

I AM A WORK IN PROGRESS

A Teacher's Journey of
Learning, Unlearning and Becoming

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DEDICATION

To my beloved parents,

Mr. Suhas Bhide and Mrs. Sampada Bhide,

my first teachers, my first mentors, my greatest blessings.

Though you are no longer here to hold this book in your hands, every page carries your values, your wisdom and your unwavering belief in me.

You taught me that learning begins with humility, reflection and love.

This book is my way of saying...

Your lessons continue to live on.

With all my love.

Always.

PREFACE

I am a work in progress.

That is perhaps the most honest way I can introduce both myself and this book.

If you are looking for a book written by someone who has mastered every aspect of teaching, you may be disappointed.

This is not a book about getting everything right.

It is not a book that promises perfect classrooms, perfect strategies or perfect teachers.

Instead, it is a reflection of my journey—of learning, unlearning, making mistakes, questioning myself, seeking answers and slowly becoming a better educator, one child at a time.

Years ago, if someone had told me that I would one day write a book on teaching, I would have smiled politely and dismissed the idea.

Teaching was never part of my original plan.

Like many young professionals, I believed my future lay elsewhere. Armed with an MBA and aspirations of building a successful corporate career, I was confident that I knew where life was taking me.

Then my mother asked me a question that quietly changed the course of my life.

"Why don't you try teaching?"

I still remember my immediate response.

"I have an MBA. I have worked with reputed organisations. And you want me to become a teacher?"

Looking back today, I smile at that younger version of myself.

At that point in my life, I genuinely believed that my qualifications defined my capability. I thought I was the most educated person in the room and that there was very little left for me to learn.

How wonderfully wrong I was.

Nothing—not my degrees, not my professional experience and certainly not my confidence—had prepared me for the beautiful unpredictability of a classroom.

When I entered my first classroom, I carried lesson plans, activities and ideas.

What I did not carry was an understanding of children.

I thought my role was to teach them.

Little did I know that they would become my greatest teachers.

My mother became my very first mentor.

She never gave me answers.

She gave me questions.

Whenever I shared a classroom challenge with her, she never rushed to solve it for me. Instead, she gently encouraged me to think differently, observe more carefully and reflect more deeply.

She taught me that the best educators are not those who know the most.

They are the ones who remain willing to learn.

Without realising it, she planted the seed that would later shape my entire philosophy of teaching.

Reflection.

For many years, she was the person I turned to for every important decision in my life.

Then came the greatest loss I have ever known.

When I lost my mother, I did not just lose a parent.

I lost my first teacher.

My first mentor.

The person who had quietly helped me make sense of the world.

I suddenly found myself searching for answers that no one else could give me.

It was one of the most difficult phases of my life.

Yet, somewhere within that grief, another journey quietly began.

The journey inward.

For the first time, I truly began asking myself the questions she would have asked me.

I learnt to sit with uncertainty.

To reflect instead of react.

To seek growth instead of certainty.

To become my own guide while remaining open to learning from others.

That journey changed me as a person long before it changed me as a teacher.

As I continued teaching, I also had the privilege of learning from remarkable mentors, colleagues, parents and school leaders who challenged my thinking and expanded my understanding of education. They reminded me that professional growth never happens in isolation.

But if I am completely honest, the greatest lessons still came from the children.

They taught me patience.

Humility.

Trust.

Observation.

Acceptance.

They taught me that behaviour is communication.

That readiness cannot be rushed.

That relationships always come before strategies.

And perhaps most importantly, they taught me that before expecting children to change, I had to be willing to change myself.

Throughout my journey, I also realised something that no qualification had prepared me for.

Degrees give us knowledge.

Experience gives us confidence.

But it is reflection that gives us wisdom.

The classroom has a beautiful way of humbling us.

It reminds us that every child is different.

Every family has a story.

Every behaviour has meaning.

And every teacher, no matter how experienced, remains a learner.

This book is not a collection of perfect strategies.

It is not a guide that claims to have all the answers.

It is a collection of moments that transformed me.

Moments that challenged my assumptions.

Moments that helped me replace certainty with curiosity.

Moments that slowly shaped the educator I continue to become.

Every story you are about to read is inspired by real children who left an imprint on my heart and transformed my understanding of teaching. Their identities and personal details have been thoughtfully changed to honour and protect their privacy, but the lessons they taught me remain true.

If, somewhere within these pages, you find yourself pausing before judging a child...

If you choose curiosity over certainty...

If you begin observing a little more and labelling a little less...

If you walk into your classroom tomorrow believing that relationships matter before strategies...

Then this book will have fulfilled its purpose.

I continue to believe what I wrote in the very first sentence.

I am a work in progress.

And perhaps that is exactly what every good teacher should strive to be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No meaningful journey is ever walked alone.

Although this book carries my name on its cover, it is the reflection of countless people who have shaped my thinking, challenged my perspectives, believed in me during moments of self-doubt and inspired me to become the educator and person I continue to be.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, **Mr. Suhas Bhide** and **Mrs. Sampada Bhide**. You were my first teachers, my first mentors and my greatest role models. The values you instilled in me continue to guide every decision I make, both as an educator and as a person. Though you are no longer physically present, your wisdom, love and firm belief in me continue to illuminate my path every single day.

To my husband, **Omkar Bapat**, thank you for believing in me, encouraging every dream and standing beside me like a pillar through every challenge. Your patience, strong support and quiet strength have made this journey possible.

To my daughter, **Shamika**, thank you for bringing immeasurable joy into my life and deepening my understanding of childhood. Your pride in every milestone I reach touches my heart deeply. The twinkle in your eyes reminds me of my parents and the love that shaped me. You are my joy, my inspiration, and a beautiful reminder to keep learning, dreaming and becoming.

To my siblings, **Shweta Bhide** and **Rohan Bhide**, thank you for being my constant pillars of strength, my greatest

supporters and my forever safe place. Knowing that I can always count on you has been one of life's greatest blessings.

To the **Bhide family & Bapat's**, thank you for the love, encouragement and pride you have shown in every step of my journey. The way you celebrate my work, my milestones and even the little things I share with you means more to me than I can say.

My heartfelt gratitude to my mentor, **Dr. Praseedha Sreekumar**. Thank you for continually challenging my thinking, encouraging reflection and helping me view myself through a wider and more thoughtful lens. Your mentorship has influenced not only my professional journey but also the person I continue to become. **Dr. Sonali Malhotra**, Early Childhood Specialist and Author — thank you for your invaluable mentorship, for continually inspiring me, and for the many thought-provoking conversations that have shaped the way I think, reflect, and grow. Your ability to encourage me to question, challenge assumptions, and look beyond the obvious has had a lasting impact on both my personal and professional journey.

To **Ms. Vijeta Sinha**, thank you for your first reading, trust and belief in my work. Your support has motivated me to continue striving for excellence while remaining grounded in the values that matter most.

Finally, and most importantly, to every child who has ever walked into my classroom...

Thank you for your laughter.

Your curiosity.

Your questions.

Your imagination.

Your tears.

Your trust.

Your courage.

You may have entered my classroom believing that I was there to teach you.

The truth is, you quietly became my greatest teachers.

The stories and reflections in this book are inspired by my experiences as an educator. Names and identifying details have been changed, and the characters portrayed are fictionalised. They are not intended to represent or identify any particular child, student or family, past or present. Any resemblance to identifiable individuals is purely coincidental.

As I look back on this journey, I realise that this book was never written by one person.

It was written through relationships.

Through conversations.

Through classrooms.

Through reflection.

Through love.

And through every individual who reminded me that education is not about having all the answers—it is about remaining willing to learn.

To each of you, thank you for being a part of my journey.

This book belongs to all of us.

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CHAPTER 1

The Child Who Changed the Way I Saw Behaviour

Sometimes the first person who needs to grow in the classroom is the teacher.

From My Classroom

One of the children I taught became one of the greatest teachers in my own journey as an educator.

On paper, he was every teacher's dream. Academically, he was exceptional. He grasped new concepts almost instantly and retained them with remarkable ease. His worksheets were beautifully completed, his handwriting was neat and well-formed, and he constantly wanted to learn more. Even before he transitioned to Grade 1, he would eagerly ask me to teach him joined handwriting because he was always ready for the next challenge.

He was curious, intelligent and genuinely loved learning.

If someone had looked only at his academic profile, they would have expected him to have a smooth and successful school journey.

But my everyday classroom experience told a very different story.

He found it difficult to remain engaged during whole-group learning experiences. Sitting through circle time was challenging. He frequently got up from his place, moved around the classroom, interrupted discussions, answered

before others had a chance to speak and, at times, hit or poked his peers with whatever happened to be in his hand. His actions often disturbed the learning of others, and naturally, his classmates began complaining about him.

Gradually, despite his many strengths, his behaviour became the first thing everyone noticed.

As his class teacher, I felt deeply responsible.

I wanted to help him.

But I honestly didn't know how.

I tried every classroom management strategy I knew. I redirected him, reminded him of expectations, reinforced positive behaviour, changed seating arrangements, provided movement breaks and looked for ways to keep him engaged. Some strategies worked briefly, but nothing created meaningful or lasting change.

There were days when I went home feeling completely helpless.

I questioned myself as an educator.

"Why am I not able to reach this child?"

I remember feeling emotionally exhausted because nothing I tried seemed to make a difference. Every morning I walked into the classroom hoping that today would be different.

I even requested our school counsellor to observe him. Unfortunately, we never had enough opportunities to gather meaningful observations, and we were left with more questions than answers.

At that point, I realised I had two choices.

I could continue searching for another behaviour management strategy.

Or I could stop and ask myself a different question.

What am I missing?

That simple question changed everything.

Instead of focusing on changing his behaviour, I began intentionally building my relationship with him.

He was usually one of the first children to arrive at school every morning. Those quiet moments before the rest of the class arrived became our time together. We talked about his day, the things he enjoyed, the questions he had and, sometimes, about nothing in particular.

Those conversations were never about correcting his behaviour.

They were about building trust.

Over time, I became someone he felt safe talking to.

I also noticed that he responded remarkably well when he was given meaningful responsibility.

Every morning, I entrusted him with watering the school plants. It became his responsibility, something the classroom depended on him to do. I also gave him small but purposeful jobs—arranging learning materials, preparing resources and helping set up the classroom before everyone else arrived.

These were never rewards for good behaviour.

They were opportunities for him to experience responsibility, ownership and success.

Those morning routines helped him settle into the school day. They gave him purpose, helped him feel valued and quietly communicated something every child longs to hear:

"I trust you.

You are capable.

You are an important part of this classroom."

As our relationship grew stronger, he gradually began sharing small pieces of his world with me.

One morning, during one of our conversations, he quietly said something I have never forgotten.

"I loved my pet... and it left me."

He paused for a few moments before adding,

"Whenever I like someone... they go away."

He wasn't crying.

He wasn't having a meltdown.

He simply said it as a five-year-old trying to make sense of a world that had already taught him about loss.

In that moment, everything I had been struggling to understand suddenly made sense.

The restlessness.

The impulsive behaviour.

The constant need for connection.

The difficulty settling into the day.

I realised I wasn't looking at a child who wanted to make my classroom difficult.

I was looking at a little boy carrying grief and an overwhelming fear of losing the people he loved.

That conversation changed me.

From that day onwards, I stopped searching for better behaviour management strategies.

Instead, I focused on becoming a consistent, safe and trusted adult in his life.

Our quiet morning conversations continued. His classroom responsibilities became part of his daily routine. Together with his family, we worked towards creating consistent routines and expectations between home and school so that he experienced predictability, security and stability wherever he was.

There was no single strategy that transformed this child's journey.

It was the combination of trust, meaningful relationships, purposeful responsibility, careful observation, consistency and a strong partnership with his family that slowly made the difference.

Today, that little boy is in Grade 5.

He is happy.

He is settled.

He is thriving.

Teachers admire him. His classmates enjoy being with him, and whenever I hear about how well he is doing, I cannot help but smile.

Not because I found the perfect classroom management strategy.

But because he reminded me of something I will carry throughout my career.

Before we try to change a child's behaviour, we must first understand the child behind the behaviour.

Sometimes the greatest transformation in a classroom does not begin with the child.

It begins with the teacher choosing to see the child before the behaviour.

Looking Back...

When I look back at this experience today, I don't just remember a little boy who struggled with his behaviour.

I remember a young teacher who desperately wanted to help but didn't yet know how.

Like many educators at the beginning of their careers, I believed that good teaching meant having the right strategy for every situation. If a child struggled to sit during circle time, I needed a better classroom management technique. If a child interrupted lessons, perhaps I needed firmer expectations. If a child's behaviour continued despite my efforts, I assumed I simply hadn't discovered the right approach yet.

Every challenge seemed to have a strategy.

Or so I believed.

Looking back now, I realise that I was trying to manage what I could see, without fully understanding what I couldn't.

His behaviour was visible.

His emotions were not.

His actions demanded my attention.

His experiences silently shaped those actions.

As teachers, we are often trained to observe behaviour, document incidents and implement strategies. These are all important parts of our role. Yet, somewhere along the way, I realised that behaviour is rarely the beginning of the story.

It is often the final expression of something much deeper.

Children do not always have the language to tell us they are grieving.

They cannot always explain that they feel anxious, overwhelmed or afraid.

Many are still developing the emotional awareness, vocabulary and executive function skills needed to recognise their own feelings, let alone communicate them.

So, they communicate in the only ways they can.

Through their behaviour.

The little boy in my classroom wasn't trying to make my day difficult.

He was trying to make sense of emotions that were far bigger than his five-year-old world.

The greatest lesson I learnt was that behaviour is not something we simply manage.

It is something we seek to understand.

That experience completely changed the questions I began asking myself.

Instead of asking,

"How do I stop this behaviour?"

I found myself asking,

"What is this child trying to tell me?"

That one question continues to guide me, not only as a teacher but also as a school leader.

Because every behaviour has a story.

And every story deserves to be understood before it is corrected.

Understanding the Child Through a Different Lens

When I lived this experience, I wasn't consciously thinking about educational theories.

I wasn't analysing executive function skills or attachment. I wasn't trying to implement Developmentally Appropriate Practice. I certainly wasn't thinking about the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori or Erikson while standing in front of twenty energetic five-year-olds.

I was simply trying to help one child.

Years later, when I revisited this experience through the lens of child development, everything began to make sense.

I realised that the strategies which had made the greatest difference were never really behaviour management strategies.

They were developmental supports.

Every morning conversation helped him feel emotionally safe.

Every classroom responsibility strengthened his sense of competence and belonging.

Every predictable routine reduced uncertainty.

Every successful experience built confidence.

Without realising it, I wasn't trying to eliminate his behaviour—I was helping him develop the skills that lay beneath it.

Today, we describe many of these as **executive function skills**.

Executive function refers to the brain's management system. These are the mental processes that help children regulate emotions, control impulses, focus attention, remember instructions, organise their thoughts and manage everyday tasks. These skills are not fully developed in young children; they continue to mature gradually throughout childhood and adolescence.

Looking back, I could now see that many of the behaviours I found challenging were not acts of defiance.

They were signs of skills that were still developing.

His difficulty remaining seated reflected challenges with impulse control and self-regulation.

His interruptions during discussions suggested that waiting, listening and inhibitory control were still emerging.

His need to move constantly reminded me that sustained attention develops over time and looks different for every child.

Instead of asking him to simply "behave better," I unknowingly began creating opportunities for him to practise these skills every single day.

The responsibility of watering the plants wasn't just a classroom job.

It strengthened planning, organisation, accountability and persistence.

Our quiet conversations weren't simply friendly chats.

They became opportunities for co-regulation, emotional safety and trust.

The consistent morning routine wasn't merely about classroom management.

It provided the predictability his developing brain needed.

Looking back, I also recognise how several educational thinkers quietly influenced my practice, even though I wasn't consciously applying their theories at the time.

Lev Vygotsky reminded me that children learn through meaningful interactions with caring adults. Those quiet morning conversations became the bridge that allowed learning to happen.

Maria Montessori believed that purposeful work nurtures independence, responsibility and confidence. Giving this little boy meaningful classroom responsibilities wasn't a distraction from learning—it became part of his learning.

Erik Erikson described the early years as a stage where children develop initiative when trusted with meaningful opportunities to contribute. Every time I communicated, "I

trust you," I was helping him experience success instead of failure.

Most importantly, this experience taught me the true meaning of Developmentally Appropriate Practice.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice asks us to meet children where they are, understand their individual development and intentionally create experiences that help them grow from that point.

It reminds us that children are not all ready for the same expectations at the same time.

Some need more movement.

Some need more structure.

Some need more reassurance.

Some simply need one adult who believes in them before they begin believing in themselves.

That little boy didn't need a teacher who could control his behaviour.

He needed a teacher who could understand his development.

And perhaps that is the greatest shift I have experienced as an educator.

Today, I no longer ask,

"How do I manage this behaviour?"

Instead, I ask,

"What developmental skill is this child still learning, and how can I intentionally help them practise it?"

That question has shaped every classroom I have led since.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

Every classroom has a child who challenges us—not because they are difficult, but because they invite us to teach differently.

Looking back at this experience, I often ask myself, *"What would I do if this little boy walked into my classroom today?"* The answer is very different from what it was years ago.

I would not begin by searching for another behaviour management strategy.

I would begin by observing.

Before trying to change the child, I would try to understand the child.

I would ask myself:

- ☐ What strengths does this child already possess?
- ☐ When does the child feel most successful?
- ☐ What situations seem to trigger the behaviour?
- ☐ What might the child be trying to communicate?
- ☐ Which developmental skills are still emerging?
- ☐ What changes can I make to the environment before expecting the child to change?

I would intentionally invest time in building a relationship before expecting compliance.

A warm greeting at the classroom door.

A few quiet minutes before the school day begins.

A meaningful classroom responsibility.

A genuine conversation.

These moments may seem small, but they often become the foundation upon which trust, confidence and learning are built.

I have also learnt that meaningful responsibility is one of the greatest gifts we can offer young children. When children are trusted with purposeful work, they begin to see themselves as capable contributors rather than constant recipients of adult direction.

Most importantly, I have learnt to shift my thinking.

Instead of asking,

"How do I stop this behaviour?"

I now ask,

"What skill is this child still developing, and how can I help them practise it every day?"

That single question changes everything.

It changes how we observe.

It changes how we respond.

It changes the way we build our classrooms.

And, most importantly, it changes the way children experience school.

Pause and Reflect

As you finish reading this chapter, I invite you to think about one child in your own classroom.

Not the easiest child.

Not the most academically successful child.

Think about the child who challenges you the most.

Now pause for a moment and reflect.

- **Which child came to your mind while reading this chapter?**
- **What behaviours do you notice most often?**
- **What assumptions have you unconsciously made about this child?**
- **What strengths have you noticed that deserve more attention?**
- **What might this child's behaviour be trying to communicate?**
- **Which executive function or developmental skills may still be emerging?**
- **What is one relationship-building action you will intentionally take this week?**
- **What is one change you can make to your classroom environment that may help this child experience greater success?**

Now, one final question.

It is the question I continue to ask myself throughout my journey as an educator.

If this child were to write a story about you one day, what would you hope they would say?

Before We Meet the Next Child...

This little boy taught me that behaviour is communication.

Just when I thought I had begun to understand children a little better, another child entered my classroom and challenged me in an entirely different way.

She had no spoken words.

Yet she taught me that communication does not always need a voice.

She reminded me that sometimes, the most important conversations happen without words at all.

And once again, I found myself becoming the student in my own classroom.

CHAPTER 2

The Child Who Taught Me That Every Child Has a Voice

*"Sometimes, the most meaningful conversations happen
without a single spoken word."*

From My Classroom

Just when I thought I had begun to understand behaviour a little better, another child entered my classroom and transformed my thinking once again.

She was six years old and a part of my UKG class.

Unlike the little boy from my previous story, she never disrupted the classroom.

She wasn't impulsive.

She wasn't restless.

She wasn't aggressive.

In fact, she was one of the gentlest children I had ever taught.

She smiled warmly, enjoyed being around her classmates and watched everything happening around her with quiet curiosity.

But she did not use spoken language to communicate.

As a young teacher, I remember wondering how I would reach her.

Every classroom has children with different personalities, different interests and different ways of learning. I had

always believed that with thoughtful planning, engaging activities and good classroom management, every child would eventually find a way to participate.

This time, I realised I was wrong.

Nothing I knew seemed enough.

Every morning I greeted her with a smile, hoping that today would be different.

I tried stories.

Circle time.

Songs.

Games.

Play.

Gentle encouragement.

I invited her into group activities and paired her with kind, caring classmates.

Yet, despite all my efforts, I struggled to build the connection I was hoping for.

She often communicated through her eyes, her facial expressions and her gestures.

Sometimes she smiled.

Sometimes she quietly cried because she could not tell us what she needed.

Watching her struggle without being able to fully understand her was one of the most difficult experiences of my early teaching career.

She also needed considerable support with everyday routines.

Eating.

Drinking water.

Using the washroom.

Managing simple self-help tasks.

Many of the things her classmates were beginning to do independently still required patient guidance and reassurance.

I wanted to help her.

But if I am honest...

I didn't know how.

There were evenings when I went home wondering if I was doing enough.

Or perhaps more truthfully...

Whether I was doing the right things at all.

Months passed.

Then, almost by accident, I noticed something I had somehow overlooked.

Whenever music filled the classroom, she changed.

Her eyes brightened.

She smiled.

She moved gently to the rhythm.

For those few moments, I wasn't trying to encourage participation.

She was already participating.

The same thing happened during art.

While spoken words were absent, colours spoke beautifully.

Her drawings expressed feelings, interests and ideas in ways that words never had.

That was the turning point.

Instead of asking,

"How do I teach this child?"

I began asking,

"How does this child learn?"

The answer had been quietly waiting for me all along.

From that day onwards, I began planning intentional art experiences—not simply as creative activities, but as opportunities for communication.

Music became more than a joyful part of our classroom.

It became part of our teaching.

Songs helped communicate routines, transitions and classroom expectations.

We introduced visual schedules so she could see what her day would look like instead of relying only on spoken instructions.

We also began using smiley cards and simple visual choices that allowed children to communicate their feelings, preferences and needs without words.

One decision I made during this journey became one of the greatest lessons of my teaching career.

I never wanted her to feel different.

So I chose not to introduce these supports only for her.

Instead, they became part of our classroom culture.

Every child used the visual schedule.

Every child learnt through songs.

Every child used smiley cards to express how they felt.

Every child learnt that communication could happen in many different ways.

What began as support for one child gradually became a richer learning experience for every child.

Something beautiful happened.

Her classmates naturally learnt to understand her gestures.

They waited patiently while she communicated.

They celebrated her attempts.

They included her more confidently in conversations, classroom activities and play.

Without consciously planning it, we had created a classroom where differences were not highlighted.

They were simply accepted.

Her confidence grew.

Her participation increased.

Her relationships with her peers became stronger.

The greatest breakthrough was not that she suddenly began speaking.

The greatest breakthrough was that she no longer needed spoken words to belong.

Looking back today, I realise that I wasn't simply helping one child communicate.

She was teaching me a completely new language.

A language of observation.

A language of patience.

A language that reminded me that communication is far greater than speech.

She taught me that every child already has a voice.

Our responsibility as educators is not to wait for children to communicate the way we expect.

Our responsibility is to discover how they are already communicating—and to make sure they are heard.

That lesson has stayed with me in every classroom I have entered since.

Looking Back...

When I look back at this chapter of my teaching journey, I don't first remember the classroom strategies, the visual schedules or the songs.

I remember feeling completely unequipped.

My teacher education had given me a strong foundation in child development, lesson planning and classroom management. It had prepared me to teach a classroom of children.

But it had not prepared me to teach a classroom where every child learnt, communicated and experienced the world differently.

As a young teacher, I quietly believed that if I planned engaging lessons, every child would participate.

If I explained concepts clearly enough, every child would understand.

If I created a warm classroom environment, every child would eventually connect.

Then she came into my classroom.

For the first time, I realised that equality and inclusion are not the same.

Treating every child exactly the same did not mean every child could participate equally.

She did not need me to repeat my instructions more loudly.

She needed me to communicate differently.

She did not need me to expect more from her.

She needed me to understand more about her.

That realisation was both humbling and transformative.

For months, I believed I was trying different ways to help her learn.

Looking back now, I realise I was still expecting her to adapt to my way of teaching.

The breakthrough happened only when I stopped asking,

"How can I make her learn the way I teach?"

and started asking,

"How can I teach the way she learns?"

That one shift changed everything.

It also changed me.

I began to understand that inclusion is not about asking children to fit into our classrooms.

It is about creating classrooms flexible enough to welcome every child.

Perhaps the greatest lesson she taught me was this:

Children should never have to earn their place in our classrooms by learning like everyone else.

They already belong.

It is our teaching that must grow.

As educators, we often celebrate professional development, workshops and qualifications. They are important, and they continue to shape us throughout our careers.

But some of the most profound learning cannot be found in a training programme.

It happens on ordinary school days, standing beside one child, trying something different because what worked yesterday no longer works today.

That is where theory quietly becomes practice.

That is where experience deepens knowledge.

That is where teachers truly begin to grow.

Looking back, I realise that this little girl was never waiting for me to teach her.

She was patiently teaching me how to become the educator she needed.

And in doing so, she changed the teacher I would become for countless children who entered my classroom after her.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

This little girl taught me a lesson that extends far beyond supporting children with diverse communication needs.

She taught me to look at every child with curiosity before judgement.

As educators, we often find ourselves asking:

"How can I help this child fit into my classroom?"

Today, I ask a different question.

"How can my classroom adapt so that this child can participate, belong and succeed?"

That small shift in thinking changes everything.

It changes the way we plan.

It changes the way we teach.

It changes the way children experience school.

Looking back, I realise that the most powerful decision I made was not introducing visual schedules or smiley cards.

It was deciding that these supports would belong to everyone.

The visual schedule was displayed for the entire class.

Songs became part of every transition.

Visual cues supported every learner.

Smiley cards became a language every child could use.

No child was singled out.

No child was made to feel different.

Instead of creating accommodations for one learner, we enriched the learning experience for everyone.

That is what true inclusion looks like.

Inclusion is not about creating a separate system for a few children.

It is about designing classrooms where every child finds a way to participate.

Some children communicate through spoken words.

Some communicate through movement.

Some through music.

Some through art.

Some through silence.

Every form of communication deserves to be recognised, respected and valued.

As educators, our responsibility is not to decide which form of communication is acceptable.

Our responsibility is to notice it.

To nurture it.

And to respond to it.

When we shift our thinking from asking children to adapt to our teaching, to adapting our teaching to meet children's

strengths and developmental needs, something remarkable happens.

Children begin to experience success.

Families begin to feel understood.

Teachers begin to see possibilities instead of limitations.

And classrooms become communities where every child knows,

"I belong here."

Pause and Reflect

As you finish reading this chapter, think about one child in your classroom whose way of learning or communicating is different from most of their peers.

Now reflect honestly.

- **How does this child communicate when words are not enough?**
- **What strengths have you observed that may not be recognised through traditional classroom activities?**
- **What does this child genuinely enjoy doing?**
- **How could you use that strength as a bridge for learning?**
- **Which classroom routines rely heavily on spoken instructions?**
- **How might visual supports, music, movement or peer learning make those routines more accessible for every child?**

- **Is there a classroom support that could benefit all children rather than being introduced for just one child?**
- **What is one intentional change you will make this week to create a more inclusive learning environment?**

Now pause and ask yourself one final question.

When children leave my classroom, will they remember that they learnt in my class... or will they remember that they truly belonged there?

Before We Meet the Next Child...

One child taught me to look beyond behaviour.

Another taught me to look beyond words.

The next child would teach me something I had never considered before—that learning cannot be measured by milestones alone.

Two children of the same age can sit side by side in the same classroom, yet be on entirely different developmental journeys.

Understanding that changed the way I planned, observed and taught.

Once again, I found myself becoming the student in my own classroom.

CHAPTER 3

The Child Who Taught Me That Fear Exists on Both Sides

"Sometimes the child is afraid. Sometimes the teacher is too. Healing begins when both find a place of safety."

From My Classroom

By now, I had begun to believe I understood children a little better.

One child had taught me to look beyond behaviour.

Another had taught me that communication does not always need spoken words.

Then came a little girl who quietly challenged everything I thought I had learnt.

She was in Junior Kindergarten.

Academically, she was exceptionally bright.

She grasped concepts quickly, answered questions confidently and enjoyed learning. Despite having delayed speech and a noticeable lisp, she possessed a remarkable curiosity and understood far more than many people realised.

She came from a loving, privileged joint family where she was deeply cherished.

On paper, there was every reason to believe she would flourish.

Yet, inside the classroom, a very different picture unfolded.

She struggled to settle into routines.

She found it difficult to sustain attention.

She would suddenly run around the classroom, interrupt learning experiences, cry inconsolably and throw intense tantrums that seemed to appear without warning.

She often became distracted and found it difficult to complete tasks, even though I knew she was academically capable of doing them.

She also said things that left me confused.

There were occasions when she would tell others that she had been shouted at or treated unkindly, even though every adult around her had responded with patience and warmth.

She frequently spoke about feeling unsafe.

At times, she expressed anger towards her own mother in ways that seemed far beyond what I could understand.

None of it seemed to fit together.

I remember trying everything I knew.

Gentle conversations.

Positive reinforcement.

Clear routines.

Working closely with her mother.

Encouragement.

Reassurance.

Nothing seemed to make a lasting difference.

If I am completely honest, there came a point when I no longer knew what to do.

And that frightened me.

Not because of the child.

But because I was terrified of getting it wrong.

Every interaction made me second-guess myself.

Every difficult day left me wondering whether I had misunderstood her.

Every conversation with her family felt emotionally heavy because I desperately wanted to help but couldn't seem to find a way through.

For the first time in my teaching journey, I found myself feeling anxious before she even walked into the classroom.

That admission is not easy to make.

Teachers rarely speak about their own fears.

We are expected to be calm.

Confident.

Certain.

Yet behind those expectations are human beings who sometimes question themselves deeply.

I was one of them.

Then life interrupted my classroom in a way I never expected.

Around that time, my own mother was unwell.

Occasionally, I would receive urgent phone calls from my family during school hours about her medical appointments, reports or treatment decisions.

Whenever that happened, I always explained it honestly to my class.

I would tell the children,

"It's a family call about my mother. Another teacher is with you, and I'll be back in just a moment."

I never imagined that such an ordinary moment would become the turning point in one of the most important relationships of my teaching career.

One day, after one of those conversations, she quietly came and sat beside me.

There was no tantrum.

No tears.

No anger.

Just silence.

Then she looked at me and, in her own way, shared something that I have carried with me ever since.

She told me she was scared.

Scared that her mother might hurt her.

Scared that she wasn't safe.

In that moment, everything changed.

Suddenly, I wasn't looking at a child who constantly cried, created stories or struggled to regulate her emotions.

I was looking at a little girl carrying fear that no six-year-old should have to carry alone.

I realised that I had been trying to change the behaviour of a frightened child.

What she needed first was not correction.

She needed safety.

And perhaps, without realising it, so did I.

The conversation stayed with me long after that school day ended.

For the first time, I stopped looking at her behaviour as a series of classroom challenges that needed to be managed.

Instead, I began seeing them as expressions of a little girl who was searching for safety, reassurance and connection.

Did everything change overnight?

Not at all.

She still had difficult days.

There were still tears.

There were still moments when she became overwhelmed, struggled to regulate her emotions or found it difficult to participate in classroom learning.

The difference was not in her.

The difference was in me.

I no longer entered the classroom wondering how I would manage her behaviour.

I entered the classroom wondering how I could help her feel emotionally safe enough to learn.

Around that time, I took a short sabbatical from school.
When I eventually returned, life surprised me once again.
She was still there.
Only this time, she was in the next grade.
And once again...
I was her class teacher.
Perhaps life was giving me another opportunity.
Not to teach the child.
But to become the teacher she needed.
This time, I consciously chose to begin with our relationship.
I invested time in getting to know her beyond the classroom routines.
I celebrated every small success.
I looked for opportunities to notice her strengths before pointing out her mistakes.
I learnt that she loved being acknowledged for her effort.
She enjoyed challenges, not because she wanted to compete with others, but because every success reassured her that she was capable.
Positive reinforcement worked beautifully—not as a reward system, but as a way of nurturing her confidence.
Whenever she experienced success, no matter how small, I made sure she knew I had noticed.
Slowly, she began believing in herself.
Academically, one particular challenge stood out.

She was deeply anxious about number addition.

The fear of getting it wrong often prevented her from even attempting the task.

Traditional worksheets only increased her hesitation.

So we stepped away from paper and pencil.

Instead, we learnt through play.

We counted objects.

We used blocks, beads and everyday classroom materials.

We moved.

We touched.

We explored.

Mathematics became something she could experience rather than something she had to fear.

Role play became another powerful bridge.

Through stories, puppets and imaginative play, she gradually found safe ways to express emotions that had once appeared only as tears, anger or frustration.

Sometimes the puppet was worried.

Sometimes the story character was frightened.

Sometimes the doll missed her mother.

And in helping those characters solve their problems, she slowly began making sense of her own feelings.

Looking back, I realise that I wasn't simply teaching mathematics or language.

I was helping a little girl discover that the classroom could be a place where mistakes were safe, emotions were accepted and learning did not require perfection.

The behaviours that had once overwhelmed me gradually became less frequent.

Not because someone had "fixed" the child.

But because she no longer had to spend so much energy protecting herself.

She had begun to trust.

And trust made learning possible.

Today, when I think about her, I don't remember the tantrums or the tears.

I remember her courage.

I remember the little victories that most people never saw.

The first time she attempted an addition activity without fear.

The first time she expressed disappointment without a meltdown.

The first time she celebrated someone else's success.

Those moments may have seemed ordinary to others.

To me, they were extraordinary.

They reminded me that teaching is rarely about dramatic transformations.

More often, it is about patiently creating the conditions in which children feel safe enough to grow.

That little girl taught me that emotional safety is not a luxury in education.

It is the foundation upon which every other form of learning is built.

Understanding the Child Through a Different Lens

At the time, I wasn't consciously thinking about neuroscience, attachment or social-emotional development.

I was simply trying to help one little girl who needed far more than academic instruction.

Years later, when I reflected on this experience through the lens of child development, I realised that the greatest challenge in my classroom had never been her behaviour.

It had been fear.

Fear has a profound impact on how children think, learn and behave.

When a child does not feel emotionally safe, the brain naturally prioritises protection over learning. Attention becomes fragmented, working memory is affected, emotions become difficult to regulate and even simple classroom expectations can begin to feel overwhelming.

Looking back, I realised that many of the behaviours I had initially tried to manage were actually stress responses.

The crying.

The running away.

The emotional outbursts.

The constant need for reassurance.

The stories that blurred the line between imagination and reality.

They were not deliberate attempts to create disruption.

They were expressions of a child whose emotional world felt uncertain.

One of the most important lessons this experience taught me was the power of **psychological safety**.

Children learn best when they believe they are emotionally safe, accepted and valued.

Psychological safety does not mean removing all challenges.

It means creating an environment where children know they can make mistakes, ask for help, express emotions and try again without fear of embarrassment, rejection or failure.

Looking back, I also recognised how strongly this experience reflected the work of **Lev Vygotsky**.

Learning did not happen because I explained concepts differently.

Learning happened because trust came first.

Our relationship became the bridge that made learning possible.

Maria Montessori often reminded us that children flourish in environments that nurture independence while respecting individual development.

By allowing her to explore mathematics through play, tactile materials and movement, I wasn't lowering expectations.

I was providing a pathway that matched her developmental readiness.

This experience also deepened my understanding of **Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)**.

DAP reminds us that children of the same chronological age are not necessarily at the same developmental stage.

While one child may confidently solve number problems using symbols, another may still need to touch, move and manipulate real objects before abstract concepts begin to make sense.

Neither child is behind.

They are simply developing differently.

Perhaps the greatest learning for me came from understanding **social-emotional development**.

Emotional regulation, confidence, resilience and self-belief are not separate from academic learning.

They make academic learning possible.

Only when she began feeling emotionally secure did she become willing to take risks, attempt difficult tasks and believe that mistakes were part of learning rather than evidence of failure.

Looking back today, I realise that positive reinforcement worked not because it rewarded behaviour, but because it strengthened her belief that she was capable.

Role play worked because it provided a safe space to explore emotions that were difficult to express directly.

Manipulatives worked because they transformed abstract concepts into meaningful experiences.

Relationships worked because they gave her something every child deserves before any lesson begins.

A sense of belonging.

Today, whenever I meet a child who appears anxious, resistant or emotionally overwhelmed, I no longer begin by asking,

"Why isn't this child learning?"

Instead, I ask,

"Does this child feel safe enough to learn?"

Because before children can engage with a lesson, they must first believe that the classroom is a place where they are accepted, understood and emotionally secure.

That understanding has changed not only the way I teach.

It has changed the kind of classroom I strive to create every single day.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

Every classroom has children who arrive carrying invisible emotions.

Some express them through tears.

Some through anger.

Some through silence.

Some through constant reassurance-seeking.

And some through behaviours that are easily misunderstood.

As teachers, we may not always know the complete story behind a child's behaviour.

Nor is it our role to investigate or diagnose.

Our responsibility is something equally important.

To create classrooms where every child feels emotionally safe enough to learn.

Looking back, I often ask myself what I would do differently if I met this little girl for the very first time today.

I would spend less time asking, *"How do I stop this behaviour?"*

And much more time asking,

"What does this child need from me today?"

Sometimes, that need may be reassurance.

Sometimes, it may be structure and predictability.

Sometimes, it may be a quiet conversation.

Sometimes, it may simply be knowing that one caring adult believes in them.

One of the greatest lessons this child taught me was that emotional safety is created through everyday interactions.

It is built when children are greeted warmly each morning.

It grows when mistakes are treated as opportunities to learn rather than reasons for embarrassment.

It strengthens when children are challenged while also knowing that failure will never change their worth.

It deepens when teachers notice effort before perfection and progress before performance.

This experience also reminded me that learning does not always begin with a worksheet.

Sometimes it begins with a story.

A puppet.

A role-play activity.

A game.

A handful of counting blocks.

A conversation.

These experiences may look like play.

In reality, they are carefully designed opportunities for children to develop confidence, emotional regulation, communication and problem-solving alongside academic concepts.

When children feel safe, they become willing to explore.

When they explore, they begin to learn.

When they experience success, they develop confidence.

And confident children become independent learners.

Perhaps the most important lesson I carry from this experience is this:

Children rarely remember every lesson we teach.

But they always remember how we made them feel while they were learning.

As educators, we have the privilege of creating classrooms where children do more than achieve academically.

We create classrooms where they feel seen.

Heard.

Respected.

Capable.

Safe.

And sometimes, that becomes the greatest lesson they carry with them long after they leave our classroom.

Pause and Reflect

As you reflect on this chapter, think about one child who often seeks reassurance, struggles with confidence or finds it difficult to regulate emotions.

Take a few quiet moments to write honestly.

- **What situations seem to make this child feel anxious or insecure?**
- **When have you seen this child smile with genuine confidence? What was different in that moment?**
- **How do you currently acknowledge this child's efforts?**
- **Are your classroom expectations communicated in different ways (spoken, visual, through play and demonstration), or do they rely mainly on verbal instructions?**
- **What opportunities do children have to express their emotions safely in your classroom?**
- **What is one classroom routine that could become more playful, more inclusive or more emotionally supportive?**
- **What is one intentional step you will take this week to help a child feel emotionally safe enough to learn?**

Now pause for one final reflection.

Every child remembers a teacher who made them feel safe.

When your students remember you years from now, what feeling do you hope they will associate with your classroom?

Before We Meet the Next Child...

Three children.

Three very different journeys.

One taught me to look beyond behaviour.

Another taught me to listen beyond words.

The third taught me that before children can truly learn, they must first feel safe.

As my years in education unfolded, I began to notice something else.

Not every child who struggled was experiencing emotional difficulty.

Some simply learnt differently.

The next child reminded me that readiness cannot be measured by age alone, and that teaching begins not with the curriculum, but with understanding where each child is on their unique developmental journey.

Once again, I found myself becoming the student in my own classroom.

CHAPTER 4

The Child Who Taught Me to Wait

"Not every child blooms in the same season. That does not mean they will never bloom."

From My Classroom

Some children change the way we teach.

Some children change the way we think.

This little boy changed the way I understood readiness.

He was one of the youngest children in my Junior Kindergarten class, missing the age criterion by barely three months. At first glance, three months did not seem significant. But as I continued my journey as an educator, I realised that in early childhood, even a few months can represent remarkable differences in development.

He was an absolute delight to teach.

Playful, affectionate and full of curiosity, he filled the classroom with energy. Like many lively children, he was often labelled as "naughty."

I never quite agreed.

He wasn't naughty.

He was simply a child who loved to explore, move, laugh and engage with the world around him.

He shared a beautiful bond with his mother and loved interacting with adults and friends. During conversations,

storytelling and oral activities, he participated enthusiastically. His vocabulary was good, he understood concepts well and eagerly answered questions.

His strength was always his understanding.

His challenge was expressing that understanding in ways the curriculum expected.

Our classroom placed great importance on children's thinking. We encouraged them to reflect, imagine, express opinions, answer open-ended questions and gradually record their ideas through drawing and writing.

This was where I began noticing the gap.

His thoughts were much bigger than his ability to organise them.

His imagination was richer than the words he could put on paper.

His comprehension was still developing.

Writing demanded developmental skills that were still emerging.

Every writing activity became a struggle.

Not because he lacked intelligence.

But because his developmental readiness had not yet caught up with the expectations being placed upon him.

Ironically, teaching the child was never my greatest challenge.

Helping the adults understand the child was.

Like every loving parent, his mother wanted the very best for him.

She worried when she compared his work with that of his classmates.

The more she worried, the more she practised writing at home.

Writing slowly stopped being an enjoyable learning experience.

It became a daily source of stress.

The expectation was simple.

"If he practises enough, he will eventually catch up."

Instead, the opposite happened.

The more pressure he experienced, the more he resisted writing.

Soon, writing was no longer just difficult.

It became something he feared.

In school, I watched him find countless ways to avoid it.

He distracted his friends.

He sought constant attention from me.

He delayed beginning tasks.

Sometimes he simply wanted someone to sit beside him.

Looking back, I don't think he was avoiding learning.

I think he was avoiding the feeling of not being successful.

Throughout the year, I spent many conversations helping his mother understand that school readiness is about far more than chronological age.

A child's readiness for formal learning is influenced by emotional maturity, language development, executive function skills, attention, self-regulation, fine motor development, confidence and social readiness.

Children may be the same age on paper, yet developmentally be in very different places.

I gently recommended that he repeat Junior Kindergarten.

It was not an easy conversation.

Like many parents, his mother worried that repeating a grade would hold him back.

Naturally, she wanted him to move forward with his peers.

He progressed to Senior Kindergarten.

But my concern remained.

I wasn't worried about the curriculum.

I was worried about the child.

As I had anticipated, the struggles continued.

The expectations became greater.

Writing increased.

Academic demands became more complex.

Each day required him to perform skills he still wasn't developmentally ready for.

Eventually, his mother returned to the conversation we had once had.

With remarkable courage and an open heart, she made the decision to let him repeat Senior Kindergarten.

Many people later told me,

"Repeating the grade made all the difference."

Looking back today, I don't think repeating the grade was the real turning point.

The turning point was something much quieter.

Something much more profound.

Repeating gave the adults permission to pause.

His mother no longer looked at him through the lens of comparison.

She no longer worried that he was the youngest child trying to keep up.

Instead, she saw him as a child who had time.

Time to grow.

Time to mature.

Time to become ready.

That shift changed everything.

Her expectations softened.

Her anxiety reduced.

Her interactions became calmer.

The pressure surrounding learning slowly disappeared.

And when the pressure disappeared, so did much of the child's fear.

Something beautiful happened.

The little boy I had always known was still there.

Curious.

Playful.

Intelligent.

Only now, he had the developmental readiness to show everyone what he had been capable of all along.

Writing became easier.

Learning became joyful again.

His confidence blossomed.

He participated more willingly.

The child had not changed.

The timeline had.

Looking back today, I often wonder whether repeating a grade was what helped him.

I don't believe it was.

What truly helped was that the adults finally stopped asking him to fit into a timeline that wasn't his own.

Instead, we allowed development to unfold at its natural pace.

Once he was ready, learning no longer felt like a race.

It became a journey.

And he flourished.

Today, he continues to do wonderfully in school.

Whenever I think about him, I am reminded that readiness cannot be rushed.

Development cannot be compared.

And childhood should never be measured against someone else's timeline.

Some children bloom a little later than others.

But when they bloom, they do so beautifully.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

Every year, teachers meet children who appear "behind" when compared with their classmates.

Sometimes they are the youngest.

Sometimes they have had fewer experiences.

Sometimes they simply need more time.

As educators, our challenge is to distinguish between a child who **cannot yet** and a child who **will not**.

That single word—*yet*—changes everything.

When we recognise that development unfolds at different rates, our classrooms become places of encouragement rather than comparison.

Looking back, I now know that children benefit most when we focus on growth instead of pace.

This means observing before concluding.

Supporting before correcting.

Encouraging before comparing.

It means celebrating progress that may not appear on a worksheet but is clearly visible in a child's confidence, independence and willingness to try again.

Perhaps one of the greatest responsibilities we have is helping families understand that learning is not a competition.

Every child deserves to experience success without carrying the weight of someone else's timeline.

When teachers and parents work together with patience, realistic expectations and trust in development, remarkable things happen.

Children stop fearing mistakes.

Parents stop measuring childhood through comparison.

Teachers begin noticing strengths that were always present but often overlooked.

Most importantly, children rediscover the joy of learning.

Pause and Reflect

Think about a child who seems to be "behind" compared to classmates.

Pause before answering these questions.

- **Is this child struggling because of ability, or because developmental readiness is still emerging?**
- **Which strengths does this child already demonstrate that deserve greater recognition?**
- **Are my expectations based on this child's development, or on comparison with peers?**
- **How can I communicate developmental readiness more confidently and compassionately with families?**
- **What experiences could I provide instead of additional worksheets?**

- **How can I protect this child's confidence while continuing to support growth?**

Now ask yourself one final question.

If I removed comparison from my classroom tomorrow, what would I notice differently about this child?

Before We Meet the Next Child...

One child taught me to look beyond behaviour.

Another taught me to listen beyond words.

A third reminded me that children learn only when they feel emotionally safe.

This little boy taught me that development cannot be rushed.

As my teaching journey continued, I realised that classrooms are filled with children who surprise us in unexpected ways.

The next child would challenge not my understanding of readiness, but my understanding of potential.

Once again, I found myself becoming the student in my own classroom.

CHAPTER 5

The Child Who Taught Me That Confidence Grows in Safe Spaces

"Children are not born believing in themselves. They borrow belief from the adults who believe in them first."

From My Classroom

She joined my class almost a month after the academic year had begun.

The other children had already settled into routines, formed friendships and found comfort in the rhythm of classroom life. She was walking into a classroom where everyone else already seemed to belong.

From the very first day, I knew this journey would be different.

She cried.

Not the kind of crying we often see during the first few days of school.

She cried as though her entire little world had collapsed.

Sometimes she cried so intensely that she held her breath, leaving me genuinely worried. Looking back today, I wonder if those were tiny panic responses. At that time, however, I simply knew that this little girl was overwhelmed.

For almost fifteen days, I hardly thought about academics.

My only goal was simple.

Every single day, I wanted her to leave school feeling one thing.

"You are safe here."

"I understand."

"I am here whenever you need me."

Communication was another challenge.

She rarely told me what she wanted.

If she needed a pencil, she cried.

If she wanted water, she cried.

If she couldn't find an eraser, she cried.

She never asked.

She never demanded.

She simply cried.

I slowly became a detective.

I learnt to read her eyes before I heard her words.

I watched her expressions.

Her body language.

The way she quietly stood in one corner waiting for someone to understand.

Gradually, I realised something important.

Every tear was communication.

She simply did not yet have the confidence, language or emotional regulation to tell me what she needed.

As the weeks passed, another pattern emerged.

If I appreciated another child's work...

She cried.

If she made one small mistake during dictation...

She cried.

If her drawing wasn't exactly as she imagined...

She cried.

If she couldn't complete her work perfectly...

She cried.

Quietly.

Silently.

She never blamed others.

She never disrupted the classroom.

She simply carried every disappointment within herself.

Initially, I thought I was teaching a shy child.

The more I observed her, the more I realised she wasn't afraid of people.

She was afraid of making mistakes.

That single realisation changed everything.

Because shyness and fear are not the same.

And they cannot be supported in the same way.

Instead of asking,

"How do I make her speak?"

I began asking myself,

"How do I build a classroom where making mistakes feels completely safe?"

That question transformed not only this child's journey.

It transformed my classroom forever.

I realised that if one child was silently carrying the fear of making mistakes, perhaps many others were too.

So I decided to change the culture of my classroom.

Every morning, we began gathering together before the day's learning started.

What began as a simple classroom routine slowly evolved into something much more meaningful.

Our morning circle became a space where every child mattered.

Each day, one child came prepared with something to share.

Sometimes it was a poem.

Sometimes a story.

Sometimes an interesting fact.

Sometimes simply something that had happened at home.

There were no marks.

No competition.

No judging.

No "right" presentation.

We listened.

We appreciated the courage it took to stand in front of friends.

We celebrated effort.

We asked questions.

We laughed together.

Children learnt that every voice deserved to be heard.

Around the same time, I made another conscious decision.

During our circle times, I began talking openly about my own mistakes.

Sometimes I would tell the children,

"I forgot something today."

"I made a spelling mistake yesterday."

"I burnt my breakfast."

"I got something wrong too."

The children laughed.

More importantly, they watched an adult make mistakes without embarrassment.

Slowly, our classroom developed a new language.

Mistakes became normal.

Trying became more important than being perfect.

Children began correcting each other kindly.

They applauded effort.

They encouraged friends who felt nervous.

Without realising it, we had created a socially and emotionally safe classroom where children no longer feared being imperfect.

And slowly...

Almost quietly...

I began noticing a different little girl.

She started participating.

She attempted activities without immediately crying.

She smiled more.

She began speaking in English with increasing confidence.

Her reflections during classroom discussions became thoughtful and expressive.

She no longer waited for everything to be perfect before trying.

Most importantly, she began enjoying school.

Her parents noticed it too.

The child who had once cried through almost every experience now woke up excited to come to school.

The transformation wasn't dramatic.

It happened through hundreds of ordinary moments that slowly built extraordinary confidence.

Midway through the year, I had to take a break from school for about fifteen days.

For the first time, I found myself wondering how she would cope without me.

Then I paused.

Our journey had never been about making her dependent on me.

It had always been about helping her become emotionally secure enough to flourish anywhere.

When I returned, I learnt that she had adjusted beautifully with the substitute teacher.

She had participated.

Learnt.

Played.

Shared.

She was doing well.

Strangely, that became one of my proudest moments as a teacher.

Because success was never about children needing me.

Success was about children believing in themselves.

Years passed.

One day, I heard that she had published her own book of poems.

I smiled for a long time.

Not because she had become a published young author.

But because I remembered the little girl who once cried if she made a single mistake.

The child who hesitated to speak was now confidently sharing her thoughts with the world.

What a privilege it is to witness that journey.

People often ask teachers whether they remember every child.

The truth is...

Some children become chapters in our lives.

This little girl reminded me that confidence is never built through pressure.

It grows through acceptance.

Through emotional safety.

Through belonging.

Through countless moments when one trusted adult quietly says,

"It's okay.

We all make mistakes.

Let's try again together."

Today, whenever I think about her, I don't remember the tears.

I remember the courage that slowly replaced them.

And I am reminded that children rarely need perfect teachers.

They need adults who make imperfection feel safe.

Because once fear disappears...

Potential has room to bloom.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

Every classroom has children who hesitate.

Some hesitate to answer questions.

Some hesitate to read aloud.

Some hesitate to draw, write or perform because they worry they may not do it perfectly.

As teachers, our instinct is often to encourage them by saying,

"Come on, you can do it."

Sometimes they can.

Sometimes what they need first is reassurance that it is perfectly acceptable if they cannot.

Confidence grows when children experience acceptance before expectation.

As educators, we can intentionally create classrooms that nurture confidence.

Celebrate effort as much as achievement.

Share your own mistakes openly.

Create opportunities where every child has a voice.

Replace comparison with encouragement.

Applaud courage, not just correctness.

Most importantly, remember that every child participates at a different pace.

Some children need an invitation.

Some need reassurance.

Some simply need time.

When children experience emotionally safe classrooms consistently, remarkable things happen.

They volunteer.

They ask questions.

They explore ideas.

They become willing to take risks.

Not because they suddenly become fearless, but because they know mistakes are welcomed as part of learning.

Pause and Reflect

Think of one child in your classroom who rarely volunteers, hesitates to participate or appears afraid of making mistakes.

Reflect honestly.

- **What might this child be afraid of?**
- **How does your classroom currently respond to mistakes?**
- **Do children celebrate one another's efforts or mainly compare outcomes?**
- **How often do you model your own mistakes and show children that adults learn too?**
- **What classroom routine could you introduce to help every child find their voice?**
- **Which child in your class needs encouragement more than correction this week?**

Now pause and ask yourself one final question.

When children leave my classroom, will they remember what I taught... or how I made them feel about themselves as learners?

Before We Meet the Next Child...

Every child who entered my classroom quietly changed the teacher I was becoming.

One taught me to look beyond behaviour.

One taught me to listen beyond words.

One reminded me that emotional safety comes before learning.

Another taught me that readiness cannot be rushed.

And this little girl showed me that confidence grows where mistakes are welcomed.

Just when I thought I had begun understanding children, another child arrived who challenged something even deeper.

Not behaviour.

Not confidence.

Not readiness.

But my own assumptions about what children are capable of achieving when someone truly believes in them.

And once again, my greatest lessons came not from a textbook, but from a child.

CHAPTER 6

The Child Who Taught Me to Earn Trust

"Trust cannot be demanded. It is earned, one tiny step at a time."

From My Classroom

Some children leave us with beautiful memories.

Some leave us with lifelong lessons.

This little boy left me with both.

He had attended online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic with another teacher. Like many children of that generation, his first experience of school had been through a screen. When he joined my classroom, he wasn't simply entering a new class—he was experiencing school in its truest sense for the very first time.

From the very first day, I knew this journey was going to require patience.

He cried every single morning.

He shared an incredibly close bond with his mother and found it extremely difficult to separate from her. Every morning felt uncertain to him. Throughout the day, he would quietly come to me and ask,

"Is my mother still here?"

"Will I be okay?"

"When will I go home?"

"Can you check the clock once?"

"Can I go home now?"

Looking back today, I realise these questions were never really about going home.

They were questions about safety.

He wanted to know whether the people he loved would come back.

Whether everything would be alright.

Whether he could trust this new world.

I often smiled to myself because he sometimes felt like a matured person living inside the body of a five-year-old.

There was a seriousness about him.

A need for certainty.

A need to know exactly what would happen next.

One of the first things that struck me was that he did not enjoy displays of affection.

If I moved too quickly to comfort him, he withdrew.

Even when tears quietly rolled down his cheeks, if I gently asked,

"Are you alright?"

he would immediately wipe them away and softly reply,

"I'm okay."

"no no, I am not crying see no tears, I just want my mumma, that's all"

"Are I told you no, I am okay"

He wanted reassurance.

But he wanted it on his own terms.

That taught me one of the earliest lessons of our journey.

Comfort should never be imposed.

It should always be invited.

So, I stopped assuming.

Instead, I asked.

"Would it help if I held your finger?"

Sometimes he nodded.

Sometimes he simply stood beside me and said,

"No no, no touching, I will just stand near you, okay?, just be with me"

For many days, our relationship was nothing more than a tiny finger wrapped around mine while we walked into the classroom together.

Weeks later, that finger became a hand.

It was a journey that took months, not days.

Every small step mattered.

Every little moment was earned.

I soon realised that predictability brought him comfort.

Every morning, before beginning our day, we would sit together with the class and talk about what the day would look like.

What activity would come first.

What would happen after that.

When it would be snack time.

When we would go outdoors.

When home time would arrive.

Knowing what to expect reduced his anxiety.

Along with predictability, I introduced something that made a remarkable difference.

Every day, the children were given choices.

Together, we decided the order in which some of our classroom experiences would happen.

Would we begin with phonics or story time?

Should art come before music?

Would we do outdoor play before our reflections?

These were simple choices.

But they gave children ownership of their day.

For this little boy especially, having a voice helped him feel secure.

He wasn't controlling the classroom.

He was participating in it.

I realised that children are far more willing to trust environments where they feel heard.

There were many moments that made me smile.

If he knew in advance that I would be on leave the following day, he would tell his parents,

"Ma'am is not coming tomorrow, so I'm not going either."

Sometimes he reached school before I did.

If my bus had not yet arrived, he would ask another teacher to make a video call just to confirm that I was coming to school.

Only after seeing me would he quietly settle.

His trust was never immediate.

It had to be earned.

Another memory has stayed with me over the years.

During dance sessions, physical education and movement activities, he rarely wanted to participate.

Instead, he quietly stayed beside me.

He helped me arrange resources.

Prepared materials.

Observed his friends.

One day he looked at me and asked,

"Ma'am, I don't like dancing. Is it okay if I just stand there and move only if I want to?"

I smiled and replied,

"Of course."

He wasn't refusing to participate.

He was asking for permission to participate in a way that felt emotionally safe for him.

I respected that.

Looking back, I realise personalising learning is not about making every child participate in the same way and same task so that they are engaged.

It is about allowing children to reach the same destination through different journeys.

One thing I consciously avoided was creating strategies that made him feel different from his classmates.

Instead, I made them part of our classroom culture.

Morning circles became a space where everyone discussed the day ahead.

Everyone spoke about feelings.

Everyone learnt to reassure one another.

Soon, his classmates began doing what I had been doing.

They reminded him,

"Snack time is coming."

"We'll go home after this."

"It's okay."

Without even realising it, they became part of his support system.

During free-play, while other children excitedly explored different activity corners, he often chose to sit beside me.

One day I asked,

"Wouldn't you like to play?"

He looked at me very seriously and replied,

"I'm helping you keep an eye on everyone."

That was his way of belonging.

And I honoured it.

As the months passed, I slowly saw him changing.

He began making friends.

He started participating more confidently.

He even started playing on the monkey bars in the outdoor play area of the school.

The little boy who had once shown almost no interest in art gradually began enjoying creative activities too.

Nothing changed overnight.

Trust never does.

Every tiny step became a lesson in disguise.

There is another part of this story that I rarely spoke about.

Every day that he struggled to accept me, a small part of me quietly questioned myself.

Was I doing something wrong?

Why wasn't he trusting me yet?

Why wasn't I enough?

I think many teachers carry these questions silently.

We hope children will instantly like us, trust us and feel comfortable with us.

When they don't, it hurts.

Looking back today, I ask myself a different question.

Do children really owe us their trust?

Or is it our responsibility to earn it?

This little boy answered that question for me.

Children do not owe us acceptance.

They owe us nothing.

It is we, as educators, who must patiently earn their trust through consistency, respect, honesty and genuine care.

The most beautiful moment came towards the end of the academic year.

We had begun talking about graduation and moving to primary school.

The children were sharing what they would miss about our class.

That day, this little boy quietly walked up to me.

He stood there for a moment.

Looked at me.

Then politely asked,

"Ma'am... may I give you a hug? I will miss you."

He asked for my permission.

In that moment, my eyes filled with tears.

This was the same child who, months earlier, had not wanted anyone to touch him.

The little boy who had first trusted only one finger.

Now he was offering me a hug.

Not because I had asked for one.

Because he wanted to.

It felt like one of the greatest gifts I had ever received as a teacher.

That hug wasn't simply affection.

It was trust.

When I watched him confidently perform on stage, I couldn't help but think about how far he had come.

Months earlier, even joining the group had felt overwhelming.

Now he stood on stage, confidently performing every movement alongside his friends.

When he graduated and transitioned smoothly into primary school, I felt an overwhelming sense of joy.

Not because he no longer needed reassurance.

But because he had discovered something much bigger.

He had learnt that school could become another safe place.

And I had learnt one of the greatest lessons of my teaching journey.

Trust cannot be rushed.

It cannot be demanded.

It cannot be expected simply because we are the teacher.

It is built through patience.

Through consistency.

Through respecting boundaries.

Through offering children predictability, choice and emotional safety.

One tiny step at a time.

And perhaps, teaching itself is exactly the same.

Every child changes us.

One tiny step at a time.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

Every educator will eventually meet a child who struggles to separate from a parent, hesitates to trust new adults or finds comfort in predictable routines.

When that happens, pause before asking,

"How do I stop the crying?"

Instead ask,

"What is this child trying to communicate?"

Often, the answer is not a lack of confidence.

It is a need for emotional security.

As educators, we can intentionally create classrooms that nurture trust.

Create predictable daily routines.

Prepare children for transitions before they happen.

Offer meaningful choices throughout the day.

Respect children's boundaries, including physical affection.

Allow participation to happen gradually.

Partner closely with families so that children experience consistency between home and school.

Most importantly, remember that trust cannot be forced.

It grows through repeated experiences of safety, respect and reliability.

Pause and Reflect

Think about a child who finds it difficult to separate from caregivers or struggles to trust adults.

Reflect honestly.

- **What behaviours might actually be communicating a need for safety?**
- **How predictable are the routines in my classroom?**
- **In what ways do I give children genuine choices during the day?**
- **Do I respect children's boundaries, even when offering comfort?**
- **Am I trying to gain compliance, or am I patiently building trust?**
- **What small, consistent action could I repeat every day that might help one child feel emotionally safer?**

Now pause and ask yourself one final question.

Am I expecting children to trust me because I am their teacher... or am I becoming the kind of teacher who patiently earns that trust?

Before We Meet the Next Child...

Each child who walked into my classroom quietly reshaped the educator I was becoming.

One taught me to look beyond behaviour.

Another taught me to hear what words could not express.

Others reminded me that emotional safety, readiness and confidence are the foundations of meaningful learning.

This little boy taught me that trust is never automatic.

It is earned through patience, respect and consistency.

As my journey continued, I realised that every classroom held another child waiting to challenge my assumptions once again.

And once again, my greatest teacher would not be a course, a workshop or a textbook.

It would be another child.

PART II

"The most important qualification a teacher possesses is not a degree. It is the willingness to keep learning."

When I began my teaching journey, I believed my qualifications defined my capability as an educator.

I had completed my postgraduate degree in management, pursued professional qualifications and genuinely believed that I was one of the most educated people in the room. I took pride in my academic achievements and assumed that knowledge alone would prepare me for every classroom I entered.

I was wrong.

The classroom has a remarkable way of humbling us.

It does not ask how many degrees we hold or how many workshops we have attended. It quietly places a child in front of us whose needs do not fit neatly into any textbook, theory or lesson plan.

Slowly, I realised that my qualifications were only the beginning of my journey, not its destination.

The greatest transformation in my teaching did not happen because I earned another certificate. It happened because I learnt to let go of my ego.

I had to unlearn.

I had to stop believing I already had all the answers.

I had to replace a "*know-it-all*" mindset with a "*learn-it-all*" mindset.

That shift did not happen overnight.

It did not happen after reading one book or attending one professional development programme.

It took years.

It took difficult classroom experiences.

It took children who challenged every assumption I held.

It took parents who saw their children through a lens I had not yet considered.

It took mentors who asked me uncomfortable questions.

It took colleagues who shared different perspectives.

Most importantly, it took honest reflection.

Looking back today, I believe reflection is one of the greatest qualifications an educator can possess.

Every child I have written about in this book became one of my teachers.

Each one gently dismantled an old belief and helped me build a better one.

This section is born from those lessons.

These are not ideas I learnt from books alone.

They are ideas shaped by children, strengthened by theory, refined through practice and transformed by reflection.

If Part I introduced you to the children who changed me, Part II is about the educator they helped me become.

CHAPTER 7

The Teacher Had to Change First and the classroom changed me!

Looking Back...

Every journey has a beginning.

Mine began with a conversation I will never forget.

When my mother first suggested that I consider teaching as a career, I smiled and replied,

"You know I have an MBA, right? I've worked with one of the Big Four firms. And you want me to become a teacher?"

At that stage of my life, I genuinely believed success was defined by qualifications, corporate experience and professional achievements.

Teaching was never part of the plan.

Life, however, had a different plan for me.

A few months into teaching, I remember telling my mother with complete confidence,

"I think I'm the most educated person in the room. I don't feel like I'm learning anything new."

She listened patiently.

As she often did, she didn't answer my question.

Instead, she asked one of her own.

"Have you entered your classroom with a blank slate?"

I looked at her, confused.

She continued,

"The day you stop trying to prove what you know and start looking for what your classroom wants to teach you, you'll begin seeing children differently."

At that time, I didn't fully understand her words.

Today, I realise she was mentoring me long before I knew what mentoring truly meant.

She was my first mentor.

She never told me what to think.

She taught me how to think.

She never solved my problems for me.

She asked questions that helped me discover my own answers.

Looking back, I realise that reflective practice entered my life long before I learnt that phrase through professional development.

It began at home.

Years later, life brought me one of its greatest challenges.

I lost my mother.

Along with her, I felt I had lost the person I turned to for every important decision, every difficult conversation and every moment of self-doubt.

For a long time, I searched for another mentor.

Ironically, I discovered that mentors rarely appear simply because we go looking for them.

That phase of my life was emotionally overwhelming.

Not only because I had lost someone I loved deeply, but because I suddenly realised how much of my confidence had depended on her presence.

For the first time, I had to learn how to stand on my own.

It was painful.

It was uncomfortable.

But it was also transformative.

Instead of allowing grief to become the end of my story, I slowly allowed it to become the beginning of a different one.

I started asking myself the same questions my mother would have asked me.

I reflected.

I wrote.

I questioned my beliefs.

I challenged my assumptions.

I searched for answers instead of waiting for someone else to give them to me.

I slowly realised that growth begins the moment we stop waiting for someone to rescue us.

One sentence of hers continues to guide me every single day.

"If something in your life isn't working, no one else can turn it around for you. You have to begin that work yourself."

Those words changed far more than my personal life.

They changed the educator I was becoming.

I began reading more.

Learning more.

Seeking mentors.

Listening more carefully.

Questioning more deeply.

Most importantly, I became comfortable admitting,

"I still have so much to learn."

Today, when people ask me about my qualifications, I answer with gratitude because every degree and every certification has added value to my journey.

But if they ask me what truly transformed me as an educator, my answer is very different.

It was reflection.

It was humility.

It was vulnerability.

It was learning to see every child, every parent, every colleague and every mentor as someone who could teach me something new.

This chapter is not an invitation to ignore our personal struggles.

Every educator carries a story that the classroom may never know.

We all experience loss, disappointment, uncertainty and moments when life feels heavier than usual.

The goal is not to pretend those emotions do not exist.

The goal is to learn how to care for ourselves, seek support when we need it, and ensure that our personal burdens do not become burdens that children have to carry.

Children deserve emotionally available adults.

That does not mean emotionally perfect adults.

It means adults who are self-aware enough to recognise their own emotions, take responsibility for them and continue growing through them.

Looking back today, I no longer believe that the best educators are those who know the most.

I believe they are the ones who never stop learning.

And for that lesson, I will always remain grateful to my very first mentor—my mother.

CHAPTER 8

Looking Beyond Behaviour

Looking Back...

Every child has a silent language.

As educators, one of our greatest responsibilities is to patiently learn to decode that language.

When I first entered a classroom, I believed my role was to teach children. Today, I believe my first responsibility is to understand them.

Looking back, I realise that if I wanted children to accept me as their teacher, I first had to change myself. I had to become someone they felt emotionally safe with. Someone who listened before concluding, observed before judging and sought to understand before correcting.

Every behaviour carries a silent message.

Aggression.

Tantrums.

Silence.

Anxiety.

Withdrawal.

Excessive talking.

Restlessness.

Every one of these behaviours is a child's attempt to communicate something they may not yet have the words, confidence or developmental ability to express.

The behaviour itself is rarely the whole story.

The story lies beneath it.

When I reflect on the children whose stories I shared in the first part of this book, I no longer remember them by the behaviours that once challenged me. I remember the child behind the behaviour.

One little boy taught me that aggression was masking grief and fear of losing the people he loved.

One little girl taught me that silence could be louder than words.

Another child reminded me that anxiety often disguises itself as crying, avoidance and an overwhelming fear of making mistakes.

One child constantly sought reassurance because he simply wanted to know whether he was safe.

None of these children were trying to make teaching difficult.

They were trying to communicate in the only way they knew how.

That realisation transformed the educator I was becoming.

Understanding the Concept

Behaviour is one of the earliest forms of communication.

This is especially true in the early years, where speech, language and emotional vocabulary are still developing.

Young children often experience emotions that are far bigger than their ability to understand or express.

As adults, we can usually identify and articulate our feelings.

We can say,

"I feel anxious."

"I'm disappointed."

"I'm frustrated."

Young children often cannot.

Instead, those emotions appear as behaviours.

A child who throws a toy may actually be overwhelmed.

A child who refuses to participate may be anxious.

A child who constantly interrupts may be seeking connection.

A child who cries over a small mistake may be communicating perfectionism, fear or emotional insecurity.

This is where understanding **executive function** becomes essential.

Executive function refers to the set of cognitive skills that help us regulate emotions, manage impulses, sustain attention, remember instructions, plan actions and express ourselves appropriately. These skills are not fully developed in young children. They continue to grow through supportive relationships, predictable routines and repeated opportunities to practise self-regulation.

Children are not born knowing how to regulate their emotions.

We teach them.

Not through lectures, but through relationships.

Attachment is another lens that profoundly changed my understanding of behaviour.

Some children enter our classrooms having experienced consistent love, security and emotional safety.

Others arrive carrying loss, uncertainty, inconsistent caregiving or overwhelming separation anxiety.

Some become overly attached to one adult because that relationship helps them feel secure.

Others appear emotionally distant because closeness itself feels unfamiliar or unsafe.

Neither child is "difficult."

Both are communicating a need.

As educators, we may not always know the complete story behind a child's behaviour, but we can choose to respond with curiosity rather than assumption.

One of the greatest lessons my classroom has taught me is to be mindful of labels.

Labels such as *naughty*, *lazy*, *attention-seeking*, *stubborn* or casually assuming a diagnosis without comprehensive assessment can quietly shape how adults begin to see a child.

Eventually, those labels can shape how the child begins to see themselves.

Observation, on the other hand, opens the door to understanding.

Instead of saying,

"He is aggressive."

I learnt to observe,

"He hit his peer during transition after becoming visibly distressed."

Instead of saying,

"She is shy."

I began noticing,

"She speaks confidently one-to-one but becomes anxious when speaking before a group."

Labels close conversations.

Observations begin them.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

Looking beyond behaviour does not mean ignoring inappropriate behaviour or lowering expectations.

It means responding with understanding before intervention.

When behaviour challenged me, I gradually learnt to pause before reacting.

I began asking myself different questions.

What happened before this behaviour?

What might this child be feeling?

What skill is still developing?

What is this child trying to communicate?

Those questions changed my responses.

Sometimes the answer was providing responsibility.

Sometimes it was creating predictable routines.

Sometimes it meant offering visual supports, movement breaks or opportunities for choice.

Sometimes it simply meant sitting beside a child for a few quiet minutes before expecting them to learn.

The strategy was never the starting point.

Understanding was.

Only then could the strategy truly make a difference.

Pause and Reflect

Before responding to behaviour in your classroom, pause and ask yourself:

- ☐ Am I reacting to the behaviour, or am I trying to understand the child behind it?
- ☐ What might this behaviour be communicating that words cannot?
- ☐ Which executive function skill might still be developing?
- ☐ Could attachment, anxiety or emotional safety be influencing what I am seeing?
- ☐ Have I made an observation, or have I placed a label?

Perhaps the greatest lesson my classroom has taught me is this:

Children rarely behave without a reason.

Sometimes we see the behaviour.

Sometimes we discover the story.

And when we choose to understand the story first, meaningful teaching can finally begin.

CHAPTER 9

Relationships Before Strategies

Looking Back...

If someone asked me today what has worked consistently across every child I have taught, my answer would not be a particular classroom management strategy, reward system or behaviour chart.

It would be relationships.

Over the years, I have realised that strategies may vary from child to child, but relationships remain constant.

Every child who transformed my teaching journey had one thing in common.

Before they accepted my guidance, they first accepted me.

Looking back at the stories I shared in Part I, I realise that the watering of plants was never really about plants. Morning conversations were never simply conversations. Classroom responsibilities were never just jobs. Art was never just art. Music was never just music.

They were all pathways to one destination.

Trust.

Children do not automatically trust us because we are teachers.

Trust is not given with a job title.

It is earned, one interaction at a time.

That has perhaps been one of the greatest shifts in my thinking as an educator.

I no longer enter a classroom expecting children to accept me simply because I am the adult in the room.

Instead, I ask myself,

"What can I do today to earn this child's trust?"

That simple question has transformed every relationship I have built.

Understanding the Concept

As I reflected on my journey, I realised that my classroom practice gradually became anchored in five beliefs.

The first is what I call a **student-first mindset**.

Before planning lessons, before selecting strategies and before correcting behaviour, I learnt to begin with the child.

Who is this child?

What are their strengths?

What are they finding difficult today?

What might they need from me?

The child always comes before the strategy.

The second belief is that **trust must be earned, never taken for granted**.

Children choose whether they feel emotionally safe with us.

That trust grows through consistency, honesty, respect and genuine interest in who they are.

It cannot be rushed, demanded or expected.

The third belief is the importance of **co-regulation**.

Young children borrow our calm long before they develop their own.

Our body language, our tone of voice, our facial expressions and the way we respond during moments of challenge become models for how children gradually learn to regulate themselves.

If I respond with frustration, children often respond with more frustration.

If I respond with calm, predictability and reassurance, I offer them something steady to hold on to until they are able to regulate independently.

The fourth belief is **belonging**.

Every child enters the classroom carrying an invisible question.

"Do I belong here?"

Belonging is not created through displays on classroom walls.

It is created when children know they are seen, heard, valued and accepted exactly as they are while still being supported to grow.

Children who feel that they belong are more willing to take risks, ask questions, make mistakes and build relationships with others.

Finally, I have come to believe that **emotional and psychological safety are the foundation of learning**.

A classroom where children fear embarrassment, ridicule or constant correction may appear orderly, but meaningful learning struggles to flourish there.

Children learn best when they know they can make mistakes without losing dignity, ask questions without fear of judgement and express themselves knowing they will be treated with kindness and respect.

Emotional safety is not the absence of expectations.

It is the presence of trust.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

When I think back to the six children whose stories shaped this book, I realise that none of them needed a perfect teacher.

They needed a teacher who was willing to know them.

Sometimes that meant greeting them every morning before anyone else.

Sometimes it meant giving them responsibility.

Sometimes it meant allowing them to make choices.

Sometimes it meant sitting beside them quietly.

Sometimes it meant celebrating tiny victories that no one else noticed.

None of these actions were extraordinary on their own.

Yet together, they communicated a powerful message.

"You matter here."

That message has become one of the most important strategies I carry into every classroom.

Relationships do not replace teaching.

They make teaching possible.

Pause and Reflect

As you reflect on your own classroom, ask yourself:

- ☐ Do my children know that I genuinely enjoy being with them?
- ☐ Have I intentionally built trust with every child, especially those who challenge me the most?
- ☐ Does my presence bring calm or anxiety into the classroom?
- ☐ Would every child in my classroom say they feel they belong?
- ☐ Have I created an emotionally and psychologically safe space where children can learn, make mistakes and grow?

The longer I teach, the more convinced I become of one simple truth.

Children may not remember every lesson we teach.

But they will always remember how safe they felt while learning from us.

Because relationships are not separate from learning.

They are where learning begins.

CHAPTER 10

When Theory Meets a Real Child

When I first entered education, I believed that knowing more would make me a better teacher.

I read. I studied. I attended courses. I learnt about different educational philosophies, theories of development, approaches to learning and ways of understanding children.

And all of it mattered.

But somewhere along the way, I realised something rather humbling.

Theory makes sense until you meet a real child.

A real child does not arrive in your classroom carrying a label saying, *“I am a constructivist learner,”* or *“I need scaffolding,”* or *“I am displaying behaviour because I am seeking reinforcement.”*

A real child arrives with a personality.

A history.

A family.

A temperament.

A fear.

A strength.

A need.

And sometimes, a behaviour that we do not immediately understand.

This is where theory became meaningful to me.

Not as something I had to quote in a staff meeting or write about in an examination, but as a lens through which I could begin to understand what I was seeing in front of me.

Over the years, I have come to believe that teachers need to **know theory, keep researching and keep teaching.**

But we also need to remember that theory is a guide, not a box.

The child always comes first.

When Behaviour Became Communication

Behaviourism was one of the early theories I encountered as a learner of education.

At its simplest, it helped me understand that behaviour can be influenced by what follows it—reinforcement, consequences, encouragement and the environment around the child.

But classroom experience made me look at this differently.

I began asking myself:

What am I reinforcing?

If I constantly give attention to disruptive behaviour, am I unintentionally strengthening it?

If I notice and acknowledge effort, persistence, kindness and participation, am I encouraging those behaviours?

And more importantly, am I using fear to get compliance, or am I helping the child understand what successful behaviour feels like?

One of the children in my stories taught me this very clearly.

The child had begun working through fear. Writing had become something associated with scolding, pressure and the fear of making mistakes. The more pressure was applied, the more the child resisted. The resistance then invited more adult intervention, and the cycle continued.

It would have been very easy to say:

He doesn't listen.

He is stubborn.

He is attention-seeking.

But when I stepped back, I saw something else.

The child was communicating.

He needed attention.

He needed reassurance.

He needed time.

And he needed to experience success without fear.

Positive reinforcement did not mean praising everything he did. It meant deliberately noticing the small steps forward and helping him experience learning as something safe.

This is where my understanding of behaviourism began to change.

I stopped seeing reinforcement merely as a reward for compliance.

I began seeing it as a way of communicating:

“I see what you are doing. I notice your effort. Keep going.”

Constructivism: Children Build Their Own Understanding

Another theory that deeply influenced my thinking was constructivism.

The idea that children do not simply receive knowledge from adults but actively construct meaning through experiences, interactions, exploration and connections with what they already know changed the way I planned learning.

It made me question the very idea of a teacher being the person who *delivers* knowledge.

Perhaps my role was not always to tell.

Perhaps sometimes it was to create the conditions in which the child could discover.

I saw this repeatedly in my classroom.

A child struggling with a mathematical concept did not necessarily need another explanation from me.

Sometimes the child needed to touch, move, see, manipulate, play, talk and try again.

A child who struggled to express an idea did not necessarily need me to provide the answer.

The child needed opportunities to experience, imagine, listen to others and gradually construct their own understanding.

The expressive work we did in the classroom became particularly important to me.

When children were asked what they thought, how they felt, what they imagined or what they believed, they were not merely answering a teacher's question.

They were constructing meaning.

And I was learning to step back enough to let that happen.

Readiness Is More Than Age

One of my classroom stories made this lesson particularly personal.

A child was only a few months younger than the prescribed age criterion for the class.

On paper, the difference seemed insignificant.

But the child reminded me that **chronological age and developmental readiness are not the same thing.**

He could participate well in oral activities.

His understanding was developing.

His reflections were still emerging.

His emotional and social readiness was different from that of some of his peers.

And yet there was an expectation that because he had reached a certain age, he should automatically be ready for the writing demands and academic expectations of the class.

I learnt to ask a different question.

Not:

“How old is the child?”

But:

“What is the child ready for?”

Development happens across multiple domains.

Cognitive readiness matters.

Language matters.

Fine-motor readiness matters.

Social development matters.

Emotional regulation matters.

Confidence matters.

The ability to separate, participate, communicate and sustain attention matters.

A child's birth date gives us information.

It does not give us the whole child.

That experience made me much more conscious of developmental theories and the importance of understanding the child as a developing individual rather than measuring readiness against a single number.

Vygotsky and the Power of Scaffolding

The more I worked with children, the more I understood the value of scaffolding.

A child may not be able to do something independently today, but that does not mean the child cannot learn to do it.

Sometimes the child needs a little support.

Sometimes a prompt.

Sometimes a model.

Sometimes a peer.

Sometimes an adult who simply stays close enough to say,

“Let's try it together.”

This became visible in many of my stories.

There were children who needed me to sit beside them.

Children who needed an activity broken into smaller steps.

Children who needed a little more time.

Children who needed someone to hold their hand—literally or metaphorically—until they were ready to take the next step themselves.

But scaffolding also taught me something else.

Support should not become dependence.

Our goal is not to keep holding the child's hand forever.

Our goal is to know when to hold it, when to loosen our grip and when to let go.

The child who eventually walked confidently into primary school did not need me to remain beside him forever.

He needed me to help him believe that he could walk without me.

That, to me, is the beauty of scaffolding.

Attachment: The Relationship Comes Before the Learning

Some of my most profound learning came from children who struggled to separate from their parents or struggled to trust me.

One child in particular taught me that trust cannot be demanded.

It has to be earned.

Every morning, his mother left with tears in her own eyes.

He wanted to know whether she was still there.

He needed reassurance.

He questioned whether he would be okay.

He was not immediately comfortable with affection, and even when he said, *“I am okay,”* I could see that he was struggling.

I could have insisted on bonding.

I could have said,

“I am your teacher. You need to trust me.”

But what would that have achieved?

I learnt to slow down.

I respected his boundaries.

I offered choices.

I allowed him to participate without forcing connection.

I let him stay close to me when he was not ready to join an activity.

And gradually, trust grew.

The most beautiful moment came towards the end of the year, when he came to me and asked:

“Ma'am, can I get a hug? I will miss you.”

For me, that was not just a hug.

It was the culmination of months of tiny steps.

It taught me that attachment and emotional safety are not peripheral to learning.

They are part of the foundation on which learning stands.

SEL Is Not a Period on the Timetable

Social and Emotional Learning, or **SEL**, has become an important part of educational conversations.

But my classroom experience has taught me that SEL cannot simply be confined to one session every week.

It lives in the everyday.

It is present when a teacher helps a child name an emotion.

When we allow children to disagree respectfully.

When we help them repair a friendship.

When we model how to apologise.

When we tell them that mistakes are okay.

When we acknowledge that frustration is real but hurting someone is not acceptable.

When we sit beside a child who is overwhelmed instead of immediately asking them to “*stop crying.*”

For the child who was frightened of making mistakes, SEL became the foundation for academic growth.

Morning circles, sharing, classroom conversations, simple routines and my willingness to share my own silly mistakes gradually changed the emotional climate of the classroom.

I wasn't teaching her a lesson called “*How to overcome shyness.*”

I was creating a classroom in which she could slowly discover:

“It is safe to speak here.”

And once that happened, something remarkable followed.

Her voice emerged.

Her confidence emerged.

Her academic abilities emerged.

Eventually, even her creativity found its way out into the world.

Inclusion Cannot Belong to One Child

Another perspective that has significantly shaped my thinking is **Learning Environment Design**.

What I particularly value about designing learning environments is the idea of learner variability in mind rather than waiting for a child to struggle and then creating a separate solution.

This connected strongly with something I began doing intuitively.

When a strategy helped one child, I often asked myself:

“Why should only this child benefit from it?”

A child who found it difficult to speak might benefit from visual prompts, opportunities to rehearse, structured sharing and multiple ways of expressing an idea.

But what if the whole class had access to those opportunities?

Wouldn't other children benefit too?

Of course they would.

This led me to one belief I feel strongly about:

Inclusion is not only for neurodivergent children.

Inclusion, to me, means being able to accept people without first deciding which box they belong in.

It means understanding that children differ in how they communicate, participate, regulate, understand, express and learn.

Sometimes the most inclusive classroom is not the one with a special strategy for every child.

It is the one where **the classroom itself is flexible enough to accommodate many different learners.**

Six Children. Many Theories. One Classroom.

When I look back at the six stories in Part I, I can now see how many educational theories quietly lived inside them.

The child who worked through fear taught me about reinforcement, emotional safety and the danger of confusing compliance with learning.

The child whose readiness was different from his chronological age taught me about developmental differences and the importance of looking beyond age.

The child who feared speaking taught me about SEL, confidence, scaffolding and the power of a psychologically safe environment.

The child who took tiny steps towards entering the classroom taught me about attachment, trust, co-regulation and the importance of respecting a child's pace.

The children who struggled with behaviour reminded me that behaviour can be communication and that our response can either escalate or regulate a situation.

And across all of them, I saw the value of designing learning experiences that gave children voice, choice, flexibility and multiple ways to participate.

Looking back, I realise something else.

No single theory explained any one child completely.

And perhaps that is exactly the point.

Children are not theories.

They are not case studies.

They are not labels.

They are not problems waiting for a strategy.

They are complex human beings.

Theory gives us a lens.

The child teaches us where to look.

The Teacher Must Keep Learning

This is why I believe that teachers need to know theory.

Not to impress anyone.

Not to use complicated terminology.

Not to prove that we are knowledgeable.

We need theory because it helps us ask better questions.

Why is this child behaving this way?

What might the child already understand?

What support does the child need?

Am I expecting something developmentally appropriate?

Am I reinforcing the behaviour I actually want?

Does this child feel safe?

Does this child feel that they belong?

Am I giving the child enough support?

Am I giving too much?

Could I change the environment instead of trying to change the child?

These questions have changed my practice far more than any single strategy ever could.

And this is where my own journey as a teacher continues.

I research.

I read.

I learn.

I question.

I sometimes get it wrong.

I reflect.

And then I try again.

Because educational theory is not a destination.

Neither is teaching.

We keep learning because the children in front of us keep changing the questions.

Perhaps that is what it truly means to be a teacher.

Not to know everything.

But to remain curious enough to keep learning.

To remain humble enough to unlearn.

And to remain open enough to become.

I am a work in progress.

And so is my teaching.

And I hope it always will be.

CHAPTER 11

The Reflective Teacher

Looking Back...

If there is one habit that has shaped me more than any qualification, certification, degree or professional development programme, it is reflection.

Earlier in my career, I believed growth came from learning more.

Today, I believe growth comes equally from questioning more.

Every classroom experience, every conversation with a child, every interaction with a parent, every discussion with a colleague, every mentor who challenged me and every mistake I made has quietly contributed to the educator I am still becoming.

Reflection has taught me that every classroom has two learners.

The child.

And the teacher.

Children come to school to learn about the world.

Teachers have the privilege of learning about children, about themselves and about the beautiful complexity of education.

When I look back at the stories shared in this book, I realise something profound.

None of those children transformed because I discovered a magical strategy.

They transformed because I was willing to transform first.

That, perhaps, is the greatest lesson teaching has given me.

Understanding the Concept

Reflection is often misunderstood.

It is not replaying our mistakes with guilt.

It is not questioning our worth as educators.

Nor is it striving for perfection.

Reflection is the courage to pause with honesty and curiosity.

It quietly asks us four simple questions.

- **What happened?**
- **Why did it happen?**
- **What did I learn from it?**
- **What will I do differently tomorrow?**

Over the years, I have realised that the quality of our questions determines the quality of our growth.

At the beginning of my career, my questions sounded very different.

"Why isn't this child listening?"

"Why won't this strategy work?"

"What is wrong with this child?"

Gradually, those questions changed.

"What am I missing?"

"What is this child trying to communicate?"

"What can I change about my approach?"

Those questions changed far more than my teaching.

They changed me.

Reflection taught me to replace certainty with curiosity.

Not,

"I already know."

But,

"I wonder..."

Not,

"This child cannot."

But,

"This child cannot... yet."

Not,

"This has always worked."

But,

"Is there another way that might serve this child better?"

That shift from certainty to curiosity is what I now recognise as having a true growth mindset.

A growth mindset is not something we nurture only in children.

It is something we must nurture within ourselves as educators.

The day we believe we have nothing left to learn is the day we unknowingly stop growing.

Humility: The Beginning of Growth

One of the greatest gifts reflections has given me is humility.

Every qualification I earned expanded my knowledge.

Every child I taught expanded my perspective.

Knowledge made me confident.

Perspective made me humble.

Today, I no longer believe that the best teachers are those who have all the answers.

I believe they are the ones who continue asking better questions.

The classroom has a beautiful way of reminding us that no matter how experienced we become, another child will always arrive and gently challenge everything we thought we understood.

Humility allows us to change our minds.

Sometimes, changing our minds changes a child's life.

Reflection Rarely Happens Alone

People often imagine reflection as a quiet, solitary process.

My journey has taught me otherwise.

Some of my deepest reflections happened because someone else asked me a difficult question.

Sometimes it was a parent.

Sometimes it was a colleague.

Sometimes it was a mentor.

Sometimes it was a child.

And sometimes it was simply an uncomfortable moment that refused to leave my thoughts.

Reflection grows through conversations.

It grows through feedback.

It grows through observation.

Most importantly, it grows through the willingness to listen without becoming defensive.

Earlier, feedback often felt like criticism.

Today, I see it as an opportunity to examine my own practice.

Not every piece of feedback is accurate.

Not every suggestion needs to be accepted.

But every perspective deserves thoughtful reflection.

Some confirm what we already know.

Others reveal blind spots we never knew existed.

Both help us become better educators.

Bringing It Into Every Classroom

Reflection does not require an extra hour at the end of the school day.

It simply requires intentionality.

Over the years, I have developed the habit of ending many school days by asking myself a few simple questions.

- **Which child smiled today because of something I did?**
- **Which child did I unintentionally overlook?**
- **Did I respond calmly, or did I merely react?**
- **What challenged me today?**
- **What surprised me today?**
- **What will I carry into tomorrow?**

I rarely have perfect answers.

That is not the goal.

The goal is to remain a learner.

Because teaching is not about getting everything right.

It is about becoming a little wiser with every child who walks through our classroom door.

Pause and Reflect

As you think about your own journey, pause and ask yourself:

- When was the last time a child changed the way I think?
- Do I reflect only when something goes wrong, or do I also reflect on what is working well?
- Am I open to feedback from children, families and colleagues?
- Which belief about teaching have I had to let go of?
- Am I still teaching the way I was taught, or am I teaching the children in front of me?

- Am I becoming the teacher my students need today, rather than the teacher I was yesterday?

A Thought to Carry Forward

Every child I have taught has eventually left my classroom.

Yet every one of them has left something behind.

A question.

A lesson.

A memory.

A new perspective.

Reflection is where those gifts become wisdom.

As I continue this journey, I have realised that teaching is not about collecting years of experience.

It is about learning from those years.

Because experience alone does not make us better teachers.

Reflection does.

The classroom will continue to change.

Children will continue to change.

Education will continue to evolve.

The only question that remains is this:

Will I continue to grow alongside them?

I hope the answer is always yes.

Because children deserve teachers who never stop learning.

CHAPTER 12

The Classroom We Choose to Build

There is something I have come to believe very deeply after years of working with children.

When we say we are teachers, we often think we are signing up to teach a subject.

We are not.

We are signing up to teach a child.

And there is a world of difference between the two.

A subject has a curriculum.

A child has a story.

A subject has learning outcomes.

A child has emotions, fears, strengths, preferences, relationships, experiences and a personality that is still unfolding.

A subject can be planned for.

A child cannot always be.

This is perhaps one of the biggest shifts in my own understanding of teaching.

We have to pour our heart and soul into teaching—not only the subject, but the child first.

Because before a child is ready to learn with us, the child needs to feel safe enough to connect with us.

Do I feel safe with this teacher?

Can I trust her?

Will she listen to me?

Will she laugh if I make a mistake?

Will she force me when I am not ready?

Does she notice me?

Does she understand me?

Do I matter to her?

These questions may never be spoken aloud, but children ask them through their behaviour every single day.

We Have to Earn Our Way In

I have learnt that when a child begins to feel safe with you and allows the relationship to develop, so much becomes possible.

You can challenge the child.

You can stretch the child.

You can encourage the child to try something difficult.

You can ask for more.

You can help the child move beyond what they thought they were capable of.

But if the child does not trust you, if the child does not feel safe with you, even the best strategy in the world may not work.

This is not about manipulating a child into doing what we want.

It is about creating a relationship in which the child begins to believe:

“This person is on my side.”

Once that belief begins to develop, learning becomes easier.

The child begins to listen.

The child begins to take risks.

The child begins to make mistakes.

The child begins to ask for help.

The child begins to try.

And sometimes, the child begins to surprise us.

I have seen this happen again and again.

The child who initially refused.

The child who stayed away.

The child who would not speak.

The child who would not participate.

The child who seemed difficult.

The child who appeared uninterested.

And then, slowly, something changed.

Not necessarily in the child first.

Sometimes it changed in me.

It Is Not About Them Accepting Us As We Are,

But sometimes, accepting ourselves as we are and being open to receive more.

As teachers, we sometimes say:

"Children need to accept me the way I am."

I have said versions of this myself.

But I don't think I believe it anymore.

Why should the child have to adjust completely to the teacher?

Why should the child always be the one expected to fit into our way of teaching, our pace, our communication style, our expectations?

Of course, children need boundaries.

Of course, teachers need authenticity.

We cannot become completely different people for every child.

But there is a difference between **being authentic and being inflexible**.

The classroom does not exist to accommodate only the teacher.

The teacher has to become responsive to the classroom.

And that requires us to change.

Sometimes our tone needs to change.

Sometimes our expectations need to change.

Sometimes our strategy needs to change.

Sometimes our pace needs to change.

Sometimes our understanding needs to change.

And sometimes, most uncomfortably, **we need to change**.

This is not weakness.

It is professional growth.

Becoming responsive does not mean abandoning our boundaries, values or professional judgement. It means being willing to examine whether our approach is helping the child learn, connect and grow.

How We Make Them Feel

Perhaps the question I now carry with me most often is not:

“What did I teach this child today?”

It is:

“How did I make this child feel today?”

Did the child leave feeling capable or inadequate?

Seen or invisible?

Safe or anxious?

Included or different?

Encouraged or defeated?

Connected or alone?

A child may forget the worksheet.

A child may forget the activity.

A child may forget what was written on the board.

But the feeling of being humiliated can stay.

So can the feeling of being believed in.

So can the feeling of being valued and cared for.

This is why, for me, relationships have become one of the foundations on which meaningful teaching stands.

The Teacher the Classroom Needs

This has also changed the way I think about professional identity.

Earlier, I believed that being a good teacher meant being knowledgeable, prepared, organised and capable of managing a classroom.

Those things still matter.

But now I think there is another question.

What kind of teacher does this classroom need from me?

Sometimes it needs a teacher who is firm.

Sometimes it needs a teacher who is patient.

Sometimes it needs a teacher who can laugh.

Sometimes it needs a teacher who can sit quietly beside a child.

Sometimes it needs a teacher who will challenge.

Sometimes it needs a teacher who will wait.

Sometimes it needs a teacher who says,

"Try again."

And sometimes it needs one who says,

"It is okay. We can try tomorrow."

The same teacher may need to be all of these things.

That is why I no longer think of teaching as a fixed identity.

I am continuously becoming the teacher the classroom needs.

What I Now Choose to Do

After all these years, and after all these children, I have a few reminders that I carry with me.

I choose to observe before I interpret.

A behaviour is information. Before deciding what a child is doing, I try to understand what the child may be trying to communicate.

I choose to earn trust rather than assume it.

Being the teacher does not automatically make me trustworthy. Trust is built through consistency, respect and countless small interactions.

I choose to give children meaningful choices.

Choice creates ownership. Even a small amount of control can make a significant difference to participation.

I choose to look for the child behind the behaviour.

There is always a child before there is a label.

I choose to regulate myself first.

My body language, tone and emotional state enter the classroom with me.

I choose to make belonging intentional.

I don't want children merely present in my classroom. I want them to feel that they belong there.

I choose to design for everyone.

When something helps one child, I ask myself whether it can benefit the whole class.

I choose to recognise that participation can look different.

Standing instead of dancing, watching before joining, helping to set up instead of immediately participating—these can all be steps towards engagement.

I choose to notice the tiny steps.

What looks insignificant to an adult may represent an enormous achievement for a child.

And I choose to keep learning.

Because experience should make us more reflective, not more certain that we know everything.

What I Now Choose Not to Do

There are also things I have learnt to consciously leave behind.

I don't want to label a child before understanding the behaviour.

I don't want to confuse compliance with learning.

I don't want to compare one child's journey with another's.

I don't want to force connection.

I don't want to use humiliation as a teaching strategy.

I don't want to assume that a quiet child has nothing to say.

I don't want to assume that difficult behaviour means a difficult child.

I don't want every child to fit my definition of participation.

I don't want my personal struggles to become a child's emotional burden.

I can be human in the classroom without making the classroom carry what belongs to my personal life.

And perhaps most importantly,

I don't want my years of experience to become an excuse to stop learning.

We Are Still Becoming

These are not rules I have mastered.

They are reminders I have earned.

I still get things wrong.

I still have difficult days.

I still make assumptions and have to catch myself.

I still have moments when I respond first and reflect later.

I am still learning when to step in and when to step back.

But perhaps that is what being a teacher really means.

We are not finished adults standing in front of children who are still growing.

We are growing too.

Every child we teach leaves something behind.

A question.

A correction.

A reminder.

A new perspective.

Sometimes a difficult memory.

Sometimes a beautiful one.

Sometimes a lesson we did not know we needed.

And perhaps that is why I have come to love the phrase:

I am a work in progress.

Not because I am not good enough.

But because I am still willing to grow.

The classroom we choose to build tomorrow will be shaped by what we have learnt today.

And tomorrow, another child will probably teach us something new.

We are not simply teaching children.

We are becoming teachers because of them.

And perhaps, ultimately, **the classroom we choose to build is shaped by the teacher we choose to become.**

A Letter to Every Teacher

Dear Teacher,

If you have reached this page, thank you.

Thank you for walking this journey with me.

These pages were never written to tell you how to teach. They were written to remind you that none of us should ever truly stop learning.

If there is one thing teaching has taught me, it is this:

We are all works in progress.

Just like the children who walk into our classrooms every morning, we too are constantly growing, questioning, making mistakes, reflecting and becoming.

Teaching is one of the most deeply human professions.

Behind every teacher is a person.

Someone who celebrates quietly.

Someone who carries worries.

Someone who has experienced joy, grief, disappointment and hope.

Someone who continues to show up every morning despite the invisible battles life sometimes brings.

I want to tell you something that I wish someone had told me much earlier.

It is okay to be vulnerable.

It is okay to have difficult days.

It is okay to feel overwhelmed.

It is okay to carry your own story.

We are human before we are teachers.

But I have also learnt something equally important.

While we cannot always control what happens in our personal lives, we can become mindful of what we carry into our classrooms.

Children should never become recipients of burdens they did not create.

They deserve adults who are self-aware enough to pause, reflect and seek support when needed.

Not because teachers must always be perfect.

But because children deserve emotionally safe adults.

I have learnt that our emotional state quietly becomes part of the classroom.

Our calm helps children feel calm.

Our patience teaches patience.

Our kindness gives children permission to be kind.

Our hope reminds them to keep trying.

Children learn far more from who we are than from what we say.

As educators, we spend countless hours planning lessons, preparing activities and designing learning experiences.

All of that matters.

But if there is one investment that has given me the greatest return, it has been investing in relationships.

Know your children.

Learn what makes them laugh.

Discover what worries them.

Celebrate what excites them.

Notice the child who speaks the loudest.

Notice the one who quietly fades into the background.

Listen to what children tell you.

But also learn to listen to what they cannot yet put into words.

Trust is not something children owe us simply because we are teachers.

Trust is something we earn.

Slowly.

Patiently.

One interaction at a time.

One of the greatest lessons my classroom has taught me is beautifully simple.

Children should first like the person who is teaching them.

Learning follows naturally.

When children feel emotionally safe, they become curious.

When they feel respected, they begin to trust.

When they trust, they begin to participate.

When they participate, learning quietly unfolds.

Never underestimate the power of one caring relationship.

Many years from now, your students may not remember every worksheet, every lesson or every activity.

But they will remember how your classroom made them feel.

They will remember whether they belonged.

Whether someone noticed them.

Whether someone believed in them before they believed in themselves.

As I close this book, I find myself thinking about every child who has walked into my classroom.

They came believing I would teach them.

Little did I know that they would become my greatest teachers.

If this book leaves you with one thought, let it be this:

Before trying to change a child...

be willing to change your lens.

Before expecting trust...

earn it.

Before correcting behaviour...

seek to understand it.

Before asking children to grow...

continue growing yourself.

May we continue choosing curiosity over certainty.

May we continue choosing reflection over judgement.

May we continue choosing relationships before strategies.

And above all...

May we always remain works in progress.

With gratitude,

Prajakta Bhide Bapat

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Prajakta Bhide Bapat is an educator, academic leader and lifelong learner. With experience in Early Years and Primary Education, she has worked across diverse educational settings and continues to believe that every classroom is an opportunity not only to teach children but also to grow as an educator.

Throughout her journey, Prajakta has come to believe that qualifications may prepare us for a profession, but reflections prepare us for living that profession with purpose. It is this belief that inspired the stories and reflections shared in this book.

She hopes this book encourages educators to pause, reflect, look beyond behaviour and build classrooms where every child feels seen, heard, valued and emotionally safe.

She continues to live by a simple belief:

"I am a work in progress, and I hope I always will be."

