Our Vision of Teachers Who Love Teaching and Children Who Love Learning

By STIR Education

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Our Vision

STIR's vision is of a world where teachers love teaching and children love learning. As the world is facing a teacher motivation crisis, we want to change the global debate about teachers by proving that teachers can fall in love with teaching again, so that children can fall back in love with learning. We currently work with about 6 million children across India and Uganda, and the problems they face are stark. In India, about 50% of grade five students are unable to read a grade two test, or solve a simple subtraction problem. In Uganda, about 7 in 10 children won't finish primary education. Around the world – in developed and developing countries – teachers have fallen out of love with teaching. In December 2018, more teachers resigned than in any previous month in US history. In Uganda, 35% of teachers are absent from school each day. In 2014, UNESCO found that 84% of teachers wanted to quit the profession altogether.

A love of Teaching and Learning

Governments and civil society organizations around the world (e.g. ASER and Uwezo as examples) have invested significant amounts of effort in measuring the state of the learning crisis across the world. Most of this effort has been focused on measuring cognitive learning outcomes, primarily literacy and numeracy. Increasingly, these assessments are now going beyond the basics and incorporating a focus on key 21st Century skills such as creativity and collaboration. At STIR, we are encouraged by this widened perspective on how student learning is defined and measured.

At the same time, we believe that sustained improvements in student learning ultimately depend on whether students develop a love of learning by being taught by intrinsically motivated teachers. Students who love learning are those who are excited to come to school and stay in school, who deeply engage in their studies, who are curious and think critically, who develop a growth-mindset and a positive relationship with their teacher. We believe that these are fundamental ingredients for children to learn, but they're too often overlooked in current assessments. Similarly, we want to demonstrate that by reigniting teachers' intrinsic motivation, teachers are more likely to attend school, teach more material more effectively, focus on all students, and continue to grow as professionals.

In partnership with state governments in India and the national government in Uganda, we've been actively working with system officials and teachers to reignite teacher intrinsic motivation and children's love of learning. We've been doing this in three different ways:

First, by developing the sense of autonomy (that you can change something), mastery (that you can improve), and purpose (a sense of connection with what you are doing and with others around you) within individuals at all levels of the system. By introducing teachers to evidence-based teaching principles (e.g. on how to effectively engage their students) and providing them with the ownership to adapt these principles to their own classrooms, teachers start to develop a sense of purpose when they observe student learning improve due to their efforts. Students, in turn, need to feel that passion and purpose among their teachers to develop a belief that they too can improve. This in turn leads to a sense of trust among children in their teachers, which in turn encourages them to be more engaged. Lastly, as they become more engaged, feel safer in the classroom, and consequently learn better, students start to develop their curiosity, critical thinking, and a growth-mindset to improve even further.

Second, in order to enable this cycle of autonomy, mastery and purpose described above and ultimately a love of learning among students, strengthening specific system structures is key. Examples of specific system structures include the ability among district officials to regularly provide observation and feedback to teachers on how they can further improve their practice; ensuring that teachers get paid reasonably well and on time so that their intrinsic motivation can indeed be reignited; or the ability among system officials to align different technical interventions so that teachers don't feel overwhelmed. These types of system structures have a direct impact on how teachers behave in the classroom and therefore on children's experience.

Third, in order to further strengthen students' feeling of passion about learning, it is important for technical programmes to be in place. Once teachers feel intrinsically motivated to further grow as professionals and engage in let's say a technical reading programme, they're better positioned to further accelerate learning outcomes, thereby strengthening the feeling of students seeing their learning improve. There is thus a direct link between the existence of "technical seeds" in a system and students' love of learning.

A 2015 OECD report on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) discusses these links between student motivation and learning outcomes: "students with high achievement goals tend to do better at school…with higher autonomous and internalised achievement motivation often come higher self-esteem, stronger cognitive flexibility, and greater effort invested at school." Similarly, the report finds that students in the top quarter of the index of achievement motivation score the equivalent of more than one year of school higher in science than students in the bottom quarter.

Carter et al. (2012) illustrate how students who are motivated tend to believe that they can impact their environment in positive ways, have a sense of duty and obligation, devote greater effort toward achieving success and regulate their behaviour to achieve their goals. In a recent article in The Atlantic – titled "Why grades are not paramount to achievement – the intrinsic love of learning supplants the drive for high remarks in the long run," Ashley Lamb-Sinclair describes how freeing students from the pressure of assessment and instead enabling them to develop a genuine love of learning contributes to drastic improvements in student engagement, enthusiasm, and determination. This in turn has a key impact on actual learning outcomes and students' career ambitions.

Relatedly, a 2011 meta-analysis of 200 studies – and comprising approximately 50,000 students – found that curiosity had a large effect on academic performance. In 2018, a University of Michigan study of over 6,000 kindergartners suggested a strong correlation between curiosity and improved achievement in reading and maths; interestingly, the effect of curiosity appeared to be higher for disadvantaged students (0.18 SD for disadvantaged, versus 0.08 for advantaged students). Fostering curiosity may have a key role to play in raising achievement for disadvantaged students.

Changing the Narrative for Children – Measuring a Love of Learning

It's often said, what's measured is what matters. It is what inspires leaders to take action by recognizing challenges and setting priorities. Extensive evidence has illustrated the relationship between intrinsically motivated children and learning outcomes, which is why we believe it's critically important to measure core indicators that define a child who loves learning:

1) First, it's key that governments systematically collect data on whether students are enrolled in school, whether they stay in school, whether they attend class, and if feasible whether they spent their time on task.

2) Second, we believe it's important to measure specific behavioral indicators of intrinsic motivation through relatively simple classroom observations, focused on six key areas:

- **The extent to which students are engaged in the classroom** (e.g. do students participate in class activities assigned by the teacher; do students embark on assigned activities readily; and do students sitting in different parts of the room contribute to class discussions by trying to answer questions)

- **The extent to which students trust their teachers in the classroom** (e.g. is there enjoyment between the teacher and the students, evidenced by the teacher smiling and/or encouraging students; do students follow class rules and the teachers' directions; and do students ask the teacher for clarification or help with an assignment or task)

- **The extent to which students feel physically and emotionally safe in the classroom** (e.g. do students seem to know what's expected from them and follow clear routines; does the teacher use corporal or physical punishment to discipline students; and does the teacher use negative words or body language to discipline students)

- **The extent to which students are enabled to develop curiosity** (e.g. do students raise their hands to participate in activities; are students able to ask the teacher for clarification)

- **The extent to which students are encouraged to develop a growth-mindset** (e.g. does the teacher have a positive attitude towards students' challenges, does the teacher acknowledge students' efforts)

- **The extent to which students are supported to develop critical thinking skills** (e.g. does the teacher check learners' assignments, does the teacher use questions, prompts or other strategies to check students' level of understanding)

3) Third, in order to understand the extent to which students' love of learning is embedded into their day-to-day experience in the classroom, we use simple surveys to ask students targeted questions, such as:

Engagement
- Do you like school (not at all, somehow, very much)

- When was the last time your teacher called on you to answer a question (never, this week, last week, in the last month, more than a month ago)

Curiosity, growth-mindset, and critical thinking:
- What do you when you're faced with a difficult exercise (ask my teacher for help, work with other students, keep trying to solve it myself, wait until someone tells me the answer, skip it)

- How did you feel when the exercise was difficult (frustrated, excited to try to learn more, bored waiting to hear the answer, sad because others had an easier time than me, determined to solve the problem)

Trust:
- Does the teacher call on you by name (yes, no, no response)

- When was the last time that you asked a teacher or other staff member at school for help with something that was bothering you (today, this week, last week, in the last month, more than a month ago)

Safety:
- Have you been caned or physically punished this term at school (yes, no, no response)

- How often do you see teachers verbally abusing students (never, daily, weekly, monthly, rarely)

Changing the Narrative for Teachers – Measuring a Love of Teaching

As described above, we define an intrinsically motivated teacher as someone who is more likely to attend school, teach more material more effectively, focus on all students and keep growing as a professional. In order to measure whether teachers love teaching:

1) We believe it is critical for governments to collect key indicators with regard to teacher effort, including whether teachers attend school, whether teachers attend class, and whether teachers spend their time teaching

2) Second, we believe it's important to measure specific behavioral indicators of intrinsic motivation through simple classroom observations, including:

   - **The extent to which teachers are trying out new classroom strategies that they're introduced to**

   - **The extent to which teachers are focused on all students** (e.g. does the teacher call on students in the class equally, instead of the same students repeatedly; does the teacher call on students by name; and does the teacher provide praise to students equally instead of only to some)

   - **The extent to which teachers are trying to improve as professionals** (e.g. by engaging in specific training opportunities and by receiving and responding to feedback from peers and their head teacher)

3) Third, to understand the extent to which these behaviors are embedded in the day-to-day behavior of teachers, we ask students about their experience in the classroom (see above) as well as teachers about:

Attendance / engagement:
- If you missed school, why did you miss?

- How many days in the last 2 weeks were you late to school?

- Do you like teaching?

- Think about your career goals over the next 3 years, what job would you most like to have (stay in current position, change to another position in education, or change to another profession)

Professional development:
- Do you meet with other teachers in your school to learn and improve your practices?

- How often are you observed and do you find the feedback you receive helpful?

- Do you feel that you've improved as a result of observation and feedback?

Focus on all students:
- Approximately how many of your students do you know by name?

- When you plan lessons, how do you consider the needs of students at all ability lessons?

Trying out new practices:
- Think about your class in the past week, have you done any of the following (ask students if they understood what was taught; let students work with each other; smile or laugh with students; show students how to do an activity during the lesson)

Looking ahead

At STIR, we're currently implementing these measures at large scale in India and Uganda, both through ongoing data collection using mobile technology by our internal team as well as by an external evaluation partner among a sample of the schools we work with to validate our insights, and where needed further strengthen them by collecting additional data on the indicators described above. By doing so, we hope to set an example for organizations globally who are committed to helping children learn and supporting teachers to thrive, to not just focus on actual learning outcomes but as importantly about what ultimately drives children to love learning and teachers to love teaching.