finally began to unfold her stories.

Nishma had been living with her mother and two little brothers along with her step-father who tried to abuse her sexually whenever he came home drunk. Her mother had to wrestle against him to protect her. Nishma hardly had a single day when she felt secured. Besides, her family had encountered a serious financial crisis; they did not have any sources for living except the little wages mother collected from the construction sites as a labourer. Being failure to endure the situation, Nishma's

mother went to Kuwait for foreign employment shifting her children to another rented room not known to her husband.

The nightmare Nishma had been experiencing became more severe then. Her mother failed utterly to manage the cost for their living for several months. To overcome the plight Nishma started a job as a road sweeper. She was compelled to rise early at 4:00 A.M., leaving her little brothers in the room. Her mornings would be spent on the roads until 8:00 A.M. Upon returning home, she had to prepare meals for her brothers, make them ready for school, and take them there. After returning home, she had to complete household chores before heading to her own school. These adversities were the reasons that obstructed her to maintain her uniform, complete assignments, be regular and punctual, and enhance her academic performance, leading to unfavorable impressions among both peers and teachers.

Tears in eyes, she said ‘...*Sir yastai chha mera katha byathaharu; ahile samma ta ma marina, aba ta mardina hola hai sir...*’ (...these are the tales of my hardships and miseries; I have been able to survive till the date, and now I have hope for life, sir...). I sighed in despair as I listened to her stories and got overwhelmed with guilt and regret for all the punishments (though given with the intention of her betterment) that I gave to her. I could not dam up my tears. That was the first time I had ever rolled my tears down the cheeks in front of my students.

My Experience as a Guardian

About a year ago, my son, who studies at one of the most reputed schools in Kathmandu, started showing his reluctance to attend classes. This was unusual, as he had always been amused about school and had never missed a single day, even during the period of serious illness. He was the top-most ranking student in his class, making us proud of his academic achievements.

One day, upon noticing him unhappy and sad while returning from school, I inquired about the reason behind it. He initially claimed that everything was fine, but after persistent questioning, he reluctantly shared the incident that had been upsetting him.

The previous day, he had sought my assistance with his homework, questioning the accuracy of an answer provided by his teacher. When the teacher marked the answer as incorrect, he explained that it was the answer suggested by his father, a university teacher. No sooner had the teacher heard this than (instead of understanding his intention and perspective) she shouted at him...

"Don't bother discussing it with me. Just do as I say. The answer is in the book, and we have to stick to it. No need to display your attitude. I can't stand students showing their attitude. I don't care who your parents are. So never try 'my father is this, my mother is that' talk with me.

'Sorry, ma'am, I'm not trying to show any attitude. I'm just trying to clear up my confusion about the answer'.

'Hey, just be quiet! I don't want to hear anything from you now'.

The teacher's harsh response adversely affected him, and he found it difficult to enjoy school throughout that academic year. Despite my attempts at counseling and persuading him to stay, he insisted on changing the school. His desire to shift the school persisted until he learned that the teacher would not be instructing his next grade, bringing him a sense of relief. Now, having upgraded to the next class without that particular teacher, he has happily restored his previous positive attitude towards school.

Result and Discussion

The narratives presented above throw light on the multifaceted dynamics of teacher-student relationships, highlighting the crucial role of teachers in shaping students' behaviors, experiences, emotions, and attitudes towards learning. The experiences shared include both historical and contemporary perspectives, offering an understanding of the evolution or perseverance of certain practices within the Nepalese educational context.

The reflective account of my own school experience exposes a distressing incident that left a long-term impact on my perception of education and teachers (Day, 1999). The incident of involving corporal punishment on being failure in answering a question not only stresses the punitive nature of teaching practised over three decades ago but also raises questions about the relevance and efficacy of such disciplinary measures. This incident vividly reflects that teachers then were not so aware of the feelings and emotions of the students (Kaplan, 2018; Hargreaves, 1998; Keller & Becker, 2021) and they were quite indifferent with the students' needs and interest as well (Waller, 1965). Teachers did not seem to have been sensitive to the emotion of the students (Kaplan, 2018; Chen, 2019) and the fact that relationship between teacher and students can have long-lasting impact on students' learning (Day, 1999; Mainhard et al., 2018). They aimed to impart quality education to the students ignoring the fact that teacher- students relationship (Day, 1999), the way teachers express their feelings

and emotions to the students (Keller & Becker, 2021), significance of addressing students' needs and interests (Kaplan, 2018), inspiring the students to learn (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012) etc. are the pivotal factors in the endeavor of imparting quality education. But the experiences I collected as a school-boy reflected that the teachers then appeared to be oblivious about these factors and they deterred the students from learning in the name of being strict.

This historical perspective and practice prompts an exploration on whether punitive teaching methods and practices have evolved in the Nepalese educational system and persisted even today or they existed in certain instances in the history. To address this issue, let me analyze the second narrative about my experiences which I collected as a school teacher.

The second narrative compels me to confess that I failed in adhering to Rousseau's notion of reading my students 'from page to page'. My approach inclined towards strictness, influenced by the temptation to gain recognition as a strict teacher. In essence, I found myself crafted by the practices of my own teachers, aligning more with the traditional craft model of teaching described by Wallace (1991). Tactlessly, I neither embraced the applied science model nor the reflective one in my classroom teaching (Schon, 2017). This lack of flexibility in teaching models hampered my ability to effectively address the individual needs and interests of my students, leading to a failure in cultivating cordial relationships with them (Frenzel, 2014).

Reflecting on my own experiences with Nishma, I realized that my disciplinary approach overshadowed my understanding of her feelings, emotions and challenges. Rather than attempting to identify her challenges and miseries, I tried out counseling and punishment. Had I endeavored to sympathetically read Nishma's emotions and miseries, a better of communication might have emerged (Mainhard et al., 2018) which could have encouraged her to comfortably share her problems with me, allowing for shared efforts to find solutions. Unfortunately, I along with other teachers, developed a negative attitude towards Nishma, being a failure to attune our emotions and feelings with hers (Keller & Becker, 2021).

The collective attitude of teachers towards Nishma revealed that teachers are used to practicing traditional methods of dealing with students. Despite the changing understanding of the importance of emotional intelligence and student-centered approaches, there was an insistent adherence to punitive measures rather than positive initiatives to address the cases like Nishma's. This observation emphasizes a

resistance to change and revision in teaching methods reflecting themselves (Pollard & Collins, 2005), indicating a need for a more liberal and student-centred pedagogical approaches in the educational landscape of Nepal.

The third narrative about my experience as a guardian, reflects a more recent incident involving a teacher's harsh response to a student's inquiry about an assignment. This contemporary example suggests that certain issues related to teacher-student communication (Day, 1999) and emotional expression persist. The teacher's attitude towards the student's attempt to clarify a query reflects a potential lack of sympathy and understanding, leading to the student's dissatisfaction with the teacher's classroom practices (Kaplan, 2018; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012; Frenzel, 2014). The teacher's attitude and inability to address the feelings and emotions of the student introduced a big attitudinal shift in the student not only toward her class but also the school (Chen, 2019; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). This incident also reflects the failure of the teachers to attune with the feelings, emotions, needs, and interests of the students.

Conclusion

The information presented in this study highlights the long-lasting impact of teacher behaviors and emotional expressions on students. The study shows that there seems to be no substantial shift in the teachers' attitude, behavior, emotional expressions, and practices in Nepalese classrooms. The teachers seem to be still more influenced and guided by the conventional approaches, methods and practices. They seem to prefer presenting themselves in the classrooms as an authority assigned to exercise their power upon the students. They appear to be indifferent regarding the feelings, emotions, and miseries of the students both in the public and institutional schools. Their priorities are about only transferring the content knowledge to the students, but not knowing the different aspects of the students and dealing them accordingly.

Moreover, the study portrays a scene that the teachers appear to be insensitive regarding the emotional dynamics of teacher-student relationships in the Nepalese context. It shows the urgency for a holistic approach to teacher professional development that includes not only the transfer of content knowledge but also the cultivation of empathetic and emotionally aware educators. The connection of historical and contemporary experiences emphasizes the importance of addressing such issues considering teacher-student relationship and interactions so as to create a

positive and student-friendly learning environment. Future researches could delve deeper into the potential factors influencing teacher behaviors and emotional expressions, offering a wide understanding about classroom emotional dynamics in the educational atmosphere of Nepal.

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