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# INDIA SCHOOL NEWS

*The online school newspaper*

## **Talking to Harsha Gandhi -A-levels Visiting English Faculty- CIE/Educationist and Academician/Economics/Cambridge Primary Program Math and Science/ Primary Pedagogy**

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### **A levels Visiting English Faculty**

### **CIE/Educationist and Academician/Economics/Cambridge Primary Program Math and Science/ Primary Pedagogy**

Harsha Gajria Gandhi – Proud to be a Bahraini born Indian Educator, who has done her schooling from The Indian School Bahrain(Arabian Gulf). She is an Educator – A levels & IGCSE, CIE and lifelong learner.

#### **How did you tread the path to teaching?**

Teaching has always been a lifelong learning for all of us and I just enhanced it by giving myself the designation of a teacher. It has been a lot many years that I have been into teaching. I have been teaching my little one and other little ones in the neighbourhood. When I was confident that my little one could take care of himself, I officially got into teaching.



### **Which classes have you taught?**

I started my career with the primary section and my heart still lies there with the affection, always. During my career with the primary section – from grade 1 to grade 5, I began catering mainly to the Math and Science sections.

As I mentioned, I am a lifelong learner so I learn more than I teach every day. After I enter my class, I wait for every new story that comes my way. I look at all the faces and I see that they are simply ready to pour their minds out. The primary section has always been a stress buster and a booster for me. Currently, I am with the AS level English faculty. This is because English has always been a passion. Per me, English cannot be learned but can only be practiced. Somewhere I felt that children, from the primary to the secondary section, need to understand what language is. This eases out every subject. That is how I paved my path into being an English faculty.

### **There is a lot of concern around about children fearing Mathematics as a subject. Your thoughts?**

I must say, that I have been a victim to this as a child. I realise that we have all been victims at some point or the other. It is a different story that some speak it out and some just climb up the ladder. It is a fact that there is a fear for Math and it lies in each and every primary section child. To make it simpler is up to the teacher.

It is the duty of the teacher who stands at the foot of a blackboard and right behind her desk facing these children to make it simple when it comes to Math. One doesn't really have to get into the classroom to work on Math problems.

It is best to keep heavy terms away at the primary level. The primary section is very tender. They just want to have fun all the time. A teacher needs to be a fun lover first. She needs to keep her mind open to children who may not be listening to her. She also needs to be open about the fact that the class may be sceptical at some point about doing number bonding – these are tasks for grade 1 and grade 2. Teachers need to be ready for the fact that she doesn't need to use books that particular day. In fact, I am of the opinion that she doesn't need to use books on any given day. She can make it simple using manipulators, creativity and hands on activities. I personally believe today Math in the primary section is 100% supposed to be all about being hands on. That is how we really learn.

For example, when we speak about fractions, introduced at grade 2, it is highly monotonous and old school to write one half on the board and tell the class that this is  $\frac{1}{2}$  and is known as half. The question is why would that be known as a half and what is the theory behind that one half? Why cannot one say 1 by 2? There is this delicate line of difference in the way you deliver concepts to children.

That is where I feel teachers need to be trained rather than blaming the tender, primary section. I am a

teacher who personally believes that no child is to be blamed irrespective of the section they are at, if the teacher fails to deliver.

If the children cannot understand, it calls for teachers to rework on the topic, their thoughts, their language, the relationship they hold with their students. They should understand that they are not there for the primary Math alone, which is the base, I agree.

But, when the children go to the secondary level, there is not much time for them to do a lot of hands on activities. Therefore, when we teach geometry, for example, when we speak about angles, curves, etc., teachers can just use the door of the classroom to demonstrate angles. That visual of the door will go a long way for the children aiding them in higher sections too. They don't have to measure anything really; they just need to get children to understand how they can judge angles.

It is definite that we need to get into theorems etc., but these are ways in which children can lay a strong base and get the connections right.

**Schools should facilitate time for teachers to step back and reflect on their work. What do you think?**

Definitely! That is absolutely missing. Today, it is a rush of curriculum, management pressure, pressure from seniors, admins, etc.

Teachers end up doing a lot of admin work these days. It actually spills over the amount of teaching that they do. This is true for International Schools, Public schools, Government schools etc. This affects the teaching quality, the connectivity between teachers and children.

There are very rare schools where teachers are actually trained and well groomed. These are schools wherein teachers are being entrusted with classes of about 20 children who is the teacher's responsibility until 2 pm. 2-4 pm is when they are asked to focus on other management and admin activities.

In such scenarios, the teachers gain a sense of balance. She/he doesn't have to track time thinking 11 am, perhaps is the deadline, and mess up her/his class time. I feel planning, delivering and coordinating needs to be taken care by the management. The management needs to take care not to disturb any teacher during her time table.

With the young millennials, I feel there is a lot of enthusiasm and passion that teachers start with. But it gets shattered with the haphazard functioning of schools. They even get blocked when they try introducing methodologies under the pretence that the curriculum has not reached that far, etc.

In the long run, teachers would tend to feel laid back and give up on something that the environment gets discouraging. They would learn to tell themselves that they don't have to change the world. It is not their own children after all, etc. They advise themselves to just do what is told, and take home the salary. The sad part is that the brunt is taken up by the primary section children. They have wonderful teachers but who are unable to deliver.

The debate of who is to be blamed goes on forever.

**You have been in this space for a few years now. Do you feel disheartened? You seem to have gone through all this and yet maintain this energy. How do you do that?**

Every teacher goes through every single thing. A few speak out, a few just hide themselves and climb the ladder – that is what I mentioned, some just find things that are worthy for them.

With respect to the enthusiasm, yes, a teacher needs to be self-motivated and that is where I stand today.

A teacher needs to be totally self-motivated. This self-motivation comes in only once you yourself being a teacher have gone through everything inside your home, your premises, your neighbours, your friends. Once you know that you are a lifelong learner, there are so many children around you then the enthusiasm never dies down and it always keeps you on your toes.

**What are your thoughts on the new generation of people coming in to teach? We always look up to our old teachers and feel that they inspired us, and we still look up to them.**

Yes, I still do – definitely!



**There is a view that there are new people adopting the profession without being motivated to teach. It is not their first choice. What are your thoughts?**

A major difference definitely exists. The first difference I see in their mind-set is that there was nothing else that I could do, so I thought I will adopt teaching – get a half day job and go home with a salary.

Another thing is they get to enjoy annual vacations – that is usually two months of holidays. But, back in the old days, teachers were not there by choice, they were there with a mind-set to deliver the best that I can for generations to come. They wanted to give valuable things to a world that would perhaps not be theirs. That is a huge difference. They had a 100% hard core teaching wherein perhaps our parents didn't have any say. That was the situation in the past.

In today's generation, the teachers are restricted from a lot of things. That is why they cannot give in their 100%. Much of it is because they think that they have nothing else to do and so get into teaching. When it comes to me, I just love being with children. It is not just about being with children and loving it. It is the most delicate and most authenticated section of our community. The tender community that we cater to is children, today. Once any teacher has that mind-set, that thought process, she will be nothing less than a wonderful teacher.

If teachers have it in them that they are catering to the tenderest of communities, then it becomes their responsibility, and then that is a game changer.

**What is your idea about guest teachers? Have you ever felt that that would perhaps generate some freshness in the way this profession is viewed?**

No, I don't think that teachers should personally think of a sabbatical or take an off and go visiting schools or colleges. For being a real dedicated teacher you need to develop a bond with your children and that comes only by being present with them. Even when the grade passes and the year has come to an end, it is important to be there on the first day of school. It is important to be with those children who come looking for you. And, mind you, all of them would! Even if they don't like Math, they will come looking for you if you have developed a bond with them, if the Math teacher has always ensured a peaceful and fruitful class, rather than just being behind a set of books and correction chores.

If you are a visiting faculty or guest speaker, the bond goes missing. The thought process is that she/he is just coming for a session and I just have to bear them for about 4 times a week and it will be over.

Then, there would be nobody to question me. I am not answerable for the subject. The sincerity, hence, from the child's end as well becomes thin, which is unhealthy.

**What are your views on the different kinds of board curriculum? Do you feel that the A level curriculum is different from the Indian curriculum?**

India has been booming around with too many curricula lately. Basically, to put it simply, people do not know what curriculum is. They are just willing to spend money but they are not in for understanding the need of the best curriculum. I personally feel that curriculum is the subject matter prepared by teachers. I would just make it simpler that  $2+2$  always is 4 no matter how you portray it. The script writer and the narratives have the same layout to be followed no matter the way in which you portray it. Those things form the base are never going to change and are always going to remain the same.

When it comes to Math, IGCSE ensures that children are given separate sheets with all the formulas in it. When you compare this curriculum with CBSE or ICSE, they don't provide such things. That is where children are more inclined towards the different curriculum than the Indian curriculum. This is where teachers also feel eased out. They also feel that their children don't have to mug up all the theorems, formulas etc. Post standard VIII, they consult school to school providing IGCSE and IB curriculum. These are boards that permit the use of a calculator unlike other boards. That is where the balancing is different.

As a teacher, I personally wonder what is the fun of having a brilliant mind if you cannot multiply 15 by 9 without the use of a machine. That way they get addicted to a machine, and stop training their minds from creating shortcuts. They fall short in understanding the pattern in which a 9 table can be written. The 9 table can be easily written by writing 0-9 on the LHS and 9-0 on the RHS. That is such a simple and beautiful thing to understand. That opportunity is lost when it comes to using machines. Hence, I personally believe that all boards have their own pros and cons. If children just want to keep their life simpler, easier and faster, the Indian boards do not cater well for them.



**In contrast to the larger picture of education, which is about learning, people are more obsessed about exams, getting the certificate, etc. The real learning opportunity, in the process, goes for a toss. Do you notice that?**

Absolutely! This has been the reality since quite a long time. This has been a trend even before I started my career as a teacher. People are more worried about percentages, marks and grades rather than understanding how much has their child taken home, imbibed and learned. That is something which is increasingly disturbing for the young learners. Once they get into the mind-set that they need to get more marks, it is all about how to get them. Then understanding and learning takes a back seat,

and mugging up is the only choice. This is becoming very difficult for us educators. Parents come in with a lot of comparisons. This becomes very annoying. Lately, it is a task to educate parents to stop comparing and making them understand that every child is different. They need to ensure that the child learns and knows most of it rather than rushing him/her for marks.

I personally believe that marks are unimportant compared to having concepts clear in your mind. That way, in the long run, there are less chances for that person to get stuck because they are on a mind-set to learn more, unafraid of being stuck. Basically, everything starts from home. The comparison amongst children also starts from home. That needs to stop and that is a huge task for an educator to convince a parent to stop comparisons. It is not necessary that one child writes a beautiful essay the way your neighbours' child does. Every child thinks differently.

**Sadly, the societal expectations of what a school education means, needs refinement.**

I have another view as well. That is when the parents tell their children that they need to be like their teacher because she/he knows everything. I am one teacher who ensures mentioning it to my learners and my set of people once in a while that I am neither Einstein nor Newton. I am a simple human being who has crossed multiple stages of failure, have got up, reappeared and moved on. It is absolutely fine to not know everything.

When you don't know something, raise your hand. I make it a point to make it comfortable for children to raise their hands in my class when they don't understand something and ask/say confidently that they don't understand. I don't want the class to think that I may not like if someone asks me to repeat. I don't want a feeling in class that asking a question disturbs a class. At times, I may slack with my curriculum, but I ensure that questions are answered.

**Every bit of my success is thankful to my Mentor Ms Pranita Lele who has been guiding me since I have been 13.**

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