

## ***Teachers as Transformers: Learning from outstanding primary school teachers***

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### **INNOVATION FOR CHANGE**

- P G Vijaya Sherry Chand

Lateral learning', or learning from the good practices of one's outstanding peers, provides the rationale for this study. The teachers who have evolved practices which have worked for them have, in a sense, countered the constraints posed by their specific socio-economic and classroom situations. Their innovations (in spite of the limitations imposed as a result of the specificity of the socio-economic contexts in which the teachers have worked) may be relevant to the wider teaching community, since they take into account some of the actual contextual constraints most teachers face. The question, therefore, is how we can learn from the experiences of the outstanding teachers. This chapter attempts to answer this question through an analysis of the experiences of the outstanding teachers. The teachers' innovations are discussed in terms of certain crucial components of the universalisation of primary education: strategies for enrolment; pedagogical and curricular innovation designed to promote learning with enjoyment and hence to retain children in school; institution-building initiatives; resource mobilisation strategies and personal motivation and self-regulation. Certain examples are provided but these are only illustrative. The narratives in Chapter 3 provide further examples as well as the contexts under which these innovations were evolved.

### **Shaping the context, educational practice and the self**

The most important theme that is communicated by the answers that the teachers give is the concept of active shaping - shaping of the context in which the school is located and schooling takes place, shaping schooling practices in accordance with particular conceptions of education that the teachers hold, and very importantly, shaping oneself into a better teacher. However, these three elements, the self, educational practice, and the socio-economic and cultural context, cannot be compartmentalised. From the point of view of attaining educational goals, the consonance that is achieved among the actions on the three elements is perhaps more important than focusing on only one or two of the elements. For instance, in matters of homework, if the teacher does not reflect on his or her own homework-giving practices, and does not make arrangements for out-of-school support to first-generation learners, any effort at building community-school partnerships is bound to be more difficult. Another example is building on the cultural traditions of the community (tapping the traditional skills the teacher possesses and incorporating culturally-attractive educational pedagogies into schooling). Similar examples are to be found in the various experiments that the case studies narrate.

### ***Shaping the contexts in which schools and schooling are located***

The pro-service training that teachers receive prepares them for the professional (teaching) role that they have to play; how to deal with the interface between schooling and society is usually a neglected aspect of the curriculum. Perhaps teachers are expected to develop their skills in dealing with the community while on the job. Teachers in rural state-run schools especially need such skills since their schools are usually clearly identifiable with a particular neighbourhood (the village or hamlet), the problem of non-enrolment is still severe in many places and teachers are expected to play a mobilisation role in addition to a teaching role, and they have to depend on local resources for helping them achieve their educational goals. The responses of the teachers in this study to these features indicate how the teachers have tried to shape the socio-economic contacts in which they functioned.

### ***Drawing on local cultural experiences***

Given the strength of cultural traditions in most villages, it is not surprising that the teachers have used cultural elements in their educational practice, extensively. What is interesting, however, is the creativity shown by the teachers in using specific local features to make decisive impacts on their educational goals. A few examples are provided below.

Folk drama was, and still is, a popular form of entertainment in villages. In the mid-1950s this form was used to communicate the need for enrolment of girls with great effect by Nanji Kunia, to communicate the message that the school 'is the common property of everyone in the village (Tara Upadhyaya) or just to raise some money for the school (Moti Nayak, Keshav Purohit). A closely- related intervention is the use of the *katha* (religious discourses on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) to involve people (Thakarshi Kunbar). Shankar Patel used the *dayro* folk form to communicate the importance of education.

Culturally significant events or days have also been tapped to great effect. *Rakshabandhan* is an occasion on which women tie sacred threads around the wrists of men, who then become their 'brothers'. In return, the men present them with gifts. The 'gift' which Bhanumati Upadhyaya asked the village men for was their daughters for the school. Culturally speaking, the gift could not be refused and a dramatic impact was made on the enrolment of girls. Days of significance to the community *ekadashi* and *poonam* were set aside by Keshav Purohit for parent-school interaction and the meetings were also used to collect small sums for the school. *Navratri* is a festival which brings girls together; Manjari Vyas used the occasion to mobilise non-enrolled girls who were later enrolled in school.

The *Satyanarayan pooja* is a religious event 'which involves the distribution of *prasad*-, this *prasad* cannot be refused by the people to whom it is offered. Kanu Solanki used this norm, sanctioned by religion, to achieve a breakthrough in inter-caste relations. He himself belongs to a scheduled caste and his *prasad* (food) distribution to all the castes in the village helped him in building bridges with others in the village as well in attracting children from caste groups which had remained traditionally outside the schooling system.

### ***Introducing new cultural elements and new roles for people.***

The teachers have not restricted themselves to drawing upon existing cultural traditions. Many of them have introduced new elements in order to achieve their educational goals. The experiment of Thakarshi Kunbar with birthday greetings is worth noting. Many of his students were children of salt pan workers. There was no tradition of celebrating children's birthdays: in fact many parents did not even note down the dates of birth. During discussions with the principal of a college, Thakarshi hit upon the idea of sending greeting cards to all the school-going children. The *panchayat* supplied the first set of cards; then a few parents and he himself took up the task of supplying the cards. But a more crucial modification he made was to send birthday greeting cards to the parents of infants still to be enrolled in school. The parents were happy that a new practice of celebrating birthdays was introduced; but more importantly they were reminded that the time for enrolment of their children in school was approaching. Other teachers, like Manjula Upadhyaya and Shankar Raval, introduced systematic involvement of the community in the celebration of national festivals like the Independence and Republic days.

Nanji Kunia created a new role for the *maulvis* in planning the school cultural events so that they could change the timings of the *madrassa* which provided religious instruction to Muslim

children. This move made it possible for some children to combine religious and secular education. Bhanumati Upadhyaya, Sardarsingh Patel and Shankar Patel found new roles for mothers, initially by discussing with them, in their own idiom, the importance of educating girls. Shankar Patel even had a system of special meetings for mothers, the notices for which were sent in with reply slips. The mothers noted down their concerns and suggestions, often by taking the help of others, and these formed the content of the discussions. According an important role to mothers in the public sphere runs counter to the general cultural environment in the village, in which women are not seen as significant actors in the public sphere, and, therefore, also acts as a means of empowerment for the mothers by sending a message to the community that their opinions on public matters are valuable. A slightly different new element, introduced by two teachers, is a consciousness of the impact of child labour on education. Shambhavi Joshi's response to parents who pulled out their children during school hours was that just as they needed the children for their work, she also needed them for her work, teaching. Moti Nayak worked towards substitution of child labour with adult labour or paid labour, with some success. He also successfully countered the practice, prevalent in a community, of not sending children to school for 12 days after a death in the family.

### ***Teachers as entrepreneurs: 'Edupreneurs'***

Another role that almost all the teachers in this study seem to stress is their role as resource mobilisers. This role demands a lot of enterprise from the teachers. The financial status of *panchayat* schools is too well known to need any comment. The only resources available to the teachers were meagre contingency amounts for meeting the costs of chalk and dusters. Maintenance of infrastructure is erratic; in any case there are often fewer classrooms than the student strength calls for. In the absence of state funds (or district *panchayat* funds) for educational activities that teachers may want to take up, there is perhaps no alternative to mobilising local resources. Most of the schools that we are talking about are themselves located in economically-poor contexts, adding to the difficulty in raising resources. Mobilisation of resources from the community may sometimes act as a spur for social participation in school activities, or participation in school activities may lead to resource mobilisation. Involvement of the community in resource mobilisation also influences the quality of the utilisation of resources. In other words, source of funding is related to the efficiency with which funds are utilised. The teachers have also developed a variety of funds, each with its own institutional features, norms and purposes; these features are greatly dependent on the specific contexts within which the resources were raised. These are some of the issues that the 'edupreneurs' deal with in their narratives. A few examples, however, are given below to illustrate the range of approaches adopted.

Some teachers have built on the cultural traditions of contributing on auspicious or religious occasions to mobilise resources for the school. The motivation behind such attempts is best explained by Manji Prajapati, "If the priest can beg for help in godly matters without any sense of shame, I should not hesitate to beg for the betterment of the school." Thakarshi compared, with the people, their private expenditures on religion and education, and Ajitsinh explained to marriage parties visiting his village that primary education was equivalent to prayer. Others have used occasions like gatherings on *poonam* day and the child's first and last days in school to build up school funds. Ajitsinh also organised *Pam kathas* (religious discourses) for which people had to pay. The collections went into a school building fund which was then matched by the government. Children's entertainment and cultural programmes have also been used to build up sizeable funds (Bhagwati Joshi and Sushila Vyas).

Shankar Raval raised funds, on principle, only from the village people. But the others have relied

on outside sources, including Indians who have settled abroad, for building up facilities in their schools. The narratives of Kanu Solanki, Ajitsinh Solanki, Shankar Patel, Sushila Vyas, Narbheram Trivedi and Nanji Kunia provide excellent examples of how large amounts, often running into lakhs of rupees, were collected systematically.

Often the non-financial resources that exist within the community were also mobilised. The skills of carpenters, masons and others have been used by many teachers to make improvements to their schools, or even to build educational aids and models (Kalpana Acharya).

A few principles the teachers have followed stand out. Firstly, all insist that transparency in all financial matters is absolutely essential if funds have to be raised over long periods of time. The accounts have always been open, and donors publicly acknowledged. Secondly, there are official restrictions on teachers raising money through the school; most have overcome this constraint by forming associations with village elders in which they are also present. Thirdly, many teachers have started with their own contributions. For instance, Nanji Kunia started one particular drive by donating part of his house for a classroom. Finally, many teachers show an ability to improvise and be resourceful when an opportunity presents itself. Many years ago Sushila Vyas once met, in her village temple, a woman who was visiting the temple. The woman wanted to build a water room for the temple. Sushila immediately responded by saying that her school was in greater need of a water room. The woman pondered the request and decided to leave it to god to decide. She prepared two pieces of paper, one which had the school's name and the other the temple, and asked Sushila to pick one. If the school turned up, the water room had to be built in three days, otherwise the money had to be returned. Fortunately, Sushila picked the school's name, and by mobilising the community managed to build a water room in three days. This room even today meets the water needs of the school.

### ***Work with community as means to educational goals***

The experiences of many teachers indicates an explicit realisation that often community-level interventions are needed to achieve educational goals in the school. This is an important aspect of the shaping of village contexts that are often characterised by alienation from the school and low levels of education among parents. Community activities, strictly speaking, do not form part of the duties of a teacher. However, in practice, many of the teachers have involved themselves in organising mothers, conducting adult education classes and forming social service associations in order to create a more supportive climate for enrolment and retention in school.

Tara Upadhyaya, in 1948, identified the low levels of literacy among women as a barrier to the enrolment of girls in school. She organised education classes; when this did not work she organized *bhajan mandals* which resonated with the needs of the women. Since the women belonged to the scheduled castes, Tara had to face resistance from the upper castes in the village. Later, in the early 1960s she used the same approach to target older non-enrolled girls, and succeeded in most cases in opening up educational avenues for the girls. More than 35 years later, many of these girls are still in touch with her. Literacy initiatives have also been used by Manjari Vyas (who used children of the upper primary classes and children who had just completed their schooling as resources). Thakarshi Kunbar, Bhanumati Upadhyaya, Bava Sondharva and Shankar Patel. Other levels of involvement include initiating development activities in the village (Ajitsinh Solanki), social service like arranging for blood supply or using indigenous medicines (Raman Soni), struggling with the people against exploitation by seeing to it that cotton growers got proper prices or that labourers engaged in cutting wood got their dues (Sardarsingh Patel), or just helping people in Times of need (Ashwin Patel).

### ***Institution building efforts at the village level***

The teachers' efforts to raise resources or work with the community on non-school issues have usually been accompanied by attempts to give a formal institutional shape to the activities. Thus many teachers formed youth associations which then took up repair work in the schools or involved themselves in village development work. Parents' associations have been another form that community-school collaboration has taken. Shankar Raval formed a group of 15 life members' from the village who were interested in education, since this group was seen as having the moral authority to decide for the good of the school. A more formal form of collaboration has been the school committees set up by some teachers. Some were set up only for specific purposes like building a school. Ajitsinh Solanki mobilised Rs. 475,000 for a new school building on land supplied by the village *panchayat*. As soon as the school building was inaugurated, the committee was dissolved. Nanji Kunia formed a more permanent 'governing body'. Shankar Patel's initiative was even more institutionalised in that he formed a registered trust to handle school-community linkages. The latter is a rare example of using the non-governmental organisation format, subject to control of the Charity Commissioner, for developing *panchayat-nin* primary school and community linkages. In a few other cases, informal village education committees have been formed. Some of them are very active; for instance, the committee set up by Kami Solanki takes up repair work, construction of rww classrooms and the organisation of vanow *mahotsavs*, and also approves every request that goes out for funds. This committee has also rewarded good teachers. Many of these initiatives predate the current concern for involvement of *panchayati raj* institutions in the management of basic education. The manner in which the teachers in this study have gone about building up the commitment of the people evolving committees rather than legislating them offers lessons for the establishment of village education committees which is part of official educational policy in the District Primary Education Programme districts.

### **Shaping educational practice**

How teachers shape their educational practice in the light of their understanding of the socio-economic contexts in which they work and of the- attempts to develop themselves professionally, constitutes the theme of this section. As noted earlier, the consonance that teachers achieve between their actions on the self, educational practice and socio-economic contexts ultimately determines the achievement of their educational goals. Flexibility in organising school timings. In matters of organising the school calendar, primary school teachers are guided by the regulations laid down for daily timings and the number of days of schooling. Many of the teachers in this study recognise that these regulations are often restrictive and may not mesh with local realities. The response has usually been to allow flexibility in matters of timings or organisation of classes. These variations, that are often necessary in practice, are not usually reported in inspection reports for instance, but according to most teachers, the educational administration does recognise the need for flexible timings and is usually supportive of such efforts. The patterns of flexibility fall into three major categories: extension of school hours after a break in the middle of the day for domestic work; allowing certain children to come late or leave early to attend to their domestic work with compensatory attention at other hours of the day (for instance, Pratima Vyas and Zohra Dholia) and setting aside specific hours to meet children's needs (for instance Manfari Vyas setting aside one hour daily after school for embroidery practice since she needed to attract girls belonging to the Ahir community which is skilled in this work and depends on it for income, or Sardarsingh Patel setting aside one hour before school for local songs and games).

### ***Physical facilities and infrastructure***

Many teachers attach a lot of importance to creating a pleasant environment in which the children

can study or feel comfortable. There are many examples in the narratives but particularly interesting efforts are the school beautification initiative of Daood Maewan. the school gardens set up by Manjari Vyas and Tara Upadhyaya to which children brought plants they preferred or found in their own localities, the creation of bathing and dressing facilities for children so that they could take pride in their appearance - felt by the teachers to be particularly important in the social contexts in which they operated (Bhanumati Upadhyaya and Shambhavi Joshi). Sometimes the improvement of facilities went along with giving children a special identity through uniforms.

A few teachers have deliberately, and successfully, concentrated on building up libraries in their schools or in the villages where they worked. Jasu Patel developed a library informally over a ten year period from 1964 to 1974, before mobilising Rs. 70,000 for expanding the facilities in 1974. Daood Maewan and Shankar Raval are the other teachers who have specifically addressed the issue of having a good library.

### ***Management experiments in schools and 'earning while learning'***

The concept of a *shala panchayat* (school *panchayat*) has been used by many teachers to teach self-management in the schools. The efforts of Shankar Raval, Daood Maewan, Ashwin Patel and Narbheram Trivedi have been particularly prominent. Most of these initiatives date back to the 1960s when the movement for local self-government was strong and many teachers decided to adopt the *panchayat* concept in a limited way in their schools. The children's *panchayats* have been more in the nature of experiments in managing their educational material, tours and school practices like debates. The teachers have usually been directive and the influence of the experiment on reforming schooling practices is not so clear. The school *panchayats* have also not been extended into the school-village interface in the sense that issues like non-enrolment or drop out have not been the concern of the experiments. However, within the limited aims that the teachers set for themselves, the school *panchayat* has provided children some exposure in managing their own affairs.

More organised and demanding efforts were the children's cooperative store set up by Shankar Raval, the *Sanchayika* savings scheme for books and uniforms established by Bava Sondharva and the children's hand-written newsletter (which lasted for less than two years) started by Keshav Purohit. Sometimes similar efforts have been converted into 'earn while you learn' schemes. The most outstanding example is provided by Nanji Kunia with his newspaper distribution and *mandap* setting up activity which are handled by children. These activities have been going on for about 40 years now. In the socio-economic contexts in which he worked, such activities were felt to be necessary to make schooling attractive.

Handicraft skills possessed by children have been used by some teachers to provide the children with some income. Door mats and wall hangings were produced by Tara Upadhyaya. Manjula Upadhyaya and Zohra Dholia who also used the activity to teach children, an approach similar to the *nai talim* model of education proposed by Mahatma Gandhi. In the case of Kalpana Acharya, the activity provided a means to channel the energies of unruly children. Other teachers like Bava Sondharva and Shankar Patel have used the school land to raise saplings or set up orchards in order to provide some income to the children and to use the profits for student welfare and infrastructure. Behind such attempts is a recognition of the fact that in economically poor environments, the skills that children already possess can be tapped in order to help them earn while they learn. Opponents of the working-in-school approach would no doubt question the wisdom of enabling children to earn income through the school, but the teachers concerned

appear to have consciously adopted work practices to attract children to school and retain them in it.

### ***Exposing the school and the children to the outside world***

This is another theme which is emphasised by some teachers as very important for developing an awareness about other schools and places. Nanji Kunia and Natwar Vaghela made it a point to make their schools compete in fairs and competitions. Shankar Raval created a fund for children's travel since some children were not in a position to pay for their travel. He linked the fund with the afforestation of school land with neem trees. The leaves were auctioned to camel owners and the branches sold to the people, under the supervision of a *panch* (committee of elders); the income went into the children's travel fund. A similar fund was created by Tara Upadhyaya. Narbheram motivated all children to save for purposes of travel and then pooled the money to take the children on educational tours. He also ran a shop in the school which was managed by children and sold educational material: the profit was set aside for educational tours.

### ***Children as educational resources***

A very important feature of the teachers' work is a recognition of children themselves as educational resources. Many teachers have adopted various forms of child to child learning. The children may be in school or out of school. Moti Nayak mobilised out of school children to take part in his plays and brought them into contact with school-going children. This was one of the factors which contributed to his achieving his target of enrolling all the girls in school within a three-year period. Manjari Vyas used school-going girls as researchers who studied and interacted with non-enrolled girls. Thakarshi Kunbar and Nanji Kunia tapped children who had passed out of school to mentor and teach school-going children. Many teachers have motivated such children, boys and girls, to become volunteers for adult education. Thakarshi also assigned the responsibility for bringing children new to school, to the upper primary children. Savita Parmar made the students of class six responsible for collecting text books from the batch passing out of class seven, repairing the books in collaboration with class five children, and recycling these books among themselves. These examples indicate a recognition that children, whether they are in school or have passed out, or have not been enrolled, can act as resources for teaching, enrolment or mentoring other children.

More commonly, many teachers have used various forms of peer group learning and cooperative learning. These forms usually involve grouping children according to ability and letting the academically sounder children teach the weaker ones, or grouping children across grade levels so that the older children teach the younger ones. An interesting example of tapping the creative talent of children is Kantilal Donga's experiment of allowing children to collect waste paper, write articles on the paper and circulate them in the school. Daood Macwan organised annual exhibitions of children's achievements, during which the children explained their work to other children and visitors.

### ***Teachers' use of their own traditional skills and interests***

Pre-service or in-service teacher training efforts usually do not build on the skills that the teachers may possess or may have developed. The narratives in Chapter 3 bring out a range of toys and educational aids developed by the teachers to make their educational practice more interesting and entertaining. Outstanding examples are provided by Manji Prajapati and Thakarshi Kunbar who used their pottery skills to develop a range of teaching aids. Manji even exposes parents, every year, to the methods which he uses, since he believes parental involvement in their

children's education will increase if they are aware of how children learn in school. Jasu Patel's narrative provides an outstanding example of the use of stamp collections for educational purposes. There are many other examples of indigenous educational aids, like the 'number reader' and the set of 39 aids of Hasmukh Acharya, puppets (Manjula Upadhyaya and Moti Nayak), indigenous projectors (Natwar Vaghela) and toys and paper pulp models (Savita Parmar).

### *Learning methods*

As is to be expected, many of the teachers have experimented on alternative teaching methods. These experiments have been dictated by their personal development (the skills they possessed or developed) and the composition of the children's groups they taught. Moti Nayak uses dialogue between two puppets that he has designed to teach language and local geography. He speaks the various dialects and accents of different regions of Gujarat and is in effect promoting an awareness of cultural diversity. This aspect of classroom practice is in contrast to the general homogenising trends usually observed.

Sardarsingh Patel uses a 'benchmarking approach' to knowledge development. Whenever a new topic is introduced, children are given pieces of paper on which they write whatever they know about the topic. A summary is then made by a few selected students, and then teaching proceeds. What happens is that a benchmark of existing levels of awareness and knowledge is established, enabling him to build on it, or to assess the progress made subsequently.

A common practice adopted by many teachers to promote learning, which is perhaps dictated by the cultural contexts in which they teach, is to translate the lessons of the syllabus into skits, plays or songs. Bava Sondharva, Sardarsingh Patel and Natwar Vaghela have developed fairly extensive repertoires of plays. Raman Soni has developed a collection of about 150 songs on science and the environment, set to popular tunes. Some teachers use objects which attract children in the class. For instance, wooden spoons used to eat ice cream and then thrown away attracted the children in Savita Parmar's school. She used them as 'question papers' by writing problems on them. Ashwin Patel experimented with the period system of instruction but realised that the 'minor subjects' (like socially-useful productive work) were being neglected; he introduced monthly reviews for the neglected subjects and took on children as helpers for such subjects.

A few teachers have tapped the alternative knowledge systems, about plants for instance, that the children possess. Bava Sondharva sent the children to the marginal lands of the village to collect varieties of thorns which were then converted into an exhibition. Sardarsingh, after dividing the unruly children into groups named after national leaders, called them half an hour before class to use their knowledge about agriculture to plant and nurture trees.

Some teachers have adopted alternative forms of organising teaching: for instance, Daood Macwan has experimented extensively with the project approach to teaching and Zohra Dholia has experimented with the 'open classroom' concept, in which children were inducted into school through a three-month period during which they were free to explore drawing or handicrafts, before being introduced to the formal syllabus.

Testing and evaluation of children

Periodic testing of the children is stressed by some teachers as necessary for identifying children who need additional support or for improving the achievement levels among children. Shankar Ravat was particular about quarterly tests so that after the second test at the end of six months, the weak students could undergo a remedial programme in the mornings before school started; the

evaluation during the tests was done by the teachers who taught the children and teachers who taught other classes. Narbheram Trivedi had a strict regime of weekly tests for the upper primary children. These tests were held on Saturdays, the papers corrected on Sundays and the results and weaknesses discussed with the children on the following Mondays. Regardless of the merit of burdening children with a heavy system of tests and evaluation, these teachers feel that in a context where parents were desperate to use education as a route to social mobility, these tests have resulted in better academic achievement, as evidenced by the number of children who have become professionals like doctors and engineers over the past 30 to 40 years. Help provided to students outside school hours A major factor that contributes to poor retention in school is the lack of parental support in matters of homework due to low educational levels among parents. The teachers in this study are particularly aware of this issue and many have made attempts to provide support to first-generation learners outside school hours. The form this support has usually taken is coaching in the evenings, either on a regular basis or during examination time. Another form, adopted by Manjula Upadhyaya is a system of directed and guided self-study, especially for girls.

### ***School management***

Apart from the academic initiatives described above, there are examples of teachers taking steps to improve the organisation of school activities or to encourage peer development. Savita Parmar paid particular attention to detailed organisation of school hours through a rigorous time table, as principal she also instituted the practise of assigned homework to her teachers. The unintended result she experienced was the teachers getting together to discuss their assignments. Other teachers maintained close watch on the irregular children in an effort to anticipate dropping out of school. Natwar Vaghela introduced a mission statement for his school: action on energy savings, use of indigenously developed educational aids and encouraging teachers to prepare essays. The first part of the mission led to redesigning of *chulahs*, and then to resources from the Indian Oil Corporation for school infrastructure. Shambhavi Joshi introduced a *balmandir* in the milk cooperative office which used to be shut during the day time. She linked this initiative with schooling since children could be inducted though the pre-primary cycle gradually into formal schooling.

### **Shaping oneself**

#### ***Inspiration***

Most of the teachers who participated in this study are able to identify specific sources of inspiration which have been powerful enough to sustain their motivation over long periods of time. These sources range from individuals like *gurus*, parents or children themselves, to critical incidents or the scriptures. The range is indeed vast, but one characteristic common to the teachers is their ability to reflect on the nature of the inspiration provided by the sources: usually the inspiration takes the form of a personal lesson which either provides a guideline for behaviour or serves as a solution to a personal problem. A few examples of both kinds are provided. For Nanji Kunia, a reading of the scriptures, and his *guru*, have enabled him to derive support from his interpretation of the principle of accountability. "Accountability comes out of being a duty-lover and developing a sense of consciousness about a sense of duty" This understanding of accountability has enabled him to follow a rigorous lime table and to set aside time specifically for his own learning, a principle worthy of emulation. Ajitsinh Solanki, early in his career, was inspired by the extremely bad infrastructure that he found in schools and an innovative class one primer that had been developed by a senior teacher and was being used to great effect by the children. His reflection was, if conditions could be better, innovative ideas would have greater

impact. This lesson has perhaps inspired his constant effort to mobilise money for schools and support the innovative efforts of his co-teachers. Raman Soni, when he became a teacher, was told by his primary school teacher never to judge a child and never to predict that this particular child would turn out to be dull or weak in the future. These words of advice have shaped his philosophy of education. The importance of having the right mentors during the first few months of one's career is stressed by many teachers. In fact, Keshav Purohit and Shambhavi Joshi suggest that every new teacher should undergo mentoring for a few months in his or her first year of service. For Daood Macwan, learning from children has been the most important source of inspiration.

For Shankar Raval, the realisation that "ordinary people can do things" and a sense of balance "neither a full tide, nor an ebb, is good", have served as guiding principles. For Keshav Purohit, his struggle to list the talukas in his district during an inspection visit early in his career in 1946 he had not paid adequate attention to the map hung on the wall in the school resulted in his guiding principle: teacher competence is primary. Raman Soni was initially ashamed of his status as primary school teacher, but his father's characterisation of children as gods in human form and his advice to Raman to develop the *drishti* (vision) required to understand this characterisation, was a crucial turning point in his career. In 1950, Savita Parmar was asked by a class one student a simple, but what for her turned out to be a significant question: "Why do we see more of the large black ants attracted to jaggery and the small red ants to white sugar?" She did not know the answer, but the result was a willingness to learn from any source, including children. Sardarsingh Patel was once punished by his teacher during his teacher training course for being absent without leave. The punishment was to clean the grounds of the institution, but the teacher who had awarded the punishment joined in the cleaning, perhaps punishing himself. This incident has given Sardarsingh a base on which to develop his ideas about value education.

### ***Reflective practice and personal philosophies***

These examples indicate that during a critical period of their careers (usually the very early stages) the teachers have responded to certain influences in such a manner that they were able to derive powerful lessons which have stood them in good stead. This ability to reflect on experience at a young age and translate the reflection into guidelines for behaviour 'is perhaps an important trait that teachers need to develop early on in their careers.

The reflective ability also leads to certain tacitly held theories of what educational practice should mean 'the theories in use' that organisational behaviour theory talks about. Those, as is to be expected, take a variety of forms. A few are listed below to illustrate the range that emerges from the case studies. For Nanji Kunia the rural school needs to be valorised, for he believes that these schools have very poor infrastructure but it is not realised that they may in fact be better than well-endowed schools in the efficiency of utilisation of resources. So when he visits any village, he first visits the school to communicate to the people the importance he attaches to the school. Secondly, his goal is just to develop the inner creativity of children. For Jasu Patel it is simply "do full justice to your profession" and for Raman Soni, the dignity of the profession must be maintained at all times.

Hence he took it upon himself to provide proper plates, at his own cost, to all the children using the mid-day meal scheme. Apart from lowering the standards of schooling practice, improper arrangements for the meals, in Raman's view, tower the dignity of the teacher involved in the activity. For Tara Upadhyaya education has to promote independence in all children, including neglected children like the physically disabled. Some teachers hold what may at first glance appear very simple approaches to education: students' lives should be made better (Bava

Sondharva); nothing is difficult for a child, whatever is difficult is difficult only for the teacher (Sardarsingh Patel); three items should be ensured in schools: textbooks, writing materials, breakfast (Ajitsinh Solanki); how pupils learn is more important than how to teach (Manji Prajapati). Many of these principles may seem very personal. But the efforts of the teachers to translate these principles into activities so that they do not remain mere platitudes, offer lessons for other teachers.

### ***Priorities and setting personal examples***

A third important theme that informs the 'shaping oneself' dimension of the teachers' practice is the communicating of educational priorities through personal action and example. This theme is especially important when one is trying to shape educational practices in contexts of socio-economic deprivation. The example of school cleaning and beautification is taken up to illustrate this point. In the poorly endowed schools that we are talking about, the teachers and children themselves have to undertake the job of cleaning the school. There is no money to employ someone for the purpose. But in some places, as shown in a recent study (Vijaya Sherry Chand 1997), families, which are already in economically-dependent relationships with better-off sections of village society, resent this practice, since they interpret it to mean a reinforcement of their economically subservient status. The first working day after a vacation is particularly dreaded since the cleaning toad is heaviest on that day. On the other hand, some castes may consider cleaning public places (like schools) outside the social definition of their rote. The outstanding teachers in this study appear to have handled this issue by themselves taking up the broom. Kantilal Donga, Savita Parmar and Bava Sondharva especially make a point about the importance of the teacher leading in those tasks which have the potential to be interpreted as demeaning or reproducing exploitative social relationships. The teachers have also avoided the gendered division of sweeping labour by involving boys and girls in the activity. In many schools, girls tend to get a heavier share of 'domestic' duties like sweeping.

A similar approach of leading by example is evident in other activities like beautifying the school (watering the school garden, whitewashing). An example of a different kind is provided by Bava Sondharva. He wanted to compile a song/ prayer book that drew on many religions. Many parents objected to this, but his commitment to developing the book for his own use first and his explanations to the community were appreciated and now there is a demand for the book from other schools. These examples primarily show how the priorities that the teacher sets for improvement of schooling practices are communicated through demonstrating the teacher's personal commitment to the tasks.

### ***Teachers as researchers***

In recent educational practice, there has been a strong move towards empowering practitioners to undertake research. This move has received its impetus from various forms of action and participatory research which encourage an active action-reflection role for teachers. Ultimately it is teachers who are at the cutting edge of educational practice, and such research, apart from addressing problems that are relevant and of concern to teachers, also adds a researcher dimension to the conception of a good teacher. Many of the teachers in this study, though unaware of the theoretical underpinnings of action research, have adopted research as an important facet of their educational practice.

Usually the research efforts of the teachers started off with questions that intrigued them or represented problems that they faced. A few examples follow. Raman Soni was intrigued by two questions: 'Why did very young children often invert the order of digits when they wrote a two-

digit number, though they read out the number correctly?'; 'Why were some children able to read the titles that flashed through rapidly in a movie whereas other children with similar backgrounds were unable to do so?' The former question led to a very interesting piece of original research that resulted in identifying the practice of calling out the units digit first in Gujarati as responsible for the problem, thus leading to a new system of calling out two-digit numbers. The second question led to speed-reading experiments. An interesting feature of these experiments was that Raman Soni compared the new methods with the traditional methods in an experimental research format. Natwar Vaghela was interested in finding out the effectiveness of self-designed audio-visual aids in teaching and constructed an indigenous projector, taught his subjects with this aid, and compared the results with the traditional methods of teaching.

Bhagwati Joshi wanted to understand the dreams of children in an effort to mould her teaching to the children's needs and interests. Another question she asked was, 'How can the dissonance between the home environment and the school environment, which often present to children contradictory role models, be reduced?'. The same question was asked by Shambhavi Joshi, who also undertook research on the games that children played and organised the school activities around the findings of her research. Many teachers have studied the problem of non-enrolment through research efforts. Sushila Vyas undertook a systematic effort of interviewing ten girls from each caste in order to study the interactions between non-enrolment and caste status: an interesting effort to use school-going girls as researchers was made by Manjari Vyas who wanted to study why the proportion of non-enrolment among girls was high.

These research efforts, except in one case, were designed by the teachers themselves, and conducted in their spare time with their own resources. Secondly, the kinds of research undertaken indicate a concern with researching the classroom context as well as the school-society interface. A third feature is that most of the teachers were happy with using their results in their own practice and did not make special attempts to write up their experiences for a wider audience. The rare exception is Raman Soni who used his research as the basis for further research for a postgraduate degree in education. A few teachers, however, have retained the notes they had made at the time of the experiments. A fourth aspect of the research is that the teachers have not stopped with one experiment. Whenever a new problem cropped up, new experiments were designed. In the final analysis, though developing research capabilities is one aspect of shaping oneself, it is difficult to separate it from the shaping of one's immediate schooling and socio-economic contexts. This is perhaps the reason why these outstanding teachers have not been so concerned about communicating their research efforts to a wider audience.

### **Addressing gender bias**

Literature on the gendered division of labour in society indicates that certain professions have come to be associated with 'feminine' qualities, and therefore women are expected to constitute most of the labour force in these professions. Examples include nursing and school teaching. In Gujarat, however, only about 44 percent of the primary school teachers are women. In certain educationally-problematic districts like Banaskantha, the proportion is very low women constitute only slightly more than a quarter of the teaching force. Apart from facing general difficulties like inability to work in remote areas and lack of peer support, women may also have to face the gender bias of male colleagues. One example, of Manjari Vyas, is cited here to illustrate the awareness of gender bias that exists among some teachers, as well as intelligence in handling bias as a demonstration to others without getting into angry confrontation. When a male teacher

ridiculed her and suggested that she would not be able to answer a question he would pose, her reply was that she would answer, provided he answered the question she would pose after answering his question. Her women colleagues realised that they could also assert themselves. The issue of redressing

gender bias through an appropriately conceived framework of teacher development has not received adequate attention up to now. The *Mahila* Cell which has been established within the GSPTF has just begun to address issues relating to the problems faced by women teachers. Developing a broader gender consciousness, among both male and female teachers, is a task in which outstanding teachers may involve themselves fruitfully.

### **Concluding remarks**

The narratives in Chapter 3 provide a spectrum of intense and concerned grassroots initiatives for improving performance in the primary education sector. These communicate a vision which is a challenge alike to the general lethargy of the average citizen and to the large-scale official initiatives in this area. It is necessary for such teachers to be part of policy-making processes, and for initiatives such as theirs to feed into policy procedures, so that the country's educational policies become the considered products of the practitioners' own reflections and outstanding activity shared with their peers. Such policies are likely to have greater relevance to the actual situations in which teachers find themselves and to be more feasible; and the inclusion of teachers in the process would tap, organise and provide institutional support to potential which has already been transformative in the hands of single individuals.

### REFERENCE

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### **TEACHERS' NARRATIVES**

- P G Vijaya Sherry Chand and Shailesh R Shukla

This Chapter consists of the case studies of 30 teachers who participated in this study. These cases were prepared during 1994-95 and they have been retailed in their original form.

[Look up the cases in this archive]