

Establishing a Non-Threatening School Environment | An Account from a Classroom

Anil S Angadiki

VOICES

'The school environment is okay, and you are taking care of our child more than we do, but there is a need to keep students under control, otherwise, they will not follow anyone's instructions.'

'Since you are not punishing children, my child has started retorting to me, which should not happen.'

'If you don't have control over your students in the classroom, then how will you teach them?'

'This is not the right method of teaching students in school, we have not seen this before; it may spoil them.'

Many more such observations and suggestions would come from the parents whenever we met them during parent-teacher meetings or home visits. This would also come from other stakeholders who visited our school children during the initial years of the establishment of the Azim Premji School, Yadgir. (one of the six Azim Premji Schools started across the country in 2012). The school started in a godown with some modifications to run classes as the permanent premises were under construction.

The reactions and responses mentioned earlier were received regularly as we set out to establish a fear-free environment without physical punishment, mental harassment or discrimination.

In 2012, 32 students enrolled in class I. They were all from the nearby villages and most of them were first-generation school-goers. We were equipped with our school policy and guidelines which largely had components based on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009, National Education Policy, and National Curriculum Framework. There was a team of leaders and resource persons from the Field Institutes of Azim Premji Foundation, having experience in working with alternative schools, NGOs or the public education system, who supported us in building our capacities to practise and gain experience in establishing a belief system in the school based on the principle that *any child without stress or fear, having good relationships, and consistent opportunities to participate/*

contribute, will gain confidence and become competent in learning and expression. Achieving this was very important for all of us to demonstrate the possibility of building such an environment and its positive impact on the learning of children.

Our challenges

The main hurdles we faced were:

- We, the teaching faculty, had previously worked in schools that had formal setups and mostly believed in punishment to help children learn and become responsible individuals.
- The parents, who had no idea about a 'fear-free' school environment were completely against this ideology.
- The children, who joined our school without school readiness made the teachers' attempts at dialogues to resolve conflicts or follow instructions, very difficult.

We needed to remain steadfast in our convictions to effect change through our beliefs and practices.

To make the learning environment stress-free, we built a setup where children could come into the classroom at their will. In the beginning, when we called them inside, most of them would remain outside, playing, sitting alone or wandering around the campus. This brought forth several challenges – some students would cross the school boundary and run into the adjacent fields to go back to their villages. We had to run after them to bring them back. There were instances when a few children became aggressive and used abusive words. The patience and how teachers dealt with these behaviours were exactly the opposite of how they were treated at home for such actions. This played a key role in establishing positive feelings among students.

We started having regular dialogues in groups and one-to-one interactions on the behavioural aspects whenever an issue was observed. We started teaching them how to converse with others, particularly to avoid using abusive language; and how to resolve conflicts. A few other activities, like

film screenings in smaller groups using laptops; and indoor activities, like storytelling and role plays, started helping us build a positive relationship with students. This led them to spend more time inside the classroom. Over time, except for one or two students, almost all started coming to class on time and participating in class activities.

Engaging children

We started engaging with the children by reciting action rhymes; starting the class with story narration and art activities, like drawing, painting, and clay art; and screening short films/videos. These were enjoyed by all students. Outdoor activities included taking them around the campus (nature walk), discussing and observing, involving students in gardening activities, group games, and establishing rules for the games. Also, using a variety of displays prepared jointly by teachers and students for language and mathematical concepts helped in their participation in learning.

All these activities while based on the curriculum, also contributed to developing the basic values of

playing and working together and supporting and helping each other. The use of examples during dialogues and discussions in the class and assembly helped students understand the importance of positive behaviours. For example, the morning assembly started providing a supportive space to keep the students seated in one place while performing/watching activities, discussing school-related matters, experience sharing etc. This made them ready for the next routines of the school.

The teachers sitting beside the students during class and mid-day meals; joint efforts in keeping the premises clean; and all other school activities consciously modelled equal treatment for all, avoiding discrimination and setting up non-hierarchical conditions. Most of the activities/and practices built a good relationship between students and teachers. Students started expressing their thoughts and views during class and even began sharing personal experiences, like challenges in their families, etc.



Figure 1. Film screening in a classroom.

Setting up processes

Gradually, we started developing rules for classrooms and the school through discussions with students, for example, seating arrangements, keeping things neatly in their allotted place, using dustbins, using washrooms properly, waiting for their turns to speak, not using abusive language or hitting others, not wasting food etc. Initially, a few simple and practical rules were made and displayed in and outside the classroom, which were referred to during dialogues whenever conflicts arose.

All of us, teachers, had regular team meetings for discussions on our experiences, the challenges and what we could do to improve the situation. Books, like *Divaswapna* by Gijubhai Badheka, *Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window* by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, *The Diary of a School Teacher* by Hemaraj Bhat, *Summerhill* by A S Neill etc., were read and discussed by us in groups. We started the practice of observing each other's classes and using recordings of our own classes to understand the positive aspects, especially, the pedagogical aspects to establish a child-centred practice, manage the class better, and get better participation from the children. Regular parent-teacher meetings also helped us maintain a continuous dialogue to convey our practice and parents' responsibilities at home.

These practices continued through the academic year and facilitated setting up the school culture. It was a surprise for all of us when the second batch of students on joining school, started sitting in the classroom, actively participating in activities without much effort by the teachers. We attributed

this to the new students having observed the senior batch, which strengthened our belief and conviction around the possibility of establishing a non-threatening culture in the school.

'Freedom with responsibility'

To make students responsible, we started establishing a few democratic practices, like setting up committees to manage school routines. Every student in the school became part of one of these committees and got involved in the decision-making, keeping everyone informed, taking part in the execution, and working on life skills, like handling emotions and problem-solving through forums, such as *School Mahasabha* (general assembly). Providing spaces for students to express themselves, celebrating events meaningfully, and designing a variety of activities within and outside the classroom helped us set up our school society.

From the experiences of different schools, such as the example of A S Neill in *Summerhill*, we assessed what and how their learnings could be adapted to our setting. This evolved into what we consider 'freedom with responsibility' – as teachers (including the principal), we are not just responsible for setting up practices, but also accountable for the sense of responsibility these would build among the students. We observed and negotiated our interventions in committee meetings, asking ourselves questions like: Where should I, as a teacher, give my opinion? To what extent should my suggestions influence the committee's decisions regarding the functioning of the school?



Figure 2. Students enjoying activities outside the classroom.

All our students and their parents are happy about the caring and non-threatening practices in the school and the number of enrolments has gone up remarkably. During the journey of creating this culture, a few teachers who had a different mindset, either left or were asked to leave, which in turn supported all the stakeholders to persevere

in realising this shared goal. Our children have been praised for their good behaviour and confident body language by outsiders, particularly school teachers from government schools in other districts. This kind of recognition and feedback keeps us motivated to achieve more in this direction and work on recognising and filling any gaps that may exist.



Figure 3. Outdoor activities retained children's interest in learning.



Figure 4. Children's schoolwork being shared with their parents.



Figure 5. Children gradually got used to school routines.



Anil S Angadiki has been with the Azim Premji Foundation since 2012 and currently works at the Azim Premji School in Yadgir, Karnataka. Prior to joining the Foundation, he taught Chemistry to classes XI and XII. He may be contacted at anil.angadiki@azimpremjifoundation.org