

A new theatre initiative at the Swami Dayananda Rotary Matriculation School puts the fun back into education!



KADALUR, T.N.—First standard student S. Ashwan is sitting by himself, waiting for his turn. He’s a bit tense, as if expecting someone. “Vaishu and Vishali are not here,” he says, quietly. “Only if they come, we can be three umbrellas.” Soon, the teacher calls for the umbrellas—umbrellas, inga vaanga (come here)—and Ashwan jumps up, eagerly. He is soon lost in the group of first standard children representing the water cycle—clouds forming droplets and pouring down as rain. The end of the scene features Ashwan and his two absent friends, who together protect the people from the rain.

The scene is part of an initiative by AIM for Seva titled Theatre for Development, and its pilot is being implemented at the

Swami Dayananda Rotary Matriculation School in Kadalur, Kanchipuram District. Spearheaded by noted theatre director and actor N.S. Yamuna, the model introduces the concept of theatre and performance in education.

Taking a step away from rote learning, Theatre for Development aims to help students understand concepts—even mathematical concepts—in a fun and engaging way. It brings creativity into learning, and the children are better able to retain concepts, since they are able to experience it, rather than simply see and learn the concepts through a blackboard and a notebook.

"After the success of the Art for Development initiative, the Theatre for Development will now offer our students another dimension to self-expression," says Ms. Sheela Balaji, managing trustee and secretary, AIM for Seva. "Learning through performance is a new concept in most schools in India, which still view theatre as an 'extra curricular activity' and we are proud to have launched this in our school." "The program is being done as a model of how teachers could make their own classes more interesting and engaging," says Ms. Yamuna. "When you employ theatre, the teacher does not have to shout all the time. It also allows the children to express themselves."

Ready for the cycle to start!

At the school, the program is being led by local theatre artist A.S. Mugilan, who specializes in training NGOs in theatre and mime. Mugilan and his theatre group, Mugil Gramiya Kalai Kuzhu, were extensively trained by Ms. Yamuna before embarking on the project.

The project aims to teach the children concepts from their own text books in an interactive and interesting way. For instance, the higher classes have concepts of mathematics included in a villupaatu-style format. "It requires a different kind of treatment," says Ms. Yamuna. "With the physicality of theatre, you are adding a different dimension to the learning."

At the Kadalur school, all classes, right from kindergarten to the sixth standard, are part of the initiative. Children are excited about the upcoming annual day, when they will perform their "lessons". Kindergarten children are amazingly enthusiastic and quick in their learning, says Mugilan. "The children enjoy this so much, and look forward to this time," he says.

Each class comes in for an hour a week, in preparation for the big show, scheduled for the end of March, to coincide with the World Day of Theatre for Children and Young People.

Meanwhile, there is chaos at the centre of the class, where the children are practising. "Where are the boats?" asks the teacher and a group of students who are "boats" raise their hands. "When the rain comes, people need you to go from place to place," says the teacher, asking them to join the group of students who represent rain and clouds, and they walk in, mimicking oars.

Another group of students is sitting on one side, rapt with attention. They are waiting for their cue. When asked what they were, they say, "We are seeds." One of the children, S. Sanjay, has more to add. "When rain comes, we will grow and become plants," he says, oblivious of any metaphor that the statement lends itself to. What kind of plant, I ask. He thinks for a bit before adding, "Healthy plants."