

Children Who Feel Better, Learn Better

Lalita Yaduvanshi

An experience based on trust deepened several bonds and gave me the opportunity to reflect on our expectations of children to modify behaviours. It made me realise how the school provides a supportive learning environment for both, the students and the teachers. Opportunities to grow and imbibe better life values (while feeling safe in the school environment) present themselves to us every day. These provide us with a foundation for reflection and help us live meaningful lives. I would like to share an experience that I had with a student in class II. Her story started last year when she was still learning to come to school in the month of September after the COVID-19 pandemic. She was absent for a major part of the time which was a cause for worry for all teachers because without coming to school and without regular learning she was bound to be left behind. At regular intervals, her class teacher and other teachers would talk to her and explain why it was important for her to come to school regularly, but in vain.

In early June this year, she came to class II. I held her hand and made her promise that she would come to school every day. She agreed with an innocent smile that she always had on her face. Messy hair, dirty uniform, missing study materials – I did not know where to start with her. I was at a loss for how to explain to her how much she would lose by not imbibing good habits and not keeping pace with her studies. I also spoke to her and her father.

This year, the storytelling activity was done in an innovative way during the school assembly. Stories were told with the help of puppets. A puppet corner was also created for the children in the classroom. I observed that she had started attending school more often since the puppet show began. Sometimes she could be seen playing with a bird, and sometimes, arranging things in the class. Sometimes, she would complain about other children who did not use the puppets properly. Soon she started coming to school every day. And again, the question of how to help her make up her mind to read and write arose. We, too, did not have

any ready-made answers. But something had to be done.

We formed two groups for informal communication along with reading and writing so that children could be motivated, we could get to know them well, and over time, we would be able to see positive changes in their efforts to learn. During that time, the girl learned to read a simple story and a poem. She started doing her homework every day. She loved receiving assignments, and most importantly, our continued interactions created a respectful relationship between the two of us.

After some time, she started learning in the class along with all the other children. Her reading was still slow. Then a 'Smiley Flower' created a stir among the children. A *Smiley Flower* was given to children who made 'good efforts' towards all-around development. Their 'good efforts' were described in two to three lines and this *Smiley Flower* was handed to them in front of the whole class. One day, she asked, 'Will I also get it?' I said, 'Yes, everyone can get it. Everyone can do better in one area or another. You can do it too.' Her efforts seemed to improve.

Meanwhile, another incident took place. Her hair was rarely combed. I told her, 'You must come to school with your hair neatly combed.' She replied, 'Mummy doesn't do it.' I said, 'Okay, we will talk to Mummy.' I borrowed a comb from a senior student and combed her hair and tied it into a ponytail. 'Go home and show it to your mother and tell her to make a ponytail like this for you, every day,' I told her. That day, she went through all her classes twirling her ponytail and looking in the mirror. I do not know what she thought, but there was a smile on her face.

She was a changed person when she came to school the next day! She seemed to bring with her a belief in herself to move forward and to learn with joy. Now, every day after lunch, she comes to me, talks a lot, reads, and narrates a story or two. She has broadened the horizons of her learning. She goes to the English Room in her free time and tries to

read. Now the other children do not tease her; they provide emotional support wholeheartedly while working with each other in a group.

This was more than just an experience; it was a learning opportunity for me. The experience of good health and happiness is important in trying to understand the aspects of wellbeing in the school environment. This includes mental and physical health, physical and emotional security, and a sense of belonging, purposefulness, achievement, and success. These keep us motivated to move on and help us connect with each other, which creates a pleasant working environment. For this reason, formal and informal communication within the school group on key aspects is extremely important. Children's success in and out of school depends on their ability to use their capabilities in a democratic culture. Therefore, efforts should be made to improve the academic performance, behaviour, and social adjustment of children in the school environment. Teachers and the school staff should also do the following:

- Have conversations with children
- Be aware of effective and innovative methods of teaching concepts
- Help students improve their psychological and physical abilities to face challenges and avoid boredom
- Provide emotional support to students
- Use appropriate judgement on aspects related to physical fitness
- Help students develop the ability to communicate
- Help students to be able to build meaningful and trustworthy relationships
- Bring a little flexibility to school processes
- Create opportunities for cooperative work

As a teacher, I feel that it is very important for a teacher to be motivated, skilled, passionate, honest, and reflective in her work. The healthy culture of the school goes a long way towards providing meaning to the workplace. It is helpful in furthering the energy and effectiveness of everyone. There is a direct link between children's wellbeing and academic achievement. Taking care of the well-being of children is an important condition for achievement, and achievement is essential to wellbeing.

Given below are some specific processes to nurture the school environment, which all of us teachers and school administrators together continue to strive to establish in our school. The strong supportive relationships they build provide children with the emotional resources to move out of their physical comfort zones and explore new ideas and ways of thinking, which are fundamental to academic achievement.

Among our efforts towards building a nurturing environment are the following:

- A happy start to the day with everyone gathered in one place to hear the children's presentations. Additionally, they conduct themselves with the feeling of having a respectable opportunity to express their opinions.
- School time has been used to deepen our connection with children and each other, whether in the classroom, playground and library or during the mid-day meals and community visits, etc. Informal conversation between teachers and children is an opportunity for everyone to take a break, eat and chat with friends, study together, help each other, learn about family circumstances, etc.
- Children want to confide in someone and once they choose a teacher, the teacher needs to play the role of an advisor. In such a situation, meaningful dialogue is necessary, which is done in a group or individually depending on the situation. For this, a group has also been formed.
- In primary classes, the duration of a period was extended. When children have short class periods, they are less likely to experience multiple modes of teaching and learning, ask questions, reflect on their learning, and get time to speak their minds. As a result, their sense of academic engagement suffers. So, work is being done on various methods of learning with the children based on the long duration of the period.
- Efforts towards creating a reading culture are on, and most children in all classes are able to make a connection with reading. They choose and share reading material related to their needs and interests on different platforms. The effect of this is boosting their conceptual and practical abilities, which makes them feel better. They also write in their diaries.

To put it simply: 'Those who feel better, can learn better.'



Figure 1. Students of Azim Premji School, Tonk engaged in classroom activities



Figure 2. Students of Azim Premji School, Tonk on the playground



Lalita Yaduvanshi is Language Teacher at Azim Premji School, Tonk, Rajasthan. She has master's degrees in Education and Hindi literature. Her interests include reading, listening to music, watching movies, visiting new places, and having conversations with children. She may be contacted at lalita.yaduvanshi@azimpremjifoundation.org