

'Tara does not speak all day. She does not utter a single word except when she is playing with her friend Riya. If the teacher speaks to her, she responds with actions. Her home language is Hindi, so she does not seem to understand if spoken to in Kannada.'

'Gowri runs around and does not show any interest in her work. She needs repeated instructions and does not seem to understand classroom discussions.'

These are some observations shared by teachers about two children in our pre-school classroom. In both instances, there was confusion regarding the behaviour of children and what strategies need to be used to scaffold their learning.

Then one day, something changed, and both Tara and Gowri started responding in ways they had never done before. What caused this change? And how was this supported by the teachers in the classroom?

Using SEEL for change

We often talk about understanding children, but it is very hard to put into words what this really means. The NCF-FS emphasises the role of Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL) in children and broadly categorises the concept into positive self-concept, emotional awareness and regulation and social development. All of these are interconnected and have been broken down into Learning Outcomes (LOs) and indicators which can be used to integrate SEEL into our teaching practice. This has helped us in our school to consciously plan and integrate SEEL into different domains and is also used as a guideline to make our interactions with children more meaningful.

Fostering emotional well-being in the classroom starts with a strong teacher-child relationship. It is important for children to feel accepted and acknowledged. To understand the likes and dislikes of both Tara and Gowri, I took the time to get to know them by observing the way they engaged with others, the games they played, and the work they chose to do. Through this, I was able to build a connection over time. I spoke to Tara in her home language and noticed that she liked vehicles, so I gave her activities on vehicles. One day, Tara came to me and asked me to draw a train and from then

on, the conversations never stopped, and I sought out instances to acknowledge her growth through moments where she took initiative, as for instance, when she made objects with clay, named them and spoke to me about them. Every time she did this, I would give her a high-five to show her I was excited about what she was doing and asked her questions about it. Slowly, this encouraged her to engage and interact more.



Figure 1. Clay work by Tara.

Gowri had a lot of energy, and she would frequently switch activities. It was difficult to get her to engage without distractions or to even follow the norms

of the class. So, I started joining her imaginative role-play and extended the time slowly, each day. Through this, our conversations also increased, and I was able to understand the gestures to which she responded best. From then on, the change in her was apparent. She became comfortable around me and would seek me out and engage with me. She soon began to want to do the work the other children were given.

At an individual level, this teacher-student relationship forms the foundation for the educational experience of the child. Along with this, we use several strategies to build SEEL skills and we model the same. Given here are some of the strategies I have used.

Some strategies

Expressing emotions

Our themes involve topics such as *me, my family*, and *my neighbourhood* (this centres around identifying oneself as a member of society), and *my likes and dislikes*. Activities are conducted in which children can share the experiences they have outside of school. This helps children know more about each other. Emotional literacy is fostered through activities that focus on identifying the emotions they feel and those that are expressed by others. Through activities in art, physical education, and language, we look at stories that centre on emotions, discuss them, enact them through facial

expressions and perform body movements to show how we feel when we feel different emotions.

Emotion cards are kept in the classroom and at the end of the day, we choose these cards to tell each other how we feel. Children are encouraged to talk about moments in the day when they felt happy, what made them happy, what made them angry etc., using the emotion cards. These cards are also useful when children are hesitant to talk. At the end of the day, everyone sits together in the circle and talks about how they have helped or have been helped by others that day. Activities like this shape the culture of the classroom and strengthen positive behaviours. Visual art, dance, and acting are used to help children express themselves creatively and their creation is shared with everyone.

Each day starts with a silent game where we play zen music and conduct breathing exercises. This helps draw the children's attention to their breathing – how their bodies contract and expand while inhaling and exhaling. Simple yoga exercises are conducted which help children stretch and release the stiffness felt in various parts of their bodies. I have also observed that when teachers do these exercises with children, it makes the environment lighter and more comfortable for everyone to open up. This further enhances the students' relationship with the teacher. Even during sessions which are content-heavy, these yoga stretches are conducted between activities to pause and focus better.



Figures 2 & 3. Children's drawings.

Routine

A familiar routine provides a sense of security to preschoolers, so a predictable routine is followed, and changes are communicated beforehand. Diversity is accepted by encouraging the different languages spoken by children and the different experiences they have at home are valued and discussed. Since we have a mixed-age group classroom with all three classes together – Pre-KG, LKG and UKG – we make pairs with children who can regulate their emotions and communicate and those who are learning to do so. It aids children to learn from each other and we often find instances where children help their partners respond better to situations. Communicating with parents to share and gain insights about their children is crucial to support the emotional development of children.

Peace Corner

A corner in the classroom, labelled 'Peace Corner', is set apart for resting and spending some quiet time with books so that children who want some space can take some time out and lie down, rest or read quietly. During the day, several children come up with a request to lie down on the bean bag for some time when they are feeling sad, want to read books or colour quietly by themselves.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*

Setting boundaries

Understanding and following the norms of the classroom is important. At the start of the year, norms are decided in conversations with children, posters are made, and role plays are conducted to demonstrate how these norms can be followed in the class. If norms are broken, it is discussed and used as *teaching moments* where we demonstrate how to solve our problems productively. Being firm when required is necessary, but I believe that a common rule does not work. Rather, the foundation based on the relationship between the teacher and the child on the one hand, and the interaction between peers on the other, is crucial in curtailing unhelpful behaviours and in building a positive learning environment.

In closing

Enabling learning without catering to the emotional needs of children is setting them up for failure. The NCF-FS SEEL outcomes have made it possible for teachers to consciously integrate practices that help in cultivating socio-emotional well-being and, thereby, creating an enriching learning environment.



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