



An Attitudinal Change

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“Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves”

- Carl Jung

Going by the statement made by Jung, it seems that life challenges us in more ways than one, giving us an opportunity to reflect upon ourselves. Let us consider a case on hand to understand this further.

A nine year old child walked into the lives of 15 adults last August (2012) at Azim Premji School, Udhamasinghnagar. The profile of the child at the time of admission was –

- Very little sense of schooling, its requirements and demands
- Clinically diagnosed as child with low IQ level
- Rules, expectations and routines did not mean much to her
- Challenged not only academically but also socially and behaviorally
- She was not refined in her manners with peers
- Impulses ran high
- Got aggressive at times
- Could not sit in one place
- Snatched things away from others
- She would lie down wherever and wasn't fully toilet trained

- She needed repeated instructions and reinforcements to help retain and make sense of the instructions given.

I wondered if as adults we know what it takes to learn something (read-academics) as often, we tend to take the developmental stages of a child for granted. We are also at a loss in handling someone who takes time to learn or someone who is differently abled. What if a child is different from the rest? Can we teach in ways that he/she can learn or to provide with what is required to make the child independent? It seems obvious then to have a special educator in every school; however, the reality is far from that. Teachers who handle 'normal' kids are expected to deal with the 'special needs' kids as well. Understandably, they not only lack the expertise but are also at a loss given their own attitudinal issues in handling such children– like any other adult! This comes into focus more simply because their 'profession' requires them to teach all irrespective of the differences in the learning levels or capabilities.

It wasn't an easy situation to handle and teachers were at a loss. I was wondering how to equip the teachers who have not handled children with different needs? I knew there was resentment although it wasn't openly stated. It was important to equip the teachers as they are the ones who would be managing the child.

In the meetings that were held, it was decided, that not one but all of them would be responsible for this child in school. It has to be a team effort. As a single point contact with parents, one of them was made the class teacher. It was clear that some general strategies had to be thought of to begin with. To list a few:

1. The instructions given would be simple, clear and short
2. All teachers to identify the problematic behavioural patterns of the child that had to be addressed on a priority basis.
3. Ensure that the parents are kept in the loop for consistency, continuity and similarity in the approaches. Instructions given to be same at home as well in school. Also to learn from each other in understanding ways of dealing with the child.
4. Didi (helper) would be our translator as the child could follow only Bengali. Didi was also made responsible for the child's hygiene and other such needs.
5. It was also decided that academics would not be 'the main focus.' This was communicated to the parents as well.
6. Class teacher to be kept informed of everything and also to remain in touch with the parents

Though I knew that these strategies per se were not going to be of much help, I let things be because I knew that more than anything else the teachers were in need of time in figuring out things for themselves and by the child.

During my visit in November, I observed that all was not well and the teachers- as expected - were frustrated and running out of ideas in handling

the child. They were requested to pen down their experiences in dealing with this child.

Extracts

"I was shocked that she has been given admission. Ma'am has made a mistake. The child should have been referred to a special school. I realised it is not her fault that her brain is not developed. But after joining us, I can see that her behavior has undergone a change."

"When she joined, I felt how will she mix with other kids? She cannot even express her needs. But now she indicates what she wants. She understands us. I also understand her. Over time she will become alright."

"She has no sense of good or bad. No knowledge of why she does something. If given some proper work she sits with it for some time. She does things only under instructions, 'do not waste food,' 'wash your plate' etc. I think she is progressing in the correct direction, getting love like at home. She has learnt a lot after coming here. She is happy. I am happy."

"I was scared of her in the beginning. I felt a need to maintain a distance. I used to even chase her away. Once she brought flowers and indicated to me to put it in my hair. I felt, perhaps I was doing the wrong things. I started talking to her. She was happy to see me when I went for substitution classes. I felt it is not her wish to be born like this."

"It was a new experience. She started watching other kids and imitating them."

I thought she has some mental problem. There hasn't been much improvement in her over the three months. She has troubled teachers and children a lot."

"In the beginning I used to be irritated, get angry. I felt she should be given work, made her sit next to me. I noticed improvement. One day she said in English, 'may I come in ma'am?' I felt happy."

"She would not sit without her mother in the beginning. But now she does. She is friends with one or two kids, likes to come to school, listens to

teachers at times. If we focus more she will improve.”

“I was wondering who will teach her. Over time there has been an improvement. She is not a barrier anymore”

“I feel she is mentally ill. We cannot educate her with normal children.”

“Lots of difference from the time she joined. If she does not beat us then why does she do that to her peers? May be they don’t share things with her!”

“She has started listening to her friends. If they say, ‘don’t do,’ she will not do. She needs attention. She has improved socially and is trying to mix with people.”

Going by the reflections it was clear that barring a few, the rest had actually started noticing a change in the child, more so in the way they had started to accept her for what she was, making it possible for them to relate to the child. Children of classes III and above were spoken to and sensitised along with being equipped to say ‘no’ to this child whenever she became aggressive or got into socially unacceptable behavior rather than hitting her back or teasing her.

The admin person as well as the principal also started pitching in by engaging her in conversations and teaching her a few alphabets to begin with. She had developed some interest in coloring. A set of worksheets (coloring, writing of the alphabets etc.) were prepared and kept handy. Teachers were to give it to her whenever she entered their classrooms. Some of the sheets were occasionally sent home as well.

Children do not discriminate. Rather, it is we who do so in finding it difficult to accept such differences.

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The end of the academic year threw up yet another challenge – progress report card - what should be written in the report? The team met to identify the positives and the areas for improvement.

Following points emerged:

- She has stopped wandering around
- Started looking into books, ask questions
- Follows simple instructions
- She imitates her peers and tries to sing
- Toilet trained and so on

Areas of concern

- Continues to be aggressive at times
- Tears paper

To everyone’s surprise it was 29 positives as against 10 concerns!

It was heartening to see both the parents attend the Parent Teacher Meetings. They said, “We are happy to see our child enjoying coming to school, she acts busy by opening books and sharing things that happen at school, and above all is being treated as a human being, and has friends.”

The teachers definitely needed time and space to figure out many things for themselves. Having got the time and space to figure out things, the teachers had come a long way in accepting the child. Now they are coming up with their own strategies in handling the child which I think is going to make both the child as well as the teachers independent.