What are your beliefs as a teacher?

Neeraja Raghavan

Teachers are expected to be up-to-date with all that is happening in the education sector: well, if not *all*, at least the significant developments. Given the packed day of a teacher, however, there is scarcely any time to browse through the literature and cull out the valuable findings of researchers and educators. Thinking Teacher is launching this series with the intent of bridging this gap: we will bring to the readers of *Teacher Plus* the *essence of one research paper in each article*. Along with the gist of the paper, we will also suggest ways of putting into practice the main import of the paper through some strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. We invite your responses – if and when you do practice any of these strategies at < thinkingteacher22@gmail.com > .

In our last exchange, we examined the prior concepts and beliefs that children come with when we engage with them in our classrooms. So I thought an appropriate extension of that paper would be to read about the beliefs and values that we – *teachers* – come with when *we* enter our classrooms! Unlike our previous installments in this series, you will find in this one **a set of very do-able exercises** which are guaranteed to help you reflect on your teaching practice.

This time, I went through a chapter of a book (see box below) and it made very interesting reading indeed. The author begins by posing a provocative question: by asking whether a teacher should randomly select her instructional strategy and mode of assessment, or if there should be *some deliberate thought* behind this choice. He then goes on to point out that there are certain underlying beliefs and values that determine even these so-called 'random' choices that teachers make, and leads the reader through a systematic route of examining (and enquiring into) these values and beliefs. He assures the reader that if an honest self assessment is conducted, as suggested, this will pave the way for the development of clear targeted objectives.

Title of Chapter: What are your values, practices and actions as a teacher?
Author: Jeff C Marshall
Title of Book: Succeeding with enquiry in Math and Science Classrooms (ASCD publication)
Link for free download: http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/113008/chapters/What-Are-Your-Values,-Practices,-and-Actions-as-a-Teacher%C2%A2.aspx

Just for fun, I too, joined the exercise. I invite you to try it as I enjoyed it greatly.

To begin with, he jolts the reader's attention by stating a vital research finding as below:
The greatest academic growth is not dependent upon students' gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Rather, the teacher's effectiveness is the single greatest determinant of student success (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

So if you ever had any doubts about the power that we wield as teachers, Darling-Hammond's research study sets those doubts at rest!

The author then goes on to use a lovely analogy for describing perspectives: altitudes! Imagine yourself climbing a high mountain – the mountain of your perspectives! The more overarching the perspective, the higher will be your altitude. Thus, he places *values* at 30,000 feet above sea level, *core ideas* at 10,000 feet, with *interactions, relationships and learning* on ground, i.e., sea level.

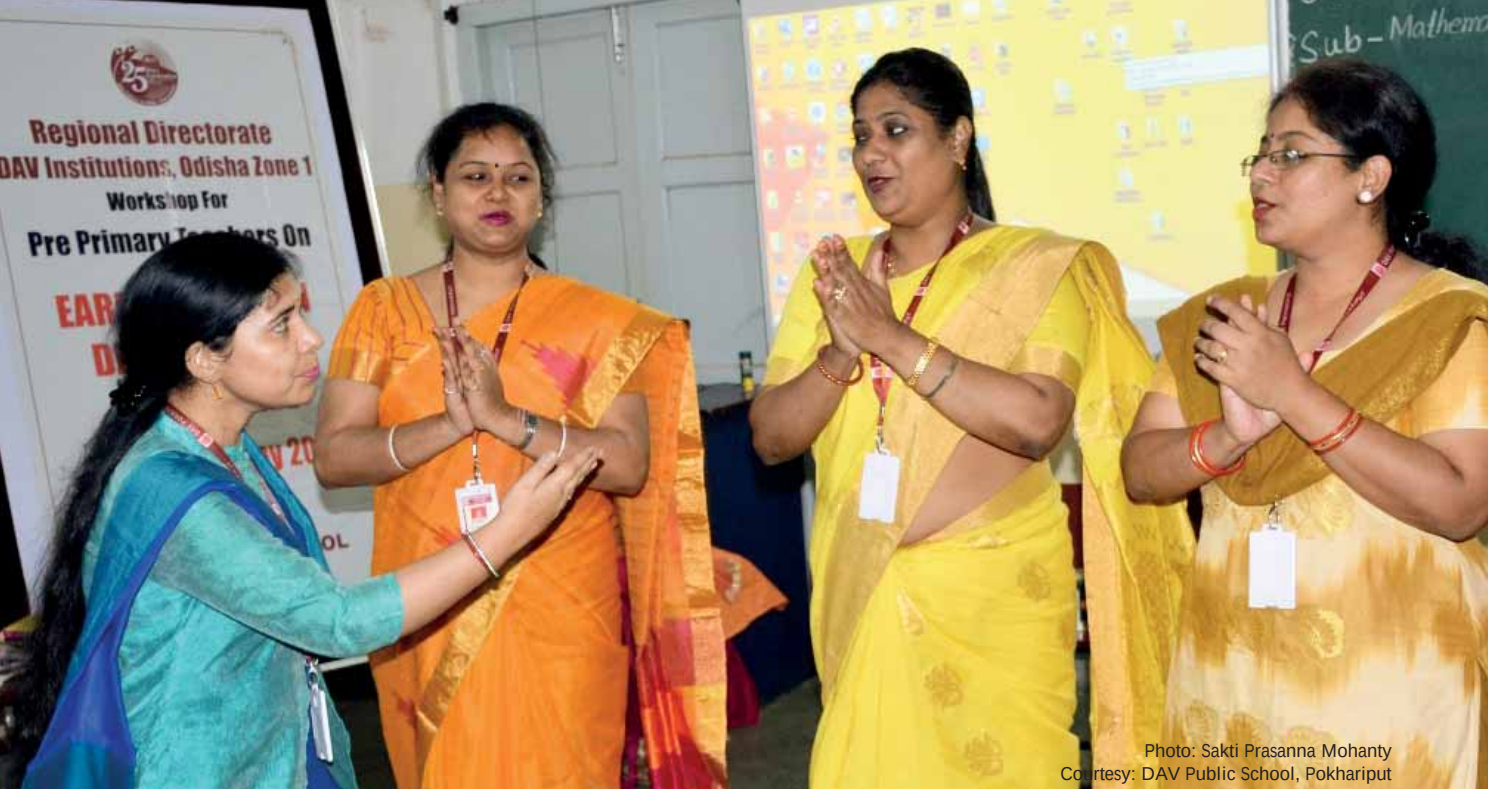

Photo: Sakti Prasanna Mohanty
Courtesy: DAV Public School, Pokhariput

Reproduced below is his table:
Perspectives That Inform Your Values and Practices
(Ref. Chapter 1, *Succeeding with Inquiry in Science and Math Classrooms* by Jeff C. Marshall)

Perspective	Core Values and Practices	Question to Address
30,000'	Teaching philosophy	What do you value?
10,000'	Core ideas	What is truly important for students to know and be able to do?
1,000'	Success	How do you know when students have been successful?
100'	Strategies	How are students engaged in learning?
Ground level	Interactions, relationships, and learning	How can learning be maximized?

He then nudges the readers to take a moment to write out their own teaching philosophy in one or two sentences. I found this to be tough – but very fulfilling – to do. He points out that this should be a *dynamic statement* which will evolve as we do, as teachers.

Now, if you are bewildered and are looking for guidance as to how to go about this sort of articulation, he cleverly adds:
If you are like most readers, you might now begin to peek ahead to see what the "right" answer is. After all, our educational upbringing has taught us to look for the single right answer instead of seeking thoughtful, unique solutions.

I couldn't help chuckling as I read this: for this rings so true especially in our Indian scenario, where most of us are so conditioned to look for the 'right answer'!

He then takes us down to the next notch, and asks us to *review what is truly important*. By this, what he means is:
The 8 to 10 things that you want your students to know or be able to do by the end of the year.

Now I found this very difficult to put down. On the surface, it seems as if the prescribed syllabus will dictate this. However, teachers know only too well that present day syllabi are often too heavy (especially in the senior classes) and frequently necessitate focusing (by the teacher) on *some portions* of it over others.

What determines this selection? Is it the types of questions expected in the end-of-year examination? Or is it the *inherent importance* in the selected topics: for living everyday life?*

* In this regard, I recall an interesting talk, where the speaker began by writing out the following equation on the board: $X = -b + (b^2 - 4ac)^{½} / 2a$ and then followed this up with asking: "How often have you used this equation in your life, after you passed the exams which tested you on it?" I had to answer: "Never!"

Deepening conceptual understanding, *teachers in response...*

Teacher Plus would like to thank its readers who have been writing in to share their views on the article ***Deepening conceptual understanding***, which was published in its April 2017 edition. We give the responses here in brief. Please do visit www.teacherplus.org for more detailed versions of these responses.

I have always believed in my approach of using stories to teach concepts. But my experience has also taught me that that may not always work. I had to teach Kabir and his poetry to my 10th class students and while Kabir and his life became a passionate storytelling session, I couldn't apply the same methodology to his poetry. And the gap in the students' understanding of Kabir and his poetry was quite clear. So I use different techniques like songs and role plays also to 'hook' my students to learning. I have come to believe that dividing a large chapter into smaller units helps convey concepts more clearly, although being able to divide the chapter at the right places and helping students form connections from one part of the chapter to the other involves a lot of work for the teacher. It is also important to create an open atmosphere in the classroom so that students can express themselves, grow and learn together.

Swathi Gautam
The Peepal Grove School, Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh

Before starting a new lesson I always discuss the topic with my students. These discussions are lively and act as a hook to the lesson they will next be learning.

By connecting the chapters in their textbooks to everyday life and learning I help my students form information chunks and find connections between them. This helps them remember their lessons.

I try and create a friendly atmosphere in class so that my students are not afraid to answer, discuss, and comment on the lesson being learnt.

Also in order to give my students new experiences and spaces to learn I not only am watching videos by physics experts but also a TV serial called Science of Stupid.

Nusrat
Kendriya Vidyalaya, Chandrapur

Perforce, while answering this question posed by the author, I found myself examining the *intrinsic worth* of whatever I had thus far deemed to be 'important' and 'worth teaching/learning'.

How do *you* find this exercise? I will be curious to know.

Here, the author cites certain research studies which showed that exemplary teachers view standards as *guidelines* or *frameworks* to aid their teaching practice, whereas other teachers regard them as obstacles. I took this to mean that *the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath*. In other words, if a teacher regards the prescribed syllabus as a guideline rather than a millstone around her neck, it will make for that much more enjoyable teaching and learning! Needless to say, the teacher needs wholehearted support from the management of the school to hold this view.

The author then goes on to ask when our students have been the *most successful*. As I thought about this, I realized that this brought to the fore my own definition of 'success' and made me re-examine my usual route of planning a lesson, implementing it and *then* assessing student understanding. The author suggests that we go about it in a slightly different fashion, viz.

- First, identifying the core ideas in whatever we are going to teach.
- Then, listing out the main concepts within these core ideas, which we expect the student to master by the end of the lesson.
- Then designing our assessment method for gauging whether or not the above has truly been mastered.
- After all of the above, the author suggests that the lesson be planned keeping in mind this method of assessment.

This turned on its head my usual route of lesson planning. Does it do the same to yours? After all, we are all so used to the PLAN-IMPLEMENT-ASSESS route, that this sequence seems to be back to front,

I learned this lesson over a period of time that learning is all about sharing with open heart and objectivity. It is about sitting together and creating an environment of listening and accepting others' ideas. I teach chemistry and I know the power of effective questioning. To me the most important rule of teaching is knowing my students and leading them to the solution by letting them explore on their own without deviating from the goal. For this, the teacher must be well equipped with knowledge, understanding and application skills. The teacher should also know when she should hold her students' hands and when she should let go. A teacher should never give up on her students. I try and understand each of my students' strengths and weaknesses and thereby work out how to react to each of them. This is how I believe I have come to earn the love and respect of all my students.

Asia Khawar, Fauji Fertilizer company FFC Grammar School, Sindh, Pakistan

As a teacher there have been many instances where I have been really satisfied after teaching a concept but later found out that my students didn't understand the lesson as well as I thought they did. I particularly recall an instance of having taught parts of the flower to class six students.

Before beginning the lesson when I asked the students what they knew about the parts of a flower, most said they had already learnt the topic and therefore did not pay as much attention during the lesson. (This I found out later when trying to understand what had gone wrong with the lesson plan.)

The scientific names of the parts of the flower were new and confusing to the children and they couldn't relate a live flower with the diagram in their book.

I found out about these problems only after I gave them a worksheet to answer based on the lesson. So I went back to the drawing board and we did the entire lesson again. A real challenge for the students was relating a real 3d flower to the 2d image of the same in their textbooks. We recalled the the learnt concepts during informal situations in the playground or the dining hall. These chunks of information helped relate to the topic in the class.

The construction of working models helped the children clear the concepts.

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The Peepal Grove School, Andhra Pradesh

almost, doesn't it? And yet, it does make a lot of sense!

As the author points out, the first method assumes that the end-of-lesson assessment is the appropriate method for gauging achievement of objectives, while the suggested sequence above does not make any such assumption. Instead, it nudges the teacher to revisit the learning objectives and *think them through in the light of a valid assessment methodology*. By doing so, the teacher stays aligned with what (s)he values as *critical learning*, instead of merely going along with what the writers of the textbook deemed to be of value. It is here that the teacher's own values come bobbing up! The author then proceeds to invite the reader to take a look at how students are involved in the classroom transaction, by scrutinizing aspects like the following: *determine the percentage of time students typically spend doing (1) individual work, (2) small-group work, and (3) whole-group work.* The author calls the resulting pie-chart a *General Classroom Organization Chart*. Further, he invites the teacher to also examine the *learning environment* by noting down: *portions of time typically spent on (1) teacher presentation; (2) class discussion; (3) group projects, labs, and explorations; and (4) individual work.*

To be honest, I have not yet tried this exercise. But I can immediately see the immense value in it. It might help if I have an observer sit in on my class and make this apportioning, so as to keep the assessment objective. Would you like to try this as well? He ends the chapter by inviting the reader to take a look at instructional strategies, and gives a suggested list of such strategies for the teacher to run through and mark against. Just how this will connect to a teacher's underlying beliefs, I leave it to you to decipher!

Overall, I found this chapter to be a good stimulus to reflect on my own teaching practice. If you would like to bring the essence of this chapter into your classroom, do try out the extracts that are inserted in the box on the next page.

Now bring it into the classroom!

- Articulate your **teaching philosophy** in one or two clear sentences. (You may need to write more than one draft.)
- List the 8 to 10 **core ideas** that you want your students to master by the end of the school year. Which are the most important? Which are the least important? (How) Can you cut down on the time spent on the less important ideas and increase the amount of time that you will spend in teaching the more important ideas?
- Draw your **General Organization Chart** as well as **Learning Environment Chart**. Seek the help of an impartial observer if you are unable to do this yourself.
- Now step back and examine both these charts. What do they tell you about **your teaching and learning environment**? Do they represent an ideal scenario? How can you make the environment better?
- Try filling in the **Teaching Approaches** table in the original paper – see the box: *TIP: Teaching Approaches* in the link http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/113008/chapters/What-Are-Your-Values,-Practices,-and-Actions-as-a-Teacher%C2%A2.aspx
- Now go back to the first statement of your teaching philosophy. Re-examine whether or not your charts and teaching approaches are in **alignment with your philosophy**.

Please do share your responses to these suggestions at thinkingteacher22@gmail.com

References

1. Jeff C. Marshall (ASCD publication) *Succeeding with Inquiry in Science and Math Classrooms* Chapter 1. What Are Your Values, Practices, and Actions as a Teacher?
2. Linda Darling-Hammond (2000) Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol 8(1) pp. 1-44

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher (www.thinkingteacher.in), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at < neeraja@thinkingteacher.in > .