

Voluntary Teacher Forum(s): An Experience of a Journey (Rajasthan)

Abhishek Singh Rathore



Background and History

Evolution of Voluntary Teacher Forum is rooted in some organizational priorities, concerns of teacher community and joint initiative. It was in 2009 that as an organization we were in Tonk and Sirohi District and were exploring alternate methods of teacher professional development under the circumstances when in Rajasthan entire academic support system for teachers consisting Block Resource Center and Cluster Resource Centers were abolished. We were thinking about an idea that is ideologically different, which is primarily driven by teachers, assumes that teacher is a thinking individual, and which does not have problems of formal in-service teacher training programs. In our effort to address this we decided to provide a platform to self-introspecting teachers where they can share with, question and learn from each other. The central idea was/is to provide teachers the needed space to talk openly about all issues concerning the teaching-learning processes in schools. Hence we decided to create voluntary spaces for teachers.

At the same time there was a group of teachers in Malpura (Tonk, Rajasthan) who had common concerns. They were fed up with in-service programs but interested in sharing their classroom experiences. Although it may appear that it is virtually impossible to find such teachers in public education system; this accorded with our belief that every system has some good individuals. We started the journey of teacher forums with those set of teachers which now exists in 7 states in which we work and hold the key to our teacher professional development programs.

Concept and the Process

Since it was a shared concern there was a joint action. The team of Foundation facilitated discussions with teachers to arrive at certain premises and operating principles on which we laid the foundation of these forums. The then premises and operating principles are as follows:

- Teacher Forum is conceptualized as a self-help commune, a group, which undertakes responsibility for its own professional development.

- This is an informal platform where teachers can meet up and converse on the experiences, problems, successes and triumphs they encounter in their everyday classrooms.
- The central assumption behind the forum is that there is no absolute expert who can provide solutions and address the needs of the group. Instead every member should work together to seek collective solutions.
- Here the problems encountered are not theoretical or hypothetical in nature, they are burning problems which every practitioner wants to address to make their classroom processes more effective and inclusive in nature.
- The Teachers' Forum is a flat democratic platform where there is no hierarchy between different participants. Everyone has the same stake over the issues and their strength to influence a discussion or dialogue is based on their logic and reasoning rather than their power or position.
- The group decides when to meet, where to meet, what to discuss, and how to take the forum ahead. The forum functions based on the norms decided by the group.
- The group would be only comprised of teachers who have felt the need to come together due to their own interest, even if the number is small.
- There would be no monetary benefits in the form of TA or DA, the teachers would come on their own expense and would decide on a venue that would be most comfortable for them to commute.
- 2-3 hours might not always be good to discuss all the issues. For issues that need to be dwelled in depth and details we can have residential teacher forums.


It took us a year to evolve these premise and principles together with teacher community and simultaneously teacher forums were also taking place.

Why is it working?

So many things look so dismay, hopeless and depressing in the current education scenario in the country that anything of this nature gathers grains


of doubts and disbelief. The fact that currently there are over 10000 such individuals who are members of these forums across the country is good enough an indication of its popularity and success. When this is discussed in different forums people don't believe this and the question people often ask is – what is the motivation of the teachers behind this?

1. Reciprocating work and respect - As a social construct, reciprocity means that in response to friendly actions, people are frequently much nicer and much more cooperative than predicted by the self-interest model; conversely, in response to hostile actions they are frequently much nastier and even brutal. When you see individuals from same teaching community taking the initiative for the professional development of their colleagues there is a tendency to reciprocate it in terms of making some contribution, even if it means only participating in the forum. We have observed that teachers who are doing some work in their classrooms are looking for respect for their work. Reciprocity and Respect remains the core idea on which these forums work.



Mutual voluntary aid exchanged between Greece and Turkey, when earthquakes struck both countries a few years ago. The voluntary collaboration between these two populations has subsequently led to an official Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries regarding future disasters.

Global Research – Volunteerism and Capacity Development (2002)



In the Andes, for example, mingas orfaenas are traditional ways of communities coming together to share labor, usually for the common good. Similar traditions exist in Africa and Asia. Records show that these forms of reciprocal labor can be traced back many centuries.

Global Research – Volunteerism and Capacity Development (2002)

2. Showing Solidarity for the Profession – Every community has good individuals and human beings and teaching community is no exception. It was not very long back that one of such forum was organized in Malpura and the same question was asked to teachers; what is your motivation to start such a group? Well one of the guy came up with an amazing reply: I come here because of three reasons; a teacher must be honest towards her subject; her teaching profession; and her country. To put it in Hindi so that its basic fabric is not lost, it is 'Vishay ke prati imaandaarii, Peshe ke prati imaandaarii aur Desh ke prati imaandaari'.

3. Mutual Concern – The forum itself has been laid on the foundation of concerns shown by teachers and we also share the same with them. There are enough such analogous examples available which will prove why initiatives driven by mutual concerns achieve its objective.

4. Pride, Identity and Image – Preliminary findings of our recent research on VTFs indicates that teachers believe that it is helping them regain their lost identity and image. Many teachers in our research reported that being part of such a forum is considered good and valuable in the teaching community and amongst the district administration.

The discussion of teachers on issues like Anna Hazare Andolan indicates that the group has matured a lot and has started getting in to larger social issues.

Learning/Critical Attributes:

There has been a continuous discussion/reflection of the team and teachers on the attributes responsible for the continuity and flourishing of these forums. After reasonable debate amongst ourselves regularly, we have identified factors/attributes which altogether are working behind these forums:

1. Commitment and Belief – We have experienced that forums where we had an initial core of members who were committed and had a belief in collective action for common good, are the ones where we can see a marked difference in people capacities.

2. Ownership and Initiative – Forums which were jointly initiated by Foundation and Teachers initially are now owned by teaching community as compared to forums where we had significant role in initiating forums. We observed that wherever we have failed to create joint ownership we have also struggled to sustain the discussions with teachers.

3. Resource Mobilization – This has been a critical factor in ensuring the continuity of forums. Forums where more local resources (Resource Person, TLM, Content etc) have been mobilized are the ones which are more regular as compared to forums which unnecessarily created a dependence on Foundation.

4. Quality of Transactions – It was in 2011 that we discovered that attendance of teachers was dropping. The reason can be attributed to two things:

- A. *Discussions were not well structured and preparation for each forum was not up to the mark*
- B. *Teachers now wanted that we must operate one level higher than before.*

Quality of transactions depends upon two critical things: Preparation/Quality of Module and Quality of Resource Person. We observed that once we kept both these things under check we quickly recovered from the problem. This has remained as one of the most critical attribute to the success of these forums.

5. Escalation of issues in Residential Teacher Forums/Workshops – While 2-3 hours regularly is a reasonable time to discuss issues, not all issues can be discussed in limited time. Some issues require greater academic rigor and time to discuss. We had that in mind and conceptualized Residential Teacher Forum or such issues are dealt in workshops.



Teachers of Uniyara block (Tonk, Rajasthan) make frequent classroom observations of each other's classes and held discussions around it. We want teachers to come up with such progressive ideas and stay with them.

Miles to GO.....

The way the entire idea unfolded has been really exciting and challenging but something that has worked on the ground. Currently Voluntary Teachers Forums forms an integral part of our overall strategy of teacher professional development in a district. Going ahead we have to answer some of these questions that how we reach to more number of teachers with the same idea, how do we meet the diverse needs of the group and while many teachers do experiment in their class room how do we make sure that all teachers are using constructive ideas of teaching learning in their schools. We have complete belief in the idea and believe that it will emerge as one of the good ways of pursuing teacher professional development for individuals and we have good reason to believe so.

Abhishek has been associated with Azim Premji Foundation since 2006 and has contributed in the areas of Computer Aided Learning, Workbook Development, Research, Large Scale Assessments of Learners, and Professional Development of Teachers, Head Teachers and Education Functionaries. He has evolved and led the District Institute and Azim Premji School of the Foundation at Tonk, Rajasthan. He currently provides leadership to State Institute, Rajasthan, Azim Premji Foundation. He may be contacted at abhishek@azimpremjifoundation.org