

School Leadership: Understanding students' backgrounds

English

Our school is located in a village, in a rural area.

Being in a village, the children who attend mostly come from a lower social economic background and they choose to come to this government school.

As everybody knows, the fees here are nominal, so most students are from a lower economic background.

Because of this, in all of our planning, it is very important to understand the context of the school and the home life of the children.

Along with this, we also have to understand their family background; their reading and writing abilities, and comprehension skills.

We keep a record of the parents' professions, the atmosphere at home, the siblings.

We have all this information.

We organised a survey and the children completed a questionnaire, so we can plan activities according to the child and their specific background.

We have also created a profile for our teachers.

When I joined the school, I realised that during the harvesting season, the children's attendance is low.

Most parents are involved with agriculture, so they keep their children at home to help with the farming.

Children in the ninth and tenth standards are older, so they support their parents.

I have talked to the children about it and we have discussed children who have low attendance with our teachers.

When there is lot of work in the fields like sowing wheat, paddy cutting or paddy sowing, these children work in the fields.

At first, we explained to the children at prayer times and during assembly.

I convinced them that they were very lucky to have this school in their village. Otherwise they may have had to travel a long way to study after eighth class. I did not say that they would not be able to study. I said they would probably have to go far to do so, and they were very lucky.

They told their parents that their school was very nice, that we teach very well and that they will become good human beings by studying here.

I did not focus on whether they will become a teacher, doctor or an engineer. I told them that it's important to become a good human being first.

I told them that whenever they are absent, they should give us the real reason and not lie. At the start, I focused on that a lot.

I said, 'Whenever you are absent from school, tell me the truth that you went to work in the fields or you went to your relative's house, or some guests had come over.'

Then slowly the children started telling me the truth. When they started telling me the truth, I reacted positively. Now that's the situation today.

If any child seeks leave of absence, they have to submit an application first: 'That I have some work for two or three days.'

First they must come to me and give me a reason, and if the reason is genuine, I inform the teacher and we don't stop them. Otherwise, they would have been absent without informing us.

So to improve attendance in rural areas, we need to teach the children moral values.

All children are good. It all depends on how we handle them.

So if we scold them and say, 'If you don't come to school and are absent, we will exclude you,' their reaction will be, 'Well so be it – we have to work on the farms anyway.'

But no – through understanding their side of the problem, their background and their needs, we have planned our teaching and learning processes.

After arriving here, I started work on this and we are still moving in this direction.

There is a huge improvement in attendance.