

Two girls and a classroom

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Photo by Anantha Subramanyam K/MMCL

By Sowmya Rajram

Two city girls have been providing literacy to children of migrant labourers, and have been selected as Changemakers by Ashoka Youth Venture in India

First, the incentive was food – biscuits, bananas, chocolates and more. Then, it was games and rhymes. Slowly, it became about learning – English, Math, Science, Environmental Science, Self Defence, Health and Hygiene. And finally, even though it was only for two months, the classroom in basics conducted for children of migrant labourer workers in Kodigehalli, changed the lives of children who had, until then, seen more debris and dirt than stationery and teamwork. Oh, and it also meant that the ‘teachers’, Senora Sundar (19) and Kruthi Murthappa (18), were selected in the 9th Batch of Youth Venturers from India as part of the Ashoka Youth Venture, a programme that identifies and supports the world’s leading social entrepreneurs and trains them further.

Students of Parikrma Humanity Foundation, a city-based NGO that works to educate children from marginalised communities, the duo took two-hour classes, four days a week, for 30 children (it dwindled to 25, as migrant labourer families move a lot), all the while juggling college and exams. But, like Sundar puts it, it’s all worth it when it’s about paying it forward. “Our experience at Parikrma has given us opportunities that we would never have had otherwise. We need to pass that on to these kids.”

And so it came to be that after helping the children of a government school that Parikrma had adopted (May 2017) to put up an annual day show, and winning the Inventure Academy competition last year, which was about how schoolkids can bring change in the society, they – along with a team of five others – decided to look at the issues in their own neighbourhood. “We see that a lot of kids in our locality are of schoolgoing

age, but don't go. We asked around, and found that often, the parents weren't interested because they moved around so much that their kids' education really wasn't their topmost priority. When the children did get enrolled, they would often drop out," Murthappa says.

Initially, there was resistance, which surprised the girls. "We would go door-to-door to the houses in the slums, but parents weren't interested. We wondered why – we were offering an education, free!"

Murthappa says. It was the first of many realisations, which taught the duo that grand ambitions often don't account for realities on the ground. So they tweaked their "strategy", offering incentives such as stationery, clothes, food and games, soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes, and the promise of an attempt at securing "admission to a government school" for children with good attendance and performance. When they children finally came, they had to coaxed away from the food and games into the classroom, which took time – "One boy started crying! We had to hug him and console him," Murthappa says.

Classes themselves were designed around the realities of their life and community. Concepts of good and bad touch, self-defence ("they don't even know they are being exploited sometimes," Sundar says), and health and hygiene were taught to the kids. The impact may have been slow, but it was sure. Sundar, for instance, recounts how some of her students went back home and wrote messages of cleanliness such as 'Mom, wash your hands', 'Mom, stay clean' on drums of water. The girls also realised why the kids kept dropping out of school – because they moved so often, they weren't able to catch up with the next class at the new location, and simply stopped going. "So we decided to teach them the basics – the alphabet, numbers, body parts etc – so that they would be able to grasp whatever was happening wherever they went," Murthappa explains. While Kannada was the main medium of instruction, the kids, they found, really wanted to learn English, and took to it quite well. Basic lessons in behaviour and etiquette transformed a bunch of boisterous children into ones that started paying attention in class, learnt the importance of clean clothing and hygiene, and took care of their stationery and belongings instead of carelessly throwing them around.

There have been learnings for the teachers too. The biggest, has been a recognition of the gratitude they owe their school, for giving them as much as it has. Both Sundar and Murthappa recall a particular incident of a mother who began crying when they approached her to ask her to send her kids to the classroom. "She had never had an opportunity to study, and she couldn't believe her kids were getting one." The daughter of a plumber (father) and tailor/ housekeeper (mother) herself, Murthappa says she could relate to the joy and excitement about food that the kids expressed. "Fruits are out of reach them.

The way they would light up when we gave them food was heartening," she says. Sundar describes how one time, a tiny girl asked her to hold her hand and help her draw the alphabet, after which, it became a pattern. When they took the kids for a basic health checkup, they realised many of them had never had one before. "They had no idea what a checkup was, and were scared of getting an injection. We had to hug and hold them, calm them and talk to them, give them juice," Murthappa says. She adds: "When we gave them the resources, they would ask if they could keep it or if they had to return it."

And even though most of the kids have migrated elsewhere with their families, the girls know they've evoked a lifelong interest in education and bettering themselves. Perhaps the biggest validation came from the parents of the children, who converted from reluctant enthusiasts to wards who were disappointed that the classes had to end.