Leading to achieve the promise of education for all

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The Government Higher Primary School (GHPS) of Chikkamandya was established in 1951 and the preschool in 2016. Chikkamandya is a village situated in the Gopalapura cluster of Mandya South block. This village belongs to the Mandya Rural Gram Panchayat. There are about 810 households with a total of 2610 families living in this cluster. They work as labourers in agricultural fields, in mattress-making, garment and beedi-rolling factories or do other small jobs. About a kilometre from Chikkamandya village is a small colony of about one thousand families, where the women's primary source of livelihood is beedi rolling, while men work as daily-wage labourers. Most of the population is Muslim. The government has allotted small houses (approximately 600 sq. ft area) to these people. The economic status of these families is considerably poor. Majority of the children who come to GHPS come from this colony. The GHPS has about 185 children in higher primary and 36 in pre-school out of which 81 children (44% of total enrolment) in higher primary and 9 in pre-school are from the Muslim community.

Murthy's personal sketch

Srinivasamurthy (referred to as Murthy) is the Head Teacher (HT) at the GHPS, Chikkamandya. He grew up in a village in a family of four children. He was influenced by his father who was considered a social reformer in the village. His high school teacher, Mr Abdul Lateef, also had a huge influence on Murthy's choice of teaching as a profession. After working for nine years as a teacher in GHPS Maragowdanahalli at Mandya, he came on promotion as HT of this school in 2007. When he joined, the School Development Monitoring Committee (SDMC) reposed a lot of faith in his capabilities to improve the school and that encouraged him to build this school into what it is today.

Commitment to children through leadership

What makes Murthy strive to keep his school child–friendly despite the overwhelming challenges? What aspects of Murthy’s leadership approach ensure student enrolment and retention? Which resources have been instrumental in the development of the school? What are the key aspects of Murthy’s practices as the HT that attract children to his school? Riddled with challenges and barriers that shape the contours of the effort of providing quality education to children from the disadvantaged sections of the society, Murthy's narrative is a story of hope, courage and motivation. During our conversations with him, we asked Murthy to identify the key reasons why parents choose GHPS Chikkamandya for their children’s education. He listed six reasons that been used as a frame to analyse Murthy's work as HT:

- Emphasis on learning Kannada
- A home-school connect
- Care for children
- Equal focus on academics and co-curricular activities
- Safeguarding children’s right to education
- Teamwork
- Emphasis on learning Kannada

Most of the families coming from the Muslim community prefer that their children go to Madrassas or to Urdu medium schools. This preference in Karnataka for primary education in Urdu medium schools is highlighted in the Sachar Committee Report (2006) also. While the State continues to support Urdu medium schools under the constitutional obligation to provide primary education in the child’s mother tongue, unfortunately, the geographical spread of Urdu medium schools is uneven. In Mandya, there are no high schools that offer education in Urdu medium and hence, the children who come from the Muslim community, especially those from poor economic backgrounds, are forced to enrol in Kannada medium schools for further education.

Citing either the absence of Urdu medium schools or the difficulties in learning Kannada as the reasons, parents, would sometimes, discontinue their child’s education. This is where Murthy plays a significant role in convincing these families of the importance of getting an education in Kannada rather than having no education. He also tells them that enrolling their children in his school from the beginning would help them continue their education without facing language barriers. He emphasizes to the children and their parents that they get to learn three new languages—Kannada, Hindi and English by joining GHPS.

The Department of Minority Affairs, Government of Karnataka offers a scholarship of Rs 1000/- to all Muslim students from class I to VII. But often, parents did not have all the documents required for processing this scholarship. Murthy helps them with this. Since his school is only up to the primary level, he keeps a close watch on the children so that they transit to other schools, and do not drop-out due to the language barrier. Since the transfer certificate (TC) goes from the primary school to the high school directly, he is able to track the students’ continuity of education. Given that Karnataka has the highest school drop-out rate among the Muslims, Murthy's vision for the school that, ‘All children from the Muslim community will be able to read, write and speak the Kannada language,' is sagacious.
A Home-school connect

Parents’ conviction in the importance of education is central to the retention of children in schools. Children are the most vulnerable victims of gruesome poverty. Parents in poverty have usually been through many pre-existing issues—financial problems, debts, inadequate house space, large families, their own poor schooling experience—that make building relationships with parents a very daunting task for teachers. Recognizing these host of problems, Murthy views effective relationship and communication with families as central to his role. He respects them for who they are and finds great joy in being friendly with parents. He believes that most parents aspire for a good education for their children and because he understands their background and problems, he does not expect any academic support from them after their children return home. But, he requests them to allow the children to study in the evenings rather than making them do home errands that take away their time to study.

On Saturdays, he goes around the community and talks with parents. He tries to understand their problems. He keeps track of each child’s attendance and follows up with home visits when any child is absent for three days, consecutively. He updates parents regularly about the learning progress of their children. The community and parents are appreciative of his efforts. Murthy says, ‘I have genuine respect for who they are, as people. They have too many problems... I support them in whichever ways I can.’

Murthy’s engagement with parents begins even before they enrol their child in the school. He visits all the houses of the Muslim community in the colony and has one-to-one conversations with parents, gently pressing them to enrol eligible children in his school. He attends Self Help Group (SHG) meetings and ward meetings to orientate parents about the benefits of government schools. He involves two SDMC members actively in the process of motivating parents and in the other school development initiatives. He takes regular support from one of the teachers in his school who belongs to the same community for enrolment of children and ensuring their retention.

Besides this, he has printed a pamphlet that lists all the facilities and merits of his school. It also provides the various forms of financial support available to children from the Government of Karnataka. He distributes these pamphlets to parents in the village. Murthy tells us that parents are not aware of all the facilities available in government schools. These strategies become important, he says, as parents continue to think that private schools provide the best education. There are five private schools within one kilometre from the school. The pamphlet may encourage them to come and see the school.

Care for children

Caring is often treated as a ‘woolly nothingness’. However, in the context of schools, especially those having children with disadvantages, care assumes a special meaning. Fundamentally, care means respecting students as unique human beings and believing that every student can learn. Care manifests in the form of teacher-child relationships, affecting both students and teachers, resulting in the formation of the school culture and a sense of community. Care in GHPS Chikkamandya takes various forms. Throughout our conversation with Murthy, I found him use the word ‘ensuring the safety of children’, repeatedly. Given the struggle in bringing children to the school, safeguarding them from physical or mental harm is important for him. He personally oversees that children leave for their homes safely with adults or peers. Given the structural conditions of the school with Hindu and Muslim children, Murthy makes efforts to ensure that children respect each other’s culture and there is no discrimination. He says, ‘Children should know, care and respect other cultures.’ For Murthy, diversity seems to be an educational resource.

He is very perceptive of children’s needs and problems. For example, once when all the teachers referred to a child as poor in academics and having reading and writing difficulties, Murthy’s observation of the child during a substitution class revealed that the child had poor vision and was later advised surgery by the doctor. Murthy recalls that it was at great risk that he took the responsibility of convincing the unwilling parents to go for surgery. The child is currently doing well in class IV. Ensuring good health of the students is also an important dimension of Murthy’s work. Regular health and eye check-ups are carried out. He has organized free spectacles for 25-30 students. There are 16 students with special needs in the school and they undergo a yearly check-up. Murthy sends a teacher with them for any further support that these children may need. Fundamentally, Murthy cares deeply for the children’s right to education and this drives all his actions and practices.

Equal focus on academics and co-curricular activities

As HT, Murthy has a clear vision of academic development and quality teaching in the classroom. Murthy believes that children have immense potential and academic study needs to be balanced with co-curricular activities. So, the teachers of his school focus on both. Murthy has made immense efforts to help children prepare for admissions to Navodaya, Moraji and Rani Chennamma schools. A timetable has been prepared for teachers to take turns and prepare interested children for the examinations before and after school timings. Teachers pay special attention to these students and the parents appreciate and feel encouraged by these efforts made by the school.

Generally, very few children from the rural areas qualify these examinations but five of Murthy’s students have joined the Navodaya schools in the recent past. Besides academic development, Murthy encourages his students to participate in the prathibha karinji 1 programs. GHPS Chikkamandya had received the first prize in qawwali singing and bhavageete (light devotional music in Kannada). Murthy asked these children to sing for us and both these prize-winners sang mellifluously and confidently. For the fourth year in succession, his school had got the first place in clay modelling. Murthy emphasized that teachers take a lot of pains to develop confidence and skills through these co-curricular activities, ‘We cannot deprive children of any opportunity. Development of children through various means is important.’

Safeguarding children’s right to education

Greater educational participation of children from the disadvantaged sections through asserting their right to education is not without challenges and problems. There are innumerable children who are completely outside the purview of education. Murthy’s conviction to protect children’s right to education finds him deeply involved in bringing children back to school. He is a member of the Child Rights Forum at the district level. Through this forum, he has been able to support children on the streets, in destitution and child labour, and has
helped them find a secure place to live and made provisions to enrol them in schools. When he finds these children in public places, he informs the police. He is of a strong view that when children are educationally deprived, owing to the absence of supervision, guidance and care of adults, children are pushed into these activities. There have been several instances when he has got information about newborn babies being abandoned in the interior villages of Mandya and he has rescued and admitted them to the balamandiras, ensuring the safety of these children.

He says that he keeps a constant vigil over children who may be married off before they attain their legal age of marriage. While the practice, he says, is fading, it is still prevalent in small pockets. In a village, once, he had saved six children from child marriage. In his own school, he has been able to stop several child marriages. According to him, peers of a child to be married off are most often the source of information. During discussions with parents of such children, he convinces them about the importance of education for their child's future. He also tells the students that if a higher government official investigates and gets to know, the school, as well as their parents, would get a bad name. Children sometimes deny that a marriage proposal is being discussed but when nudged, (Is it true that your engagement is being discussed?), they divulge the truth. When parents approach the school for age-documents, it is often a signal to the school of the parents' intentions of getting their child married and the school quickly swings into action to stop early marriages by advising parents and children.

Besides child marriages, child labour is also prevalent. Murthy has found children working in garages, beedi rolling, and, in road-side hotels. Lack of awareness among parents about the importance of education is the key challenge according to Murthy. They want their children to stay back to take care of grandparents, siblings or do menial work at home or outside, and attend school only if and when possible.

At various forums, Murthy creates awareness among the community members about how child marriage leads to educational deprivation and affects the future of the child. He speaks at various forums, camps, awareness programs in collaboration with NGOs, and in Anganwadis about the protection of children's right to education. He also creates awareness among children on these issues. Children at his school are aware of the Childline number 1098. He believes children need to get justice. He says he has faith in God, government institutions and law. While much of his work every day revolves around ensuring education for children, he does work related to the Child Rights Forum on Sundays. Clearly, for this HT, there is no division of time between personal and professional.

**Teamwork**

Murthy attributes the success of his school to the tremendous collegiality and cohesiveness of the staff in his school. Murthy is proud of the ten teachers in his school. While some of them have TCH and BEd, a few have a master's degree too. In an interaction that we had with the teachers and Murthy, it was clear that there was a lot of co-operation among them. Teachers spoke with great pride about their school. They spoke about the extraordinary work done by Murthy to enrol children into the school. Teachers are sent regularly to participate in professional development programmes and the HT encourages them to study further. He motivates teachers and other staff by demonstrating punctuality, transparency, cohesiveness and shares responsibilities with them. Teachers, in their conversations, brought out how Murthy's actions and practices inspired them to continue in the same school. Murthy's relationship with SDMC members is also friendly. He considers them as key participants in the process of his school development and willingly takes their support. Murthy showed us the photo documentation of the infrastructure development of the school and one sees the participation of several community members in it.

We asked Murthy about his aspirations for the school and with a thoughtful smile he said, 'To build this school as a model school.' He wants his school to demonstrate good practices to other schools. He desires to bring technology into the school and wants to have the facility to be able to show videos to the children. He also wants to bring Edusat to his school. Murthy's wants to ensure that all children have access to good education without any discrimination. He is a self-aware, reflective and intrinsically motivated teacher who sees a deep sense of moral purpose in carrying out his responsibilities. Succinctly put in his words, 'Children are in difficult circumstances owing to their parental situation, but we have an obligation towards these children.' Murthy's story reaffirms the idea that good leadership at the school level is indeed an important component for improvement in education.

**Some reflections**

The claims of the reform initiatives of universalization of elementary and secondary education and the enactment of the Right to Education Act do not easily translate into direct positive outcomes in educational practice, especially in the life of children from the marginalized sections. Social inequities and cultural practices continue to have a consequential impact on children's chances of enrolling and remaining in school. For example, 'work and education' for only 'some' sections of children in society (Sinha, 2016) is a travesty against these children. In such contexts, proactive good practices of the various actors of the school system, assume high importance, if children are not to be left on the margins of the society.

Beliefs and practices of teachers and head teachers (about children, schooling, education, learning and teaching) in public schools play an important role in enacting the constitution's commitment to equality and justice through the educative processes in the school. Once in school, socio-economic status is not a barrier to learning if the students are exposed to good teaching practices. Children need a caring advocate in the school for their retention and to safeguard them from direct and indirect violence. Children need caring practices---practices that reflect the belief that 'all' children have capabilities to learn; focus on their socio-emotional, cognitive and moral development; and align with the broader aims of education. The curricular reform documents of school education (NCF, 2005) and teacher education (2009) has highlighted the importance of 'care' while developing the vision of teacher education: 'Teachers need to be prepared to care for children and should love to be with them' (NCF, 2005 p.108) and, 'Teachers need to be prepared to care for children and enjoy to be with them' (NCFTE, 2009 p30). By including these in the changes, these reforms seem to hint at the nature, content and form of the relationship that needs to be nurtured with children in schools.

The family-school connect emerges as significant in the entire scheme of mechanisms to keep children in school and to ensure their learning. Parental aspiration for the education of their children is on the rise. But, often, their current personal circumstances seem to overpower their desire for a bright future for their child. They too possibly need the support of teachers and head teachers, who understand their problems and respond in humane ways. Besides the varied concerns that emerge from within the school environment,
teachers and head teachers in public schools seem to be challenged by the growing penchant of the parents for the private schooling system. They are forced to make more concerted efforts to attract children to public schools. Although not desirable, this new form of ‘competition’ perhaps is making them re-examine some of their practices and will nudge them to develop an alternative imagination about quality of education and the approaches towards continuity of education of their children.

The need to make a difference to the lives of children in difficult circumstances and the extent of moral accountability that teachers and head teachers hold towards the well-being of children contribute significantly to the quality of children’s participation in school and consequent completion of education. In a research study by Lawson (2005) on the role of principals in schools having children from the disadvantaged sections, one of the school principals remarked, ‘It really matters whether we do our jobs well. If we do, students can have a route to independence, employability, and economic security. If we don’t, we lose them to the streets. If we can get them hooked on learning and provide them with the skills to be successful, we give them a route out of poverty. That gives their future children hope of being well-supported in their growing years and the chance to live out their dreams. For many of our students, we are the ones who give them a glimpse of what the future can hold’ (p.14). If education affords one to make one’s life choices, the pursuit of children’s participation in education with equity and quality becomes an imperative.

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Author
Rajashree Srinivasan, Faculty, Azim Premji University

References

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