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Summary

How Teachers in Indian Slums Make Work Meaningful

Many organizations take a dim view of hiring impoverished people, while management researchers frequently describe the dark side of employing such workers. An *Academy of Management Journal* article, however, reveals a brighter picture.

With training and support, as well as freedom to shape their work to align with their own beliefs, values, and knowledge, and their communities' needs, women in Indian slums can become more effective teachers and create more social impact., according to "How Do Field Workers in Poverty Craft Meaningful Roles to Achieve Social Impact? Female Teachers in Slums in India."

"Management researchers only see a dark side to growing up in poverty, having limited talents and social networks that are not so valuable, and so on. And they see women in these settings as especially constrained, due to obligations at home," said Harry G. Barkema of the London School of Economics and Political Science. "But hiring people who grew up in poverty is not just a negative thing, as many organizations think, and as management researchers emphasize. What we actually see is that there are advantages to hiring people who grew up in poverty. One thing, they know the local situation well, of course, in terms of the problems. They have local networks to help them do their jobs well. If they come from the slums themselves, as our research shows, it energizes them to help kids from their community. It's all about, 'My kids; I'm giving them a chance.' Our research shows that helps the workers overcome the taxing burdens of poverty. It's a bit of a superpower that they are getting energy from identifying with their own community. That in turn helps them shape their jobs in more meaningful ways, and in turn, to have more social impacts for the kids."

"Teachers who grew up in slums see the local kids as their children, and even say things like, 'I want to give them a future I never had,'" he said.

Barkema cowrote the article with past Academy of Management President Jacqueline A-M Coyle-Shapiro of California State University, San Bernardino, and the London School of Economics and Political Science; and Eva M. le Grand of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Barkema, Coyle-Shapiro, and le Grand based their findings on two studies among teachers and students at Gyan Shala ("Knowledge House" in Hindi) schools, which educate 45,000 elementary, middle, and high school kids in slums in Gujarat, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. Gyan Shala employs

about 2,500 para-skilled female teachers who provide high-quality, low-cost education to children in rented, standalone classrooms. The para-teachers, most of whom live in the slums where they teach, earn $50 to $100 monthly.

In the first study, Barkema conducted four rounds of 45- to 60-minute interviews among 131 former students and their siblings, teachers, supervisors, curriculum-designers, and the CEO, including 33 interviews with teachers in the final round with le Grand, between 2010 and 2017. In the second study, 175 teachers and 33 of their supervisors were surveyed. Survey questions covered moral duty, community identification, family and organizational support, and social impacts on students. Both studies were in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

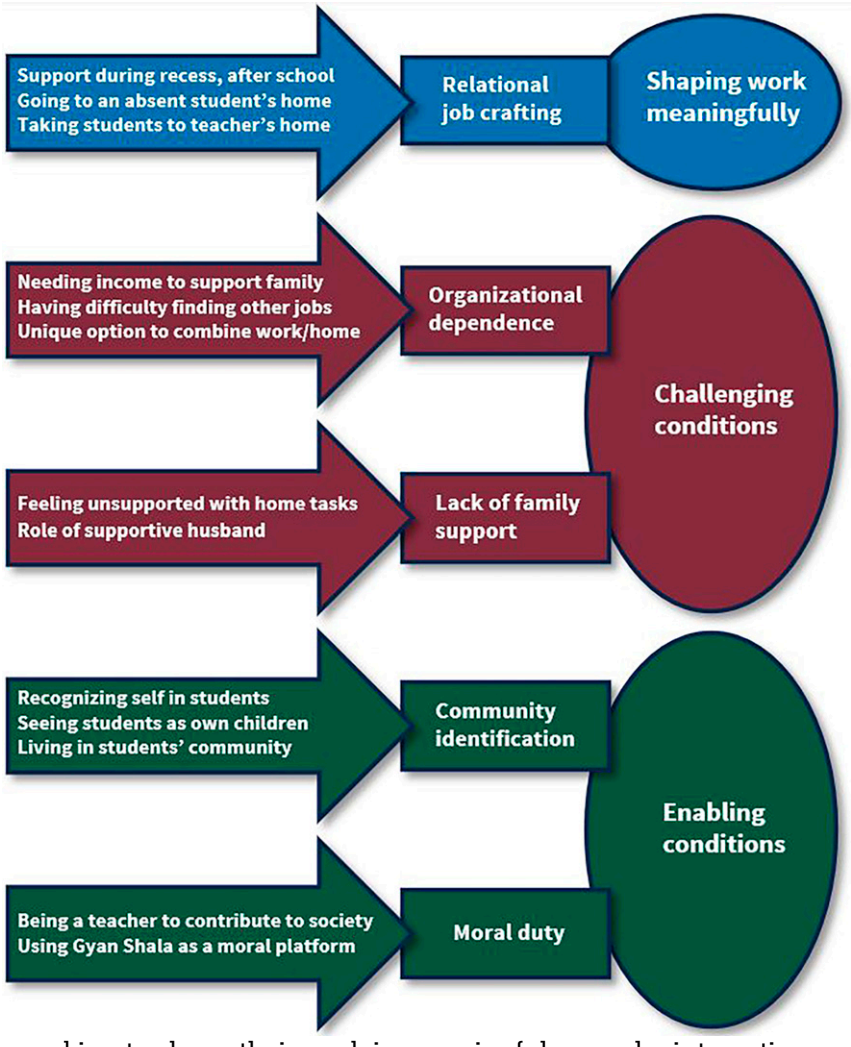
Even though Gyan Shala teachers get only two months of training and two weeks of annual follow-up instruction, the authors found that they outperform college-trained government teachers.

The authors also developed a new framework to assess and measure social impact in a context-specific way. Based on interviews with students, teachers, and local experts, the authors identified four quantifiable components of social impact for the Gyan Shala children:

- Gaining confidence
- Learning to make decisions independently
- Becoming ambitious and envisioning careers
- Developing social relationships to help achieve goals

Key to Gyan Shala teachers' effectiveness was "**relational job crafting**," shaping their work in interactions with children, parents, and others in the local community where they taught. "Teachers actively shaped the depth and breadth of their interactions to support children in ways that were meaningful to them, such as staying late after class to help children," the authors wrote. If students were absent for more than a few days, teachers visited their homes to convince them and their parents about the importance of education. Teachers even invited students to their own homes to work on projects or for social visits.

"The kids of the slums know me very well as I spend a lot of time with them," one teacher told the authors. "My home becomes my school as well. They visit as if my house were their own home. They basically pay a social visit, but if they want to learn something, I help them."



However, when seeking to shape their work in meaningful ways, by interacting more with children, parents, and other people in the local community, through relational job crafting, many teachers had to cope with significant **challenging conditions**, including:

- **Lack of family support.** "Most of the women were responsible for household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of in-laws and children, in addition to their jobs at Gyan Shala," the authors wrote. "Teachers who did not get significant help from their families (in-laws) had little or no time to relax after work before starting their household chores, making them feel exhausted. … One teacher said she was only able to work at Gyan Shala because

her husband was willing to take their son to school every day. … Several women reported that when in-laws were opposed to the work (middle-class in-laws seeing teaching in slums as low-status work), the support of their husbands enabled them to work." While not all husbands supported their work as teachers, one woman noted, "My husband likes it when I take kids home. … We give them tea and some biscuits. My husband supports me in all this."

- **Organizational dependence.** "Some women felt dependent on Gyan Shala because they feared they would not be able to find a job elsewhere. With only a high school education, their ability to find different suitable jobs beyond their current, relatively low-paid work was limited," the authors noted. "Many teachers shared that Gyan Shala was the only organization that allowed them to combine having a job with doing household duties or studies. Teaching at Gyan Shala allowed many to live close to the classroom and save time that would otherwise be spent commuting, and the freedom to work morning and/or afternoon shifts."

Enabling conditions that helped teachers overcome these challenges were:

- **Community identification.** "Teachers felt the community was like 'family,' a student succeeding in life felt like a family member succeeding. They felt a sense of belonging. They perceived their students as 'my kids' and would help them 'move ahead in life' if the students' parents did not have the time, skills, or sense of urgency to do so. These were kids 'who would otherwise not have had the opportunity to study or do well in life.'" Identifying with their community energized teachers to overcome challenges to shaping their work in meaningful ways and to have more social impact.
- **Moral duty.** "Some teachers also felt they ought to contribute to society; they saw teaching as their moral duty," the authors wrote. "One teacher reported she felt a moral obligation to 'help the children of India.'" However, their sense of moral duty only led to shaping their work meaningfully and to more social impact if they felt their organization was contributing to the social cause.

"NGOs typically hire people from slums, like para-teachers, for two reasons. One, it's cost effective. Two, it's part of an inclusion policy, often with doubts about how productive they are," Barkema said. "However, what we show is that these workers are actually very effective, especially if they have a chance to create their own work meaningfully. The lesson is to not let your bureaucracy invent more and more rules, but instead give support and training and leave enough space for them to create their own jobs, based on their own knowledge, values, and beliefs. Because what we see is that if they have the chance, they'll create the jobs in ways that are meaningful for themselves and in ways that create more social impact."