

Kiran-The Glow from a Good Heart

Nida Mulji

“Dear Nida auntie,

i can play. I am Kiran. I lik to sing the AaBc. my mother’s name is Sana.

love, Kiran

the and”

So read an introductory letter to me from Kiran – a talkative little girl who skipped into my Class 1 room some years ago. A few things which had been highlighted for me as I took on my first full-time experience of teaching Class one. Kiran had been held back in Class one from the previous year. She was a “slow learner” and “learning disabled”. But, people made sure they mentioned – Kiran had beautiful long hair.

At the time (perhaps not so different from now), Pakistan was at a crossroad. Despite the urgent need of the hour for genuine unity, people were more reluctant than ever to consider themselves part of a larger union. Differences on every conceivable level – where you lived, where you worked, where you went to school, whether you were fair or dark – abounded across the nation and were becoming more pervasive than ever. Observing my newly arrived class, I heard and watched such sensitivities arise even within their young interactions. The need of the hour for our classroom was indeed no different from that of the country: The need for cohesion and respect for diversity. So I sought to talk to this excited group of youngsters about our differences and the need to embrace them.

The next day, I presented two differently wrapped boxes before the children, asking them to comment on their appearances. I invited predictions about what these boxes might contain? Guesses ranged from toffees in one to marbles in the other – old newspapers in one to pieces of foam in the other. After webbing their predictions on the board, I invited two volunteers up (one of them Kiran) to unwrap both the boxes, revealing the same object ,a cricket ball, on the inside. The classroom was abuzz with discussion.

The children were fascinated. I took this opportunity to lead them gently into sharing their thoughts on how different appearances can have the same heart, feelings and other attributes. With some nervousness, I drew from examples around them – people who spoke different languages, lived in different houses and even people who looked different. The children were intrigued.

What followed was each of them receiving a sheet of paper with a massive variety of different (skin) colours to choose from and create a collage. Initially, children were most interested in finding a ‘matching’ colour for their skin and then looking around for colours ‘matching’ their friends. They tirelessly combined colours and decided how those different colours would be incorporated into their larger picture. As they worked, I asked them to share what they were creating. A burst of colour traveled around the classroom as each of them carefully pointed out all the different colours they had selected and what their image was. I paused and asked, “What if we’d only had one colour to choose from – let’s say just brown. How would your pictures have looked then?” How instant and unanimous their reaction was about their pictures being incomplete and not as interesting! It didn’t take much to hook them back into our earlier discussion of how each of our

differences is so essential to keeping our classroom and our world colourful and lively. The children, including little Kiran, had been guided down a path of reflection. Unlike the other children though, Kiran never really brought up the subject of differences again for the rest of the year, until the last day of school.

A year later, Kiran, with her “slow learning” and “learning disability” was ready for Class two. What remains my most poignant memory of Kiran, however, is her skipping into class on the last day of school just as she had at the beginning of the year – with a letter in one hand and her “long, beautiful hair” reduced to the shortest of haircuts. When asked what had happened to her hair, she remarked quite matter of factly, “But Nida Auntie. Sara (Kiran’s cousin who had recently been diagnosed with cancer) woke up and had no hair. She looks different, like we talked in the class a hundred days ago. She’s my friend and I don’t know what happened. I want to know how she feels so I can tell the other children to hug her too, like we said a hundred days ago. She’s still the same and so much fun, just like we said! My hair’s ok – Sara will make a wig with it and we can play!” With that last chuckle, Kiran stuffed a paper into my hand and ran off to join her friends.

“Dear Nida Auntie,
thank you. And you taught us for more than a hundred days. and I love you Nida Auntie. and good day. Love, Kiran.”

So read my goodbye letter from Kiran.