

A Teacher Transformed Through Training

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Are certain individuals born to be teachers and can only those be truly competent? Or can people without such aspirations develop to become 'great teachers'? Are there certain conditions, the presence of which foster such development? Are these conditions internal (personality, temperament) or external (support, opportunity)? These are some questions which emerged during conversations with an unassuming teacher in a school in Dharsiwa, a rural town in Raipur.

The School

PS Ramsagarpara is housed in a small building off the main road. It consists of four classrooms and one small room for teachers. The school has 99 children with roughly equal gender distribution. On average, 70-75 children attend school per day. Most children come from labourer families, which means their parents work long hours and children spend many hours unsupervised, which is a major reason for incomplete homework and alcohol use among teenagers. Discrimination in school is not a concern, students mostly mingle with everyone. Average attendance in the parent-teacher meetings (PTMs) is 30-35 since most parents are daily wage workers and/or do not have time and energy to engage with their child's education.



The children eat their mid-day meal in the long corridor between the classrooms. Space is a major restriction in the school; there is no space to play or have activities which require movement.

Personal journey of the teacher

Ms Gayatri comes from a humble family where meeting daily needs was a struggle. Being one of 5 sisters and 3 brothers, she, at a young age, had to leave education and start working due to the family's financial constraints. After a few years, she went back to school and finished her schooling. After her schooling, she did not particularly aspire to be a teacher but her father found her a teaching job and she joined only because of the family's financial needs.

Gayatri considered teaching as just her job and went about it daily without much deliberation. In 2010, she taught classes I to III due to a shortage of teachers. She says she found it difficult to teach three grades together and often found herself ill-equipped to do so. She resorted to rote teaching-learning because of both, teaching multi-levels and her own inability.

In 2017, the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) offered an English proficiency course to her. She had always fancied being fluent in English and decided to go ahead. What followed were workshops on teaching methods and pedagogy which marked the beginning of a total shift in the way she viewed her job. In her world, she would have never imagined that there were any other ways to teach but the workshops completely captivated her; she saw routes to change which she did not know existed.

Narrating the workshop experience, Ms Gayatri looked buoyant; she recollected how awed she was by the patience and calmness of the facilitator. It initiated the process of self-realization in her; whenever she lost her temper with the students, she would think 'what would the workshop facilitator have done in this situation'? She also started maintaining a reflective diary which helped her with this process of self-realization and transition.

This reflected in her practice; the central learning from her training was that children can learn on their own and enjoy exploring and experimenting. For example, she shifted to using word webs; progressing from words to alphabets instead of making the children mug up ABC, she started using TLMs and stories more often. She understood the value of leaving books, chart papers, models and learning

Perspective of District Institute members

Since 2015, Ms Gayatri has been continuously engaged with APF through educational activities, such as workshops, cluster meetings, school visit, Voluntary Teacher Forums (VTFs)¹, Bal Melas and seminars. Her engagement on VTFs has been consistent and she has also facilitated some of the sessions in workshops. She truly follows continuous teacher professional development. Some significant changes as seen by the district institute (DI) members were:

Change in thinking and belief system: Compared to earlier, positive changes in her classroom practice and children's learning are clearly visible. For example, she gives equal opportunity to all students of class I to participate in various activities (poetry, story, games).

Action-oriented learning: She is prompt in implementing her leanings, for example, she very quickly adapted her pedagogy to follow the whole language method, phonological awareness and creating a print-rich environment.

Networking and knowledge sharing: Teacher Gayatri shares her experience with staff and other school teachers during cluster meeting, and workshops.

Pedagogy: Her work with the children in the classroom is remarkable. She does not maintain hierarchy among the children or the teachers. She believes in working together with the children and tries to involve every child in the learning process.

Note from one of the DI members

"I met Gayatri Jangde through the English Proficiency Course. She has, recently, successfully completed EPC Level 3. She is more spontaneous, dynamic and confident now than before. She is extremely interested in improving herself. After observing her class and having a discussion with us, she created plans to change her methods. It would be an understatement to say that she is giving her best. Even the material she uses to make her classroom print-rich must be hung in the morning and taken off at the end of the day as the middle school continues in the same room. She has just brushed these problems aside and created her own way out of it."

Reflections

Coming back to the questions in the beginning – Ms Gayatri didn't grow up wanting to be a teacher, neither did she have a passion to become a better teacher once she started working as one. However, when she got an opportunity to learn, she blossomed. This raises a question; does getting an opportunity enable a person to become more open to learning or does one's pre-existing openness impact what a person takes away from an opportunity? Did the workshop she attended facilitate Ms Gayatri to be more open to learning or did she possess openness as a trait and that enabled her to make the most of the workshop?

A member from the DI expressed that after working for so long with teachers and their training, she is now able to recognize teachers who would be open to learning. Some characteristics of this are: they like engaging in debates during the training; they don't accept things on face value; they ask questions; they show a willingness to engage after school hours; some of them remain silent but are extremely attentive; they actually reach out on phone post the training asking for help. The conversations often start with them saying, 'Please don't mind me calling you like this, but would you please give some suggestion for...'

Another important factor expressed both by the teacher and the DI member was the role of pivotal support systems – having a supportive family and some elbow room in school enables the teacher to apply her learning.

Perhaps then, it is the marriage of internal dispositions and external factors that contribute to the making of a teacher. From Ms Gayatri's example, we can see just how important a role training can play, and that has important implications on the role of teacher training.

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