

Ravi Aluganti Fellowship Site Visit Report

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Ravi Aluganti is an Asha fellow being supported by Asha Seattle since 2001. He is working with 15 government schools in Madanapalle mandal of Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh. Most of these government schools consist of 1-2 rooms with 1-2 teachers each.

The site visit was broken into two parts:

1. Obtaining written feedback from teachers in the government schools that Ravi visits - With the help of Jayashree, Anita, Swati and Sunil, I created a questionnaire to solicit feedback from teachers. It was translated to Telugu by Ravi himself. I handed out these forms to teachers during my visit and the completed forms were sent back to me at a later time. All the feedback was translated back to English with help from Hareesh and his friends. It is available @ <http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/279/RaviAlugantiFellowship-TeacherFeedback.pdf>
2. My 3 day personal visit from March 29-31 which is summarized below

Day 1 (March 29): I reached Madanapalle @ 10:00 AM after a long over night journey. Since schools were operational only till noon, we decided to go to a school directly from the bus station. We received warm welcome from children of Poolavandlapalle School who were excited to see “Bommala Sir” (Drawing Sir), as they like to call Ravi.

We started with a round of introductions and then plotted my route from Kakinada to Madanapalle on the state map painted on the wall. Ravi asked children what activities they would like to do that day for which we got varied answers (drawing, science experiment, storytelling etc). He finally picked science experiments to demonstrate the concept of “Air Pressure”.

Apparatus used were two plastic bottles sharing a common cap with a hole in it. Ravi asked a child to fill water in one of the bottles, fit the cap and fit the second bottle on top of it... He then asked children what would happen if he turns the bottles (with empty bottle at the bottom)... Except one all the children answered that water will trickle down through the small hole in the middle. The one who said water will not trickle down did not give any reason for her claim... There was enough enthusiasm by now and the eagerness to see what would really happen was increasing. To their surprise, water didn't drip down from the hole as they had expected. They were totally amazed and the natural reaction was to start squeezing the top bottle... Ravi quickly intervened and asked children why the water wouldn't fall through the hole as one would expect. Couple of students quickly responded by saying it is because of the air in the bottle at the bottom that it is pushing the water upward... After this experiment, Ravi showed them how to make paper fan and soon we had kids running all over the place with their little

fans. After another experiment, Ravi asked them to open their text books to go through the actual lesson.

We then started collecting the books children had borrowed during his prior visit and started issuing new books. Almost all the kids were able to read the Telugu books and were eager for their turn to read... Some with good modulation, some in monotonous tone but everyone who got a chance to read did pretty well (and we did make sure we gave chance to almost all that were present that day)... Also, one of them was able to tell the story she just heard in her own words which was very impressive.

While Ravi was working with children from Grades I & II, I handed out the feedback questionnaire form to the teacher. We then headed to Chilakavaripalle School which had one of the three education facilitators (Ramachandra) that we support as part of this project.

I asked children if they could tell me a story and none of them came forward despite efforts from Ravi and Ramachandra. They were ready to read a story but not ready to tell the story in their own words. I did notice that Ramachandra tends to control the children in a more traditional way unlike Ravi who gives them tremendous freedom and it might just be that they were scared of making any mistake... We finally got 3 children to recite a poem that was part of their telugu text book. This helped break the ice and we had two more volunteers tell us stories. After the storytelling, we played a game with Grade 5 students. They stood in a line and started counting numbers from 1. If the number was a multiple of 3, they had to sit down instead of saying the number. This created some amusement for the children. It took a while to get the hang of it but they were getting there... We tried with multiples of 6, multiple of 2 and this time instead of sitting down they had to say Bingo... It was quite fun and pumped up the class room.

Ravi asked Ramachandra if he had taught them *Dwimukha padalu* (Palindromes). After we got his affirmation, we asked children if they could write some words... It took some time for the first child to come forward but once that was done, we had a whole bunch of volunteers and all of them were correct in their understanding. We then played Scrabble on the black board (with Telugu words) and this was not a great hit... It was time for children to go home and we called it a day.

Day 2 (March 30): We went to Palemkonda School. I asked if they knew Ravi's name but to my surprise none of them knew his name. They too called him "Bommala Sir". So both Ravi and I introduced ourselves.

We started with storytelling exercise. This school unlike the previous one had many volunteers willing to tell stories and the overall confidence to speak was much high compared to previous schools. Four of them told us stories that they had read before. Once the storytelling was complete, we issued new books and had a reading session.

We then did language exercise - Vyathirekha Padalu (Antonyms). Ravi uses flash cards for this activity and picks up the words from their text books. Since this was pretty much end of school year, Ravi also wanted to use this opportunity to revise the entire syllabus. So the activity involved discussing what the lesson was about, using flash cards to see if they understand what the word means and can tell

antonyms for it. There were some cases where the children knew what the antonym was but were not able to explain what the word means... He then laid down a bunch of cards on floor and asked children to pick up cards that match in meaning ... We even had participants from 3rd grade who did pretty well.

By the time we were done with this, it was lunch time and the food was waiting. Ravi and I joined the kids as well for lunch. We could only cover one school on day 2.

Day 3 (March 31): Ravi had a meeting to attend and so I asked him to drop me off in one of the schools (Reddiganipalle) so that I could spend some time with children and education facilitator (Radhamma). We started working with younger children using flash cards. We then had a small painting session where I asked them to draw whatever they feel like. While some children started on their own, others were happy to replicate what they saw on their friends' paper. The teacher was not present that day, which I learned was not uncommon in schools where education facilitators are present. She told me that she makes sure all the children are enrolled and are sent to the school as she knows all the parents. Though her abilities to use Ravi's methods of teaching are not very great, she definitely adds value to the overall eco system.

I asked Radhamma if she could conduct the experiments for air pressure that I had seen Ravi do the previous day. She started by telling what the experiment was rather than building the curiosity among the kids, contrary to what I saw with Ravi. It was also clear that she did not have much confidence. I also tried my teaching skills by doing an experiment myself (bringing two rubber surfaces together to create a vacuum and trying to pull them apart). I was finding it hard to explain in Telugu but I think I did OK :)

Once Ravi joined us, we had a storytelling session combined with drawing. Children picked a story and Ravi started drawing characters on the board. Children copied them over to their slates and repeated the story with the help of drawings. Children loved it and it was just another example of how he can make anything fun.

We had our lunch at the "Praja Aikyavedika" meeting. "Praja Aikyavedika" is a collective forum where various NGOs were coming together to address issues that each of them can't individually take up. Everyone was in great spirits after the success of their first undertaking - demand for broad gauge railway line to improve access to/from Madanapalle. I then attended the weekly meeting between Ravi & education facilitators that happens every Saturday. We made some education material for the activities planned for the next week. Though Ravi tried to keep the discussions open by asking for their inputs I haven't seen much contribution from them... I also used this opportunity to talk to education facilitators to understand their perception regarding the program, especially their training. I did my best to convey that this is just to see what we can do better but didn't get any negative feedback...

Observations

Ravi's program still provides great enthusiasm to kids and is something they dearly look forward to and they just love mobile library. The feedback from teachers and education facilitators support this as well. But the frequency of visits is quite low due to the number of schools he needs to cover, and that dilutes the effect of his efforts.

This was the reason we started the Education Facilitator program in 3 schools (from 2005) where a person can work full time and use his teaching methods to facilitate better learning. Though Education facilitators provide a valuable role, they are far from being close to Ravi in their approach to teaching. Few reasons that contribute towards this:

1. Hard to find people skilled like Ravi locally in villages
2. Lack of robust training – Currently Ravi meets with education facilitators once every week mainly to discuss the activities to be covered. Other than this, they get to see Ravi teach when he visits their school and that is also the only time where Ravi can watch educational facilitators to provide feedback. This in my opinion is not enough.
3. Attrition – 5 Education facilitators have left since we started the program in 3 schools in 2005.
 - a) Lakshmidhevi (April 2005 - March 2006): Her would be in-laws were not interested in her working
 - b) Radhamma (July 2005 - October 2007): Became a Vidya volunteer (government appointed) in the same school
 - c) Veerabhadra (April 2005 - Dec 2005): Got admission for MA (History)
 - d) Suman (June 06): Both were not happy with the work being done
 - e) Sujatha (Sep 2006 - Sep 2007): Left for maternity reasons

Finally, Ravi still spends a significant amount of time travelling which not only is affecting his health but also is very inefficient use of his time.

Future direction

Ravi is looking into the idea of a local resource center/school which can serve as an example of school with alternative teaching and also as a platform for more elaborate & efficient teacher training. This will also help him focus his energy more on teaching than on traveling. This is still in the planning phase and will be brought in as a new proposal once the logistics are worked out.