

Working for a Greater Cause

Interview with a Special Educator

Vijayashree P S

How conscientiously would our student community learn and understand mutual respect if a school caters to both the disabled and non-disabled children! One such exemplary school that is doing this is GHPS Paper Town, Belagola, Mandya. The initiative by a government school teacher has changed the way children with disabilities are perceived by children studying in a regular school.

The day I visited this town, there were more than fifty parents at the school premises with their special kids for a medical camp. The cluster functionary introduced us to one teacher, Syed Khan, mentioning that Syed is the reason for starting this, Primary Health Care Centre in the school and he takes the ownership of the entire process as a teacher. Intrigued by the sight of students running around, parents in conversation with the doctors about their child's medical conditions and teachers volunteering and focusing on the arrangements, I requested an interview with Syed Khan after school. He readily agreed.

Vijayashree: What is your educational background? And why did you choose to be a Special Educator?

Khan: I completed my BA and was working as an Assistant Teacher at GHPS Ganamguru, in the Srirangapatna Taluk. In the initial period of my service, whenever I met my colleagues in the Education Department, we would come to know of a lot of deaths of children with disabilities. Such news was disturbing to me, and I used to wonder why these children should die only because there are no facilities for them. During that time, the department organised a 90-day *Bunadi* training, which is an induction training for newly appointed Assistant Teachers of government high schools. After the training, the participants needed to clear a test. I was one of the seven participants who passed that assessment and were sent to Bhoj University, Madhya Pradesh, to complete the Special BEd certification. The Karnataka Government funded our Special BEd degree. I completed it and returned as a Special Educator.

Vijayashree: When and how were you posted to this

school?

Khan: There was no Primary Health Care Centre round this location when I returned after my course. So, the first thing we needed to do was to choose a region to set-up the care centre. For that, we needed to identify the place that had the largest number of children with disabilities. When we surveyed the records of the Health Department, we realized that the KRS cluster had the most number of children with disabilities. We, as a crew with a first-aid van, also, travelled across the region and with the help of Anganwadi employees we were able to visit the houses of children with disabilities. We saw how living in far-flung areas, in economically poor households made the children's health weaker.

Therefore, we started searching for a place to set-up the health care centre. That's when we came to know of the Paper Town school building, which was the verge of shutting down due to low pupil enrolment. Right away, we approached the Block Education Department and requested that the Primary Health Care Centre for Hobli be set up here, retaining the school also.

Vijayashree: Was the permission was granted immediately?

Khan: Yes! I was extremely excited about this good news. By then, I had discussed and head-hunted for a few volunteers and social-workers, because I knew that having a strong team was crucial. We, as a team, reached this school. There was half-an-inch of dust on the first floor to clean. We had received a primary amount for procuring basic materials, as well. We put up a hoarding: 'Punarvasathi Kendra' (rehabilitation centre). The regular school was running smoothly on the ground floor, so, we also, we did not have to bother about the mid-day meals. We were all set.

I had imagined that the Centre will be flooded with parents the very next day after it opened. Unfortunately, no one turned up to this building for quite a long time.

Vijayashree: That must have been very

disheartening.

Khan: I realized that neither the parents nor the community clearly understood what this centre was for, what it meant. So, around mid-2008 this solid team of the three of us set out to go and meet the parents at their houses. We approached each family with the *anganwadi* volunteer. It was pathetic to see the plight of these children. Not to fault the parents, because they were not aware of how to take care of these children. A few children were completely bedridden, and cleanliness of their room and surroundings was very poor. The children were actually, also suffering due to the unclean environment.

As we became closer to these families through regular visits to all the villages, trust was built between us. In the course of time, when we realized that the families are receiving us and our interventions positively, we became confident to start awareness programmes for the communities, as our next step. That is when we introduced the concept of a rehabilitation centre where there are facilities for children with disabilities.

Vijayashree: Did they understand what a rehabilitation centre can do?

Khan: The parents had witnessed us doing first-aid and fundamental physiotherapy at home. That made it easy for us to clarify that the facilities provided at the rehabilitation centre would be more than the basic exercises we did at home. We did persuade the families, saying that the rehabilitation centre would help their kids become a bit more independent.

We invited the families for the first medical camp to the school, which the parents instantly agreed for. Once they saw the physiotherapy facilities, play materials and toys that the children delighted in and understood that there were doctors/specialists to consult, they were ready to send their children.

Vijayashree: This is a major achievement considering the conservative living conditions and remote locations of these parents.

Khan: It was a considerable effort by our team. We had to work for months to gain their trust.

Vijayashree: How did the centre function post this?

Khan: It was evident to the parents that their children are happy coming to school. Few children started sitting independently after a few days of therapy. One child began walking with the support of a metal frame. All these were wonders for their

families. The parents have formed a friendship-club here and they were spending the entire day with the kids and us (staff). We are all a family now.

Vijayashree: What is the routine of a typical day at the rehabilitation centre?

Khan: The school begins with the assembly. The students, then, go to their respective classrooms for classes. The children with disabilities with their parents and staff begin their planned routine, such as physio, playroom, speech therapy, to name a few. Post-lunch, these children sit with the regular students in the respective classrooms for their subject lessons.

Vijayashree: So, all the students learn together?

Khan: Yes, all the students learn together (*smiles looking at my jaw drop*).

Vijayashree: How do you do it? It must be very challenging.

Khan: Well, it is not, ma'am. I have learnt one thing, which is that instructing at a moderate pace can do wonders for a non-disabled child. But our teachers must teach at a slow pace since they must cater to all the students here. As a result, non-disabled children also learn things proficiently.

The inclusiveness that the school provides to both sets of students is something that is immeasurable. Students grow with this involvement in peer learning. Parents are here during school hours, also offer assistance in the students' learning. The complete school environment aids every student's holistic development. This is an incredible space to learn!

Vijayashree: Sir, how do you work with different departments?

Khan: If all the three departments – Education, Health and Women & Child Welfare – work in collaboration, we can bring a change or see a change.

Vijayashree: How do you manage all the aspects – collaborating with the community, the school routine, working with the various government departments and most importantly, improvement every child's physical & mental well-being?

Khan: We have a strong team of teachers, staff and parents. The system is transparent here. For example, if there is a release of fund or special scholarship, I immediately call a meeting of all the stakeholders and we collectively decide on how we use the fund. While working for a greater cause it

is important to maintain transparency and the right use of resources.

Vijayashree: Now that you have accomplished such an incredible task. What is your goal in life?

Khan: I strongly feel that I have done nothing and there is an immense amount of work still to be done in this field. All children have the fundamental right to live and I wish we have to start a full-fledged hospital that caters to the special needs

of children with disabilities. I also feel all the children need to get equal opportunities. One of our alumni is now pursuing his bachelor's degree at Mysore University. We feel proud when we learn that he is living a life like any other student, which has been possible because of the speech-therapy that he received during his school days here. And I request the Education Department to consider this slogan for our school, 'A school that gives equal opportunities to children with disabilities'.



Vijayashree is a Resource Person and part of the Urban School Initiative of the Bengaluru District at the Azim Premji Foundation. She may be contacted at vijayashree.ps@azimpremjifoundation.org