

As soon as his name is called, wherever he may be, Madhava comes running to appear before his teachers. The teachers like calling him for every task. He is not fluent in speaking or adept in reading and writing, yet he is the leader of the whole school.

This child, who was struggling to perform even his daily tasks when he was admitted to class I, is today doing all his work himself and is mingling freely with everyone, just like any other child. Madhava is now confident in talking face-to-face with people who visit the school.

Transformation through inclusion

This transformation of Madhava, a child with special needs, has been possible because of the love and affection of his teachers and the opportunities they provided to him. This is also a testimony to the fact that given the right opportunities and assistance to cope, inclusion of every child is possible and that it is their right to get these opportunities more than empathy. Empathy is not enough; children with learning or physical disabilities should be provided with opportunities to grow. They need to be treated with patience, love and respect which go a long way in helping them to learn, which is part of their right to equality and justice as enshrined in the Constitution.

A few years ago, we had arranged a *mela* at Surpur for children with disabilities. Our team had worked hard for about two months to make it a success. On the day of the event, the way each child presented the assigned topic left teachers and parents spellbound with immense love and appreciation for the children. We felt an inexpressible sense of accomplishment; the children had made us proud of ourselves!

A mindset that children with special needs are a burden on family and society still pervades among us. Rather than looking at their differences, we need to explore how we can ensure their right to education within our system. It is my belief that if teachers make up their minds, every child can be educated well. When the parents of another 7-year-old child with disability came to know about

Madhava's progress, they also admitted her to the same school and now that child too is able to carry out her daily tasks independently and parents are very happy with her transformation.

Diverse social groups

Children from diverse social backgrounds come to Government Lower Primary School, Shadimahall (Mudagal, Lingsgur block, Raichur district). Currently, there are 42 children studying in this school and they have different mother tongues (eighteen of them speak Telugu, five speak Marathi, eight speak Urdu, one child's mother tongue is Kunchati (the language of *Kunchikoravas*), and the mother tongue of the rest of the children is Kannada. The parents of these children are drama artists (*hagalu veshagaararu*), stone masons (*kallu kutigaru*), basket weavers, bangle sellers, vendors of small kitchenware. Some parents even beg for a living. They live in shanties. And some of these children go for begging after school. Even those whose mother-tongue is not Kannada, speak it well because Kannada is the language of their livelihood.

However, because of the teachers' sense of equality and social justice, children from such diverse social backgrounds do not have any inferiority complex. What visibly stands out is how they play freely with each other, share food, work together and help each other. Teachers have love and compassion for the children.

Teachers' role

When children join the school in class I, they have a hard time in adapting to the school processes; they often want to go out and hesitate to mix freely with others. One of the teachers, Ms Pramila not only respects their way of life but also allows senior students to interact with the younger students for short periods of time during school hours. Since she can speak their language, children share their feelings freely with her. She encourages children to sing songs, tell stories and helps them to contextualise their daily life. She also makes good use of the knowledge children already have about their social environment and recognises and shows

appreciation for even the smallest work done by the children. So, the children gain a sense of self-worth because of the democratic approach of the teacher. When spoken to, one can clearly see that the teacher knows each child well and also what and how each one is learning.

Pramila teacher is aware of the potential of these children. She uses the *Nali-Kali* methodology to add to their everyday experiences. She gives children a chance to talk, discuss with each other, and express themselves freely. Most of the children love storytelling, drawing, and making toys out of clay. This is because many children, even before coming to school, have the experience of selling toys and

kitchenware along with their parents at local fairs in neighbouring villages. Hence, children from this school participate in drawing and storytelling programs at the Talent Show (*Pratibha Kaaranji*) held every year.

In sum, in this school, children learn about life along with acquiring literacy. Children come to school willingly every day. The school is like a family and learning is a part of everything that the children do at school. The fact that children are able to talk freely and their talents are encouraged, shows that the enacting of the Constitutional precepts is possible and can be a reality in every school.

**Names have been changed to protect the identities of the children.*



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