

Building a school and community – brick by brick

By | Jan 28, 2013

In Uttarakhand's Bageshwar district lies a village dotted with houses and surrounded by fields. At the edge of this village is a school that we were to visit. When we reached the school, we were welcomed by the teacher, Hemchandra Lohumi, who shared with us the journey of the school...



Enrolment was low in the six schools established in the region about four years ago. In our school, there were ten students and three teachers including myself. The school was just a building in the beginning. It had a few rooms, a kitchen, and some furniture but lacked the feel and spirit of a real school. We, the teachers, took it upon ourselves to make it a 'real' school – we taught the students during school hours and worked on setting up the school in the evenings. Seeing the effort we were putting in, the villagers soon began to help. Time spent in doing up the school helped create a bond between the teachers and the villagers.

More than the school itself, it was the sense of community that brought the enrolment up. The interaction the parents had with us encouraged them to send their children to school. The villagers had put their faith in us, and now it was upon us to ensure that the children learned in school.

Lohumi along with the other teachers – Kanchan Varma, Uma Parihar, and Mohan Chandra Tiwari, would sit together and discuss the issues and challenges faced by them and their students. These discussions helped to not only solve challenges in the classroom but also learn better ways to teach.

If today we are capable of rising to any challenge or find better ways to work, it is all the result of our discussions and our working together. When it is required that we visit nearby schools to hold classes we take turns to do so. The advantage of teaching at other schools is that we get a chance to interact with other students, meet parents and talk with the teachers. Our visits have helped form a bond with these schools.

With aid from the education department, we were able to buy good furniture in the classrooms. We were also able to install a swing and slide set for the children. Our visits to the village involve us spreading awareness about the facilities offered by our school.

Enrolment in the school has been increasing every year. While we would like all the children in the neighbouring areas to join our school, we are proud to have 90 students enrolled here, especially since most schools have a maximum of 40.

Parents appreciate the facilities that the school provides and are pleased to find that their children enjoy studying, even at home! When students are absent, parents make it a point to inform us. They sometimes volunteer to teach various skills in the class and help with hosting the children's' fair.

Many of our students have graduated from secondary school and gone on to study at high schools. As teachers, we are proud to hear of our students who have done well. Hearing stories of their success encourages us to keep doing what we are doing.

Now it's lunch time at the school. The students are waiting in line for their lunch. We find the teachers helping the cook serve the students. Don't the teachers find their academic activities disrupted when they are expected to do all these tasks?



No. We have a system in place. We buy the rations once a week and it is the responsibility of the cook to ensure the meal is prepared in time. While serving the children, we get to assess the quality of the food and ensure that everyone eats well. The cook takes her job seriously and the children enjoy the food prepared. We spend around ten minutes every day filling out the forms required for the midday lunch scheme. But that is all.

It is time for us to leave and Lohumi sees us out...



What makes this school work is the sense of belonging. Once a week, we all get together to discuss the school and update each other about various aspects. We make sure to include the villagers in the discussions and the decision-making process too, especially since it is their children who come here.

As you can see, the building has been done up quite well and this is mostly because we've had help from the community. We've been able to expand our school and build more classrooms because of land donated by some villagers. It took us time to build the school but we built a community in the process. It helps all of us – teachers, parents and students - to work together, face the challenges together and share the responsibility.

The original article and the photos were submitted by Vipin Chauhan from Azim Premji Institute for Learning and Development in Uttarakhand, Dehradun.

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