



Rudresh

On the makeshift stage were six students of class 4 and 5 of a government primary school in a remote village called Thirtha, in Surpur taluk of Yadgir district. They were in the age group of 10 to 12 years. They were performing a five-minute role play on ‘Gram Panchayat’¹ and had been given just 15 minutes to prepare on a serious subject.

When the play ended the 40 strong audience cheered them profusely. Because the boys had played the role well, although the subject was a bit profound for that age. The theme, structure and the dialogues were very good. The children had stressed on burning local issues like drinking water and basic sanitation. It was presented with all seriousness and the children performed with confidence. In just five minutes they communicated very clearly that the Gram Panchayat had failed in discharging its duties. The role play was part of a creativity workshop.

A similar creativity workshop was being conducted at Timmapur village for children who were irregular to school. A boy had kept away from this workshop but would often peep inside the classroom where children were engaged in painting, drawing, singing, dancing. The next day he walked in and introduced himself to the coordinator, Iliyas, and said he too wanted to join the workshop. He was Daud, a 6th class student. He was let in and he participated actively for two days. That changed him and he became a regular in the school.

There are many such positive outcomes from the creativity workshops organised since 2008 by Child Friendly School Initiative (CFSI)², Surpur. The idea was to engage the CSFI team with children in a meaningful activity and understand the way they learn, the way they behave and, more importantly,

to understand and learn the way the Margadarshis – CSFI team members- need to behave with them. Another objective was to acquire the experience of creating a non-threatening and fearless environment in schools and create space for creativity and self-learning.

These workshops convinced us that we can engage with children without creating fear or threat of punishment in their minds and this environment can be very productive and enjoyable. It also disproved the ‘spare the rod - spoil the child’ theory.

As already mentioned, the thrust of our workshops is to create an atmosphere of freedom for children, and awareness in them not to waste and not to hurt others. The workshop starts with painting. First, it is playing with colours. We ask children to play with colours individually and in groups. In this exercise they learn many things- mixing of colours, what new colours one gets while mixing them, what creates different shade and it ends in making of greeting cards which they take home with pride. Children enjoy the make-up on their face.

In the singing session they first sing songs from their text books and then school songs. Later they sing other songs known to them. Towards the end they try to compose songs and sing them. The dancing sessions are high energy sessions. After some painting, singing and dancing it is time for stories. Storytelling and story writing make them think. At this point we introduce mask making and later we move towards drama. We have different theatre games for children to introduce a character, establish a character, and change the status of a character. Theatre games are a hit with the children. They enjoy improvisations. We do not plan for any final product. We exhibit the



workshop process products on the last day during the concluding session.

These workshops gave us rich experience. The art forms helped us a lot in engaging children joyfully and at their own pace. We had a diverse group of students in the 9 to 12 age group – some were bright, a few average and branded as slow learners, irregular students and even a few out of school students. Initially it was difficult to get them into the workshop and engage them. And their number swelled and we would end up having more than 40 children on the third day.

Pointing at a student wearing the lion's mask and shouting 'I am the king of forest, every one listen to me', Mr. Tayappa, a teacher, said: "Students who would not utter a single word in the class have performed here with a lot of confidence and pride. See how they are manipulating the puppets with sharp dialogues at the end of third day". Shy children were found either wearing masks or dancing or played puppets to avoid facing the audience. This shy group had come out of its shell and performed excellently. But a few were back in the shell after puppet show.

We ensured that all the students participated and made available a lot of material which was kept openly so that they could use it freely. They were to be treated with love and affection and no one was to hurt or scold them. This applied to both the Margadarshis³ and the teachers. We encouraged the peer group activities and helping one other. Role plays on local themes were prepared spontaneously and presented to the audience. Our Margadarshis would, in the process, work on building the children's vocabulary using language in different forms, and develop in them, problem-solving skills. They would strengthen the academic and social skills.

Art forms like drama, role play, story construction, storytelling and puppetry would help in building skills like thinking, inference, comprehension,

expression, logical conclusion, spontaneous enactments etc. Drawing, puppetry, mask preparation, clay work would build imagination, aesthetic sense, a sense of size, structure, texture, colour contrast along with boosting psychomotor skills. Working as groups, taking each other's help by understanding strengths and limitations would help in building human relation skills, peer learning customs, group spirits, team work, cooperation, emotions, sensitivity and communication required not only for school years but also throughout their life. Eventually this would help in developing language, exploration of ideas and skills, understanding of self and others.

The fear of failure is totally absent in these child friendly workshops which helps in breaking limitations, boundaries and the freedom to do whatever they want helps in enhancing their creativity and originality. Let me cite an example. In Yalagi village workshop participants were asked to prepare individual puppets after a puppet preparation demonstration. While many had painted white thread or waste paper black to make it look like hair, Reshma, a class 5 student, had cut her own hair and pasted on the head of the puppet. Her handkerchief had been used as the skirt! This was neither asked for nor expected but that was the extent of her involvement. Many had designed interesting hats on the puppets and masks.

Learning

Three years of experience in conducting children creativity workshops in Surpur have made us learn that:

- Design of the activities should be based on children's interest and pace to ensure their active participation.
- Different art forms help in engaging children who are not interested in academics.
- Varieties of activities are needed, as the span of interest of children is very less and their interests are diverse.
- Creativity blooms in a free atmosphere.



- Facilitators need to be skilled in breaking stereotype products that the children produce in the workshop
- It is important to involve teachers since they are the people who will carry this forward.
- Art forms give ample scope for the child to express, explore and experiment.

In schools, these art forms would be treated as entertainment tools in functions that are organised. Our attempts are to involve teachers in these workshops and motivate them to incorporate these art forms creatively in the classroom process. We are however aware that it is a great challenge.

These creativity workshops have boosted our confidence in creating a child-friendly atmosphere and we are able to communicate this to the teachers. We have found that when the teachers see and experience, they start believing!

Rigorous training

Children might enjoy a creativity workshop but conducting one was a challenging experience for us. First, we had to build our capacity to conduct a workshop and then take it to the children. We had to play

a dual role – of a facilitator and of a researcher – as we had to conduct the workshop and also observe the behavior of children and understand the group dynamics.

We planned a cascade training module with enough inbuilt scaffolding for our Margadarshis. An expert in the field conducted a creativity workshop for all Margadarshis and based on this workshop, a team of 8 Margadarshis conducted workshop for children. This gave us first-hand knowledge and understanding of the process with the children. Many activities worked, many others failed. We reviewed the workshop and planned with more inputs and our experience. From here the Margadarshis were paired and each pair conducted workshops for children. Then each Margadarshi conducted a workshop. By now, our Margadarshis had gained enough confidence to conduct the workshops and slowly they started involving teachers who helped in later stages to review the workshops. So far 250 workshops have been conducted in different schools of Surpur taluk. Our team is now able to design workshops based on the needs of the children and local context.

Footnotes

1. Gram Panchayat: Local self-governments at the village or small town level in India.
2. Child-Friendly School Initiative: The Child Friendly School initiative is a joint initiative of Azim Premji Foundation and Government of Karnataka. It is an experiment to demonstrate a process of providing quality education on a sustained basis, in a child friendly manner, to all children, in partnership with all stakeholders, by building capacity and accountability. The initiative covers all the government primary schools of Shorapur block in Yadgir district of North East Karnataka.
3. Margadarshi: Margadarshi is an associate at Azim Premji Foundation, who works closely with the schools and supports teachers in classroom process. Each Margadarshi supports 12 schools.

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