

Teacher as the Epicentre for Change

By | May 11, 2020

MS Khilora Government School has 107 students in classes VI to VIII and a somewhat equal gender distribution. Baring a few, students mostly come from the neighbouring farmer community. This combined with the fact that most of the children are first-generation students leads to high absenteeism during the harvest season. Other challenges faced by the school is the high prevalence of child marriage and caste discrimination. However, the teachers expressed that gender discrimination is not very prevalent with respect to access to education.

Teacher: Dropati Joshi

School: Govt M S Khilora Middle School, Simga, Chattisgarh



The school shares its premises with the primary school. They have a few classrooms; one room is used as a Staff Room and an area for the mid-day meal. The area between the primary and the secondary school is used as the playground.

Finding inspiration: Headteacher Joshi's journey

Dropati Joshi is the acting headteacher (Shikshak Panchayat) at the government MS Khilaura school. Currently, she teaches Social Science, Sanskrit and English to students of secondary school and is a master trainer for social sciences at SCERT.

After finishing her BA in 1996, she started working as a secondary school teacher. At the beginning of her career, she considered herself to be shy, hesitant and as an ordinary schoolteacher who just did her job, without much reflection. Looking back, she feels that she has come a long way. The key reason for this has been the inspiration and confidence that she found through her journey; it enabled her to channelize her existing strengths into actionable deeds and capitalize on all opportunities that came her way. She also credits her parents and family whose support has enabled her to walk the extra mile; put in the hours and work on building her skill. Her father was a schoolteacher himself and thus, always encouraged her to pursue education to become a teacher.

Ms Joshi recalled her experiences of facing discrimination as a student due to her identity as a person belonging to the Scheduled Caste. She thinks that it was perhaps those experiences that fuelled her drive to raise her voice for change as an adult. However, mere inspiration was not enough for action. The confidence that she could make a difference came from the stories that she saw on television and read in newspapers about ordinary people overcoming challenges. These were instrumental in shaping her personality and nurturing her drive. Today, her identity as a teacher is effectively interwoven with her drive to push for non-discrimination and growth of the children and society at large.

Pouring her personality into the school

Ms Joshi embodies openness and zeal for action. She expressed that she loves challenges and is not easily deterred. She possesses a desire to try out new things at the school and continually improve; hence, she grabs all opportunities that come her way. For example, the members at the District Institute (DI) had this to say about her drive, 'She never misses any discussion at the Voluntary Teacher Forum 1 and is an active participant at various platforms.' It was evident that many initiatives, co-curricular activities and pedagogy used in the school were greatly influenced by Ms Joshi's own personality and experience. For example, as a child, she had always been a keen participator in co-curricular activities; was an NCC cadet; loved dancing and theatre and was enthusiastic about sports. Having experienced the value of these activities in her own life, as a teacher now, she is able and willing to provide the same space to extra-

curricular in the school. She has encouraged the cultivation of a school garden where the children grew their own vegetables and she actively finds opportunities for the children to take part in competitions outside the school.



Pedagogy

Ms Joshi believes that children learn in an environment that is open and free from fear; where they are not scolded for making mistakes. An example of her thinking was observed during prayer time before dismissal.

A teacher: Children are not making lines for the daily prayer.

Ms Joshi: Ah, it's okay they look excited today, might not be in the mood to pray.

Ms Joshi expressed, both in opinion and practice, that children need some elbow room to function at their full potential. Though she emphasized that continuous engagement with children is essential for learning, she recognizes the need for freedom and explorative learning. This, she believes can be achieved through activity-based pedagogy which gives a chance to the children to apply classroom knowledge to their lives.



Collating her personal experiences and information from training programs, Ms Joshi advocates the importance of personalizing the pedagogical space; she not only recognises the importance of linking concepts from the textbooks to the immediate world of the children but also actively finds ways to make it happen.

Personalizing pedagogical space

While teaching the chapter, '■■■■ ■■ ■■■■ ■■■■' (small and big industries) she went out of her way and organized a visit to the nearby Parle-G and Jindal factories. After having seen the factories, the children, on their own, listed the characteristics and differences between a big and a small industry.



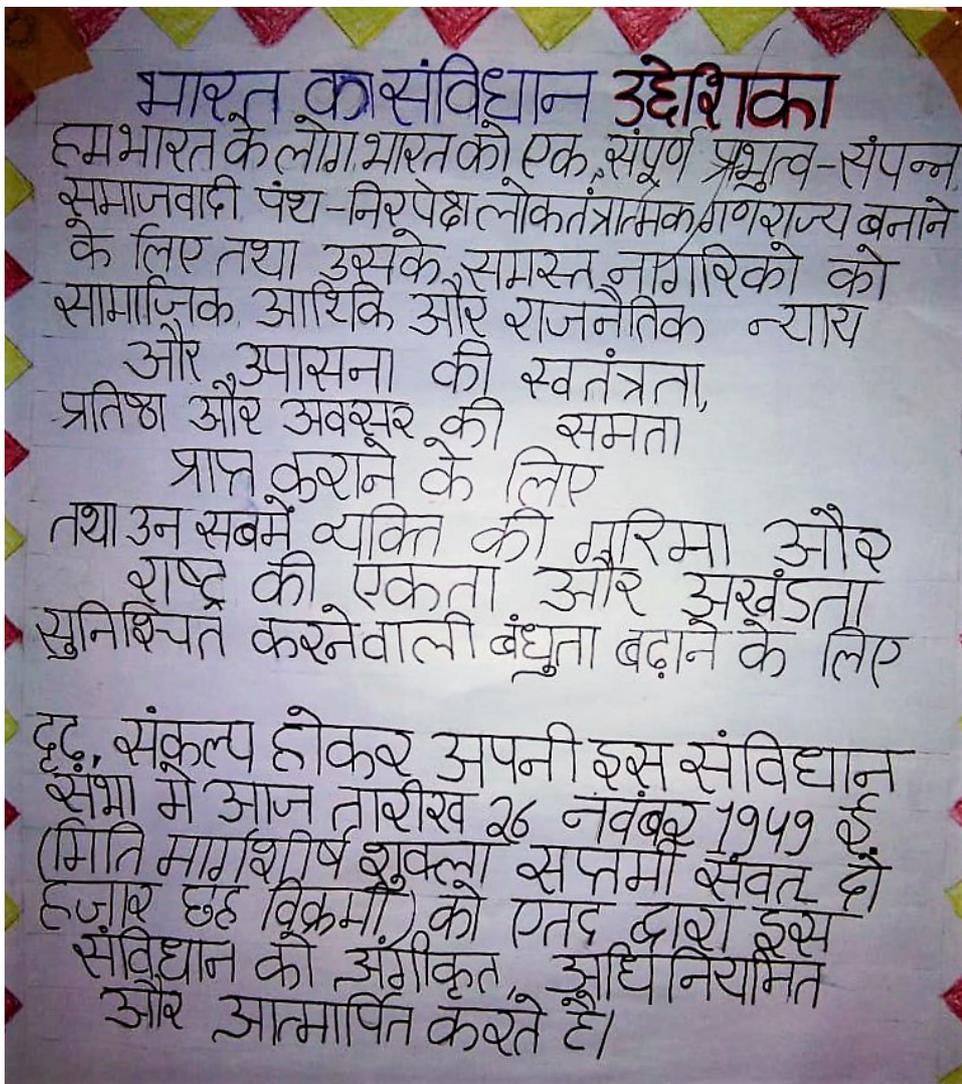
Students of another class were taken to a book factory while studying about the printing press/ media. While studying civics and general knowledge, she asked the students to choose a topic and carry out a survey in their village. The survey topics mostly consisted of issues present in their village and people's perspectives regarding those or on the demographic structures and panchayat functioning. These surveys were put up in the class and children were seen discussing these with their classmates during their free time.

Independent and explorative learning

Teacher shortage is a very common reality of many schools; often, teachers express their helplessness about the fact that students become disruptive or noisy in the absence of a teacher. What stood out in this school was how, even as Ms Joshi alternated between two classes in a time span of 45 minutes, when she left one class for the other, the students continued to work on the given task without her supervision. Ms Joshi spent about 15 minutes teaching a concept (different kind of industries) following which she divided the children into groups and gave them a task which linked this concept to their own context, for example, 'brainstorm all the industries you see in your village and classify them in the categories learnt'. This was a perfect example of how it is possible to give children tasks that pique their interest and motivate them to complete these even though the teacher may not be in class. A lot of space for independently exploring the concept was given to the children and they too seemed to utilize that space happily.

Teaching constitutional values

Ms Joshi expressed that a teacher's role in carrying forward the constitutional values in the learner is central to his/her responsibility of fulfilling the objective of teaching. She does this in various forms; she asked the DI to print a poster on constitutional values and she uses it to discuss this theme during assembly. She also refers to it frequently while teaching subjects and forming class rules. Moreover, the most significant observation was that she herself practices these constitutional values. For example, during a conversation, a child came to her saying he was feeling sick and wanted to go home. She trusted him without a doubt, told him to eat food and then take another person along to the medicine shop and then get dropped home. This respect and trust that she extended to the child is an example of the subtle ways in which her focus on constitutional values contribute to determining the school culture. She also shared that she actively has conversations with children regarding physical and mental health, and; challenges and achievements in their lives.



Engagement beyond school

Head teacher Joshi's enthusiasm is not limited to the school. She actively engages with the community. During summer holidays, she conducts summer camps for children with activities such as painting, dancing and play-acting. She mobilizes the women to form self-managed groups to learn skills like mehndi and stitching. All of this is funded by the people themselves, using frugal material and selling the output to minimize costs. She has also been an active voice in the community advocating for women to be included in decision-making and other activities. She consistently urges the women to be more participative and at the same time, voices the need for women in positions of power. She believes that schools are an epicentre for development and subsequently, impact the village and the community.

Challenges

Parental involvement/support

Since most parents are farmers or daily wage workers, attendance in parent-teacher meetings are low. Often parents do not provide time and space to children to finish homework after school and during the harvest season absenteeism is high. While Ms Joshi understands why it is difficult for parents, she also knows the need for parental support in their child's education. As of now, her outlook is to keep the child at the epicentre and give the best and hope that slowly parents can be involved, little by little.

Tobacco addiction

Since addiction is high in the community, a lot of teenagers get addicted to tobacco. While it is not possible to know for sure, Ms Joshi feels that showing teenagers the examples of how their future could look like if they develop addiction and also the alternative futures that are possible for them to achieve if they work hard, has curtailed their use of tobacco. By helping them channelize their energies, she has effectively influenced them so that many of them now choose to stay away from tobacco on their own accord, and not due to force.

Special needs

Some children seemed to have special needs and required more personal attention. Ms Joshi recalled that one student, who seemed to have an intellectual disability, could only grasp basic concepts. Instead of trying to teach him everything, she focused on strengthening his basic concepts and today, he lives independently, earns and is able to support himself. A big challenge facing schooling today is that some children reach class VIII without having learnt anything. It is difficult to determine if it is due to bad schooling or special needs. Lack of support in this domain makes it difficult to recognize, diagnose and plan interventions, especially given the lack of human resources.

Reflections

What stood out from the conversation with Ms Joshi was the fact that her diverse experiences in life sparked an intrinsic understanding for the need to extend these opportunities to others, especially her students, be it in extra-curricular activities, the space to voice opinions or the need for mutual respect.

Can this be relevant for socio-emotional development and for imparting constitutional values as well? Often interventions for both of these are focused on the child; there may be value in bringing more focus on the teacher as well because Ms Joshi's experience reiterates the fact that a teacher is better able to create spaces for children when she has some for herself. Ample examples of this were observed in her interactions with the children where Ms Joshi was empathetic, calm and treated the children with respect. This automatically seemed to set an example for the children all of who worked in her class with diligence and mutual respect. What is interesting is that Ms Joshi is able to create this environment in her class against the backdrop of a school and community in which corporate punishment is rampant and the belief that 'children do not listen unless scolded/hit' is common.

Another important question which emerges is what motivates a teacher to go out of her way and do things for the welfare of the students and community at large. For Ms Joshi, a combination of enabling factors, such as support from family and an open and curious personality, seemed to enable her to take on all opportunities that came her way. Moreover, personal skills, such as self-awareness and reflection, seemed to be significant tools for navigating challenges; as she puts it, 'Reaching where I am today has taken consistent and active work.' Hence, it seems to be a cyclical process wherein one's personality enables the person to be more open to opportunities, and the exposure to opportunities then further enriches one's personality.

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