

Teachers acquire teaching skills from practice

By [Azim Premji University](#) | Mar 11, 2019

Introduction

The Government Model Primary School, Kapkot, Uttarakhand is located about 200 metres from the Kapkot main road. On the way up to the school, you need to climb a short hill, hop across a few cow-sheds and negotiate your way around some houses and farmland. And if you are not particularly nimble, you may also brush against some bichhoo ghans (scorpion grass), which leaves you with the kind of needling pain and rash that makes you wish you were younger and sprightlier on your feet! As the school building comes into sight, a warm, comforting feeling embraces you—it is neither particularly noisy nor eerily quiet. If you pay close attention, you can hear the rhythmic recitation of the table of 14 emanating from one classroom on the first floor and a read-aloud lesson in English, in progress, in another. While children and teachers seem engaged in animated conversations in the classrooms, the bhoj matas (cooks) are scuttling around collecting rations to cook the midday-meal (MDM) for the day—it is business as usual at the GMP School, Kapkot.



Aside from a 'dramatic' (bordering on amusing), sign: 'NAIL CHECKPOINT' that catches the visitors' attention on entry, the GMP School is like any other government elementary school in the hills—a medium-sized courtyard, single storey building with classrooms and an office on both the floors, a colourful and neat exterior, and a sloping tin roof. The classrooms are a bit damp and musty to smell, but clean and tidy in appearance. The grade V children sit on mats, but in many other classrooms, there are desks and chairs. A notable feature of every classroom is that hardly any space on the whitewashed walls is left bare. Charts, big posters and paintings prepared either by the children or the teachers cover the walls. The grade V classroom has a Deewar Patrika (wall magazine), made of cloth, almost the size of the wall, covering it on three sides. Each of the three parts is dedicated to a theme and displays artwork, short essays and poems based on it, neatly organized and held together by pins. In another classroom, on the ground floor, the paucity of space is made apparent as a corner of the classroom doubles as storage for grains for the midday meal. Later, one finds out that there is a plan to construct a few more classrooms and to create some more open space for the children to play.

The Context



Kapkot is a village in the Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand, located 25 km from Bageshwar town. It houses the Kapkot tehsil, the administrative subdivision of the district. Located in the Kumaon region of the State of Uttarakhand, Kapkot lies on the banks of the river Saryu at an elevation of 331 ft. The topography is marked by valleys, local depression and high ground, with agriculture being the primary activity for utilizing the land. The average literacy rate of the predominantly rural population is about 82%. The area where the school is located has at least 8-10 private schools, an intercollege and a few other higher education institutions. Several families, which live in the higher regions, take up temporary residence in Kapkot due to its proximity to schools and colleges.

A Born Teacher

The first impression of Khyali Dutt Sharma, the Head Master and teacher of mathematics of the GMP school, prepared me for what was to come. Soft-spoken, unassuming and extremely humble—I knew, I would need to coerce him to talk about himself, which clearly was not his forte. However, attending his mathematics grade V class provided me with enough insight into what makes Khyali Dutt Sharma (KDS) stand out as an exceptional teacher and administrator, whose story must be told.

KDS grew up in Kapkot, went to college and has worked in schools and a private inter-college in the same region before joining GMPS Kapkot. Son of a teacher, he completed a Masters' degree in Physics and saw himself following in his father's footsteps, as a natural progression in life. Thirty-nine years old at the time of writing this report, KDS has remained unmarried and lives with his aged parents on a hill which is about 30 minutes of walking distance from the school. After his post-graduation, he went on to do his B Ed, which he says,

extended well beyond the stipulated one year (at the time) due to some political and legal wrangles in the State. KDS saw that as a blessing, an extended opportunity to learn and practice the craft of teaching. During his B Ed days, he received a compliment from a teacher he admired, which he says is his most cherished accomplishment to date. The teacher told him after observing one of his classes, 'Khyali, you are a born teacher!'

Watching him teach in his classroom, one can tell why KDS loves his profession so much. Teaching 'quadrilaterals' to grade V students, KDS engages in dialogue with his pupils ensuring that each and every child understands the concept. Clarifying doubts patiently, he draws diagrams on the board to explain the differences between rectangles, parallelograms and quadrilaterals. There is minimal use of textbooks and notebooks and students are encouraged but not coerced to demonstrate their understanding by drawing the diagrams on the board for everyone to see. At one point, he explains the concept by using a fascinating example from a recent experience that the class has had—of a visiting MLA! He explained, encouraging the students to recall, how the MLA was an ordinary person before but had gained certain attributes (such as winning an election) because of which he came to be known as an 'MLA'. Likewise, a quadrilateral becomes a parallelogram only after it fulfils certain conditions and gains certain qualities. In doing so, KDS also manages to test the students' knowledge of the democratic processes involved in an election, and the importance of citizenship.

Reflecting on his pedagogy later, KDS said that he could sense that at least some students had not understood the concept and hence, going forward without ensuring that everyone was on the same page, was out of the question. He believes that a teacher must be able to judge each child's level of understanding and that it is best done through conversation (baat-cheet). According to him, assessing children while teaching a concept is important, and while it is easier to determine if a child had not understood a concept, it is much harder to tell conclusively, if the child had. He believes that new concepts must be built only on strong foundational knowledge. A child's ability to apply a concept in different contexts is an indicator of the child's understanding of it. As a teacher, he tries to ensure this. KDS believes that teachers acquire the skills to teach from their students. A good teacher possesses some inherent capabilities but can sharpen these only by spending time in the classroom. Hence, the practice of teaching is important for a teacher to develop insights into teaching and to improve constantly.

The Leader

KDS referred to his classroom as the core of a 'magnetic field'. In other words, it is what the teacher does in class that is most important and it should have the power of drawing others to it. His own accomplishments, however, go well beyond his teaching and classroom practices. One of the primary reasons why he has acquired almost a celebratory status in the community is because of his transformation of the school of which he has been in charge only for the last three years (since April 2016). After spending five years as a primary school teacher in another school and an inter-college in Kapkot, KDS gradually gained the reputation of being a hardworking, sincere and an excellent mathematics teacher in the region. His efforts were soon recognized by the District Education Officer (DEO) who saw potential in him to transform and lead an institution. Due for a transfer and promotion after five years of service, KDS was requested to join the present GMPS Kapkot instead of another one where he was being sent on promotion. The school, being upgraded as a 'Model school' needed a leader who could change the way people in the region viewed the public education system. When KDS joined the school, it had only 46 children on its rolls. Only three years later, it now has 316 students, eight permanent teachers and all basic amenities to offer quality education to its pupils. Apart from the increase in enrolment, the school has the enviable reputation of being among the few schools in the State that manages to send a few children to the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas almost every year. The selection process to the schools entails a tough entrance examination held at the all-India-level for grade V children. Speaking to KDS about these achievements, as I expected, was not particularly easy. He took absolutely no credit for it and attributed the successes the school has achieved to multiple other factors—the support from the DEO in terms of making all basic infrastructural resources available; his deeply-motivated teachers; and, the community, which over the years, has come to recognize and acknowledge the merits of sending their children to the GMP School.

The People of Kapkot

In general, people in Kapkot value education and have high aspirations for their children. Nearly everyone in the remote village has, at least, a high school certificate and many children, over the years, have completed professional degrees and have migrated to different parts of the country to seek employment. Sharing his personal story, KDS humbly informed us that in his early years, when he taught mathematics at the intercollege and took private tuitions, children who attended his classes started doing well in the subject and at least 42 of them went on to become engineers! Gradually, his reputation as a teacher grew and when he took charge of the GMP school, it began to attract children from private schools—the metaphoric, magnetic field, at work. However, this was not always the case. Two interesting stories shared by KDS although anecdotal in nature, are illustrative of the impact that the effort of the leader and his team have had in shaping the mindset of the community over the years. The first incident happened after a girl in grade V was selected to the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya based on her performance in the entrance examination. The mother of the girl, along with several other parents, visited the school, a few days later, and during an informal interaction with the teachers, began to cry. KDS said

that he thought the mother was sad that her daughter would soon be going away and that she would miss her. When KDS tried to console her and asked her why she was crying so much, the mother said that she was crying because she would have to sell off her cow! Apparently, the cow was accustomed only to being milked by the girl and with her going away, the cow would stop giving milk. KDS shares, with some amusement, that the news of the family having to sell off their cow because of the school created quite a stir in the community. He was blamed for bringing misfortune upon the family.

He relates another incident to illustrate how the mindset of parents has changed over the years. Some years ago, a boy in grade III was being reminded every day, for a couple of days, to bring a new notebook as his class notebooks were about to get over. Thinking that the child was being forgetful and careless, KDS summoned his parents to school. The parents, angry at being summoned, stormed into the school the next day, refusing to send new notebooks saying they did not have the money to buy new notebooks in the middle of the academic year and they did not care if their child's studies suffered because of that. The notebooks, of course, are provided by the school. The twist to the tale, came, when the boy went on to clear the Navodaya school exam in grade V. KDS proudly points towards the ubiquitous steel almirah in his office that he says cost Rs. 15,000 and was gifted by the parents of the same child out of gratitude for their son's success!

All in a Day's Work

In the course of sharing routine activities of the school, KDS describes some daily practices that can only evoke awe and disbelief from the listener. KDS comes to school every day by 8 am and leaves for home at 10 pm. All grade V children and sometimes even the grade IV children, stay back in the school until about 6 pm every day. At least, three to four teachers also stay back. Their afternoon activities include team teaching and group sessions with the children on clarifying concepts in different subjects; playing 'math games'; discussions on general topics of interest; and, help with homework and remedial teaching for those who require individual attention. Such intensive engagement with the children on a daily basis helps the teachers to clarify basic concepts and in the process, prepare the children for the entrance examinations of Navodaya and Kasturba schools. After the children leave, the rest of the teachers' time is spent on catching up with the administrative work and preparation for the next day's lessons.

It is interesting to note that while there is an emphasis on preparing children to excel in the entrance exams that seemingly hold a better future for them, at no point does one get the impression that KDS or the other teachers are focused only on nurturing these high achievers. KDS acknowledges that not every child in the school has the potential to clear these highly competitive exams but it is his duty to ensure that every child in his school learns well and reaches her or his full potential. And for this, he believes, hard work and perseverance are the attributes that a teacher must have.

Even as KDS gives credits to his colleagues for their motivation in contributing to making the teaching-learning experience exceptional at the GMP school, it is needless to say, that this is no mean task to achieve. The difficult terrain, the inclement climate and the danger of leopards that lurk in the region only exacerbate the conditions. One wonders then, what sense of purpose drives all these people—the headmaster, the teachers, the parents, and the children in this distant community—to display such exemplary adherence to a single goal? Are they driven by a collective purpose or does each one have their own motivation, a point to prove? Can one say with conviction that it is the dedication of a single person and his love for his craft that has motivated others to believe in him and follow his vision? Or is it the strength that he draws from those around him that keeps him going? Perhaps there are no definite answers to these questions, nor does KDS appear to be preoccupied with such ruminations. When asked about his future aspirations, KDS does not point to any lofty ambition. He believes in the present and wishes to continue doing what he is doing, with *astha* (complete dedication).

Conclusion

Driving out of Kapkot after meeting KDS, a contemplative silence enveloped us for a long time. Undoubtedly, meeting KDS was a truly humbling experience. His is a story that is indeed worth telling. It is inspiring, full of hope and an example of how a person who believes in his own capabilities can get an entire community to work with him in realizing the dreams of a people for whom education is, perhaps, their only means for social and economic mobility and alleviation from poverty.

One also felt that to view the 'story' only in terms of the number of children that KDS has managed to enrol in his school or the children who have gone to the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, as measures of his success, would be taking a myopic view of the matter. His deep reflections on his own practice as a teacher of mathematics; his unyielding dedication to his work; his vision to make every child learn through perseverance and hard work; his humility; and, his ability to inspire others to believe in his vision, are all markers of the exceptional person, teacher and leader that Khyali Dutt Sharma is.

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