

Teacher Learning Communities – Some Insights from Surpur

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In 2008 we had a review of the Child Friendly School initiative which had started in Surpur, an underdeveloped and underserved area of NEK in 2005, with the objective of quality education to all children in a child friendly atmosphere. We were working in the block consisting 300 plus schools in 5 areas – 1. School environment, 2. Classroom environment, 3. Teaching learning process, 4. Teacher academic development and 5. Community participation. The review threw up the fact that among the five areas the most neglected areas were teacher academic development and community participation. Our deeper analysis on these review results made it clear that without teacher academic development nothing significant in education could be done. Hence, our focus for the next phase was on teacher academic development or teacher professional development. After a lot of deliberations and exposure, Mela or Baal– Mela and Teacher Learning Centers (TLC) were two approaches on which we concentrated.

The Mela we conduct is on a subject, for example, science, math, social science or language. One school, or a group of schools, takes on the responsibility with a subject and a theme and prepares their children to present the concept in an interactive mode to people (student’s teachers and community) who participate in the mela. In these five years in NEK we have conducted nearly 400 melas on different themes. The first mela was conducted with all the 25 volunteers (margadarshis) working for the mela. All of us stayed in the school for a week though now when the school conducts a mela just one of our margadarshis helps the school. All the planning and preparing of the children is done by the teachers. It is heartening to see how the teachers, all public school teachers, prepare themselves. When they prepare the children, the questions the children’s questions force the teachers to learn more about the concept. Hence, they start a journey of learning with the children. The majority of the teachers in government primary schools have usually not done any science experiments or used Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs) either in their schools or during their D.Ed, B.Ed courses. However, after a mela is confirmed teachers of surrounding schools come together, for example, all the science teachers of surrounding schools to put together the concept and allied activities. During the process, they start reading and sharing information and knowledge. This process of coming together builds cohesiveness and is the genesis of an informal learning forum.



After some time the learning of the teachers becomes very intense. They extend this learning with students and other teachers. This process slowly grows and extends and moves out of the school to other teachers in other schools and high schools. They try to meet experienced persons and experts to build themselves. This learning together is the best part of the mela. It makes people vulnerable and ready to learn from others, which I feel is the starting point of relating to others. The hierarchy between teachers and students, other teachers, head teachers and functionaries is broke, a pre-requisite for evolving a learning community of the teachers.



This process, of meeting others and learning from them, has led to teachers encouraging and helping others to conduct melas. The preparation for the mela is key to its success and it is in preparation that the capacity building of the teachers happens. When they start reading, exploring, experimenting and conceiving together. The non-formal space thus created is enough to motivate and encourage teachers to build up a small group of open and enthusiastic teachers who want to do something, learn and contribute. If the preparation creates a space for learning, the event itself provides a lot of scope for recognition. The teachers receive a lot of gratitude from the parents, community and kudos from their teachers' community and higher officials.

At this juncture, we felt that the informal space needed to be converted to a more formal and rigorous space for learning together, since learning is a serious endeavour which needs organized reading, discussion and sharing. And thus the idea of the Teacher learning Centre was born.

In Surpur first we started four Teacher Learning Centres (TLC). The TLC is a space for teachers to



meet, share and learn. A lot of discussion went in to changing the name from Teacher Resource Centre to Teacher Learning Centre. The emphasis for the teachers was on the word learning- that it should

'The lines in the original translation from Mustache Thievery by Sukumar Ray read: 'They claim the mustache is mine—as though it's something you can own! The mustache owns the man, my friends—that's how we all are known.'
 This particular translation is from: http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/sukumar_mustache.html

not be a passive resource centre but an active learning centre for teachers. It is true that in the initial phases, teachers did not participate willingly. It took about 18 months to get an organized teachers group to form in TLC. The initial programmes were the usual hard spots, something to immediately execute in classroom the next day, tomorrow. More of immediate problem solving. But the teachers themselves showed the way. Subject teachers gradually felt that there is need to meet at regular intervals to address common classroom problems. They started meeting once a month as a group to discuss the issues which later became the voluntary teacher forum since they have volunteered to build their capacity by investing their personal time. Subject teachers began asking specific things in their subject which led to the forming of voluntary subject-specific teacher forums. These forums later started having discussions on the aims of and perspectives in education. The voluntary teacher forums became active with a lot of capacity building activities. The teachers trained here in English under 'change agents' began doing very well in their classes and were selected for the government training sessions as resource persons. The teachers slowly started taking more responsibility and a core group was formed which manages and runs the TLC. The newsletter being published by the District Institute team was slowly taken over by the TLCs. The TLCs became a hub of activities for teachers. Some teachers demanded sports materials, others wanted books. Teachers started borrowing books, science equipment and using it in their classrooms. They went to different places on exposure visits to different resource centres (Chamrajnagar, Kuppam,) and classroom transactions (Kerala).

Today there are six TLCs in Surpur and twenty two TLCs in North East Karnataka. We have a wide range of TLCs run by our own coordinators, government officials and teachers groups. The TLCs are attempting to formalise their activities calendar and are focused on academic discussions and activities. Along with the academic work they have attempted many things like making video clippings that can be used in classrooms, and newsletters. Many teachers are involved in 'barefoot research'. They

conduct seminars, conferences, informal discussions and workshops on relevant topics. Discussion is happening on the core committee on developing curriculum for teachers who come to TLCs. These TLCs in Surpur are visited by other TLC members of NEK. They are a source of motivation and inspiration for other teachers.

The most important thing to be understood here is that these are all teachers of government primary schools in most remote, underdeveloped and underserved areas, which is a challenge. But the teacher community is vibrant, learning at every step. Moreover these are voluntary teachers' forums, a learning community of teachers, something we have still not understood .

We do not know what really works. We cannot single out anything as the magic silver bullet. We have done many things and everything was integrated in an organic way. We have done it for long but today, we feel this is not enough. This is just a trend we see and it has to be grounded and rooted for sustainability.

However, there are a few basic assumptions that we have gathered in our journey. The intentions, which have to be genuine and clear, get communicated only through our work and action. Everything has to happen, creating demand and then supplying what is demanded. It is important that teachers' capacity building efforts that are taking place in TLCs are adding value and contributing to their professional development. Our being in the field and working shoulder to shoulder with the teachers helps to convince them that we are not short- term players, who have come here to initiate work and vanish but will remain with them through their ups and down as their true partners, working together, with respect for their experience and knowledge. We begin with the attitude that we do not know and want sincerely to learn from each other. A community gets built on a sound foundation of relationships which respects and believe in each other. A lot of initial group building happens in non-formal settings, but the rigours of learning demand a more structured and systematic designed process. The most important thing is teachers enjoying learning and tasting the power of autonomy.

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