

Doing Things Differently To Do Them Better

By | Oct 27, 2014

What sets a school apart? Yogesh Durgapal from Azim Premji Foundation shares with us his visit to the Government Madhyamik School in Nagla.

Situated in the Pant Nagar University campus is an otherwise non-descript building which could easily be mistaken for a private school campus. This building incidentally is a government school - a school where you will find teachers long after the school is over, discussing or planning the next day's activities. A school where the teachers ensure that government duties don't come in the way of teaching even if it means working beyond school hours. A school where the head teacher learns to dance so that she can train her students for cultural programmes. A school where teachers are not just confined to teaching but are involved in almost every other aspect of the school's activities. A school where the teachers treat the school as their own and can be found discussing issues based on topics as varied as the construction work to their discoveries on the internet related to topics covered in the classroom.

Welcome to the Government Madhyamik School, Nagla. It is what I call an "amazing" school.

Enthusiastic Staff

"What you see is an initiative taken by our team, which has played an important role in not just supervising the construction work but also ensuring that all aspects of the school function properly." This is what Ravi Mohan, a teacher at the school, said when he first met me.

"Earlier, there was no boundary wall. The land around the school required a major land fill and lots of brickwork. During the initial period, we would sit for hours and sometimes even days on issues that I am sure you or for that matter even the officials would not have noticed. The designing of the motif on the main entrance, a tightly held fist, which symbolizes the five stakeholders i.e. the administration, the teacher, the child, community and the school, was a much thought over process," reiterated Ravi.

"We don't adhere to any timing when we are in school," he later told me, while walking towards the office. "We take a short break after school and are return by about 5 o' clock. We normally stay on till 6 or 7 in the evening - surfing the internet or discussing the next day's agenda or the problems that have cropped up in school."

Quality Teaching-Learning

"We have strength of 270 students at present which sometimes goes up to about 300. This increase does lead to an increase in our problems. With a staff of six including one Head teacher and two voluntary teachers, teaching the students and attending trainings and workshops interspersed with government duties really makes our task herculean."

Finishing the curriculum and finishing it well becomes almost impossible. What happens to the quality of education? "Ours must be the only school that does not believe in completing the curriculum for the sake of completing it. If we are not able to finish our curriculum then the numbers of chapters completed becomes our syllabus for the year. For us, it is really important that the child not be burdened. Understanding the content and the application of what is taught is given utmost importance."

"We have a lot of problems. The shortage of staff is one of them, the content and methodology another. At times, we are in a fix when a particular way of teaching is just not delivering the desired results. That's the time we go to the internet," pointing to the single computer lying in a corner, which is courtesy the donors who are from far flung areas and have nothing to do with the school.

"Can the Foundation provide us some inputs on teaching certain topics that students find difficult to comprehend, in say, Mathematics or Hindi?" Looking at me with so much hope caught me off guard, and my instant response was visibly evasive. Fumbling with words, I said that I would get back to them after consultation with my colleagues.

Taking the Initiative

"We made these cemented platforms under the trees especially for the children," and then abruptly added, "You know it's my long cherished dream to have a laboratory where I can keep all the broken radios, watches, televisions, cycles, which the children can just open, explore and learn while they enjoy the activities. I want the children to enjoy their childhood and not get too bogged down with bookish knowledge. We have children who come from places like Jharkhand, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, and trying to make them understand the matter in Hindi itself is an arduous task but I am sure an activity centre like this will be asset in making them understand through simple experiments." I could only nod in agreement for the simple reason that his passion was infectious.

"The land that you see to your right has been purposely left untouched and unfilled. During the monsoon, the place gets filled up with almost 2 to 3 feet of water which helps in raising the water table. We have never had water problems and our boring pump works well though the year. By the way, do you know that the boring pump was also a very personal initiative taken by the team members? When we got to know that some other school had rejected the offer, under the government sponsored scheme we grabbed it," he told me with a smile like that of a child who got a gift.

“When the government decides to appoint a teacher exclusively for Urdu then why not for mathematics, English or Hindi? And why do we need to introduce Sanskrit from class three onwards when we are already burdened with the load of the existing subjects? Along with all the other subjects, I also take Sanskrit which is actually not my subject of expertise. I am very lucky that my children don’t ask questions but God forbid if someday they do then it will indeed be very embarrassing for me,” says Ravi, explaining his staffing problems.

Can this work be sustained if one of you is transferred, I asked. “We have no answer and by the way Pandeyji has already got his transfer orders, with no replacement in sight. We can only pray that the person joining is equally motivated.”

Creating excitement in children

What is it that distinguishes your school from the other government schools?

“I’d say it is the space that we give our children in class - where they are not just asked to do questions and answers on their own but also do some activities. The box files that the children maintain is a testimony to all this,” answered Vinay Prabha Pathak, a class 5 Hindi teacher. The students are asked to write poetry and stories or just draw, based on the topic done in class. The children who had come with their box files were very excited to read out their poems or their stories which are original and connect with their day-to-day activities.

“After school, we sometimes stay late to teach some children because they come from a very poor and illiterate background. We want our children to have a bigger goal in life. Earlier a child was more than happy if he or she passed class five but now they want to know what else they can do after. So we guide them and coach them for the Navodaya and Sainik Schools. We also buy reference books for them to help them take the entrance examination”, informed Pradeep.

If I can’t learn the way you teach me, can you not teach me the way I can learn? This is the ideology that the school seems to follow. The main focus of the teachers here is the children. And that is how it is meant to be.

This article, written by Yogesh Durgapal, was published earlier by Azim Premji Foundation under its 'Reasons for Hope' initiative . It has been published here with changes.

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