

Rising above

Anandhi

Note: This report is a report that the author gave the parents of her students in 2005. It was a culmination of a seven year cycle of being the class teacher of this group of children, as is the practice in Waldorf Schools. We have included this report as part of the Teacher Plus, September 2019, Teacher's Day issue because of its relevance to our theme.

This is a very unprofessional report; not the kind that I'd normally give. This is not about your child. This is about your children. Our children. The children who inspired us to break away from the norm and choose Waldorf Education. And stick with it through thick and thin. The children who constantly showed us – this is how education ought to be.

You might have been the biological parent of one child in the class; but that did not stop any of you from feeling that all these children were (y)ours. This report is a tribute to a community, if ever there was one in the history of Waldorf Education in India.

Pioneer class, pioneer children, pioneer parents, pioneer teacher, pioneer trainer, pioneer problems, pioneer solutions. Pioneers need peace too. Perhaps it is time to breathe out looking at the extraordinary group of children who were entrusted to our care.

Should I write about these kids in alphabetical order? Not fair. Little Vichitra's face in grade 1 or 2 would have shrunk. She'd end up being the last. Of course she would not mind it now. But I do. So let me do this as my hands move...unthinkingly.

Strange that I think of Abhinaya first. She went to a school that stifled her soul in the name of education; like most schools do. When we brought her to the Waldorf environment – she blossomed from being a withered, near dead flower. It meant bringing her down by two whole years. We were sure that we would never regret this decision. Few parents manage being the teacher of their own children. I can never express my gratitude enough to her for making things so easy for me. No extra expectations from me. No mothering needed at school. No teaching back home. Looking back, I know that she has gained more from me as a teacher than a mother.

Sresht. I've never longed to have a son. Very often in the early years with Sresht this thought did pass my mind: If I do have a son, I want one like that – mischievous, full of practical jokes, lively and goal-oriented. In class three when we built a little house, every day the mason would join us for lunch. Sresht took it upon himself to see that the mason had a proper meal. Sresht would read signs of reluctance and run around serving him, making him feel at ease. Well, how many masons are treated like people? Initially, the mason felt so out of place joining us for the meal; but that did not last long. The class saw a side of Sresht that they will treasure deep within them. I am sure you will join me in wishing him well in the steps he takes in cricket.

Kiran joined us much later. His reddish eyes showing an unspoken strain...gradually opening up in an

atmosphere of freedom. He is the archetypal 'angry young man'. Angry with the world for the mess it is, sensitive enough to want to do something about it, yet feeling rudderless. Where does one start to reform the world? Yearning for real heroes as against the weakened men and women the world is throwing up. It looks like I have an unfinished job- I need to present biographies of many more lives before he comes into his own and knows where to start. Till then do not read his aggressive play as aggression – it merely acts as a mask for the softness within. Vulnerability in need of a hardened shell to grow, even as a butterfly needs the shelter of a cocoon before it can emerge.

Niketa joined us late too. By then school life had taught her to show the world what it asked for, that she had nearly forgotten who she really was. It took a while for her to shed the 'accepted behaviour' and be herself. Who says you need to be in a Waldorf school to be artistic - take a look at her artistic work and you meet the real child - beauty, balance and inwardness. For all her talent, she never shows off; a quality that the class treasures in her. The art work in the invitation you'll all get for the report day, is her handiwork.

For some reason I feel like writing about Dhatri now. Recently, as the class was silently drawing, she walked about eagerly looking at every one at work. Suddenly she pulled out Niketa's work and announced, "Wow, look at this." The attention of the class was drawn to the lovely work she exhibited...but it was also drawn yet

again to the selfless nature so unique to Dhatri. She has always been like that - a deep appreciation for others, no petty feelings of envy or jealousy...a factor that contributed immensely to the social balance in the class. She taught us all how to give... to recognize and appreciate the worth of every human being and to rejoice in quality.

Siddharth. I first met him when he must have been 8 or so. His eyes had a pained expression. This was accentuated when his sister with her sparkling eyes stood near him. I felt so strongly that he should join the band wagon. But all that I could do then was tell a story that I had told the class. He inched closer even as I pretended not to notice. And there he was... part of the gang in no time. The first year was not easy for him. The class had become a closed cosy group and every newcomer had to be tested and tried. He stood up to every challenge - in firm, silent ways. He was our living lesson in standing up for human dignity. Today it looks like he has been with the class all along.

Sai Charan joined us in class two. His number work was brilliant. Since English was unfamiliar, he felt so alien in the classroom. After a week of retelling a fable, I used a simple puppet with the hope that it might reach him. As the story came to an end, he stood up with a bright smile and said, "Very nice (story) teacher." I don't think the heaviest of pay packs or greatest of adulations from adults can ever mean what those words meant to me. The class was moved by the truth and simplicity of those words. I felt humble - and even more frustrated

with our colonial legacy of education. When are we going to value our own languages? Why should English be the medium of instruction..."Some day, I hope to deliver the curriculum in Tamil," thought an angry young teacher then.

Vedashree joined us in class three. Chirpy, relaxed and very athletic. She was a pleasure to watch while at play. Our outings exposed us to realities of life. Often when we drove out, in busy traffic signals we caught glimpses of the less fortunate, gravitating towards cars seeking alms. We did not know what to grapple with, the misery of the poor on the roads OR the misery of Veda when she encountered them. All pain must lead to a capacity to heal...God knows how much of healing this world needs.

Vichitra. Every day in the lower grades, I'd be greeted with a tight hug. Now when she is angry, she turns her face growling and frowning. So typical of her - always wore her feelings on her sleeves. Born to lead. A whirlwind that can bring the roof down. The angel manifests when it's time to sing. In class one, she had already outdone me with regard to art and music. My heart rejoices with joy of the purest kind when I see her artwork or listen to her singing. The feminist buried within surfaces with glee when I see her take every bull by its horns. The world needs more and more Vichitras - but for the moment I am happy with one.

Navya, an antithesis to Vichitra. Yes they had their 'girlie' problems. Jealousies and making and breaking of friendships...yet each understanding

the unique place that the other had in the class. Navya's old school too had gotten her into the habit of pleasing adults; it took a while for her to become herself again. Recently she shared with us an incident where she took a stand about an issue in question. That's it lady. Life is not about pleasing anyone. Language in Navya's hands was never merely used but always created. The elegant nuances of her art can be stunning.

Sakshi - her artistic work like Navya's has a breathtaking quality. I remember Sakshi retelling stories in class one. She'd come to the fore and speak with such grace. Grace that enveloped the class. Grace that fell like a blessing from above. No one wanted it to end. Remember how beautifully she played the part of the 'Lordly Cock' in class two? Recently she had to play the role of a mean boss - and there I was thinking, "She'd make the most graceful villain." While the Vichitras and Kirans would take the class on a whirlwind trip - One Sakshi was all that was required to calm the storm. Always the silent strength.

Bushra. Protecting this tender little child was not so easy. The only task I thought I had with her was to help her find her real strength. Do we protect children too much in a Waldorf School? Yes indeed. We better do, till they can protect themselves. One day, she did let us know that the shield of protection was not needed anymore. The transforming process was imperceptible, but the transformation was conspicuous. In my block on Indian history, where I had to deal with the unpalatable goriness of

religious bigotry dividing humanity - there she was looking straight into my eyes telling me, "Don't build any bias." No lady, the world needs no more additions to its biased, warped and rotten understanding of history. She is my inspiration to get into researching Indian history from an anthroposophic perspective.

Nishita - Mystery. With all the other children, their adolescence seemed to match my predictions. Nishita is a rule unto herself. And no one knows how she gets away with every prank with her charm. I remember the day she joined us in grade one. A smile making a faint suggestion of dimples. And when she laughed it was like flowing river over pebbles - it still echoes within me. In the lower grades there was something very impersonal about her comments. When Nishita said something was wrong, it hurt, after all she was incapable of taking sides. And suddenly we had to grapple with a new Nishita. Joyous, vivacious, teasing, full of practical jokes and given to flights of real temper.

If you did not know that Nishita and Sresht were like cat and mouse - in that order you've lost your qualification to be a class parent of this lot.

Where is my little to grown up bespectacled intellectual, Medha. Already in class two, everyone thought that she deserved to be in class eight! But here is a story that lives in our silences...It took a whole year for Medha to attempt to retell a story in the class. And a whole seven years to volunteer to act in a play. When we

decided to put up the play of Archimedes, there were quite a few contenders for the role of Archimedes. What surprised us was Medha's hand going up. The poor teacher had to settle for a vote - sure enough the most robust actors voted for Medha happily, elated by her newfound confidence.

I am left with Rohan and Anisha. Did I say that I wanted this report to be a spontaneous overflow? Not pre-meditated? I must be lying. Every time these two names came up, I pushed it to the end.

My mentor, Tine, saw Rohan the first time. She sensed that he was going to be a handful and asked me, "Sure you want that brat?" I had no answer. He was in the KG and I went into their class to tell them a story. The day was over. Rohan suddenly appeared from nowhere to say bye to me. My first lesson in how to be a loving authority and what it means to children. Rohan was uncompromising. If my lesson went well, I could read it in his eyes. If not, I could feel him bury me alive. He pushed me mercilessly to give more than my best. I'd literally plan my lessons keeping Rohan in mind. If I did some justice to my role as a teacher, Rohan has had a major part in it. He always reminds me of this quote from the Bible: Love rejoices in truth. Rohan's love for me never stopped him from letting me know when I was lousy. This was mutual. He was happier to take my criticisms than my compliments. How many relationships in life can withstand such ruthless honesty? He will forever be my lesson in owning responsibilities in human relationships.

Anisha. the polar opposite of Rohan. I could come into the class and say anything under the sun and she thought that I was the greatest. (Not any more, thankfully. But even now, she is the most forgiving.) If Navya creates language, Anisha presides over it. All the wonderful storytelling of the early years transformed into intense writing skills. With such richness in content. In class one she once declared, "Anandhi teacher can never make a mistake." I am not sure Anisha. I can only thank you for not seeing them; perhaps a lesson I still have to learn...and am struggling with.

These children have enriched our lives. In each of us is a capacity to rise above human limitations - time and

again I've seen that in these children. They are asking this again from us. It is time for me to thank each and every one of you - none of you were limited by being attached merely to 'your child'. Not many teachers can boast of a parent group that formed a circle of trust around children. Thank you.

You are welcome to join me in setting up the room for their report day - in silence and peace.

The author has been connected with the Waldorf Educational movement in India since 1996, both as a parent and a teacher. Her professional years unfolded in Hyderabad. Presently, on a sabbatical, she trains and mentors in various educational contexts. She is now based in Chennai.

