

Teachers working together – WORKS!

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All these years was a struggle to find out if there is a pattern of what goes in to making a good school. I want to share here how the process unfolded itself from trying to find out elements or a pattern that make a good school, to understanding that there cannot be a single reason or element that makes a good school to slowly being able to get some, very minimal understanding I should confess, of two elements that emerge from the schools we have been engaged for more than a decade. Not a new thing for the field of education, but for us it has been a hard earned learning. The importance of teachers working as a team and a democratic leadership.

In 2003 I came to this field of formal Education. Till then, my experience had been largely in Non-formal education, especially in Adult Education. In Foundation too, we had just started working and were looking for means and methods of effective processes to bring about the change. We were meeting a lot of people and experts of this field to find out what is the best way to work for quality education in schools. We were consulting experts and getting involved in Studies to understand this area. We approached Prof. Jalaluddin (leading NEEV, Network of Enterprising Educational Ventures. Director NCERT in 90s,) to conduct a study for us to find out what makes a good school. The professor shocked us by saying “you will not find a single element that is responsible in making a school good, nor is there a pattern that will emerge of good schools. Different elements help in making a good school and in different schools it would be different, there is no single answer to this question - what goes to the making of a good school? No point in finding out, get engaged.”

True, this did not give us an answer, but, it gave us a direction. We started getting involved in the schools, classroom processes and mainly with teachers and functionaries. Our work more and more focused on teacher professional development. Building the capacity of the teachers became the nucleus of our work. In the course of our work, we saw all types of schools- the good, and the not so good. But, teachers gave us hope. We saw teachers in remote

areas, in bare minimum running good schools where children had achieved good learning levels. We saw schools far from the highways and motorable roads very punctual and vibrant, involving the children in a lot of academic activities. We saw teachers turning hostile community to school friendly partners in running the school. There was a young teacher in Surpur who was able to take on the powerful feudal landlord belonging to the royal family and fight for a piece for land for the sanctioned school. This I feel was a great courage on part of the teacher and with support from others was successful in getting the land for the school.

There were a lot of schools doing academically very well. There were teachers like Rekha who single handedly taught 5 classes and the learning of the children is good. These were very confident and independent children. There were teachers who took remedial teaching very seriously and did that with commitment benefiting the out of school children. There are teachers giving extra time to help these children cope with the learning. There are various teachers who have built good relationship with the community members, old students and involved them in them in teaching and engaging with students. It is these teachers who give us a hope. Hope to work and hope that the system will change for better. We were convinced that in the system, there are good committed people who are creative and solve their problems and move forward with the children.

In these 13 years I have seen various types of good schools in 6 states where we are working. As professor Jalaluddin has said it is not one but various things that make the schools, good schools. But, as I look back at these schools a common pattern emerges. Two things stand out in all these good schools. One, the teachers working together as a team and the other a democratic leadership.

A good and healthy relationship is the base on which the teachers team is built. One thing that strikes anybody who enters these good schools is the teacher’s team. They have a very good relationship amongst themselves. Though they

say “it just happens that people are good.” when you ask about the good relationship, it is not true. It takes a lot of effort in building this relationship. They take time to communicate and understand. When the other is in trouble and need support they go out of their way to help and support. We do see that they put in a lot of effort in to this and this is consistent. As one of the teacher was saying, it needs a lot of effort and time in the beginning, but, later you have to just keep it going. But, you cannot neglect. Later it becomes smooth and way of life and you feel terrible when it is missing.

Working together in team is the key. The sight in these schools is of all the teachers involved and working. It could be anything you see teachers together doing it. The assembly, the mid-day meals or dealing with the community or dealing with the officers, any events the teachers are together. In these schools like in Sharana Sirasagi Thanda school in Kalburgi, the teacher team is a bundle of vibrant and jovial teachers. We all know that in school this does not happen easily. This needs a lot of preparation. The teachers as a team speak amongst themselves. If it is about the event who does what and also sees that it does not end up being a burden for one or two. In this way it looks seamless but, a lot of background work goes in to it to make it a team effort.

Time and space for meetings is important for the team to get built. Structured time for a formal meeting is something that we see in most of these good schools. In spite of an informal atmosphere the teacher meetings are very structured with specific agenda. There are different possibilities. Many of these schools have it on Saturdays immediately after school hours. But I saw few schools having it either just before school starts or as soon as they finish school in the evening. These daily meetings are just 15 to 30 minutes meetings. But, the teachers say that it helps them a lot. In schools such as the Naganahalli in Kalaburagi, the team uses their lunch time for an elaborate chat around academics and different children. Especially children with concern. They make it a point to see that all the teachers are there and all participate. Interesting to note, is that these teachers in these meeting speak about subject, their plan and also about dealing and engaging with difficult children. (Similar efforts in Kashibai school in Gaddada Narayana Tanda in Surpur, Yadgir)

There are a number of small things that go to building a team. Spending time outside schools is also very important. Could be just meeting in another teacher’s house for a tea or an exposure visit to some place. Could be anything but, that helps. But, the most important thing the teachers identify is that there should be learning and growth in the team. Sharing what you know, and getting to know from others is something that happens subtly. I have not seen teachers taking up a paper on a subject, read and discuss. But, a lot of discussion happens on what is written in the newspaper on Education and allied topics. They share the books they have read. More important is they encourage each other to write to newspapers, magazines. It is true that they do not work on preparing papers and discussion on published papers in journals. They do not reflect on some other papers. But the discussion is not personal. It is on education and around child’s development.

The teachers working as a team is very important. But, that does not happen just like that. These processes has to be led by a leader. A leader of high quality. A leader with vision. A leader with values and leader who believes in team work. Invariably we find good leaders in these good schools. Here we see a pattern of leadership in these schools. I will take a head teacher Sri Sharanabasappa Nasi,(Head teacher Anapur school, Yadgir) whom I know from my Surpur days (from 2007) to see how a principal of a good school performs.

Nasi is a person with vision. Anywhere he goes he starts dreaming of making that a better place. We saw him as a head teacher, a Cluster Resource Person and then once again a head teacher. It could be anything. He constantly thinks of what should this be developed in to. His vision he shares with his colleagues. He takes a lot of time to convince his staff members, assistant teachers. He shares that he works on the vision development person by person. There are times when his friends or other teachers of the team tell him why he is wasting a lot of energy on one particular teacher. But, Nasi is adamant. He says in a team to develop a common understanding you will have to invest on each teacher. The strength of the chain is as good as its weakest link. Some understand soon and some take a lot of time but, as leaders we have to work on each person. He says once, this is done then developing a team with shared understanding and

vision is easy. He says the team understanding is not static. It is very dynamic, you cannot stop the process of constant communication. Clarity and excitement about the vision is very important for any team to move forward. A leader needs to have a vision, but for a good leader, that vision should be the vision of the team. And the skill is in developing, rather evolving this vision with the team. Nasi does this very skillfully in all the situations and has been successful till now.

Planning is the strength of Nasi and a lot of head teachers like him for this. They can plan what they have visualized very concretely. Nasi's team members say that Nasi can work to design a very detailed plan which is practical and challenging. It appears that Nasi has a good hold over working the details to its last step. Nasi always works the plans with his team.

Nasi contributes. When I ask him how is it that he can contribute. He replies "I am not so intelligent. I am a hard worker that's all. I prepare. I read, speak to people who know and prepare myself." He is a regular visitor to Teacher Learning Centre and District Institute. He will meet people speak to them and read. He reads and the best part is that he makes it a point to discuss what he has read with others. He participates in training programs and encourages his teachers to participate. He takes classes. He has a regular class and he substitutes whenever teachers are absent. This has built respect for him amongst his team mates. This is also leading by example. He reads books. He has a habit of sharing the content with his team members. This has slowly led to his other team members reading books and sharing it with the other members.

Nasi is a democratic person. He consults his team members on everything, big or small mundane and important. The meetings are open and transparent. What is most striking thing about Nasi's leadership? His teachers say that he provides academic leadership. They say whatever Nasi does, his focus is on Academics. How to provide good education to children. How to make the learning interesting and challenging for children? How to create a better learning atmosphere for children. How to create a process of continuing education and development for teachers? This is what makes Nasi's school a good school, a performing school. There is no rote learning here. Both the children and teachers are a happy lot without any fear why children even we like being in Nasi's school.

The report of the case studies done in 2006, of the 3 time winners (15 schools), in Learning Guarantee program also came up with conclusion similar to this. The winning schools had a few things common, like a committed head teacher, teachers having cordial relationship amongst themselves and with the community. Now, when we look at the schools across North East Karnataka, we find many good performing schools. When we look very closely in to these schools to find out what is making these schools tick, these two elements stand out. One, the teachers are working as a team and two, there is a good democratic leader who makes academic work at the nucleus of the process and take this team to a level of working together and enjoying it. Keeping these aspects in mind, we have not forgotten Prof. Jalaluddin's words "what goes to the making of a good school? No point in finding out, get engaged."

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