

A School Where all Students Feel Safe, Valued, and Seen

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On one of my visits to the Government Higher-Primary School (GHPS) Goravanahalli (Maddur, Karnataka), I saw a primary-grade student, Pranitha playing the role of a teacher in the classroom. She was imitating her teacher, Savitha Ma'am with whom I have closely worked for a few years. Pranitha asked the class, 'Dear students, are you ready to listen to a new story today? Shall I begin with a rhyme or an activity, what would you like?' (She waited for everyone's response). The students gave multiple responses. Anil said, 'Let's begin with a rhyme'; Preeti replied, 'Can you teach the song you sang the last time, ma'am'? Many others said they wanted to play a game. After listening to them all, Pranitha said, 'We shall take up what most of you want (most of them had said they wanted to play a game). Okay, let's play a game.' Then, looking at a student, she said, 'Rajesh, you should listen carefully to me, okay *magu* (child)? Did you work on the school map project?' Rajesh replied, 'Yes, but it is not yet complete.' Pranitha replied, 'Okay, no problem. We will do it in the evening.' This went on until the teacher arrived. It is quite common to see students pretending to be the teacher in their absence – wielding a stick to show authority, sitting on the teacher's chair, speaking in a stern voice, and giving commands. This was different.

In this instance, the student, throughout the conversation, addressed her classmates as '*magu*', asked for majority views, was gentle, and appreciated their efforts. The student used the terms that were generally used by her teacher and behaved in the way the teacher did. She believed that being humane, demonstrating fairness, and showing love were the traits of a teacher.

Building a relationship

This school remains open till 5.30 PM. After 4.30 PM, the teacher and students gather at the school grounds and engage in various activities. They sing, play games, talk about things happening in the village, and do project work, crafts or homework together. Evening walks are a common practice on this school campus spread over three acres. The

teacher and students go around to look at the trees and plants – there are more than a hundred trees, including coconut, jackfruit, mango, teakwood, tamarind, banana, neem, etc. The students have also grown greens and vegetables in some patches.

I have had the opportunity to spend some evenings at this school watching them. So, I asked the teacher how this positive relationship was built. She told me, 'Students talk and express themselves when they are given space. Students here feel free to shout, run around, ask questions and talk about anything that comes to their mind. Every evening is different, and we are open to new things.' Indeed, the students seem to feel warm, heard, and safe around her. They stay until the teacher leaves the school. This has become a regular practice, and parents know that their children are safe at school.

When students come to the teacher with conflicts, she listens to both sides, asks for reasons, and shares her views, gently guiding them. She does not believe in punishment, instead, she helps them reflect on their acts. She says, 'Students look for the teacher's validation, so, I try my best to balance my emotions, not saying things that are unpleasant or hurtful to them.' When the students ask her about something she does not know, she never hesitates to say, 'I don't know this, but tomorrow, I will find out. If not, all of us will try to find the answer.' Savitha Ma'am tells parents to regularly ask their children what they are learning at school. This, she believes motivates the students to learn.

How was the school transformed?

It has been nine years since Savitha Ma'am joined this school. The situation was not the same then. Students were not regular to school. Since a large section of the community is engaged in manual work, mainly in garment factories or as daily wagers, they were unable to pay any attention to their children's learning. Sometimes, the children were left at home to take care of their younger siblings. Savitha Ma'am visits students' homes and communities. She says, 'Knowing students' backgrounds is the key to building a good relationship with them. Also, the

more we know, the more sensitively we behave.'¹ There were also safety issues at school. After school, unknown community members and senior students used to enter the school campus and misuse the property, also engaging in activities, like drinking, playing cards, etc. The Head Teacher, School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) members, and teachers, together made some efforts to deal with these issues. The children were made aware of the problem, and they started convincing their parents to not damage school property and help with safeguarding the school. With the support of the community, these activities stopped.

Apart from this, the teachers and the Head Teacher made concerted efforts to build awareness of the importance of education. Enlisting the help of senior students, they took the following initiatives:

- Organised meaningful celebrations of national festivals during which students presented plays on constitutional values for parents, panchayat members, and the community
- Held meetings with the women of the community on girls' issues during periods
- Displayed students' learning in small exhibitions regularly
- Most teachers tried not to take leave for many years to set an example for their students. This resulted in a hundred percent attendance of most students
- Provided special care to students whose parents were alcohol addicts, speaking with each one

of them regularly to understand how they were feeling at home and in school

Visible signs of transformation

- Parents used to call students in the middle of the class through the windows (the windows face the road). Now parents take permission before entering the class and calling students through the windows has completely stopped.
- Parents visit the school during parents' meetings, 'Samudayadatta shale'ⁱ meetings, during functions, and make regular visits to drop off and pick up their child. Teachers interact with parents and update them about their child's learning. Not just academic but non-academic progress is shared and discussed during these meetings.
- All students engage in all the school activities without fear or reluctance; no student is left behind. Students engaging in school-, taluk- and district-level competitions have created hope in parents about the school. The school has won top prizes in *Pratibha Karanji*ⁱⁱ for nine consecutive years at the cluster and taluk levels.
- Students assume leadership roles and plan cultural activities. Almost all students have taken part in stage programmes, like anchoring, planning activities, etc.
- The school has built a culture where senior students guide their juniors.
- Regularly, during the morning assembly, there are quizzes and sharing of new things that students have learnt.



Figure 1. Students learning in pairs outdoors as the teacher guides them.

- Children care for each other, treat each other with respect, and no longer use abusive language.

Savitha Ma'am says, 'Values are mutually learnt. Students should think of the school as their space, a place to grow, achieve, and be happy. The school should help children develop self-confidence and make them feel safe. Our attitudes and positive

relationships with students play an important role in this. We should let them know that we have hope for them, so they feel responsible and do better than how they are doing. We should be careful about how we treat them. Students remember the way we treat them, and they should cherish this later in their lives. They deserve the respect we give them.'

This article is based on a study conducted during 2018-19 in the Maddur block, Mandya district, Karnataka.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



Figure 2. Every child is encouraged to participate and each one's voice is heard.

Endnotes

- i *Samudayadatta shaale* is a designated day for teachers, SDMC members, parents and volunteers to come together to create the School Improvement Plan.
- ii *Prathiba Karanji* is a programme for school students where cultural and literary competitions are conducted at cluster, block, district and state levels.



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