

SHAMBHAVIK. JOSHI

"I am of the personal opinion that a teacher should not point out individual children who are weak in their studies"

I studied in the Idar Primary School up to class seven. The secondary school was co-educational. Many parents did not, therefore, continue with the education of their girls beyond class seven. My elder sister was a primary school teacher and she motivated me to study beyond the primary level. She was a good teacher and was my role model. She developed in me a liking for learning new things and the habit of reading literature.

When I started teaching I found some teachers studying for a degree while continuing with their jobs. My circumstances were also such that I needed to work. So, following their example, I decided to study as an external student. I also observed many women teachers who had to manage their careers and also their children. They did not have much time for anything else. I decided to do something different. The competitions arranged for teachers gave me an opening. I took part in elocution and essay competitions and was successful. My articles also got published and this motivated me. I continued with my studies and acquired the B. Ed. and M.A. degrees. These studies have been useful since as a practitioner I could relate them to the conditions of my students.

Lessons from my mentors

My first posting was in Jadhar village. The principal of the school there was my first mentor. The two important lessons I learned at that time-and which have been my guiding principles ever since-were the importance of treating children with affection and adopting a caring attitude. The child comes from a home environment to which it is accustomed. The school environment is new and threatening. If there is no affection forthcoming from the teachers, fear is the result. Also, many times children make mistakes and it is hard to be patient. I always pray that even by mistake I do not raise my hand to threaten a child. I have discussed the problem of child psychology with many colleagues, but I feel all teachers should first study and work about their own attitudes.

Helping children take pride in their appearance

In order to make school an attractive place, I decided to help children take pride in their appearance. I bought combs, mirrors and napkins and started bathing the children in the school. I also kept a needle and thread so that the children could do minor repairs to their clothing themselves. The children were very enthusiastic and used to admire themselves in the mirrors. The money that I put in was a small amount, but the gains were the joy of the children and the regularity of attendance. The parents also started taking an interest in this activity and appreciated my efforts. Initially the number of girl students in the school was very low. I surveyed the households and prepared a list of girls who should have been attending school. I met the parents and over a series of meetings put pressure on them to send their girls to school.

Balmandir for toddlers

When I was working in Bhumel village I observed that many of the school-going children used to bring their younger siblings to the school. I realised that an alternative for the young children was needed since the school-going children were usually worried about their brothers and sisters. I talked to the parents about this and they felt very bad that I was sending toddlers out of the school. I proposed that we could set up an alternative institution for the purpose. I saw that the milk cooperative had a building which was opened only in the mornings and evenings. The committee agreed to lend the building during the day time. I also roped in two literate women of the village and brought in a girl from a neighbouring village who could take care of the kids. I invested a small sum initially and then mobilised government funds for the activity. Eventually the initiative became a Balmandir.

The Bhumel village school was a two-teacher school, and I was the first ever woman to teach in the village. The parents thought they could take me for granted. They would come at any moment of the day, stand at the door of the classroom and call their children out for work. I visited all the parents and explained that the practice had to stop. For a month things were all right. Then a parent tried to take away his child during school hours. I refused to let the child go. I told the parent that between eleven in the morning and five in the evening the child was my property, and just as he needed the child for work, I also needed the child for my work, which was teaching. After an argument, the parent gave in. I called a meeting of the parents in the school and explained to them the incident and why it was important to let the child be in school during the day. After that I did not have any problems.

Donations to the temple and to the school

At that time the physical infrastructure of the school was very poor. Village people attach more importance to the temple than to the school. Once the villagers decided to renovate the temple and collected funds for the purpose. I met the elders of the village and told them that they did not recognise living gods - their children - and that they were not doing anything for the temple of the goddess of learning - the school. From my side I presented a clock to the school. The people then started activities from their side. As a result the school was whitewashed, a compound wall built and watering arrangements were made. Various individuals also contributed money for windows, doors and a cupboard. In return I donated money for educational charts. As time passed regular contributions from parents started coming in for prizes and educational material. When the parents saw that their contributions had not been wasted, they were happy to contribute whenever the need arose.

Government assistance, slates, pencils and books, is available to the backward caste and Adivasi students. Other children, who may also be in dire economic need, are not eligible and this creates divisions sometimes. I am trying to raise a fund so that all children, irrespective of caste status can get books and pens.

New ideas from my studies

I have tried to introduce some new ideas in my teaching practice which my educational studies introduced to me. A few instances follow. I used to play with the children the games they liked most in order to attract them to the school atmosphere. I also used to sit at their level and talk to them about what they liked best at school. I used to keep toffees and biscuits for distribution as snacks. Initially I had to spend from my pocket. Later on the parents started contributing money for the purpose. This way I could figure out what were the games or activities liked most by the children. I then organised the school activities around such feedback. Children very often feel afraid to approach their teacher. When the teacher gets involved in such activities, the barriers may break down.

I also started a system of group work. I am of the personal opinion that a teacher should not point out individual children who are weak in their studies. However, there is always a group of children who are not performing as well as the others. When the group of 'weak' students is quite large, individual children will not feel that they are no good. I enlisted the help of better-performing students to teach the other children after school hours. I supplemented this activity by conducting classes at my home in the evenings for about an hour. When the students and parents realised that I was doing such things without getting paid anything extra they responded very well. I have also adopted the 'question-answer' technique as one of my main methods since it promotes curiosity among students. My B.Ed. studies helped me study this method in great detail. I have also used the classes under socially-useful productive work to combine teaching with extracurricular activities. For example, making earthen beads can be used to teach counting. By making collections of portraits of national leaders, history can be learned.

In my first posting I also realised the importance of having a good principal to build up an institution. I was aware of the period system of teaching and convinced him to adopt it in his school. He also encouraged me to overcome my weakness in mathematics. I used to attend his mathematics classes, sitting along with the children. I realised that instead of moaning about my drawbacks or hiding them, I could become a student myself, I attended the classes for one full year and later on started taking classes on my own.

I believe that starting the school's day correctly is important. A short prayer, performed with enthusiasm, sets the tone for the rest of the day. I have also used such meetings to encourage students to address their fellow students on life histories of saints, leaders and scientists. The ability to communicate and to think before communicating is there in every child. I give the selected student the topic and general information a day in advance. He or she is then supposed to work on the topic at home and communicate what he has learned to the school the next day.

Ultimately, releasing the potential of the child is the task of education. A primary teacher who shows affection and a caring attitude towards children is well placed to design opportunities for the children to utilise their full potential.