

Student Morale and Learning | A Teacher's Perspective

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In school, we occasionally see children who are quiet and solitary, different from the rest. As teachers, when we come across such students, the question that comes to our minds is whether they have been like this since their childhood. If not, what could be the possible reasons for such a change in their personality? This is an account of one such student.

It was with a very pleasant feeling that I entered the school for the first time as a teacher. The atmosphere of the school was encouraging. It had about 200 children, 7 teachers, and several B Ed interns at the time. On the first day itself, teachers informed me that about 30 children from classes V to VIII could neither read nor write in Hindi. This also impacted their comprehension of other subjects. Learning this, I decided to work with the children at two levels. First, during class hours, where classroom discussions would be based on the subjects being taught, and second, during the free periods, where additional language support and practice would be provided to the students who needed it.

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Getting to know the children

It was my first day in class V; I introduced myself and then asked the children to introduce themselves. All the children did so with great ease, but one girl, whose name I later came to know as Prachi, seemed hesitant as she stood up to introduce herself. Thin, frail, and quiet, Prachi's body language was subdued – very different from the other children in the class. I also noticed that when she stood up to introduce herself, all the children started laughing. Prachi stood there; her eyes downcast. I waited for her to speak, then, once again, asked her to introduce herself, but she remained silent. This first class on my very first day at school compelled me to ponder over what could be done with children who are shy or introverted. It also urged me



Figure 1: The joy of reading and each other's company.

to want to explore new and creative approaches with children like Prachi.

The next day, I began teaching a lesson on environmental science (EVS). While teaching the lesson, I tried to gauge the learning level of each child in the class. I asked them questions based on the lesson to check their comprehension of what I had explained so far. Almost all the children participated in the discussion, except Prachi, who remained silent. Consequently, I could not assess whether Prachi could read and write.

The next day, I held a separate class for children with special needs. Prachi was a part of this class. I felt that perhaps it was because Prachi could not read or write

that the other children laughed at her. But it also struck me that this tendency of children to laugh at someone could not have developed just like that; there must be some specific reason behind it. To investigate this further, I tried to closely follow the behaviour and actions of Prachi as well as the other children. I noticed that during lunchtime, only after all the children had gone out, would Prachi leave the classroom. Alone. Even after several days, it was not clear to me whether it was the other children who had alienated Prachi or if it was Prachi who had chosen to be alone.

Prachi, I, and the other teachers

Was Prachi herself responsible for this image of hers created in the school, or was it the other children, the teachers; or was there a collective role of everyone in this? These were my thoughts and questions as I tried to understand the perspective of the other children and teachers towards Prachi. In our conversations, all the teachers shared that Prachi neither knew how to read or write nor did she understand anything, which is why she was unable to respond to questions when asked. With the permission of the teachers, I observed their classrooms and attempted to understand their pedagogic processes.

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I also realised that whenever teachers asked questions in class, both the responses or lack of responses by Prachi and other students like her became a source of laughter or anger for the teachers because these students fell short of their expectations. When these children did not respond, the teachers would also make some harsh remarks that would give everyone another chance to laugh. The teachers and children had become accustomed to such behaviour and did not find anything wrong with it.

This behaviour of the teachers was probably the reason that had gradually pushed Prachi towards silence and withdrawal. While the teachers were not deliberately being harsh on her, indirectly their disapproval was being communicated to the child. When teachers do not pay careful attention to subtle things, such problems can arise, and it is quite possible that we may not even realise the existence of such issues in the process. Over time, we become so habituated to such situations and processes that we do not see any problems with them.

Some initiatives that I took

After understanding the entire scenario, I started trying to give Prachi individual time and regularly talked with her. It took me a long time to gain her trust. During lunchtime, while all the children played ball outside, Prachi would play alone with a ball inside the classroom. I started playing with her. When I would ask her for the ball, she would give it to me and sit down. I would deliberately not throw the ball at her; instead, I would throw it in a different direction and ask her to bring the ball to me so that she would talk to me. For one or two days, she quietly brought the ball and gave it to me, but after that, she started saying, 'But Sir, you are not throwing the ball properly!' Hearing this made me very happy that at least she had begun to speak. Gradually, she started talking with me. As time passed, she began to feel more comfortable around me. She would listen to my questions and try to answer them. I would try and connect the questions from the books with her real-life experiences and context to help her feel comfortable and be able to respond. However, when asked something in front of the other children, she would become silent. Perhaps she still did not believe that she could answer correctly. She was not as afraid of her answer being wrong as she was of the children laughing at her.

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My interactions with her continued. Gradually, she started trying to put forward her points of view even when other children laughed. I also talked to the other children about their behaviour with her. Over time, the other children started listening to Prachi and became more accepting of her. Prachi still could not read or write properly, but she could answer questions orally. Sometimes, she was also able to answer questions that the so-called intelligent children of the class were unable to. She became so eager to participate in the classroom that at times, I had to ask her to let the other children answer! Her sad face started blooming, and she began to look up more.

Challenges

There was also a negative aspect to this entire effort. When I started giving special support to Prachi and the other students like her, the behaviour of the rest



Figure 2: Students learning together.

of the class towards me and these children changed. They complained that I prioritised Prachi. Some children stopped talking to me or answering my questions. Although this situation did not last long, it was a major concern for me for as long as it did. Perhaps one reason was that my attention, like that of the other teachers, was no longer only on the well-performing children



Figure 3: A teacher uses manipulatives to help students grasp maths problems.

but on the needs of the rest of the class, which might have made these children feel less 'seen'. In my view, all children need equal attention, and my primary aim was to foster in them the ability to learn and understand. It was a long effort and continued for as long as I was in the school.

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