

Everybody's School of Smiles and Happiness



When we went to visit that school, they were playing with a ball in the yard near the shrine. A name of a child is called and the ball is thrown at him or her. The child who catches the ball directs it to another child calling his or her name. Everyone was happy and laughing.

Students and teachers who walked near them while going for various purposes encouraged them. Some even helped them by picking up the missed balls for them.

They were the students of the special education unit of that school. Among them were children with Down syndrome¹ and with mild intellectual disabilities.

Throughout the day, we observed how the children were learning happily and playfully under the guidance of Ms. Soma, who is in charge of that special education unit.

"I am retiring this year. I am very happy to be able to do this service," said teacher Soma.

We heard that there was a shortage of special education teachers in that zone. Ms. Soma is a trained primary education teacher. She is also the head of the primary section of that school and supervises the rest of the primary classes. She added the knowledge of special education to her primary education training and revived the special education unit of this school which was about to be closed due to the shortage of teachers. She received the support of the principals, teacher advisors and subject directors in charge of special education and got the opportunity for related training.

"Training alone is not enough. We need to cultivate empathy to make them ours," said Soma Teacher. "As a mother, I can understand the parents of the children in my class. Therefore, I try to render the maximum service I can."

We watched how the children of this class were taught letters, colours, nouns as well as English words through activities such as singing, dancing, art and games. They sang a song to welcome the English teacher to the period. The teacher conducted an activity to teach English words for colours.

¹ Down syndrome is a genetic mutation. The condition is known as Down syndrome because it was discovered by John Langdon Down, a British medical specialist.

The special education teacher pointed out that simple handicrafts were vital for them to improve their dexterity. We watched how they learnt to cut cloth with scissors and make lamp wicks with a simple machine. The teacher has been allowed to call the parents to the school as needed to help with such activities. As the head teacher in the primary section, it was very easy for her to coordinate the extra support needed by the special education unit.

We noticed that the administration had been very considerate when selecting the location of the special education unit. It is at one end of a building with primary classes and has easy access to water taps and toilets. There is also a small yard adjacent to the classroom for outdoor activities.

"These kids are popular in our school. No one marginalizes them. We always make sure to give them equal opportunities in co-curricular activities," said the principal of the school. "For example, every concert includes their performances. That's one reason for their popularity. They also participate in other events like sports."

A down syndrome boy showed us how they performed a folk drama in a recent school concert. He found it from the database of the teacher's mobile phone and showed it to us smartly. The school has built their skills to look after themselves, walk on the road carefully, read simple things like the name board of a bus, communicate ideas, engage in pre-vocational activities and use computers as well.

A period has been allocated for them in the school's small computer lab. The IT teacher told us that she teaches customized and simplified lessons to these students.

One female student had not attended the school that day and we enquired about the reason.

"Sometimes parents don't send their children to school because of economic issues. I telephone them and ask them to bring the children. They are happy here. Happiness is very important in their lives," The teacher told us.

Speaking about the education received from the school, one mother told, "My daughter has Down syndrome. She is our only child. I always bring her to school. In the past, we came by bus. Now the bus fares are high, so we talk and walk," the mother of a girl in the school's special education unit told us adding that her daughter also understands how to go on the bus with the other children.

We saw love throughout that placid, rural school. The special education unit of this school is a place where more and more love is received. One Down syndrome boy delivered a speech to thank us before we departed.

"Inclusive education is the most effective way to give all children a fair chance to go to school, learn and develop the skills they need to thrive. Inclusive education means all children learning in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded," UNICEF² says.

² <https://www.unicef.org/education/inclusive-education>

This school, which is located in a rural area, is a perfect example of an educational environment that understands inclusive education. The principal said that some students with disabilities study with their peers in other classes. We saw that the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to provide equal opportunities to all students have been built in the school community including teachers and parents. Awareness is highly important for establishing inclusive education.

