

# Journey of an NGO Teacher in a Government School

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## *Abstract*

Students play a significant role in the life of a teacher, and teaching, like all other professions, has its ups and downs. The two years of my fellowship journey were a roller-coaster, but the memories from the journey are nothing like others. During a recent webinar, I was asked about my inspiration and, without hesitation, stated that my students are my inspiration. They showed me the positive side of life, along with inducing self-confidence, grit, and appreciating life. Every day at school was just another day, and there were very few "good" days, but every day created memories. In most cases, teachers serve as an inspiration to their students. However, my students were an inspiration to me because entering the classroom was like starting a new chapter in my life since I came in as a teacher and left as a student.

**KEYWORDS:** Teacher Experience, Government school, Teaching, Pedagogical Innovations

## **THE JOURNEY PREPARATION**

Going through a rigorous one-month orientation at the beginning of my 2-year teaching fellowship on teaching practices, culture, vision, classroom goals, and a strong emphasis on community involvement instilled new confidence and fuelled my determination to succeed. Teaching came naturally to me as I used to teach my school as well as my college classmates, but this was the first time in a structured classroom. Time passed quickly, and we were assigned schools and classes at the end of the month. I was assigned to a government Kannada medium school as a literacy teacher for the fourth grade. This marked the beginning of my two-year teaching journey. Before entering the classroom, I had a clear vision and a particular culture plan, but I forgot one of the most important things: my students' context.

I still remember the 20 minutes I spent in the autorickshaw while traveling to the first day of my school (as a teacher), where I already imagined where my students would be and where I would be able to take them. Stepping

into the government school with the national anthem playing and the morning prayer being solely conducted by the students gave me a sense of independence that the students already had at such a young age. When I arrived at school, the students were surprised to see a new face and the principal, or as we called her, Headmistress, introduced me to the staff and other members in the same way a parent introduces their child.

The warm welcome and support I received from the first day I stepped in have been there till the last day. Walking around the school gave me a sense of pride, as it was one of the best government schools I had seen, with state-of-the-art library rooms, computer labs, halls, and grounds for extracurricular activities. The headmistress personally took me and introduced me to my class, or shall I say our class. I was overwhelmed seeing the students, and their faces were like an open book—some showing emotions of inquisitiveness, whereas some were yawning away. I looked around, took a deep breath, and started my session (ice-breaking session)

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where I asked them to introduce themselves with a small sound or body movement, but soon I could feel a sense of cluelessness in them. I tried to understand the body language and asked questions but received no answers, and quickly enough, the designated class teacher of the fourth standard came and told me that the students did not understand or comprehend English. I was taken aback and wondered what I was doing there as the main tool of teaching, that is, communication was a hindrance as I did not understand Kannada and they did not understand English. At that moment, the only thing I was waiting for was the bell to ring so that I could rush home, but the time seemed to pass slowly. The bell rang at 3.30p.m which was like music to my ears and, without saying goodbye to my students, I left the class.

I was upset by the scenario and tore up my classroom culture plan, realizing that the goal I had imagined was impossible. Speaking to my co-fellows and colleagues, I found the feeling was mutual, and I was ready to quit. I questioned my motivation and ability as a teacher and how to communicate with a set of students who do not understand the language. My mother, being a teacher, explained to me that there is always a start to learn, and the best result is seen when you lay the foundation. This strengthened my determination, and the plan I had devised became my end goal. I knew it was not going to be easy, but that is what makes the path more memorable and the journey successful.

### THE JOURNEY BEGINS

I stepped in the next day with a new sense of self-assurance. With the help of miming and enacting my words, for instance, "look into the book," "eyes on the speaker," and "raise your hand," I helped students recognize what I was saying. Through the help of "phonetic

sounds," "reading fluency activities," and a "print-rich classroom," I was able to instil a sense of hunger and eagerness to learn. Soon they would point at things and ask me for the English word, which made me happy as it indicated that we were on the right path. Hence, their enthusiasm made me start a vocabulary wall. The wall had new words that the students could go back to whenever they wanted to. Soon, without my help and with the use of available books, they would look for words and paste them on the wall. Thus, the lesson, I learned that there is never an "I" in teaching, but always a "we," as I played the role of only a facilitator with the students taking up the significant role of learning. The first six months were tough with the students progressing from phonetics to words to sentences, but they never gave up and never let me give up, and they were adamant on communicating with me only in English. The students who had been around for eight months were able to connect words and form broken sentences, which gave them an edge over the other students in the school. They even tried their hand in teaching me how to read and write Kannada but to their disappointment I was too slow and inconsistent.

We, the fourth graders, were praised by the headmistress and staff and became a role model class for the school. Without even teaching them, they inculcated the value of grit, and soon this was mapped to other classrooms. With the help of my manager and external partners, I was able to teach them critical thinking and analytical skill through photography, art, music, and theatre. The theatre activities helped them become more comfortable with their identities and respect the opposite gender. At the same time, the photography sessions assisted us in creating a problem-solving environment in which they

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would identify an issue in their community and discuss a solution. We soon involved students from other classes in mapping the skills across the school. The “learnings” and “skills” were showcased in a performance task at the end of the academic year. We, the fourth graders put up a musical where the students demonstrated and spoke about their childhood through pictures, songs, and dance, showcasing teamwork and hard work. The one-hour musical was done entirely in English, and to think about it a year back was unimaginable. This was made possible by the training and support we fellows received from the NGO, the commitment of staff and parents, and most importantly, the student's diligence. The journey from miming to words to phrases to finally doing a showcase appeared to be lengthy, but this was only the beginning.

The second year of my teaching journey started with a change in administration as I was stepping in with my students to the fifth grade. This meant more subjects, more responsibility, and less teaching time, as, unlike in the fourth grade, where I got a lot of time with the students, my teaching time was reduced to that of a regular teacher, and I was assigned one period (being a literacy teacher). This seemed difficult but fair as each subject teacher was given only one period. The only solution we came up with was extra class, and as the solution was from the students, they held me and each other accountable. Since the emphasis was always on holistic education, morning circles comprised mostly theatre group activities, meditation, and simple dance routines which inculcated values and mindsets coupled with reading newspaper headlines in the assembly. The incentive structure from daily to weekly in fourth grade shifted to monthly in fifth grade, when I ran a monthly market where stationery items were put up for

sale. Based on the group's needs and points collected, they would purchase the items by making a bill and there were also badminton sessions for the best group of the week.

The structure and routine of the class made them focused and ready to learn. As part of their monthly value of empathy, the students made earrings and cards and sold them in the community, raising funds to donate to a "Special Home" near their school. The visit moved the students and made them understand the true meaning of empathy. As part of another task, the 5th graders held a drawing competition for all the schools under our organization. They not only brainstormed on the topic but also on the gifts and the criteria for the winners. My only responsibility was to send the gifts to the winners; everything else was handled by the students. Seeing the confidence and independence they instilled, I enrolled our class in a drama competition where I again took the role of only a facilitator, as from the scripts to the costume, it was all decided by them. The class received many internal scripts, and they voted for the best one, which was performed in the competition. They did not come first, but they were definite winners for me. They received participation medals and certificates, which were overwhelming for many. I recall one of the new students approaching me and explaining that this was her first time performing on stage and receiving any sort of medal. This brought a tear to my eye.

Meeting my students' parents as part of community visits, or in some cases, their guardians, made me realise the students' maturity, as although they had problems with their stay, food, and some personal issues, they never let me see it. Some stayed with five members under a tin roof, and some would run to a shop to get me some snacks during the

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home visit, which was overwhelming, and it made me realise how many luxuries I had but still complained about. Speaking to the parents gave a sense of the students' progress at home and they thanked me for providing a learning environment which was missing for the children. The visits became frequent, and so did my bond with the students and parents. I was preparing myself and the students for the last day from a couple of months talking to them about the new teacher who would come and take them forward, but honestly, no preparation was enough. The last day was full of emotions, tears, and hugs, and I promised them to be back and assured them that I would be there at every step of their life.

chapter in my life as I stepped in as a teacher and left as a student.

### **THE JOURNEY AND AFTER**

Today, my students are in the eighth standard, and we are constantly in touch through social media, calls, and video chat, where I come to know about the everyday happenings, changes in their lives, and changes in their skills. I even get calls and messages from the parents and siblings stating that the best years of my students were those two years spent with me. The irony was that they thought I taught them, but in reality, I learned from them and evolved as a better person. During a recent webinar, I was asked about my inspiration and, without hesitation, stated that my students are my inspiration. They showed me the positive side of life, along with having self-confidence and appreciating your life just the way it is. They motivated me whenever I doubted myself and picked me up whenever I failed. Every day in school was just another day, and there were very few "good" days, but all those days had made memories. Usually, teachers are an inspiration to students, but in my case, my students were an inspiration as stepping into the classroom was like the beginning of a new