



Pages from Teachers' Diaries

Before we teach them, we need to understand children

Deepika Doble



My primary school is situated in a rural area. I work with children from classes IV and V. When I first began working with the children, I noticed that they struggled to express their experiences and showed little interest in studying or attending school regularly. I have introduced some new initiatives in school to improve their attendance and provide more opportunities for them to speak and interact with each other. Here, I would like to share some of these experiences.

With the help of the children, I created welcome cards with options, such as 'Hug,' 'High-five,' 'Shake hand,' and 'Namaste,' and stuck them on the classroom door. After the morning assembly, I greet each child as they enter the classroom. Children either point to or mention their preferred greeting, and I welcome them accordingly. This activity has greatly improved my rapport with the students. They have also become more open and comfortable interacting with one another and sharing their thoughts and feelings with me.

We collected some empty matchboxes and covered them with white paper on the outside. Each child was asked to bring their passport-sized photo, which was stuck on the top of the matchbox. On the inside, the part that holds the matches, we wrote 'A' on one end (for 'Absent') and 'P' on the other (for 'Present'). This activity was done together with the children. In this creative attendance system, students mark their presence by displaying their matchboxes. Similarly, I mark absentees. As a result, students have developed the habit of attending school regularly and marking their attendance. Their overall attendance has improved.

In order to encourage self-expression among the students, it became necessary to create a language-rich environment. We decorated the classroom with name charts of students, along with posters of poems and stories. We prepared word-picture cards and number-picture cards. We also created two 'Learning Corners' in the classroom. One for books and the other to display students' creative work. Now students use these materials for reading and learning purposes. These materials are also updated from time to time with their help. I regularly began holding discussions and conducting activities with the children around local issues such as experiences or incidents in the village, experiences of celebrating festivals, their experiences of trips or outings, and children's birthday celebrations. I also started conducting daily storytelling and poetry sessions, followed by discussions. Now the children talk openly and share their experiences comfortably.

Once, during 'letter writing', we discussed different means of communication and their usefulness. All the children participated enthusiastically and shared their experiences of using letters, emails, *WhatsApp* and phone calls with relatives, friends, or acquaintances living far away.

To provide children with opportunities for expression, they were encouraged to write, draw and paint. Instead of finding faults in their written work, we displayed their writing and pictures on chart paper on the classroom walls. This gave all children the opportunity to read each other's work, notice errors, and correct their own work. Now, all of them write down thoughts and feelings without any hesitation.

From my work with children so far, I have realised that I will have to understand each child individually and identify and learn about their learning needs and styles. The children have now developed a better rapport with me and also with each other. In their free time, they explore the books, materials, and posters in the Learning Corners independently and even discuss them. The children now attend school regularly and have gained the self-confidence to articulate and express themselves.

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Translated from Hindi. Translator: Bansi Sharma Vetter: Simran Luthra

Ma, I want to study, send me to school!

Rinku Singh



This dates back to the time when I was a teacher at the Upper Primary School in Nagla Sarangpur, a village in the Bulandshahr district of Uttar Pradesh. I started talking and making friends with the children. During one conversation, I asked the students of class VIII, 'What do you want to become when you grow up?' Except for one girl, most of the children wanted to become doctors or engineers, while some aspired to join the army. But that one girl sat quietly. Her name was Razia. When I asked the question again, she said, 'I do not want to become anything.' I was surprised. When I asked her the reason, she said, 'My father does not want me to study further.' I said to her, 'I will talk to your father, you keep studying well.' Then I enquired about Razia's father from the other teachers and villagers. Together, we talked to him. He was clear that he did not want his daughter to study any further; that whatever she had studied was enough.

I understood that Razia's father would have to be approached differently. I started organising small group activities in the classroom and found that Razia was one of the brightest students in the class. We decided to organise group activities in science, mathematics, art, sports, and general knowledge at the school. The plan was that if Razia performed well in the activities, we would invite her father along with the other parents and honour him.

Razia's performance in all the activities was excellent. As per the plan, her father was honoured in the school. He was told, 'Your daughter is the pride of our village. She will make the village proud. You are a good father.' This continued until Razia completed class VIII. After Razia passed class VIII, I spoke to her father about her admission into class IX. He said, 'Masterji, I came to the school and saw that my daughter is good in her studies, but now I don't want her to study further.' When I asked him the reason, he repeated the same age-old beliefs about girls' education. Then, in a softer tone, he said, 'I do not want to educate my daughter too much. What purpose would it serve? Ultimately, she is destined to get married. If she goes out, she will be influenced by society, which is not good. That is why I do not want to send her out to study. She will stay at home and do the housework.'

Once again, I sought help from some socially conscious people of the village for Razia's admission. Everyone tried to convince her father again. I knew he might even say that he did not have the money to support her studies any further. So, we arranged for that as well. We went to their home and affectionately kept up our insistence. After our conversation, Razia's mother supported us. She said, 'Sir, I will convince Razia's father for her admission.' Razia herself was very eager to continue her studies. She said to her mother, 'Ma, I want to study, send me to school!' Her mother said, 'I will educate my daughter further.' Finally, Razia's father said to me, 'I do not have money to support her education anymore.' As soon as he said that, I placed the required amount for the fees in front of him. He had not expected this and fell silent.

The next day was a joyful one for which we had been waiting eagerly. Razia's mother came to the school with her. We gave her money for the fee, and Razia was admitted to class IX. As expected, she passed her class X board exams in first division. Trouble arose again when it was time for admission to class XI. Her father once again declared, 'Sir, now I absolutely will not let my daughter study further. She's grown up now. Anything wrong could happen to her.' The struggle for Razia's admission to class XI was even harder. With the support of the villagers, I spoke to her father again and said, 'You must let Razia study. I take full responsibility for everything.' The father replied, 'She is my daughter. Why are you being so insistent about this?' I humbly replied, 'She is not just your daughter, she is a daughter of this country. As a teacher, I want to give a responsible citizen to the nation. A talent that can contribute enormously to the nation with her abilities – I don't want to see this go to waste.' The result was very heartening. The next day, Razia came to the school with her mother. She was admitted to class XI.

Razia also passed her class XII exams in the first division, and she is now studying in the first year of her undergraduate degree course.

But this question keeps troubling me – there must be so many Razias, Seemas and Nishas, who are unable to break free from the shackles of such circumstances. So many who may never receive the kind of support Razia did. I have been able to ensure the education of just one Razia. If only every girl and boy in this country could have the chance to study well!

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Translated from Hindi. Translator: Asfia Vetter: Anwar Jafri

How peer learning transformed my class!

Shruti V



The idea came to me one afternoon as I watched my students struggle with their reading tasks. Some breezed through the words effortlessly, while others hesitated, their fingers tracing the lines as they tried to decode the sentences. It wasn't a matter of intelligence – I knew that. It was about opportunity, support, and confidence.

I decided to introduce a simple yet powerful concept: peer learning. But I knew that if I was not careful, it could easily turn into a situation where some students felt 'less than' the others, while others saw themselves as 'better than' the rest. That was not what I wanted.

I first sat down with my L3 students – the ones who were fluent in English and academically stronger. Instead of telling them they were 'smarter,' I framed it differently: 'Some of your classmates don't have the kind of support you do at home. Imagine how hard it must be to struggle with something just because no one is there to guide you. And sometimes, family isn't the only support we need; friends can be even better mentors, don't you think?'

I saw their expressions change. They did not just nod out of obligation – they understood. Some even shared how they had once needed help themselves. That was my green signal.

Then, I spoke with my L1 students – the ones who hesitated to speak in English, who felt left behind. I told them the truth: 'You all are the same age, with the same ability to learn. It's just that some of you have had more practice. You wake up, eat, play, and laugh just like everyone else. You're not lagging behind because of your abilities – you just need a little push. And we're going to make sure you get it.'

I also listened. Some students admitted they did not like studying alone. Others said they felt ignored by teachers. A few confessed their parents could not help them with their schoolwork. Their honesty only reinforced why this plan needed to work.

Every Monday, during circle time, we talked – not just about studies, but about teamwork, struggles, and progress. It became a space where students felt safe sharing their thoughts.

When it came to reading, I paired L1 and L3 students together. But with a twist – L1 students had to read first and explain what they understood, while the L3 students listened. Then, L3 students would help them fill in the gaps. It was an exchange, not a one-sided lesson.

One day, as an L1 student read aloud in class, he hesitated over a word, unsure of its pronunciation. Before I could step in, an L3 student sitting beside him whispered the correct phonic sound to help him along. The L1 student repeated it, this time with confidence, and continued reading. That was the moment I realised that the students were not just following instructions anymore. They were supporting each other naturally.

Over time, something wonderful happened. L1 students stopped hesitating. They started speaking more, reading more, and even asking for help without hesitation. And L3 students? They became patient listeners, learning how to break concepts down in simpler ways.

Of course, it was not all smooth sailing. Some students developed a superiority or inferiority complex. A few L3 students started taking control, while some L1 students withdrew, feeling 'less capable.'

To handle this, I identified these students and paired them with L2 students – those who were at neither extreme but could bridge the gap. This balance worked better. And for the mischievous ones who refused to cooperate, I stepped in personally, giving them extra attention until they adjusted. Weeks passed, and the shift was undeniable. L1 students were no longer afraid to speak. L3 students became more empathetic. The gap between them started fading, and friendships formed naturally.

One day, as I observed a session, an L1 student hesitated over a word. Before I could step in, their L3 partner smiled and said, 'It's okay, take your time. I used to struggle with this too.' That's when I knew that this was not just about academics anymore. It was about trust, support, and confidence. Peer learning had done more than improve language skills. It had created a classroom where no one felt alone.

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