How a Govt School Teacher from Bidar is Realizing the School of his Dream

By | Oct 14, 2019

A lush green campus welcomes visitors to the Government Lower Primary School (GLPS), Nehru Nagar, Hallikheda, Humnabad, Bidar. Children have finished watering the plants and the morning assembly is just over. The classes have not yet begun but the preparations for the midday meal are already on. Teacher Ramana Gouda is taking attendance in the classroom. We head straight to the Head Teacher’s (HT) room. Anuradha, the HT is waiting for us.

The school has three teachers and 55 students. The children come from a village that has a population of 765. Of the 86 families in the village, except 10 families that belong to a minority community, all belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community.

Background of the school

Smt Anuradha has been the in-charge HT for the last nine years. Her experience of working as the head of the institution has been quite bitter. The school looked deserted ten years ago. The HT has been at the receiving end from two sections of the local SC community, who have been trying to take control of the School Management and Development Committee (SDMC). The fight between the communities left the school in a dire state. No development work could be carried out since members of the SDMC would not agree on any development agenda. The fund reserved for construction of the compound wall went unutilized for years. Infighting among the SDMC members started impacting the functioning of the school. Teachers were not allowed to work autonomously, leading to lack of student learning, the HT tells us.

Teacher Ramana Gouda

Ramana Gouda is a native of a small village, Sindhagi in the Bijapur district. He passed his senior secondary schooling from Talikote, staying with a relative. After completing a Diploma in Education (D Ed) from Aphzalpura (Kalaburgi district) as a topper in the District Institute of Educational Training (DIET), he joined the education service in the year 2009. The day he reported for duty, he had to join Prerana, the teacher induction programme for newly recruited teachers.

One of the exercises for new teachers in Prerana was to write about their dream school. Ramana Gouda distinctly remembers what his dream school idea was—an ideal school to which children love to come, a centre of learning for children, one where teachers work together, located in a community which owns it, a school with its own garden. When Ramana Gouda reported to GLPS Nehru Nagar, it was far from his dream. There were 58 students on the rolls, but only 15 attended school regularly. The school premises were open to all and were being misused by the community. There was a desperate need for change. 
A Breeze of change

It took one year for Ramana Gouda to understand the dynamics of the school and the community. In the first year, he made many visits to the community and interacted with parents. He came to understand that there were families that had just a couple of biscuits for breakfast. Many relied upon the mid-day meal as the only source of a full meal for their children. Many families could not afford to buy a graph sheet for class-work. Many did not know how to get the facilities their children could claim. For many, visiting the town to get an Adhaar copy which costs Rs 10/- for transportation was unaffordable. Many families were grappling with the problem of alcoholism of the male head of the family. Ramana Gouda’s interaction with the community helped him develop empathy towards the community and the students. He started a dialogue with the SDMC trying to tell them of the need for a close connection between the school and the community. His argument was, it is just one of the many schools for a teacher—if not this, there will be another school where the teacher could go to teach. But for the community, this was the only government school. It is their responsibility to ensure that the school functions effectively. This argument struck a chord with the community.

A meeting with the parents was called by Ramana Gouda to discuss the issues the school and the children were facing. In the meeting, he urged the community members to cooperate with the school for the benefit of the children.

Ramana Gouda started spending more time in the school. Though the school starts at ten, he would reach the school by nine. He would start watering the plants and cleaning the premises on his own. He would visit the school premises on Sundays and other holidays too. Over a period of time, children started joining him in these day-to-day affairs of the school. Children started owning the campus.

Soon, the school realised that the premises need to be protected from grazing cows and trespassers. They started working towards building a compound wall. Community members helped in getting the money released from the Zilla Panchayat—an amount of Rs 1,23,000/- for compound wall construction and Rs 1,88,000/- for toilet construction. Teachers and community members supervised the work and ensured that a gate was also installed with the sanctioned money. Many community members worked for free. The accomplishment of this task was a good beginning for a cordial relation between the school and the community.

Inside the classroom

Ramana Gouda thinks that children own the school campus. Their love for the school campus is reflected in their keenness to keep the school premises clean and green. They like to spend time in the school premises. He thinks that this love helps him in taking learning to the children. Since 20% of their school time is spent in the school garden, it is an important source of learning for the children. Ramana Gouda is aware that textbooks cannot be the only source of learning. He cites the example of a lesson on plants. Students are already familiar with the parts of the plant and their functions. When he takes a plant to the class, students make enquiries. Many of these conversations use local terminology. The teacher uses this opportunity to introduce the terminology given in the textbook. Ramana Gouda’s interaction in the Teacher Learning Centre (TLC) also comes in handy in such situations. He believes that teaching is not for completing the syllabus but for achieving learning.

Results of Raman Gouda’s efforts are reflected in the children’s learning. At grade II, children can read and write in Kannada which is not the case with the children going to private schools in Hallikheda. This is the reason that not a single child from the village has enrolled in private schools in the last three years. Private schools try to woo parents by various means. Off-late, they have started offering free transport facility to fetch students from the interior villages. From Nehru Nagar, they have not been successful in getting any enrolment.

Ramana Gouda is confident that no one will go to these private schools as long as their school functions well. Parents have started withdrawing their wards from private schools to enrol them in GLPS Nehru Nagar. Siddharth—the son of a gram panchayat member, who was earlier enrolled in the Keni School has now joined GLPS Nehru Nagar—is the best example. Siddharth’s father believes that Siddharth’s learning was not up to the mark in the Keni School, but it has picked up now ever since he joined GLPS Nehru Nagar.

Beyond the curriculum

Ramana Gouda takes a keen interest in students’ learning beyond the classroom. The community is now aware of the educational opportunities in Morarji Desai and Navodaya schools and children are eager in preparing for the entrance exams of these schools. They spend one hour daily in preparation for these entrance exams and are made to practice through mock exams. Children are confident of facing these entrance examinations. Ramana Gouda takes complete responsibility for their preparation and also takes them to write the entrance examination which is held at a centre at Humanabad. Of the 13 children who wrote the examination for the Morarji school in 2013, 11 got admission and all are now doing their D Ed. There has been no looking back since then. Most of the students continue to get admission in to Navodaya or Morarji schools after completing grade V from GLPS Nehru Nagar.

Basavaraj is the father of Somashekar, a grade V student. Somashekar’s two siblings are studying in grades I and III. Basavaraj has noticed that children are keen to go to school and he is happy that Somashekar is able to read and write in English. Basavaraj thinks that Ramana Gouda is an ideal teacher. As a teacher, he thinks of the students’ present as well as their future. Basavaraj’s children speak of going to Morarji and Navodaya schools, which has happened due to the hard work put in by the teacher. The children and the community are proud of Ramana Gouda. In his opinion, the community can go to any extent to retain the teacher in the school, says Basavaraj. When they heard that the teacher would be transferred, the community geared up for a dharna. Unless the teacher himself wishes to go from the school, the community will not allow it, Basavaraj tells us with tears in his eyes.

Guidance beyond classroom learning

Limited awareness among community members leads to poor scholarship claims. Lack of bank accounts adds to their woes. Ramana Gouda took a personal interest in opening zero balance accounts for students. So far, one hundred zero balance accounts have been opened in the Canara Bank with his help. In one instance, Ramana Gouda had to personally spend Rs 700/- to recover students’ scholarships amounting to Rs 45,000/- which he did not mind because it was such a big sum for the children. Parents visit the school to seek guidance from the teacher. They discuss and want to know what the best educational opportunities for their children are after completing grade V. Ramana Gouda is the educational guide for the community. Many of his past students have started entering the higher education sector and regularly seek his guidance. Following his advice, 11 to 12 students of the 2013 batch are doing D Ed.
Once an Educational Officer visited the school for inspection. On not finding Ramana Gouda in the school despite his attendance showing him to be present, he was issued a show-cause notice. Ramana Gouda was away in the town to complete linking Adhaar to student bank accounts so that the scholarships reach the students regularly.

The HT took up the responsibility of answering the show-cause notice. She says that she was not worried about giving an explanation as they were working for the children. Ramana Gouda agrees and says that it is the HT who gives him encouragement and freedom to take up initiatives for the benefit of the school and the students.

School cooperative shop

Children in the school run a cooperative shop. The shop houses all the stationery materials that they may need. There is a display board listing the price of various items sold. The shop is open during school hours. There is a record of all the things brought and sold. The cupboard which houses the stationery materials is located in the HT’s room. Students have free access to it and walk in and walk out completing the transactions on their own. The shop is currently run by a student monitor, Siddharth.
The school also runs a cooperative bank. The students manage the daily transactions of the bank and report these to the teacher every day. Ramana Gouda believes that running a student-led bank helps the students to understand financial transactions better. He also thinks that such initiatives, apart from teaching the value of saving, give students the confidence in handling money in their day to day life. The school charges a fine of Re 1/- for absence without a reason. The fine charged goes to the bank account of the student. Currently, the bank has a deposit of about Rs 8,000/-.
Alumni association

The school has a functional alumni association. The first set of students who were part of the alumni association are now studying D Ed in various colleges. The school organizes alumni interaction with the current students. The alumni share their experiences of higher studies. Stories related to Morari and Navodaya school entrance examinations are the key focus of the interactions.

The Teacher’s vision

Ramana Gouda believes that every student is important. This inclusive vision of the teacher has led him to work for all. Not only their educational needs but the physical needs of the needy children are also attended to. Another striking observation is his belief in students’ capabilities. This belief has facilitated him to start many student-driven initiatives. Because students are given the responsibility, they actively take part and deliver what is expected of them. They have become confident, which should be the aim of any education. That one can see it happening in a remote school, is an added reason to celebrate it. Another important highlight is his unlimited love for his students. He does not mind what time of the day or which day of the week it is when it comes to his dedication to school and children. His
selfless devotion to the school and the children has been reciprocated by the students. They miss him whenever he goes out of school for official engagements and pester the HT, asking when he would return. His presence in the school during holidays has made the children come to school on holidays too.

Ramana Gouda thinks his work is not yet over. He thinks that a lot more needs to be done for the school. He believes that that school needs to be self-sufficient in providing vegetables for the mid-day meal. At present, they get Rs 55/- for buying vegetables but the actual cost is around Rs 75/-. Some families send grams and vegetables needed for cooking. He thinks that if they can grow some vegetables, they can bring the expenses down.

Ramana Gouda wants his students to explore the computer and the internet. He believes that this will expose them to a different world altogether. At present, they do not have these, but he wants to create a computer laboratory for the school. He has already identified space for and is hopeful that a philanthropic initiative would fulfil this dream of his. Library and laboratory are the other facilities that he wants to have for his school. He feels that in the absence of these facilities, he can explore teaching and learning only to a limited extent. Since children sit on the floor, Ramana Gouda is contemplating arranging for floor mats.

Ramana Gouda feels that he owes a lot of his professional development to the engagement with Azim Premji Foundation and their work in sustaining many of the initiatives. Opportunities to visit educational institutions outside the state and visitors from various places has made him reflect on and improve his practice. Recognition by the education department and the 'Best Teacher Award', have kept his spirits high.

Conclusion

The school won the ‘Green School Award’ for the beautiful campus that the teachers and students have been maintaining over the years. Ramana Gouda says that when he wrote about his dream school, he had a vague idea about the school. He was not sure if his dream would materialize. When he looks back at his dream when he is about to reach a decade of teaching service, he realises that he has done more than what he had dreamt of. But now, he has new dreams for his school, a school which fulfils the dreams of the students to study in the best higher education institutions. Ramana Gouda fondly remembers the most satisfying moment of his professional life as that when his students won the district-level quiz competition defeating three high-profile private schools of the district. Ramana Gouda’s eyes tear-up and twinkle with pride as he remembers how his students rushed to hug him after their victory. He is a satisfied teacher for the path he has walked. He is also aware that he has a long way to go.

GHPS Nehru Nagar has shown that it is possible to help communities to realize their educational dreams by providing the best education through government schools. When the school works effectively, it is not difficult to overcome the competition posed by private schools. Through demonstrable student learning, it is possible to bring in students to government schools who otherwise may be headed to private schools. Schools have to work closely with communities and communities must value the opportunities they have for improving the future of their children.

Acknowledgements: Our sincere thanks to Ramana Gouda for taking the time out of his busy schedule to share his experiences and reflections on his professional practice. Our heartfelt thanks to the members of the community who took the time to visit the school and shared their thoughts and experiences. Sincere thanks to Bidar District Institute, Azim Premji Foundation for identifying and giving a brief about the teacher and making all arrangements for the field visit.

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Republished from Azim Premji University Practice Connect website.

Source URL: http://teachersofindia.org/en/spotlight/how-govt-school-teacher-bidar-realizing-school-his-dream