

An All-Inclusive Oasis of Learning

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My school is located in an urban slum of Karachi with people who do not have enough money to feed their family and that becomes their prime worry rather than children's education and well-being. Being an Early Childhood Education (Katchi) teacher, every year my class has a new batch of children ranging from 3-6 years and sometimes even older for whom it is the first-time in school. The school is a classic example of neglect, disinterest and poor planning that characterizes public sector schools. For instance, the ECE class is on the third floor, going up a dilapidated staircase. Much like the proverbial velvet patch in a rag, my ECE class seems like an oasis in that school with children's faces glowing with excitement as they engage in classroom activities and games. For my relentless commitment, I am subjected to a lot of criticism and negativity from my peers and especially the school in-charge.

What keeps me enthusiastic about teaching for now seventeen years in an otherwise unsupportive and rough environment is the children. It is not their fault that they were born and are living in such dismal conditions; they deserve a chance to shine. I have learnt to value each child from the Early Childhood training programmes that I have attended. However, what cemented my resolve was a child named Farzana,

Farzana had a hearing and speaking disability. Her parents were neither aware nor interested in admitting her in a school for children with special needs.

Farzana was ten years old when she came to my class and thus was the oldest child in my class. She had never been to school nor was she taught at home. I did not know what to do with her. It was the first time that I had a deaf and mute child in my class. I didn't even know how to communicate with her let alone teach her. I went to my ECE trainers to seek guidance and was given a lot of reference materials and teaching tips. Using them, I learnt sign language to connect with Farzana, involved her in pre-writing and sight reading activities through which she started picking up the words and learning new things. Other children in the class never excluded Farzana nor did they call her names, mainly because they saw me, their teacher, respecting Farzana by involving Farzana in all these activities.

I felt I was the one transformed more than Farzana. I realized my ability to learn and adapt to children's learning styles and disabilities – since then, I keenly observe my students to see if they have any learning disability for which they need additional support. Earlier on, I was completely unaware of this aspect of life. Farzana brought to me not only the consciousness but also the confidence in my own abilities as a teacher. I teach with commitment and a zest to improve myself; all this comes through children from the most marginalized background. After a whole year of telling them and working with them, children start doing everything themselves. They start working together. They are not afraid to experiment, express themselves and to enjoy themselves. All this gives me the hope and the courage to continue my teaching in spite of all the negative factors in and outside the school.

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