

A calling to teach inspires educators to nurture and challenge students, creating a reciprocal relationship where both students and teachers grow, learn, and contribute to a vibrant, compassionate community of lifelong learners.

# The Heart of Education

## Being Called to Teach

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Teaching has been called a noble profession. It prepares all other professions and a future generation for an unknown tomorrow. However, the teaching profession is filled with innumerable challenges — from students to their families to the policies at workplaces and institutions.

A call or passion for teaching transcends the obstacles and helps teachers understand the value of their profession. A calling to teach helps teachers look at students as more than consumers of knowledge and to recognize their potential and uniqueness. It helps provide a respectful and supportive environment for learning, leading to lifelong learning habits.

### **What Is a Calling?**

Being called toward a profession means experiencing work as a part of one's life, deriving satisfaction from it, and considering it meaningful and helpful to others.<sup>1</sup> A calling is a force that pulls educators and teachers toward their classrooms and their students and creates an atmosphere of respect and a place where curious minds can quench their thirst for knowledge. This force drives teachers' everyday tasks as educators, helping them get up in the morning, work through challenges, and find joy in every child's success.

Multiple therapies, including acceptance and commitment therapy, discuss a value-led life that helps one find meaning and purpose in daily tasks. Similar to a calling, a value is an inner urge or push to do a particular task or, in this case, pursue a specific life path or career. In many

therapies, value is something that can be used as a compass to decide where to go in life. Similarly, a call for a career is a compass that helps people choose what to do in their everyday work lives. A call to teach thus helps beyond providing an overall vocational direction; it also helps in daily choices about how to teach, interact, learn, and so on.

### Impact of a Calling

A calling also helps bring innovation, as there is an intrinsic motivation to teach. Teachers with a calling see the career as more than a profession and go above and beyond to support their students. A calling helps teachers learn and grow continuously. Teachers with a calling inspire future generations, motivate future scientists, ignite a love for learning, and sustain curiosity in their students.

Teachers who respond to their calling are more likely to engage with their subject matter in a way that sparks students' curiosity, which leads to further exploration and a love for lifelong learning in students. Passionate teachers can help develop critical thinking and problem-solving in their students by demonstrating their own intrinsic motivation. A teacher with a calling looks at the challenges in the classroom as a way to grow in their profession; thus, a curious question from a student can lead to problem-solving and critical thinking by both the teacher and the student.





Moreover, teachers who know their calling understand the purpose of being in a classroom. They can see the diversity in their classroom, the problems and concerns of the students, and they continually work with the future of their students in mind. At the same time, they can maintain their boundaries and are aware of their limitations.

### Research on Callings

Ancient Indian education practices focused on learning about both the inner being and things outside of the individual. Teachers, or gurus, were tasked with keeping the learning process alive for the students, or the shishyas. Therefore, the role of teachers in the ancient education system of India was to help the pupils become total human beings.

Research on the calling to teach is in its nascent stage. Nevertheless, studies suggest the importance of a calling as a protective factor against burnout and increased engagement at work.<sup>2</sup> A calling helps teachers deal with the tensions at work and the conflicts that arise due to teachers' various roles. It is easier to deal with the stress that accompanies the profession when one has an internal motivation to teach. Teachers with a strong inherent motivation put extra effort into their work, thus leading to increased engagement.

Studies also show that cultivating a call to teach can help prevent burnout, increase engagement, and

make lives meaningful for students and educators alike. Interventions to prevent burnout could incorporate the cultivation of a career calling.<sup>3</sup>

The Job-Demands Resource (JD-R) model<sup>4</sup> explains the complex dynamics between personal resources, job resources, job demands, and engagement. The model posits that resources, such as a sense of a calling and psychological capital, can buffer the effects of job demands, thereby enhancing employee engagement and overall well-being in high-pressure environments like education. This conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of addressing the challenges teachers face and actively cultivating their personal resources, ultimately leading to a more sustainable and fulfilling teaching experience that benefits educators and students alike.

### Need for a Calling

In a 2023 report<sup>5</sup> by the Centre of Excellence in Teacher Education at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), 40% of private school teachers among the survey participants and 23% of government school teachers felt they were not being paid well. Teachers are among the lowest-paid professionals across the globe, earning 26.4% less than similarly educated professionals.<sup>6</sup> Yet, teaching is one of the most challenging and demanding jobs.<sup>7</sup> With college

graduates in other professions earning more, teaching thus is missing from the list of occupations that graduates want to pursue.

Since the pay is low, there is a reduced number of quality teachers entering the teaching workforce. At the same time, given the challenges of the profession, the number of teachers exiting the workforce is high. Many teachers join the profession with a lot of passion and commitment. However, that initial passion depletes for multiple reasons, including the low salaries and overly stringent systems at the workplace.

The high rate of attrition in teaching is alarming. According to a global report<sup>8</sup> on teachers, attrition rates among primary teachers in 2022 reached 9.06% globally, increasing from 4.62% in 2015. The report further states that teachers often leave the profession in the initial five years owing to a variety of workplace factors.

Thus, it is clear that we need to work on job satisfaction as well as teacher motivation.

### **Challenges Affecting the Calling to Teach**

The JD-R model explains how demands and resources at the job interact, leading to either engagement or

burnout. Job demands are the stressors at the workplace that lead to energy depletion. Job resources are the factors that reduce stress and help achieve goals, growth, and development.

At an educational institution, there are many job demands on teachers, such as student misbehavior, workload, relationships with colleagues, lack of support from leadership, and more. The job resources include positive social support, support from leadership, and school climate.

The JD-R model explains that when job demands increase and job resources decrease, it can lead to burnout. Additionally, an increase in job demands also leads to maladaptive ways of coping, which can lead to further harm. The more recent addition to the JD-R model discusses this maladaptive self-regulation and self-undermining. Self-undermining behaviors look like mistakes caused by inattention, disputes between colleagues, and poor communication. These behaviors become part of a vicious cycle, which leads to increased job strain.

Therefore, since calling is a systemic issue, the roots of which lie in how we view teaching as a profession and institutional leadership, it becomes difficult for





teachers to tap into their resources when they become caught up in the vicious cycle. However, despite all of the pitfalls in the education system in India, Datta and Kingdon<sup>9</sup> say that there are enough teachers to maintain a student-teacher ratio of 30:1. Which means that something helps teachers stay in the profession despite the high demands.

### Cultivating and Heeding the Call

A calling helps ensure that teachers stay on the job. Keeping all the challenges of teaching in mind, finding ways to cultivate the call to teach becomes crucial. Teachers and educators can increase their resources and respond to the call to teach through:

- **Connection and communication:** Connecting with colleagues and students with a similar vision can boost teachers' calling and passion. Connecting with people with similar views helps affirm the passion for teaching. It can further lead to growth, as a calling leads to an intrinsic motivation to do well and thus can lead to insightful discussions.
- **Professional development:** Participating in professional development programs that help teachers understand strategies for bolstering a sense of calling could further enhance support systems at the workplace. Participating in professional development can also lead to connections with like-minded educators from different institutions.

- **Reflection:** Another vital part of teachers' work is reflecting on their impact and evaluating what went well. Assessing strengths and identifying improvement can boost teachers' sense of a calling.

There are multiple ways that teachers can focus on increasing their work engagement through a calling. Most of them focus on identifying the value of teaching or their call to teach. Thus, identifying and nurturing this calling can help teachers stay in the profession despite challenges. Further research is needed to identify what has worked in the past and to strengthen knowledge about how to nurture a calling to teach.

The call to teach helps teachers stay in the profession and look at teaching as more than a job, to instead view it as their life's work and mission. To support teachers in developing such a calling, we also need better ways of looking at teaching as a profession, respecting the dedication, commitment, and passion of teachers who respond to their calling to shape the future, one student at a time.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Rosa, A. D., Vianello, M., Galliani, E. M., Boffo, V., Fedeli, M., Lo Presti, F., & Melacarne, C. (2019). Data from a three-wave complete longitudinal design survey on career calling and related constructs (N = 6368). *Data in Brief*, 25, 104310.

<sup>2</sup> Zhao, C. X., Wang, Z. J., Yang, X. J., Ma, X., Cui, Y., Zhang, Y. X., Cheng, X. H., Zhang, S. E., Guo, Q. F., & Cao, D. P. (2024). Promotion of self-directed learning abilities among Chinese medical students through preparing for career calling and enhancing teaching competencies in medical education: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Medical Education*, 24(1), 386.

<sup>3</sup> Shang, W., Yu, T., Liang, X., Wang, J., & Su, J. (2022). How does career calling influence preservice teachers' learning engagement? A multiple mediating roles of occupational self-efficacy and vocational outcome expectation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands-resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(3), 273-285.

<sup>5</sup> Centre of Excellence in Teaching Education. (2023). *The right teacher for every child. State of teachers teaching and teacher education for India report 2023*. Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

<sup>6</sup> Allegretto, S. (2023). *Teacher pay penalty still looms large: Trends in teacher wages and compensation through 2022*. Economic Policy Institute.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, S., Cooper, C., Cartwright, S., Donald, I., Taylor, P., & Millet, C. (2005). The experience of work related stress across occupations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 20(2), 178-187.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2023). *Global report on teachers. Addressing teacher shortages*. Author.

<sup>9</sup> Datta, S., & Kingdon, G. (2011). *The myth of teacher shortage in India*. Rise.

#### Disclosure Statement:

The authors report no conflict of interest.