Puvidham

July 12, 2013 by kgdesai81

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[History]

The school came to be as a realization of a long awaited dream of an ideal school that Meenakshi had conceptualized when she was studying in grade VIII. Though she took a different path for her career, the dream remained alive in her mind and she kept refining it over the years. The dream came to be realized when she started a school with her own two children and nephew of Madhavraj. Initially, there were only two teachers – she and Madhavraj.

In the initial days she visited many other places/schools, like The School (KFI), Vikasana (Bangalore), and Adanapalli (Usha-Nagraj), to understand and learn from them. Initially she had no clue about how to start and what would work. But after seeing the above schools, she had some confidence about what is possible and she started with four children and two teachers (herself and Madhavraj). In the early days when she used to train Madhavraj on certain things like action songs, how to behave with children and all, couple of children grazing sheep in the area came and inquired about what was going on there. When they got to know that this is a school they got excited and said – if this is a school we also would like to join the school.

The number of children went on increasing with time and finally they decided to make it a formal govt. approved pre-primary and primary school. They also referred to lots of Montesorri materials in those days and developed similar material on their own with the help of other teachers and students. They also enrolled for the NCLP (National Child Labour Prevention) scheme run by Centre to help bring the children who had dropped out of school, back to the mainstream.

Currently the school runs classes from Pre-primary to grade VIII. After 8th grade they are enrolled in mainstream schools (govt or private) in their locality.

Children come from a reasonably far distance (10 kms radius) also. School has vehicles to pick-up and drop children to/from school. Most of the parents are either involved in farming or labour work (due to lack of rain). Parents are concerned about the education of their children and that is why many of them send their children to this school even from a far distance. They do attend various events and meetings, but their involvement in the regular school operations is almost nil. They do come forward whenever there is an emergency or need for help. For example, times when school needed work force to construct the new school classroom/building and hostel, many of those parents contributed and helped the school in actual construction work.

School also charges nominal fees from students (around 150 INR per month from day-scholars and 250 INR per month from hostel students); to take care of a small percentage of the regular school expenses. However, required provisions are made to ensure that those who cannot afford even this amount also get to continue their education; the fees are kind of token money to ensure commitment from parents as well. School receives financial support from ASHA network and individual donors to take care of the remaining school expenses. But overall, the school runs on a very slim budget due to various effective practices. Most
of the vegetables, grains and milk is produced by the school itself. There are only five teachers running the entire school very effectively with the help of students who take care of themselves very well.

[Hostel]

The need for hostel was felt in 2004-05 when the rain failed and many parents started migrating to nearby towns for their livelihood. Parents started withdrawing their children as they didn’t have anyone in the village to take care of the children. At that time during discussions they agreed to proposal of hostel accommodation for the children. And thus the hostel was constructed with the help of parents, teachers and other donors. The hostel building is about 1 km away from the school where around 32 children are currently staying with 2 elder students who are pursuing their higher education in Dharwad. The elder students take care of the younger ones in hostel and are provided with accommodation and financial assistance for college education in return.

[Teachers]

Currently all the other teachers are from the same locality. Till now they have been getting teachers through word of mouth only. It was interesting to know that out of the five teachers, four of them are on the trustee list of the school. The idea is to handover the school responsibilities to the community in the long run and let the community take care of educating their own children in ways they think appropriate.

[Teacher Training]

The training for teachers has always been on-job using ‘learning by doing’ approach. Her focus has always been on building the right attitude as she believes that the right attitude is more important than a set of right skills.

Initially, they had more teachers and she was relatively free so she could go to the classes and train teachers or support them. “While we were training the teachers we also involved them in the curriculum and material development. This gives them ownership and also helps them in their personal development.”, she said.

Teachers also go for workshops and training outside but due to the small number of teachers and lack of funds, the school is unable to afford these trainings as much.

[Curriculum]

As mentioned above, most of the curriculum material is bilingual and has been developed by/with teachers. In the curriculum, importance is given to art-craft and other co-curricular activities. Students are divided into 7 vertical craft groups – that is each group will have children from different grades. Each group gets exposure to different craft/activity – like cooking, gardening, origami, clay work, stitching, painting, and reading – for one month on rotational basis. According to Meenakshi, the craft activities are not just vocational skills but a way of inculcating self-discipline.

[Other activities]

In the past, they were running mobile library and workshops for govt school teachers but have been discontinued due to lack of volunteers and resources.

**Current Challenges:**

Getting required resources; both human and material (including funds) is a huge challenge for the school. Though the school runs on minimal resources, the lack of resources is hampering many of their efforts.
including some of the activities which they were performing in the past. Also, due to lack of human resources, they are unable to expand their reach and innovate new things (pedagogic practices, curricular ideas, teaching learning material, better learning experiences, etc).

Also, as the opportunities outside increases, it is difficult to sustain motivation of people involved by providing matching perks and exposure in the rural setting.

About Meenakshi:

A girl studying in class 8 was asked to write about a school of her dream. And when she wrote about things which were non-conventional, she was asked to redo the assignment by her teacher. This was confusing for the child. On asking, her father explained to her that what she has written is perfectly fine and she should not throw it out of her mind but that the teacher in her school is expecting something else. So she re-wrote the assignment keeping in mind her teacher’s expectations but she kept working on her dream school ideas for years. Later on, she went on to pursue a degree in architecture and worked with/learnt from some of the best brains of that time in Pondicherry. After few years, when she started teaching her own daughters she started implementing her dream school/education thoughts and she then got an opportunity to actually start her own dream school and exercise all her ideas developed over the many years. The girl was Meenakshi and the dream school she started is Puvidham Learning Centre.

I wonder – how a small and appropriate guidance and encouragement at the right time by her father could help her continue working on her dream school and take shape at a later stage in her life. And how that small step by a parent could change the lives of many for years… that is why I think what matters is not the few big steps but every small step counts.. especially while you are working with children (or even any human-being).

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