Change: Slow but sure

By | Oct 9, 2013

It is a common complaint that government teachers are are often asked to spend more time on other tasks rather than actually teach. This is the main reason why teachers who are serious about teaching their students get angry and annoyed when they are called to participate in a training programs and workshops and do not have any choice but to attend it. Once in awhile though, the training process and the content of the workshop add meaning to the teachers' personal and professional lives and bring about improvement and actual change. This is what happened with Sonu Ram Kashyap when he participated in the School Leadership Development Program. The program, he says, gave a new dimension to his ideas.

"If I had not taken part in the training, I would have lost some precious moments of life," says Sonu Ram Kashyap, head teacher of the new primary school in Potanar, in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, who had participated in the 'School Leadership Development Program' organized by the Azim Premji Foundation.

The school is located about 15 km from Jagdalpur, near Atargudha. There are 38 students in the elementary school - 21 boys and 17 girls - all of whom are adivasis. Along with Sonu Ram Kashyap, two other teachers work at the school - Anuradha Sen and Mayawati Baghel. Mayawati and Kashyap are from the local community. The mother tongue of the school children is the language Halbi. Some of the course material is in fact taught in Halbi. While studying in Halbi, the children seem to be quite happy and confident answering all the questions asked. Kashyap was teaching them about the Indravati river. When he asked them where the river originates from, the children replied in chorus 'Odissa'. To an outsider, it's clear that there is a different joy in studying in the language one is comfortable with.

Of the students, most of the girls want to become teachers. While some of the boys want to be teachers too, many intend to join the police or the army. Becoming a teacher was Kashyap's childhood dream. As an adult, he went against his father's wishes to make his dream come true. His father, an employee of the forest department, wanted him to join the forest department too. Kashyap says, "When I was a student, I got an offer letter from the agricultural development officer for the post of an assistant. I did not take this up. My father himself insisted that I study further as both my parents had not completed school themselves. But when I got the offer letter to become a teacher I had to convince my mother to not tell my father about it. Claiming that I was simply visiting Jagdalpur I completed the formalities in order to begin work at the school in the village called Kovakunda in Dantewada district. It was only then that I informed my father about this. At the time what could he say? He just pointed out that I hadn't listened to him.

"So why did you want to be a teacher?" I asked. In response, Kashyap said, "My parents always wished that we children complete our studies to fare better in our lives. That was top most in my mind and I wanted to be able to ensure that for other children too. I could do more for children as a teacher. Teaching in Kovakunda was a difficult experience. Commuting to the school was difficult and the school did not even have its own building. Even staying there was complicated as there were no places to stay. On my first day there, I'd taken a briefcase, with my certificates and my joining letter. I had placed the briefcase against a pile of bricks and within a short while I found that termites had eaten through the case and ruined my papers. I had to re-apply for the certificates.

There was also the difficulty of getting to the school. To reach the village by bicycle, we had to cross the river. And we would have to carry enough food to last us 10-15 days as the river would flood often and we'd be cut off from the rest of the world. There was also the problem of language, the village children spoke Gondi and I did not. Students often left school to begin working. Sons would leave school after the 8th grade to help with the harvest. After studying till the 10th, daughters would get married. We, teachers, were like holiday guests, visiting the students. Although we could provide the resources we were not around always to guide them. I have two grandchildren, both below the age of six. They are currently studying in a private school in Jagdalpur as government schools only admit students above the age of six. I do not want to repeat the mistakes I made with my children and I want to make sure they are guided from a young age."

"In the beginning, my relationship with the villagers was very formal. When we teachers come to the village, while the people do greet us with Namaste, our words about bringing about change are not taken seriously. We are seen as government employees who just talk without actually doing anything. We hope to change this attitude, this lack of faith, through our work."
Sonu Ram Kashyap has already begun to do this. After attending the training workshop, he returned to the school and invited all the people in the community. They were told that the school was selected as a “model” school. The elders of the village were ceremoniously welcomed. He says that this was done to show the community that the teachers too belonged and were a part of the community now and would like to work together to improve the conditions of the school.

By being shown around the school, the community and the people associated with the school could better understand the problems and work together to find solutions. For instance, some of the issues that were brought up were that the school doesn’t have a boundary wall and along with a shed also needs a lunch hall. As the school does not have a tube well and plans for a bore well were not successful, it was suggested that we install pipes and get water from the water department. The school management committee is temporarily arranging for a play ground for the children. In this manner, the community came together to find solutions for the problems.

Though Sonu Ram Kashyap had probably already thought about these issues, the training gave him confidence and he seems charged because of it. He says, “We learned a lot from the training program. The program made a significant impression on me and my colleagues and we are eager to get started. Our desire to work has increased significantly. We are now seeing the school as a model school. We want to improve ourselves, our children, the community, and ultimately the society. When we say we can do it, it means we can do it and we will all do it together. The process may be slow, but it will surely happen.”

Tags: training, workshop, program, change, community

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