



# Outstanding Youth in Education Award

## TURNING COMPLAINTS INTO OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

By Miss Abirami d/o Archunan

Students tend to seek the help of their teachers when they face issues with their peers. Miss Abirami uses these situations to empower the students to solve their own problems instead.

### The mentors behind me

Failing a class test or an exam can dampen one's spirit, self-esteem, and motivation. I faced it myself as a 12-year-old child. Mathematics was not my strongest subject. No matter how hard I tried, the content did not make sense to me. Then I met a caring neighbour, who offered to tutor me after work. Things changed. With her guidance and encouragement, I managed to pass my examinations. She believed in me and did not put undue pressure on me to perform.

That was a defining moment for me. I learnt the importance of providing children with the right type of guidance and support to grow and become successful individuals. I was thus inspired to become a teacher.

Though my first application was unsuccessful, I was still able to work in schools as an Allied Educator (AED) for Teaching and Learning, assisting teachers and supporting children on their education journey. After two years, and with renewed determination, I applied again to become a teacher and my application was successful. I was overjoyed!



Miss Abirami explaining the Lunch Bunch booklet to her students.

### Character first

In my first year of teaching, my students often complained to me about one another. It was usually about disrespect, or arguments they had. I spent a lot of time helping them resolve these problems. I did not solve them directly—instead I taught my students to be inclusive in their thoughts, words, and deeds, to display empathy in their relationships, and have the moral courage to stand up for what is right.

To do this, I came up with a series of booklets filled with activities. Each one had a theme, such as respect, resilience, empathy, gratitude, or friendship. One of them had short stories featuring 'Emphy' (short for empathy), who encounters various challenges. I called this series, 'Lunch Bunch'.



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Once a week during recess, I would randomly partner my students with a classmate, get them to try the activities, and to get to know one another better in the process. They had to work together to guide Emphy to do what was best and right in each scenario.

One of the short stories focuses on being an upstander when one witnesses bullying. I encouraged my students to move out of their comfort zones, use moral reasoning, and take a stand on what they would do. 'I will tell the bully to stop bullying because it is wrong of her to do that,' said one. 'I will find out the bully's name and class and then I will tell you, Miss Abi' was another. These responses generated further discussion among the students.

Through this, they gained skills to be proactive in standing up for their peers, and to recognise the importance of taking the right course of action. They also had the chance to learn about love, acceptance, and empathy, which are necessary qualities for good working relationships and team building.

These stories struck a particular chord with my students, because they were based on real situations—the ones that several of them asked me for help with.

Through Lunch Bunch, my students became more reflective, and more confident when faced with a challenge. It was a hit among the girls. They look forward to partnering a new buddy each week, and extending their friendship to others in class.

### Cultivating a growth mindset



Miss Abirami reading a book on values to her primary one students.

**'I tell them that it is important to appreciate how far they have come, because learning is never a destination, but a journey. When the children have issues grappling with concepts, I encourage them with phrases such as, "It's not that you don't know. You just don't know yet."'**

I also strive to cultivate a growth mindset in my students. I want them to become self-reliant, motivated, and resilient. I do not want them to be overly stressed by grades, and consider these indicators as a testament to their intelligence. I tell them that it is important to appreciate how far they have come, because learning is never a destination, but a journey. When the children have issues grappling with concepts, I encourage them with phrases such as, 'It's not that you don't know. You just don't know yet.'

I also emphasise to their parents that each child has his or her own learning pace. I ask that they focus on their child's growth and learning, and not on the marks he or she attains. I often remind parents to avoid comparing their child with his or her peers.

Having experienced setbacks in my own learning, I appreciate that we can grow by focusing on our strengths, and learning from our mistakes. I aim to provide a safe environment in class where students can see beauty in imperfection, and face challenges positively.



Miss Abirami sharing the importance of values with students at the Father Barre Garden.

