

# The Class Barrier No More

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Few years back, I belonged to that category of teachers who felt that being a government primary teacher, we are labeled as incompetent and uncaring by parents, officials and society alike so it doesn't really matter how hard we work and how well we teach. While I did not stop going to the class and teaching, but admittedly, I was rather strict with children.

My moment of inspiration leading to tremendous changes in my teaching and attitude came from Bilal Zaheer, who was enrolled in my Early Childhood Education class. Bilal's two older siblings were also studying in the same school. They came from a very humble background, his father sold *samosas* but they were one of the very few parents who would come and ask about their children's progress.

Literally every day Bilal's mother would be standing outside the staffroom and would not leave till she had met the teachers. Naturally she was scorned by a lot of teachers for wasting their time, such has been the cult in our school. Not surprisingly, Bilal was also singled out by his classmates for exclusion; no one would talk to him or ask him to play with him. Both teachers and students alike would mock his broken *chappals* (slippers), torn clothes and unwashed face.

Back then, I wasn't a very involved teacher but I felt for Bilal specially because of the way he stayed quiet while everyone else labeled him a dirty, good-for-nothing child. On the other hand, his mother's persistence made me rethink my own attitude towards them.

It was during that time that I attended the training on Early Childhood Education that made me aware of the importance of the emotional and social development of children.

I decided to work with Bilal - at first, he didn't respond. But gradually when I tried to involve him in classroom tasks, he showed interest. Although it was six months ago that he enrolled in school, he was not able to write a single alphabet and would flunk every test. I stopped giving him any written tests till the time he learned to write. At the same time, I started talking to his mother asking her to send the children in clean uniforms, tidy them up, give home cooked food rather than giving them money to spend on unhygienic food from *thelas* (food vendors).

The results started showing – Bilal stayed in my class for two years, (he repeated katchi class) and by the end of the second year, he was one of the brightest most active, and tidiest children in the class.

When children were being promoted that year, the class one teacher blankly refused to accept Bilal in his class saying that he should repeat Katchi for the third time.

The teacher said he will not have 'dumb' children in his class. I requested him to at least allow him to sit in a test or talk to Bilal, which he did. After that he came to me and said he couldn't believe that Bilal knew everything he had asked on the test!

From an unwelcome student and his parent, Bilal and his mother became the most welcomed members of our school community. He is now studying in Class three and his mother still comes to me for advice.

What they taught me was not only the importance of making an effort but also that as teachers we can bring a positive change in the lives of our students. My attitude even with my own children has changed after seeing how patience, attention and time transformed Bilal. I am happy with my attitudinal change in the school – every parent, colleague every child vouches for that. They appreciate the hard work that I now put in.

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