

Rupantar 2 June 2018

A teacher's empathy changed her life

From recluse and aggressive to a bright, vivacious girl, Radhika's story
inspires all

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Radhika with Sheela Negi

Not long ago, Radhika was unnoticeable in her class with no friends, lack of interest in studies and almost no interaction with her teachers.

She used to get aggressive and restless on asked anything about studies by her teachers. Occasional fights with classmates made her a recluse as other students in the class stopped talking to her.

Inattentiveness and lack of focus in the class led to a dip in her grades and by the time she reached seventh standard, it was evident that she might drop out of school due to her inability to compete with other students in the class.

“It is very common for such students to dropout of school as they do not get the proper environment for their growth and are often seen as careless and impatient,” says Negi.

That was when Sheela Negi, her teacher in the Government Primary School in Banjarawala cluster in Dehradun district, decided to help her. With her compassionate heart and willingness to listen, Negi was able to break the ice with Radhika.

“Other students never liked or talked to Radhika. I had been noticing her behaviour for quite some time and realised that she is not of the same league as other students but I didn’t know how to handle her behaviour,” says Negi.

The teacher, who attended Project Inclusion training in 2017 on identifying and supporting children with mental health issues, says that it helped her communicate with the girl better.

The program educates regular school teachers to identify hidden disabilities in students by using simple checklists and then provides them tools and techniques to practice an empathetic and sensitive approach towards these children in an inclusive set up.

Thereafter, special educators also help parents and siblings of these children to support the child’s learning inside and outside the school. The aim is to improve retention in schools and the quality of life of these children.

Negi identified Radhika and on assessment by Project Inclusion experts, the girl was diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorder (NDD), where that child is hyperactive, slow learner, suffers from anxiety and social isolation.

“It is very common for such students to dropout of school as they do not get the proper environment for their growth and are often seen as careless and impatient,” says Negi.

She said that even teachers are ill equipped in handling such students and their inability to develop an empathetic and sensitive approach towards them makes situation worse.

However, Negi’s approach was different. She counselled the teachers in the school and Radhika’s parents about her condition and asked them to support the girl and provide her with whatever help she needs, whether it is in studies or behaviour change.

The teacher also approached Radhika’s classmates and made them aware about her condition and explained to them how the girl would need a little extra care from everybody around.

“Things started to change. Students accepted her as one of their own and even teachers stopped getting impatient at her slow learning ability. Radhika too started opening up

slowly,” says Negi.

The teacher says that building a proper environment in the school for Radhika was very important. “I wanted everybody to accept and support her so that she does not feel that she has some sort of disability. This was the first step in Radhika’s journey towards being a regular student.”

“Just with little empathy and acceptance, Radhika has blossomed into a bright young girl who loves to dance, draw and smile always. She likes to hug and her innocence never misses to touch a heart,” Negi said.

Even though she speaks slowly, Radhika, who is in eighth standard, with the help of her teacher, is working hard toward a bright future.

Sunandini, a Project Inclusion trainer who oriented Negi, said that the teacher’s concern, determination and sincerity to work with such children was visible at the time of training and the success in Radhika’s case validates that.

“We need such teachers who can identify students with hidden disabilities and bring them out of their cocoon, making them able enough to compete with the world,” she says.

About Project Inclusion:

Project Inclusion is Rupantar’s program for mental health awareness among teachers to help students suffering from hidden disabilities. It is currently operational in 8 states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Puducherry, Bihar, Sikkim, Chandigarh and Jharkhand. Project Inclusion has a deep rooted approach and addresses the core issues for retaining children with NDD in government schools. ■
