

DID YOU PASS?

"What do you mean, you called home and asked for the car to pick you up? Don't you know school doesn't give over until half past three?" I asked the sullen eleven year-old, in an exasperated tone.

It was nearing the end of term. My class of twenty-five sixth graders seemed to be even more of a challenge than at the start of the year.

As their Class Teacher, I met them at the end of every day for a twenty-minute Class Teacher's Period, when (unlike in our regular Science Classes) we were expected to run through the day, check on assigned homework and 'touch base', as it were. On one such afternoon, I discovered, to my horror, that one boy had left the school before closing time the previous day, without informing any teacher. He had telephoned his parents from the school office, and asked for the car to be sent to pick him up.

"I had permission to be exempted from games, Teacher," he replied, innocently. "So I wasn't missing games without permission."

I could see that the rest of the class sympathized with him silently. That a student could not leave the school premises, without the knowledge of the teachers, was something none of them was in tune with.

I explained, as patiently as I could, that the school ran from half past eight in the morning until half past three in the afternoon, and that they were expected to seek permission to come late or leave early.

I thought I had made things clear. I was wrong! In a matter of four days, five different boys and girls left the school without permission in more or less the same way..and I came to know of it much later!

Marching into class for my Class Teacher's Period, I fumed at the bunch of little rebels. What did they think? I had had it up to my neck, I flared. Did they think I had an interminable supply of patience? How many times did I need to explain things to them? I had tried to tell them calmly, and it hadn't made a jot of difference. Well, now, I said, I had had enough. I was glad our association was ending, I said. (I was leaving the school that year, as I had to move to another town.) In a few weeks we would part.

I went home that evening feeling disturbed. I was upset with the way things had turned out. My 'fun class' had been less and less fun of late. It had gradually become increasingly difficult to handle these bubbling eleven-year-olds. I found that our usual games, jokes and banter had given way to repeated injunctions from me, and I was not happy with this shift in my stance: from 'friendly teacher' to 'authority'.

Yet I did not know what else to do. End-of-term work piled up before me. Reports to be written, the course to be completed, and along with all this.an increase in the indiscipline in the class..what was I to do?

Dejectedly, I dragged myself to school the next day. Mid-way through the morning, I was not surprised to receive a call from the Principal's office: the parents of an errant boy wished to meet me. Keeping my pile of uncorrected note books aside, I hurried into the Principal's office.

Seated before him were a tearful mother and an angry father. The latter spoke of how hurt his son felt by my scolding him the previous day. The mother cried: "They used to love you! Yesterday, my

son came home so hurt..I believe you said you were glad the association was ending. That really hurt them. I couldn't listen to him as soon as he returned from school yesterday, as we were on our way out for the evening. But when I got back and heard him, I felt his pain."

I was stunned. Didn't these parents understand that their son had erred? That he had been told many a time that he could not leave the school without permission? Wouldn't they have held me (or the school) responsible if their son had gone out of the school gate unescorted and been harmed in any way?

Again, as with my eleven-year-olds, I found my protests falling on more or less deaf ears. Yes, they conceded, while their son should not have left the school without permission, I had hurt him by dealing with it as I did.

From the things which my Principal left unspoken, I could see that he, too, did not agree with the steps I had taken, although he did see that the students had erred. Why, I asked him, did nobody understand my predicament? He replied that perhaps I should try and understand my own testiness first.

I went home that day with a heavy heart. Was I supposed to be a saint? Didn't I have the right to be human? How much patience could I display? After all, it had not been the first time that such a thing had happened. But the picture of the crying mother haunted me. That, and her words: "They used to love you!"

What had happened? I asked myself. What had gone wrong? I barely slept that night. The picture of a hurt child and his equally hurt mother kept flashing through my broken dreams.

All of a sudden, I had an idea. I would put my helplessness before the class. I would show them how I had reached the end of my tether.

I walked into my Science class the next day, and noticed the frightened look on the face of Aditya, the boy whose parents had come and seen me the previous day. No doubt, he was expecting a reaction from me.

The tension in the air was palpable. All the children looked up at me expectantly. Not a smile could be seen.

I forced a smile and said: "Yesterday, Aditya's parents met me. After I spoke to them, I went home and played a game."

A murmur of surprise rippled through the class. A game?

"I told myself, you are not Teacher. You are Aditya. How do you feel? And I felt: 'I don't like Teacher. She is getting angry very easily these days. Why should she scold me so? After all, I only went home after calling up my parents'.."

A sparkle of recognition gleamed in Aditya's eyes. His neighbour's expression echoed this.

Still, no one spoke.

"Then," I continued, "I played the game again. I told myself, I am not Teacher, I am Divya. And I felt: 'This Teacher is not as kind as she used to be. She has turned nasty nowadays. I am glad she is leaving soon.'." A slow smile spread across Divya's pink face. Ever so slowly, the smiles began to flash across many faces.

Visibly, the tension eased.

"And now, I would like each of you to play this game with me here.will you?" I asked.

"Yes, Teacher!" chorused my old bunch of lively eleven-year-olds.

"Each of you must act like you are Teacher. You are NOT Divya, or Aditya or Anita.you are Teacher. Now will each of you tell us how you feel?"

A hand shot up. "Teacher feels." began Deepak, in a loud voice, when I interrupted: "No, you are Teacher. You must say ' I feel.'."

He began again: "I feel this class is getting to be too difficult to manage. They just don't listen to me any more."

"YES!" I said, vehemently, in an I-couldn't-agree-with-you-more tone.

"I used to tell them things nicely, but how long can I be patient? After all, aren't I human?" asked Divya, with feeling.

"I can only try so much," said Arun. "I feel like giving up now."

"I have failed with this class. I can't teach them the right things any more." This came from Anand.

And so it went on.as each child spoke, I felt as if my own inner voice was being heard.

Suddenly, we were all friends again. What had been impossible to communicate on all the previous occasions, was now crystal clear to all the children: of course , they understood how it was necessary to keep the teacher informed of their whereabouts during school hours. If anything were to happen to them during that time, who else would be held responsible?

"You see, children, I feel I have failed with all of you. I couldn't even teach you this!" I said, with openness.

"Teacher, just give us one more chance!" they chorused. "We will make you pass!"

"But we only have six weeks left!" I protested.

Sure, they agreed. Couldn't they show how much they had changed in six weeks? Just wait and see, Teacher, was their assurance. They would be on their best behaviour and would ask me at the end of the term whether I had passed.that was a deal.

With relief, I agreed, and our class teacher's periods reverted to fun-filled games and jokes, from that very day.

Slowly, the weeks slipped by, with no more undue incidents. Swallowed in end-of-term work, I had put the whole experience behind me, when the last day of school caught me unawares.

My class had organized a farewell Treasure Hunt for me during the last class teacher's period. Little did they know that I had already caught sight of the "treasure", tucked away in a gift-wrap beneath a chair. I played along, pretending to hunt for the treasure, and after what seemed to be a decent length of time, 'hit upon' it and began to unwrap the gift.

Wham! Aditya slammed his hand upon the gift.

"Wait! Wait, Teacher!" he shouted, excitedly. Then, he turned around to all his classmates, and whispered: "We forgot!"

Oh, yes! They shouted in unison: "Teacher, did you pass?" Expectant little faces looked at me, waiting for my verdict.

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence which ensued. All eyes were focused on me, seated before the unwrapped gift, as I saw their snapping eyes and felt the expectant air, with a full heart and unshed tears.

"I think.." I replied slowly, and I could swear none of them took a breath during that pause; "I think.I just made it!"

With a delighted whoop, the entire class shrieked in excitement, gathered around me, and we laughingly unwrapped the gift together.

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