

Moving stories from an educator

Gitanjali Sarangan talks about a disabled girl who walked in to a warm welcome at a regular school

by Shiyama Krishna Kumar

Bangalore: Trained in classical dance and music, Gitanjali Sarangan, founder of an arts based learning (ABT) centre, believes art is the best way to learn and teach.

At Snehadhara Foundation, which she started towards the end of 2012, differently-abled children and adults approach learning through multiple disciplines.

Gitanjali narrates a recent incident that changed her understanding of inclusion.

Umaima, 18 years old, goes to Snehadhara. Gitanjali took her to a government school in Putenahalli where she works with Class 7 children.

Umaima was clad in her usual salwar kameez and burkha as they walked in. "I was dressed in jeans and a short kurta. Surely, she looked more commanding," Gitanjali narrates.

"As we entered, a class of 36 children stood up watching Umaima and greeted her, "Good afternoon, ma'am." Now for her, this was reason enough to flash a lovely smile," recalls Gitanjali.

She hoped Umaima would not start talking the way she usually does. But she was



Gitanjali (right) helps children learn through art at Snehadhara Foundation, Bannerghatta Road

standing confidently facing the class and nodding along to what Gitanjali was saying.

During class, Gitanjali explained to the students that though Umaima looks 20, she is mentally not that mature. She also let them know that if they were uncomfortable with Umaima's presence, she wouldn't bring her

along the next time.

At this point, a young boy stood up and said, "But ma'am, I don't know Hindi, so this could mean I'm disabled when it comes to Hindi. It doesn't mean I should just sit at home."

Gitanjali was moved. "Tears rolled down my eyes," she says Gitanjali. "This was what I would want to call inclusion."

That is also the reason she believes the children teach educators, and not the other way around.

"Inclusion is as much about special needs kids reaching their potential as about normal kids reaching their compassion potential," she realised. Challenges Last

year, for Teacher's Day, the foundation held a discussion on what it would mean to challenge themselves as educators.

"We can never say that we've cracked it. Every methodology we come up with falls short because every day is a new day when it comes to teaching and learning with these children," she says.

Gitanjali's credentials speak of diverse skills. She holds a master's degree in biochemistry, and has done a French course from Alliance Francaise and taught the language at Jyoti Nivas College, Bangalore. She continues to use French as a tool to help children work through learning difficulties.

She is trained in classical dance and Carnatic well as Hindustani music.

The Snehadhara centre, located on Bannerghatta Road, now works with 35 children of various ages.

"I've observed that learning is most effective when it takes place in an organic manner, and art is the most uninhibited form of learning there is," says Gitanjali.

The centre uses all forms of art, from dance to music to theatre to cooking to help children achieve specific goals, which could be acquiring life or motor skills.

Gitanjali wants educators to be equal stakeholders in the process. "To that end, every Friday, we let the children stay over at the centre, so we can be more involved in their lives and learn from them as they learn from us," she says. Snehadhara is looking at partners to diversify the experiences of disabled children and their families.

(Snehadhara can be contacted on 89514 88998).



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