

*comm*UNITY, FAITH & DISCIPLINE

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Shazia came to school after an absence of two days .First I thought of ignoring this but then I decided to know the reason for her regular irregularity . As was often the case, she hadn't learned the lesson. I went near her, touched her little shoulders and asked why she had been absent the day before? Firstly, she went pale with fear at my touch. Then after some hesitation she told me, "I was busy with my mother in the fields." I also found out that nobody at home could help her in her studies.

I decided to discuss this with the Head Teacher .She said this is usual for most of the girl students. "We are Government servants, taking our salary regularly for teaching them in class. We do the best we can, so you do not need to worry about what they do at home". I suggested calling a mothers' meeting but my Head Teacher didn't see the point of it. , "You just complete your syllabus; that is enough for us."

This answer did not satisfy me. I had faith in the power of change, and in my own ability to trigger that change.

I didn't give up on my Head Teacher and missed no opportunity to gently mention to her that good interaction with the community can be at least a partial solution to some problems such as school dropout and absence. It is true that many schools have School Councils but their role is not positive. I convinced the Head Teacher that an effective School Council (SC) *can* make the decisions at local level. Finally she agreed.

We sent out invitations for the meeting. Our school is in a poor locality with children of mostly agricultural workers. At first call only five mothers came to school with one member of the SC .

After our discussion with all the mothers, the SC member said, “Although I am educated yet I was not familiar with the importance of the involvement of community.” She promised to bring more and more mothers to school within two days through advocacy. On the decided day many mothers gathered at the school .Firstly most of the mothers were not pleased to have been called to school as education was not their first priority . They had other chores to take care of, they grumbled.

The meeting began. First I appreciated their different roles, their work at home along with work in the fields. I sensitized them to the importance of education specially for girls; how it provides them a chance to live a successful and happy life; how an educated woman can train her children in better ways than an illiterate one.

At this, Shazia’s mother said, “For us, Madam *jee*, feeding our children is more important than their education!” The Head teacher answered her, “You have lived a difficult life, don’t you want a good life for your children? If you do want this, education is the only way to achieve this.”

I pointed out how I and the other teachers at the school are spending a good life with respect in society. After this discussion Shazia’s mother had changed her mind.

I told the mothers to just check or ask her children if they have any homework. One mother said, “We can’t read. How can we check this?”

I said, “When your children weep , you know right away if they are weeping from hunger or if there is some other problem; you feel all this while you are not a

doctor. You cannot read but you know when your children are lying about not getting any homework. You cannot read but you can listen and ask them to tell you what they have learnt in school. This way you can support your children in their studies.

At the end, most of the mothers were happy with our genuine concern for their children, and all left with the promise to cooperate with us for the sake of their little ones.

After this meeting I started my work with new hope to teach children through activities, to display their work and to make learning meaningful for them. We continued to call the meeting of parents and SC members every month.

On one of the meetings we helped the children prepare some presentations which they would give in front of their mothers at the meeting. Shazia's mother was happy to see her daughter's performance, as were all the others. On seeing that the school was headed in the right direction, some members of the SC provided us a donation of Rs. 30,000. They pledged more donations in future.

The Head Teacher appreciated my effort in initiating a process which would enable us to make our school a model school. We now had a very clear vision in our mind for the progress. It wasn't my vision, nor the Head Teacher's nor the parents' vision. This was our shared vision.

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