

Environment Education In A Government School: My experiences at Hengavalli

in [Environmental Protection](#)

by [Deepthi Amin](#)



1. About the school

Government Higher Primary School, Hengavalli, is located at a village named Hengavalli, in Kundapur Taluk, Udupi District, Karnataka. My friend Poornima studied in this school and her father is the retired headmaster of this school. So, it was convenient for me and Poornima to start our project here as she knew the village, people and faculty. The school has a total of 104 kids from 1st-8th standard and 7 teachers. The project was started in October 2021. This is the report at the end of the second year.

2. About the project

We had only one plan when we started and that was to make children get to know who they share their lands with i.e. who creeps on the ground, who hides behind the rocks, who climbs the trees, what kind of trees and who flies in the sky and how they all affect our lives and how we affect theirs. Neither did we have any syllabus nor any prior experience. But we had a group of friends who shared their ideas and we often discussed what has been done and what needs to be done.

We (me and children) learnt almost everything through different activities like digging pits, sowing seeds, watering plants, removing weeds, watching birds, inventing card games, doing yoga, cooking, cleaning and through a lot of discussions. Sometimes I would guide them and sometimes they would guide me. I believe that this relationship where we treated each other as equals was the key to learning and sharing ideas (of course I would act like a strict teacher very rarely when it was absolutely necessary and that necessity kept on reducing with time).

3. What is your background that enabled you to take up this project?

I was always attracted to a lifestyle which is eco friendly, healthy and is full of learning new skills every day. My first exposure in this regard was Sangatya. Sangatya is collective around an organic farm located in Karkala Taluka, Udupi District, Karnataka. A place where there is no running water, no machines and no rat race. That is how my life was when I was young. The only difference was that back then it was not my choice. It's only when I came to Sangatya that I realized that a lifestyle like that makes sense only when it's a choice. And I am very glad that I made the right choice at the right time. My life changed after that. Through this place I met many other people, made new friends and traveled to many similar places in search of more learning. That was the only idea, to learn what I wanted to learn, what I thought matters the most, what I thought was necessary to go further in that direction. The journey is still going on. Over the past few years I have picked up some amazing habits like growing my own food, cooking, cycling, bird watching, reading, getting to know about the weeds and trees around me and being with children with the help of some wonderful people and all these things added up to make my life what it is today.

4. What have you learnt?

Consistency is the key. That's my biggest lesson. Things and people take time, change takes time. For desired change to occur one has to be consistent and patient. I have seen a child understanding the true meaning of something I said in the class, 2 years after the class. There are many instances like this through which I have understood that if something is worth doing then I should just go on with it whether or not I get to see the results at that moment or ever.

I have learnt that a child doesn't need a teacher who just teaches things but rather a listener to hear him or her out. Many of the brilliant ideas which I got came from listening to a child. Children have solved problems which I couldn't and it happened only by listening. They have shattered my pride and ego so many times and that has only helped me to get better. Teacher is not a person, it's a particular act at a particular moment. The act and the moment can be owned by anybody. So I no longer go to the class to teach. I go to see who takes that moment by which act and with that the class begins.

I have learnt to ask questions differently. For example, in the past if I wanted something to be done by children I would tell them how to do it, when to do it, who all should team up etc. Now I tell them "hey buddy, I want this particular thing to be done. But I don't know how to make you do it. Can you help me?" This works all the time and saves 90% of my energy. Children are better at planning, organizing themselves and choosing their leader. Though it takes more time, the process is so wonderful to watch and more efficient.

I have learnt that I should always give sensible answers to the children no matter what their age is. So I don't use sentences like "I can't tell you, you won't understand, you are too young, you should not be asking this, you don't need to know" etc. With time I have learnt to explain complicated things in a simple way so that a child can understand it. This habit has also made me creative. It changed my relationship with children completely.

5. What have the children learnt?

Because the children have been given the ownership of the work/learning they have become more responsible. A seed which they have sown, have seen it sprouting and which they have planted in the vegetable bed will be watered, observed and protected. They make sure to visit their plant after lunch with their plates full of water. That was not my Idea. Every time after they wash their plates or glasses they fill it and go straight to the plant.

They have learnt that it is okay to ask any kind of questions and that a discussion is always welcome. The information which they collect during the discussions stays safe in their heads. And I have seen them applying it in the most practical way. So I'm always open to discussions because I don't know which one will end up in a discovery.

Children have learnt to break rules in my class. Honestly I feel that most of these rules are made to suppress children and make it an easy job for the teacher to handle them. Children need not be handled. They are like forests: wild, diverse and self improving. They just need the right media. Converting the forest into a mono crop field is not growth. So we happily break a lot of rules and the results have been amazing.

It's quite common for children to come to the teacher with a complaint. The teacher listens to the story (not always) and punishes the guilty one. From what I have observed this only leads to more complaints. In fact children enjoy it when the naughty kid gets beaten up by the teacher. So they are always waiting to pull someone to the teacher's room. I was so tired of this that I decided to have a mini court, where I'm not the judge. We all listen to both sides and ask everyone (including the guilty and victim) what we should do about the situation. They come up with amazing solutions though they start with "he should get beatings". And most of the time the victim forgives the guilty. So children have learnt to solve problems better on their own.

6. What did the teachers and the school administration learn?

The teachers and the administration are much more supportive than before. Several times children have been sent to me for an extended lesson, to understand a topic better, for practical demonstrations. They reach out to me for advice related to health, flora and fauna, gardening etc. There are times when things seem too much to them, like the time when children and I found some dog bones and decided to keep them in the library, but they do not object.

7. What did the community learn?

My communication with the parents is much better now. I meet a lot of them and they talk about how much their child likes my class and all the new things he/she has learnt. They know that I'm concerned about the environment and we talk about that too. Near home things are much better. The garden has a huge role to play in it. If it is not the garden then the chicken coup or honey bees have this role. Our (me and Jeevan) tinkering business has taught us many skills and also made people think that we know things which they don't know . Sharing seeds, saplings, showing new vegetables, and honey bees have always been fun. I feel that a library and a garden are similar in many ways. Both of them are important when we are trying to learn and educate people about lifestyle, environment and ecology.

8. How did it affect the nature around you?

The habit of observing the nature around us, identifying the creatures in it has helped me and children to be sensitive around them. At homes children are always trained to avoid or kill these beautiful beings. Education has changed that. Now children go back home and correct their family's misunderstanding regarding the so-called dangerous creatures. Children always come back with a new argument/misunderstanding and then the answer is found after a discussion. Then they go back to convince their parents again. This continues for a few days. This process has definitely saved a lot of tiny lives because children now understand that those lives are important.

Another opinion among children has changed overtime. Many times in reality and in the documentaries which we see they notice that some animals dominate others. In nature there is always pain, torture, death, theft, violence, cheating etc. But these are all negative from a human perspective. With time children have learnt that there is no good or bad, decent or disgusting behavior in nature. And that it's all a journey towards survival and balance. They understand the cycle. In a way this also helps them understand human behavior.

9. How much have you learnt to communicate with nature/ could any of you hear nature communicate with you?

I spent most of my time outdoors. And I'm always observing something new. When I enter the garden I feel that I'm in a festival full of people. I interact with a lot of them. There are many residents out there who share the different spaces at different times. I speak with many garden lizards appreciating their acrobatic skills on different plants. I stand still when a spider is building its web to see in what direction it's moving. I follow the line of ants to see where they are coming from, where they are going and what they are taking. With that I have understood that I can walk around happily even in the presence of ants if I just avoid stepping on their line. After all, they are just busy people minding their own businesses. Biting me is an unnecessary, extra work. Kids do a better job at communicating with nature. I only talk about what I see in nature. Whereas the

children are pretty sure what nature is feeling and thinking. I can spend hours listening to that, appreciating their abilities to imagine things so well.

10. What would be your advice to a young person who wants to do similar work? What he/she should learn/ train her to be able to do this work?

First of all, they should be eager to learn. There is so much to see, feel, hear out there. And this is not taught in our schools and colleges. It can only be learnt with personal interest and effort. Anyone wanting to do something similar should ask themselves whether this is really something they are passionate about or is it just a fancy idea. If not sure then it's better to spend some time with someone who is already doing it. Their routine will give a lot of clarity.

Books– books have played a major role in my journey. They give us ideas, save our time and are available whenever we need them. I was lucky enough to have friends who could show me the right books. A good list of books related to the field is a must.

Working with **soil** – one should always spend at least 30 minutes working with the soil. It can start with filling a nursery bag and grow up to be a garden or a farm. Soil will show you what books and people can only talk about. And seeing it with your own effort is crucial.

Journal – Maintaining a journal and writing down the observations and lessons have always been useful. This prevents us from repeating our mistakes and keeps us on track.

Spending time with **children** – First of all one should like their company and listen to them rather than telling them what to do. Our personal homework matters a lot. We can't fool children. We need to know our soil, our trees and the beings in it. If we want to talk to kids about them then experiencing these ourselves is necessarily before making the kids do it. Because the children will learn from who we really are from who we say we are.

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