

The unenviable plight of today's teachers

We Need to Talk About Kevin, an Oscar-nominated film this year, is the chilling story of a child on a murder spree. The dark bit of news that recently came from one of our own schools in Chennai, and the events that followed, have also mostly spoken about a student who knifed his Hindi teacher to death.

From the pressure of performance the Chennai class IX student of St Marys Anglo Indian Higher Secondary School, had two sisters who were apparently bright kids to his being the quiet one and thus, not naturally capable of killing someone, everything was emphasized to tone down the enormity of the crime. He finally went to an observation home taking with him everyones sympathies. What many glossed over in this tale of classroom horror was that Uma Maheswari, a wife and mother, a teacher just doing her job, had died.

Are we missing something here We need to talk about Uma. Gagged by rules, some of them unwritten and bordering on the ridiculous, and straining under the demands of a management that doesn't want to lose moneyed students to competition, is it the teacher who is being cornered And that too by aggressive pupils who know they can fall back on a clutch of enablers to bully the ones with chalk and duster Are they the unarmed in the battleground that todays classrooms have become Even as we write this,reports have come in of two groups of students in an Amritsar school going at each other with pistols and hockey sticks.And will someone tell them how to deal with the stress.

Teaching was something we enjoyed, says Radha Gupta, a teacher who taught for two decades in a reputed Delhi school.Not any more. Esther Stanley, who teaches in Chennai, once rapped on the desk with a ruler while calling for silence. A student promptly got up and said, Maam, you cant use the ruler. Stunned for a minute, Stanley blurted out something like: Yes, I can. The ruler can be used on the desk. She laughs over a welcome she got when she once joined a new school. A student cheekily asked her if she was the new biology teacher. Because if you are not, you are lucky.All our biology teachers left within a month. Thankfully, she was given English. At Chennai's St Marys, teachers try many theories to rationalize the

animosity articulated by their students. One reason, they say, is the kids being hooked to social networking sites and lacking real friends. Earlier, their aggression would be expended on the playing field, explains one of the teachers as another admits becoming a soft target for students. Many teachers, clearly on the retreat, also say that the B Ed course doesn't equip them for challenges students throw at them. Moreover, each child has unique problems and teachers have to tend to them accordingly, but it becomes difficult, bogged down as they are with the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation System, which has increased work 10-fold, and other clerical jobs. We are constantly battling deadlines with assignments, projects and tests, says Alice Koshy, a retired teacher from General Education Academy, Chembur. Managements ask teachers to take out time for the kids. But how, asks Gupta.

There is another sword of Damocles hanging over their heads the strict code of conduct drawn up by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. Though the idea and aim are noble teachers can't call a child names on the basis of skin colour, gender, religion and caste as this will invite disciplinary action, even sacking some say it will be easy for students to twist even harmless things around and there will be no one to hear the teachers side out. However, Prof Anita Rampal, head of the Central Institute of Education, Delhi University, says these guidelines are important as teachers routinely and across the board verbally abuse students. But not all agree

In these circumstances, teachers often adopt a hands-off policy. A St Marys teacher said, After the ghastly killing, I find it difficult to even raise my voice at students. But if school grades fall, we will be the ones promptly blamed by the management. Teachers aren't allowed to check students bags even if there is a theft in class lest they feel hurt and take an extreme step. Students, naturally, have a merry time and come with cell-phones wrapped in plastic, either in their lunch boxes, socks or other private places, admit teachers.

Then, there are parents ever ready to blame the teacher for the misdemeanors of their child or their bad grades. Parents throw their clout at us and say they're the ones paying the fees. The guru-shishya role has become that of a seller-consumer, rues Gupta. Managements of schools, too, are hard on teachers. Post-graduate teachers are arbitrarily demoted to lower classes. Our children aren't even guaranteed admission. The management is too busy

being one-up on other schools. Who has time for us Trust has eroded, says Gupta.

But some schools have shown the way forward. A Delhi school gives teachers a day off when their own children have board exams, while another has energizing workshops for them vital concerns if they are to percolate to the students and for a greater common good (TNN 19-2-12).