



Teaching and beyond: exploring the educational landscape

TEACHING OFFERS A RANGE OF EXPERIENCE THAT PROVIDES A FOUNDATION FOR SUBSEQUENT ROLES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR. **ANAGHAA WAGH** SHARES HER PERSONAL JOURNEY.



Teaching, for me, was an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children who needed it the most. It was not only a window into the everyday life of a teacher, but also a window into the lives of my students, their surroundings, and the education system. The challenges were many, but so were the opportunities to learn and expand my horizons, and hopefully to make a positive impact.

What started as a volunteering stint during my gap year while preparing for competitive MBA entrance exams, became my ultimate career choice. I vividly remember the first day of walking into the classroom after joining Teach For India¹ as a volunteer. I felt an instant connection and a sense of belonging! Towards the end of my volunteering period, I was in an internal dilemma – I had to choose between a career in management and continue teaching on a volunteering basis or make a career switch altogether. The deciding moment arrived during an event I helped to organise as a volunteer; I realised that teaching was much more appealing and fulfilling for me. I applied for the Teach For India Fellowship and began the most adventurous and eye-opening journey that shaped my life.

Upon finishing the five-week at the training institute, I was placed in a government school in Pune to teach grade 4 students. As a Fellow, the primary goal I set for myself was to become the best teacher for my students. However, this goal transformed when an opportunity to become a school team leader arose. It was a new role with few specifications but I decided to take the chance anyway and make it my own. As a school team leader, I started looking beyond my own classroom and delved into the intricacies of the school as a system.

Working in a government school had its challenges. With barely four hours of instructional time and ad-hoc admin tasks, teaching and learning sometimes was a second priority. Most students in the school

came from low-income families, the majority of whose parents had little or no education. This translated into parental apathy and complete ignorance at times, which had to be tackled by counselling students or visiting their families. As for its workforce, the school's principal, majority of the teachers, and other staff were appointed by the government. While they always had students' best interests at heart, it seldom reflected in their practice due to limited system-level support. They lacked access to knowledge of innovative pedagogies, and in general, the school's work culture failed to put teaching and learning before everything else.

All of these problems at the school level impacted every classroom, so the Fellows decided to work in collaboration with the other teachers and the principal. Our expectation that this collaboration would be simple was quickly refuted – the Fellows and teachers had widely differing and sometimes conflicting perspectives on teaching and learning. We were also divided on lines of professional attitudes and work culture, which made this partnership an exhausting task. We started a forum to discuss the school's vision and work culture and organised monthly teacher development workshops to make this collaboration a success.

The challenges faced while working as a Fellow in a government school motivated me to enquire further and learn about education as a system. My next role as a Fellow was an internship with the Maharashtra State Council for Educational Research and Training (MSCERT)², where I worked as a research assistant, co-drafting a rubric for trainee teachers' evaluation. It was during this internship that I learned about the complexity of teacher education in the country and the problems thereof (NCTE, 2009). These included an ecosystem that supported the spawning of teaching training institutions which ranged from delivering poor quality training to being outright fraudulent. At a curriculum level, the emphasis was more on

the theories of pedagogy rather than practice. These problems had led to Maharashtra revamping its curriculum for Diploma in Education (D.Ed). Witnessing the redesign of the D.Ed curriculum, I realised that it takes a coordinated effort from all stakeholders to bring about change in a complex system. I also discovered that many teachers conducted action research in their classrooms and schools, and I could too! My goal had evolved into doing work informed by research and evidence that would impact the system.

As the academic year crossed its halfway-mark, Fellows were encouraged to take up an internship during the summer holidays at school. Going back to the Training Institute, I remember watching videos of teachers from around the world as examples of good teaching and leadership practice.

This sparked my interest in exploring 'teaching as leadership' in an international context. Fascinated by the Scandinavian model of education, I found an internship at Futuraskolan International in Sweden. I observed classes, interviewed and shadowed teachers, school leaders, and interacted with students and parents. I came back with many strong professional relationships and learnings for my class and implemented them straightaway. For example, a dedicated period every week to teach arts and physical education. In India, the burden of teaching the main curriculum subjects in the short school year and an even shorter school day meant that these two subjects did not get much attention and weren't as meaningful to the students as they could be. Following their practice at Futuraskolan, I incorporated easy-to-do art projects by famous artists along with short biographies on them. To make it relevant, the lessons had questions such as 'what values do you think the artist displayed in their life?', 'what did you learn from them?' etc. For physical education, I focused on healthy eating habits along with exercises, indoor and outdoor games.



The value of extra-curricular activities was imprinted on me from the volunteering days. In the final year of the Fellowship, I took on the responsibility of leading the Model United Nations programme for all Teach For India schools in Pune city. The principal idea was not to hold an event, but rather to build a sustainable platform for students to gain knowledge about the world and practice oratory and debate skills. As a team of 20 people, we succeeded in making this possible and the programme is now in its fourth successful year.

The sum of this experience whetted my appetite to explore education, especially educational leadership and school improvement, through research. Along with studying for a postgraduate degree in Education Management, I started to work as a teaching assistant in primary and secondary schools in London. Though I spotted many differences between schools in India and the UK, I noted common challenges too – the attainment gap between low and high-income students, scarcity of funds, shortage of teachers, etc. While these challenges still stand

strong, a greater focus on educational research in the UK aids to overcome them. With organisations like the Education Endowment Foundation running research trials all throughout the year, schools have the opportunity to participate in those trials and benefit from the evidence-based interventions.

The experience of teaching, and working with students and parents in partnership has been the anchor in my exploration of the education sector and a helpful resource to draw from at every turn. I found that one's teaching experience adds more value to any role they might take up in the education sector. A teacher's point of view is by and large in demand, and it gives an additional advantage. Personally, being a teacher has humbled me and made me a reflective person. Although I couldn't have envisaged the exact path my career would take when I first started teaching, the journey so far has been a wonderful learning experience. I am determined to keep on exploring the wonderful world of education. **T**

NOTES

¹*Teach For India is a non-profit organisation that is a part of the Teach For All network. The Fellowship recruits college graduates and working professionals to serve as full-time teachers in low-income schools for two years (Wikipedia). <https://apply.teachforindia.org>*

²*Maharashtra State Council for Educational Research and Training is the apex academic institute of the state. Its function is to provide academic support and help improve the quality of primary education.*

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REFERENCES

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