

Reframing Teacher Professionalism in Times of Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper is based upon the writer’s personal experience, observation, and a mini-research accomplished during the Covid pandemic. The paper attempts at exploring teachers’ attitudes towards their professionalism. It further explores the professional activities that they are engaged in during the lockdown. The subjects sampled in this study are teachers of the English language at different levels where the writer has used a questionnaire as a tool for data collection. The findings establish a linkage between survivability and professionalism, with reference to teachers’ responses and their teaching experiences and engagement in TPD activities.

Keywords: Professionalism, survivability, updating, professional activities

Introduction

‘*Marne se pahle mai marna nahi chahata*’ (*I do not want to die before my death*), says Rajesh Khanna in the film *Avtaar* (Kumar, 1983). Khanna (the old man) utters this dialogue to his sons in a challenging tone when he was neglected, discarded, and cheated by them after losing his hand. He had been a mechanic throughout his life and had developed enough skill and expertise. He did not want to be a burden for his children in his old age. Thus, he restarted his garage with an amputated hand.

The above scene highlights how a good professional can adjust in an adverse context. The pandemic of Covid 19 appears to be one of such adverse situations for teaching professionals. College and schools remained closed for long; many teachers were forced to do other jobs for earning their living.

In this context, the main purpose of the present study was to explore how teachers endured the Covid pandemic and what they did to survive in the teaching profession. In the following sections, first I unpack the meaning of being professional and the importance of transforming ourselves in adjusting to adverse situations. Then, I briefly describe the study process and discuss the key insights that emerged from my study.

Professionalism and teachers’ survivability

From my long teaching experience, I have realized that being a professional is more than magnifying our status in resumes. It is an opportunity for us to be members of a particular group and create identity and recognition in our field. However, survival appears to be the baseline for professional development. If we (teachers) fail to survive in the teaching profession in an adverse context, we can (and should) not claim ourselves as professionals. As sensible professionals, we need to make a strong foundation for our survivability to be in charge of our professional development, without which expecting any agency or organization to work for our survival might be a blunder.

Like others, the teaching profession has taken different courses at different periods of history. Nobody knows what threat is lurking somewhere ahead; however, we need to be ready to face the unseen challenges. Facing such challenges can enhance our professional skills. For example, some teachers effectively adopted online teaching during the lockdown of Covid 19 and could sustain themselves in the profession. In this sense, the pandemic has made us aware of the importance of ICT and virtual classes in imparting education. However, it has also raised a number of questions on the infrastructure of the educational institutes, teachers' quality, their attitude towards the profession, ICT facilities: connectivity and tools for online teaching etcetera. Thus, implementing online education appears to be one of the greatest challenges in the Nepalese context.

The Study

This article is based on personal experience of online teaching during the pandemic, observation of teachers' lives and their agonies, and a survey made on teachers of Province 2, Nepal. The survey tool was sent to 100 plus teachers from primary to university levels but only 45 responded to it. Their responses were minutely studied and analyzed, and they were discussed with the help of related literature. The insights that emerged from this study have been presented below under different themes and sub-themes.

Factors affecting teachers' professionalism

Teaching has always been a very challenging profession for a long time. It requires devotion, dedication, and dynamics with the teachers. Instant updating always appears a must in the teaching profession. Teachers are always expected to work for their professional development to signify their existence. Those with continuous professional development happen to occupy a marked space in the field while others are left behind. There comes a certain moment that filters the teachers certifying their meaningful existence in the profession. Hence, the professional development of a teacher stands atop for making teachers professionally alive.

While observing teachers through a professional lens, it appeared imperative for me to talk about survivability. When the survivability itself is at risk, what next then? During the pandemic of Covid-19, teachers were also one of the big sufferers. Then the question comes what if the profession does not lay a strong foundation of survivability.

What can make teachers exist in the profession might not be an easy question. From my study and experience, I found four key factors more dominant in ensuring teachers' survivability in the teaching profession. *First, teaching needs innovation.* Even during the pandemic, the innovative teachers were able to motivate their learners well. They could arouse interest in the learners and manipulate them easily. Learners seem to expect something new, and only new ideas appeal to their hearts and mind. Thus, innovation helped them to be fit in the profession even in an adverse situation.

Next, teachers need to be fit for the digital generation. The 21st century can rightly be called the digital age. It asks us to be digitally friendly. The teachers, who were digitally fit, could walk along with the pace of the change. They used many web tools and technologies in their online classroom and helped students learn better. Munbayva, Sadvakava, and Ashalova (2017) highlighted the need for ICT and multimedia in education to make the students of the new generation capable of surviving in the digital age.

Third, we need to adopt change and also be adapted to it. Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of America, put people in three categories: those that are immovable, those that are movable, and those who move. Immovable people are rigid in their thought; they cannot be moved. The immovable is the biggest in number. On the other hand, some people can be moved by new thoughts and ideas. However, a very less number of proactive people can move others. These are the people who adopt the new ideology and concept and try to fit themselves in every sort of upcoming situation. This was found true in teaching as well. During the pandemic, only a few dynamic teachers accepted the change (online teaching) and got adapted to it.

Finally, reading can be empowering for teachers to adjust, learn, and grow professionally. In my experience and understanding, reading serves many purposes: simply from pleasure taking to information gathering. It adds a powerful lens to teachers so that they can see the life and world ahead. Reading makes them knowledgeable and resourceful. It also helps language teachers in enlarging their vocabulary and developing linguistic competence (Krashen, 2004).

Professional development activities during the pandemic

My survey sheds light on the fact that adversity cannot derail the people with strong determination. Despite its irreversible impact of the pandemic of Covid-19, some teachers maintained their professional ethics which requires regular engagement in the profession. When surveyed, 10 teachers (28 %) adopted *online teaching*; 16 teachers (32%) *attended webinars*; 10 (28%) *presented papers* in the webinars; 5 (14%) *read* articles and 5 (14%) consumed their big portion of leisure time both in *reading* (different books) and *writing* articles. Interestingly enough majority of teachers, who took online classes, presented the papers in webinars. Their engagement in different professional activities appears to have made them more competent in the teaching profession.

Lockdown was found to be beneficial for many professionals. They learned ICT skills, attended webinars, and presented their papers on different online platforms. This enabled them to get connected to the resourceful people whose guide can be a big tool for their professional development. Three major professional development activities that the teachers followed during the Covid insurgency are:

Applying web tools in online classes

When surveyed about the use of web tools used for classroom purposes, the responses were: *google classroom, SMMRY, Rewordify, Google slides, Mentimeter, Today's meet, Listenwise, Bitgab*. Out of 45, 13 teachers (29 %) found to be using google classroom for classroom purposes' 4% of the teachers used SMMRY, 7% of them used Rewordify, 15% Google Slides, 11 % Mentimeter, 7% Today's meet, and 9% Listenwise.

With the increasing use of ICT in the classroom, teachers have started using different web tools for effective presentation in the classroom. And this seems to justify that professional development always remains at the center for the prospective teachers.

Reading inspirational books

Although reading plays a very important role in teaches' life, most teachers are found to read just for the sake of doing their jobs. The study revealed that the majority of teachers hardly read anything apart from the texts prescribed by the curriculum. However, the lockdown seems to have been more meaningful for some teachers (about 10%) who love reading. They were found to have utilized their leisure time in reading some very important and thought and perspective-changing books. Some books worth reading by teachers are *Emotional Intelligence, Courage to teach, Courage to be Disliked, The Art of Creative Writing, Rich Dad, Poor Dad, the Heart of Awareness, Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and a few others.

The participants were of the opinion that these books can be life-changing for teachers. They expressed that good readers can be better teachers. In this line, Commeyers et al (2003)in '*We Readers as Teachers*' states that reading matters in the teaching profession and teaching matters in reading. They also shared that reading inspirational books was not only a good time pass in the pandemic but also a transformative experience as Job (2005) puts reading inspirational books clears up the dogma and fills one life with new bits of perspective-changing information.

Watching movies on teachers' lives

When asked to suggest inspirational movies for teachers, it was suggested that the teachers must watch the following movies: *Dead Poets Society, Stand and Deliver, School of the Rock, Tare Zameen Par, Three Idiots' English Medium' Hichiki, Super 30, Freedom Writer, Matilda, Fitoor, Madam Geeta Rani, Angrezi Medium, Pariksha, I am Kalam*, and *Beyond the Blackboard*

There are lots of movies that can change the thought and perspectives of the teachers. The study suggests that teachers watching professionally inspirational movies tend to have been affected at the intuition level.

The Covid 19: A Curse or a Boon?

The research made on English language teachers of Province 2 suggests that the Covid 19 is not a curse, rather a boon, at least for professional teachers. They claimed to have been benefited during the pandemic. They learned lots, upgraded more, and brightened better. To them, they would not have been as informed as they are now. They have been more techno-friendly, and better informed about instructional phenomena. What's more, they have empowered themselves much better than before.

Conclusion

The issue of teachers' survivability has been a clarion call after the long lockdown against the threat of Covid 19. The study revealed that the teaching profession and professionals both are at the stake. Some teachers have already left the profession, and still, there is a big mass who might leave it in future. Despite the problem of survivability, some teachers engaged themselves in finding newer ideas, applying different web tools, and enhanced their knowledge base. Thus, they took this pandemic as an opportunity to read, learn, understand, and strengthen themselves and they have been more resourceful.

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