



Sarita is Learning

Jai Shekhar



I have always been inclined to libraries and related educational activities. As a teacher, I have always tried to make the school library an active and vibrant place through dialogues and by encouraging children to write independently. As a result, we have created many wall magazines filled with children's writings. The children's stories have also been published in children's magazines, such as *Pluto*, *Chakmak* and *Cycle*.

In the current session, the academic level of most children in my class was challenging; a majority of them were still recognising letters and alphabet and none was at the level of independent reading and writing. Given this, it was difficult to conduct library activities, especially those related to reading and writing. However, I was convinced that while connecting students with the library might be challenging, very soon, I would be able to build a culture of reading. 8-year-old Sarita, who belonged to a disadvantaged family, was also admitted to my class. She lived in a village 60 km away, where there were no schools, and so she had come to live with her uncle. Sarita did not even know how to hold a book or pencil properly. It took her quite some time to start from scribbling to writing letters. She had a deep desire to learn.

Some of the strategies I employed to help children read were as follows. I started teaching songs and poems. The classroom was made print- and language-rich with the children's creations; many posters of poems and stories were prepared and put up on the walls within reach of the children. The activities related to this reading material assisted children in learning to read.

Then, we had role plays on the stories narrated to the children. Prabhat's story *Achcha Mausī Alvida*, had three characters – a bird, a cat, and a buffalo. After a fun read-aloud, the children presented the entire story by enacting the dialogues in their own words in the style of the story. Sarita also played her role with full gestures and expressions. One day, I narrated Shweta Nambiar's story *Pehli Baar*. The role of the teacher was important here, and the dialogues were very long. Sarita accepted this challenge. With a little help, she played her role satisfactorily. There were activities like drawing pictures based on the stories. All the children would participate, but Sarita would do so with great zeal. We also encouraged the children to draw pictures or colour drawings based on their imagination.

The impact of all these efforts was that Sarita, who was timid and hesitant in the beginning, emerged as a leader in the class. One reason for this was that with her dedication, Sarita quickly learned many songs, and when she sang them in the morning assembly, the applause would further boost her enthusiasm. Everyone collectively named her 'Jugnu' after the title of the poem, *Jugnu bhai*. One day, during the midday meal, I noticed that Sarita took a second helping of food, placed it in her lunch box and quietly tucked it in her bag. I was quite surprised and wondered if her aunt did not give her enough food to eat and if she remained hungry. I was disturbed by the thought that, perhaps owing to hunger, she might be turning to stealing. So, I got Prabhat's book, *Kaisa Kaisa Khaana*, from the library and read the story aloud in class. As I read, I showed the pictures in the book and spoke to the children about food.

Sarita shared that she was taking food in her lunch box that day. Her classmates were aware of this, and no one was surprised. But I was curious and asked her the reason in a roundabout manner. Sarita replied that her aunt and uncle had gone away for a day. They had insisted on taking her along, but she had refused to go, saying that she would miss her lessons. Tears filled her eyes as she spoke. I wanted to know where she would stay till her uncle and aunt returned; she said she would just sit outside the house and wait for them! Truly, the passion for learning teaches us to face all kinds of difficulties!

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Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal

When children from a marginalised community joined school

Meenakshi Gaur



Enrolments in government schools started decreasing after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our school had also started facing enrolment issues. I looked around the school to identify children who had not been able to go to school. About one kilometre from the school, a few *Kalbelia* families had their encampments. Their children did not go to school. They spent their time collecting garbage, wandering around, and flying kites all day. I went to them and tried to convince the families to send their children to school. The children who were eligible were admitted to school. I helped them obtain relevant documents, *Aadhar* cards, etc., that were required for admission.

Although the children had started school, they did not enjoy school. They would come one day and then remain absent for a week. I always consoled myself thinking that perhaps with our efforts, someday all the children would start coming to school regularly. When I used to go to get them for school, their family members would misbehave with me and, at times, use abusive language too. They felt that I was reducing the number of helping hands that could contribute to their work and income. I explained to them that learning how to read and write would make the children capable of taking up good jobs. Education would help them take better care of themselves and their families, which is the reason the government and several other people are engaged in ensuring that everyone gets an education.

There was no awareness among the men in the community about the importance of education. Instead of being upset by the abuses they hurled at me, I would think, 'How does it matter if I get abused? Even if a few children get educated, these abuses are a very small price to pay.' The children were given the facilities available at school, and we helped them in every possible way. The mothers liked the fact that the children went to school, but the fathers were against this. They were of the opinion that going to school would not help them much. The mothers were also labourers and used to go for work and could not send the children to school on time. My colleagues and I were quite bothered by the irregularity of the children. We ensured we went to the children's homes by turns to bring them to school, but it was not enough.

I discussed the irregularity of the children in Dastak, an online group of fellow teachers in which we read informative material related to education, literature, and contemporary issues every day. The Dastak group suggested that we provide high-quality teaching to the children coming to school, give them love, and stay in constant touch with the community. They also suggested that we invite the parents to school from time to time, so that they can see the school and their children improving. We did exactly that. On the group's suggestion, the school was developed as an environment-friendly campus. Efforts were made to make the walls of the classrooms print-rich. My daughter also contributed to this process by making pictures of animals, birds, and wildlife on the walls. Posters of poems, pictures, and picture stories were made and put up.

Children's literature helped ignite the children's interest in school. However, we saw meaningful results when we were able to get a 10-year-old girl, Nirmala, to the school. She had not come to school for two months. Upon investigation, we learnt she stays at home to take care of her two younger brothers. It was ingrained in Nirmala's mind that studying was not for them. It took a lot of effort to get this notion out of her mind. We talked to her family members regularly, kept motivating them, and told them about the benefits of education; only after that did it become possible for Nirmala to come to school. A few days later, when I suggested that she bring her two younger brothers to school too, she started bringing both of them, as well as some other children from the locality to the school. Witnessing her interest in learning, we felt glad about having done something meaningful. Not only is she learning, but she is also inspiring others. She is now able to solve practical maths questions quickly because she used to purchase groceries from the market. She is also interested in reading English.

While earlier the children used to come to school in dirty and crumpled clothes, now they have started coming neat and clean. Their skin-related diseases have reduced thanks to bathing and cleaning. Their awareness about their health and hygiene has improved. Most of these children used to consume tobacco or *gutkha*. We had several discussions about this

and explained the dangers of tobacco to them. This seems to have made a difference as they stay away from tobacco. Although these positive results are not enough; our efforts have not completely failed. We hope to gain even greater success with the support of the teachers and our group members.

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Encouragement helps build children's self-confidence

Nandini Kumari



In my ten years as a teacher in a government school, I have learned more from the children than what I have taught them. It is often observed that most of the children who come to our school are first-generation school-goers. Most of them come from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Given this, it is difficult to teach all the children in the same way. While some cannot read a book, others cannot write, and some hesitate even to speak. Some are gifted with talents that lie dormant owing to circumstances and lack of proper guidance. Each one has unique strengths and skills. Some are good at singing, while others are good with their hands, and some others excel in a sport.

I tried to nurture the talent of one of my students in my own way, and the result was that she gained recognition in the field of art. Sugandha, along with Sunanda, were students of class VIII. Both were average in academics, but Sugandha used to sing very well. Her voice was melodious, but she was very hesitant to sing because in her community, dancing, singing or playing music was not considered respectable. Also, she was shy and timid.

I went to her house and spoke to her parents. Initially, they were also hesitant, wondering what people in the village would say about her singing on stage. Since our region is Bhojpuri speaking, I gave them the example of Sharda Sinhaji, who is a professor and also an internationally known singer and also Malini Awasthi, who is one of the country's most esteemed folk singers. I was able to convince them after a couple of meetings. They trusted me, and my being a teacher played a big role in this since they believed I would have their daughter's best interests in mind.

When it came to getting Sugandha rid of her shyness in singing, I too started singing a little with her, when we would be by ourselves. Then, slowly, I started singing with her along with the children in class. I also encouraged the other children to sing songs and poems. Whenever I got a chance, I would ask her to sing something. Initially, she was shy; her legs would tremble, and she would break into a sweat. I had to work with her over an extended period of time. I encouraged her to participate in the programmes held in the school, such as Republic Day, Independence Day and other cultural activities. All the teachers would praise her singing. The support of the teachers was significant in that it played a big role in promoting co-curricular activities, not just for her but for the other children as well.

There were one or two occasions when we had organised Sugandha's performance, but she did not come to school due to fear and apprehension. I kept trying and after some time, she learned to face the stage. Then, one day, some people from the media came to the school, and they later published an impressive story about Sugandha's singing talent. Sugandha got the chance to do a stage show at the district headquarters. Now, an album of hers has been released, and she has an entire world of her dreams to reach out to.

The confidence she got from this experience also made Sugandha do better in her studies. Some children get left behind due to low motivation. They can learn with encouragement and do well in their chosen fields. Sugandha's success brought

fame to the school. The cultural and literary environment in the school was further enhanced. Such activities should be taken seriously. After this, several children started receiving encouragement from home as well. The parents' attitude towards cultural activities in the school also started changing – these began to be seen as activities that promoted the culture of reading and writing.

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Children composed poems in English on their own

Upma Rani



One day, while flipping through the new NCERT English book *Mridang* for class II, I was drawn to its bright colours. This was my first time teaching from it, and as I skimmed through, I came across an open-ended poem titled 'Everybody Stop, Everybody Stand.' After reading the poem, I had an idea. I could write something new and creative with it. The title made me think of how teachers often give instructions like 'Everyone stand up' or 'Everyone sit down,' so I thought we could use these familiar classroom commands as inspiration for writing a new poem.

I decided to try this activity with my students of class V. In class, one day, I announced that we would write a poem together. The students immediately assumed they would be copying a poem from their textbook. However, when I told them that they would be writing their own poems in English, they appeared unsure. I reassured them that it would be fun and encouraged them to give it a try.

I began by modelling the activity and wrote a short poem on the blackboard, reading it aloud two to three times.

Everybody stop

Everybody stand

Everybody sit

And raise your hand.

The students recited it along with me. I explained that we would start by changing the action words in the poem and shared three simple rules:

1. They could only use three action words.
2. The action words should be related to each other.
3. In the third line, they needed to ask a question related to the action words. For example, if the words were 'eat, drink, play' the question could be: 'Why do you eat and drink?'
4. The fourth line would be the answer to the question, say, 'To stay healthy'.

The students began brainstorming different action words like 'drink', 'jump', and 'hop'. I walked around the classroom, observing their work and ensuring they followed the rules. A few girls struggled to think of English action words, but they were more comfortable with Hindi and enjoyed drawing. I encouraged them by asking, 'Why do you draw and paint?' They responded, 'Because it feels good!' I suggested they could incorporate this into their poem, using the example of the poem, 'Oh Water Fun'.

One boy wrote 'hop', 'jump', and 'go', and I asked him to find words that rhymed with 'go'. He said, 'Bow, bow', and I accepted his answer as I felt that it is more important for them to try, explore and be creative than to be correct. It was heartening to see all the students enjoying the activity.

As a teacher, my role was to guide them and provide opportunities for them to explore their creativity. I made sure not to over-correct them, as I didn't want to discourage them or make them give up. Over time, we gathered a wonderful collection of short poems. Finally, I gave each student a piece of chart paper and asked them to neatly write and decorate their poems. The completed poems were displayed on the classroom wall. One of the poems was:

Everybody come

Everybody go

Everybody walk

On your tiptoe.

The pride and joy on the students' faces as they saw their work showcased was truly rewarding. I felt a deep warmth in my heart, knowing they had created something new and meaningful.

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