



In the spotlight

Teamwork makes a school better - Kavita Singh

Manish Kishore



Kavita Singh

Kavita Singh is a committed and inspiring school principal working at the Mahatma Gandhi Government School, Bhatawala, in the Sanganer block of Jaipur. There was a time when her school was struggling with a lack of basic infrastructure, declining enrolment, and a weak academic environment. Amid

these challenges, she focused on students' learning and set up a Reading Corner in the school. Through this, and by working together with the community, staff, and students, she revitalised the academic atmosphere and a culture of learning. At the same time, she connected the community with the school and created an environment of shared responsibility for fellow teachers. To understand this journey, Manish Kishore spoke with her. Here are some excerpts from the conversation.

Manish: What were your priorities when you took charge as the principal? How did you work on them?

Kavita: In the beginning, when I tried to understand the actual situation of the school, two major challenges were evident. The first was the absence of basic facilities such as drinking water, electricity, and a safe building. The second was the continuously declining enrolment. At that time, enrolment had dropped from 105 to just 70 students. This was a matter of serious concern.

To address these problems, we created a joint plan with the staff. With the support of a donor, a borewell was installed for water in the school, and regular contact was maintained with the local lineman to ensure a stable electricity supply. This improved the physical environment of the school.

To increase enrolment, we spoke with parents to understand why they were not sending their children to school. Their primary concern was the quality of teaching.

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We assured them that we were committed to improving it and requested that they give us some time to implement a better learning experience for the students.

Teachers began focusing on warm and respectful interaction with students in the classrooms, ensuring regular attendance and effective teaching, and creating a positive environment for learning. These efforts slowly restored parents' trust. Today, enrolment has increased from 70 to 142 students.

Manish: What initiatives did you undertake to create an environment for learning and teaching in the school?

Kavita: We tried to ensure that every student feels safe, respected, and included in the learning process. We made it a point that in classrooms, students' backgrounds, abilities, and pace of learning are respected. With the use of activity-based learning (ABL) kits, students have the opportunity to learn at their own pace, without any pressure. Teachers began to appreciate students' efforts rather than comparing their achievements, and all students were included in activities without discrimination. This has created an inclusive and collaborative learning environment.

The Reading Corner has been developed as a space for dialogue. Here, students read books of their choice, narrate stories, and participate in open group discussions. This has enabled even shy students to gradually express themselves. The morning assembly has also been linked

with expression. Students present poems, plays, songs, and personal experiences. Teachers and students listen carefully to one another and give positive feedback.

This empowered the students in many ways and encouraged them to organise a children's fair in the school. They planned it together, divided work into groups, prepared food, set up stalls, and marketed their products. This developed a sense of cooperation and responsibility among them.

All students are enthusiastic towards learning. For me, all these are true signs of a healthy academic environment.

Manish: How do you see community participation in teaching-learning processes, and what do you do about it?

Kavita: I consider parents' participation very important in the development of the school. I speak with them not only about the students' academic progress but also about their behaviour, interests, and regularity. If a student hesitates to speak or lags in group work, I suggest simple practices to parents, such as storytelling or role play at home, so they can be involved in the child's learning.

Many parents contribute through voluntary work in the maintenance and cleanliness of the building, listening



Figure 1: Students reading books in the library.

to children during children's assemblies, and sharing experiences during festivals. But a continuous dialogue and participation have strengthened trust between the school and the community.

Manish: What brought your attention towards creating an academic environment in the school, and what efforts did you make for it?

Kavita: Prompted by students' academic struggles, I felt the need to establish a Reading Corner to foster a learning-focused environment. My conviction that regular book access could bring about positive change was reinforced during an Azim Premji Foundation meeting for the NIPUN Mohanpura campaign. There, the Reading Corner was redefined as not merely a storage space for books, but as a safe, vibrant, and inviting sanctuary where students can choose and read books of their interest.

I discussed students' needs and the idea of creating a Reading Corner with fellow teachers. Some helped arrange seating for students, and others suggested including reading time in the timetable. One teacher took charge of the Reading Corner, while others helped classify books class-wise and arrange them attractively in the Reading Corner. Through these collective efforts, the Reading Corner was started in the school.

Students were allowed to take books into classrooms, read them during free time, and take them home. Teachers do not expect them to write summaries. Instead, they ask, 'What did you read, and what did you like about it?' This reduced their hesitation, improved oral expression, and, gradually, children developed an interest in reading and self-confidence. Today, students voluntarily sit there and read.

Manish: It is often believed that students tear or damage books. What did you do to change this perception?

Kavita: Teachers were a little concerned about students not taking good care of the books. In the morning assembly, we discussed the importance of books and how to care for them, such as considering books a treasure of knowledge, reading them with clean hands, not using saliva to turn pages, not scribbling, avoiding folding or tearing, and keeping them in the right place after reading.

Along with this, students were also given responsibilities related to book care, such as arranging books properly, keeping count, and repairing damaged books with glue or tape. One day each week was kept aside for book repair activities. These efforts gradually developed a sense of responsibility among the students, leading to the preservation and maintenance of books.

Manish: What efforts were made to develop reading and writing habits among students?

Kavita: The Reading Corner plays an important role in developing reading and writing habits. To achieve this, we ensured four things. First, we provided the students with a wide range of good books. Second, they were given the freedom to choose books according to their likes and interests. Third, platforms were created for them to share what they read with peers. Fourth, they were given opportunities to express what they learned in their own language and words, both orally and in writing.

Manish: What was the process of setting up the Reading Corner like? What preparations did you make?

Kavita: Some aspects I have already discussed. Additionally, with regard to setting it up, we classified books based on students' age, language level, and interests. Separate sets of books were arranged for classes I-II, III-V, and VI-VIII. Priority was given to books with simple language, effective illustrations, engaging storylines, and relevance to local and students' life contexts.

Teachers collectively read and selected the books. Some of the books children loved, included *Mahagiri*, *Nanhe-Munne Geet*, *Teen Poonchh Wala Chuha*, *Billi Ke Gale Mein Ghanti Kaun Baandhega*, *Bus Ki Sair*, and others. Students of classes VI-VII read in the Reading Corner, while teachers take books to classrooms for classes I-V. The second period has been designated as Reading Corner time. After reading, discussions and book-based activities are conducted during this time.

Manish: What strategies did you adopt to connect teachers and students with the Reading Corner?

Kavita: Teachers' understanding and the department-led '*Prakhar Rajasthan Campaign*' have played an important role in connecting both teachers and students with the Reading Corner. Students were divided into four subgroups according to their reading levels: *Beej* (Seed), *Ankur* (Sprout), *Pushpan* (Bloom), and *Phalan* (Fruit).

Picture books, short stories, poems, and books in simple language are placed separately for each group, so that students can choose according to their abilities. Initially,

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teachers sat with students, looked at books together, discussed the pictures, and narrated stories and poems. Gradually, students began to take an interest in reading on their own.

Continuous engagement with different books also increased teachers' interest in Reading Corner books. Along with books, like *Divaswapna*, *Bache Ki Bhasha aur Adhyapak*, *Bachchon ke liye Khel Kriyaen*, and *Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window*, teachers began to particularly include those books that students showed a liking for. Many teachers felt they had almost lost the habit of reading children's literature, but reconnecting with these books brought them joy.

Manish: What kinds of changes were seen in teaching and learning after these efforts to develop reading and writing habits?

Kavita: After reading or listening to stories and poems, we focused on short conversations to improve language skills. Students were asked what they liked in the story, which character they liked, and why. This encouraged them to speak, and gradually their expression became clearer and more confident.

Simple activities were conducted to nurture imagination and creativity, such as thinking of a new ending or title for a story, drawing something based on the stories, or speaking as a character. Some students even started to write and share their own short poems and stories inspired by what they had read. Gradually, they began picking up books on their own, expressing a desire to take them home, and reading during free time. Improvements became visible in self-study habits, reading skills, language, behaviour, and confidence. Many students now remind teachers that they need reading time.

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Reading Corner and use them more effectively. It also brings positive changes in the way they teach subjects, interact with students, communicate with them, and ask thought-provoking questions in the classroom.

Manish: What kind of challenges did you face in these efforts?

Kavita: There were challenges in making the Reading Corner a part of the school culture. Initially, some students hesitated to choose books, and some teachers considered it an extra activity and could not give it regular time. Limited resources also made it difficult to ensure the availability and maintenance of good-quality books. To address these challenges, we relied on small, practical, and collective efforts. We made a flexible timetable. Sometimes reading time was scheduled after prayer, sometimes before recess, or for 10-15 minutes at the end of a class. We reiterated to ourselves that the Reading Corner is not extra work but a natural medium for developing language and understanding.

Manish: How did you create a positive school environment where teachers felt comfortable contributing to your efforts?

Kavita: We built an environment of trust, dialogue, and participation. The effort was to ensure that teachers

felt involved in every decision. Open discussions were initiated on every issue. While discussing the reading level of the students, all teachers were asked how the Reading Corner could be improved, instead of being given instructions. Some suggested defining book levels, others recommended adding 15 minutes of daily reading activity to the timetable. Responsibilities were also divided through mutual agreement. This conveyed that the initiative belonged not to one person but to the entire team.

Similarly, to increase enrolment, some teachers took responsibility for connecting with parents. When plans are made with teachers' consent, a natural sense of responsibility and involvement develops on its own.

It was also ensured that teachers' efforts were appreciated from time to time. Special attention was given to creating a safe and trustworthy environment where teachers could share their problems, challenges, and needs without fear or hesitation. This strengthens their confidence and encourages active participation.

Ultimately, when teachers witness that even their small efforts are visible in the development of students and the school, each teacher begins to see themselves as an active part of that success. This collective spirit keeps the school moving forward.

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