

# Diversity at the Heart of School and Classroom Culture

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In this essay, I hope to build an understanding of diversity, narrate practices of working with diversity and suggest a broader approach of education and educators towards diversity.

## Recognising diversity

Schools in India are becoming more diverse thanks to the Education for All (EFA) movement and the importance placed on this global commitment nationally through *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA, 2001) and more importantly, by teachers and parents who have persevered to educate children (against all odds). Classrooms today have greater diversity linguistically, socio-culturally, in abilities, disabilities, and gender, to name a few. A simple framework to recognise diversity is to think of it in terms of 'direct' and 'indirect' influences with the caveat that there will be overlaps between the two. Migration is one form of direct influence, though the nature of migration is equally important – a family might move to a metropolitan city for better job prospects while another might move to a neighbouring state due to unrest in their state.

Examples of indirect influence on classroom diversity are macro factors, such as aspirations of families leading to changes in school choices or progressive thinking, such as the assertion by a family/parent for their child with a disability to study in a 'regular' neighbourhood school (which is endorsed by the National Education Policy 2020). It is harder to spot indirect influences, which arise from the rapidly changing markets and their impact on the nature of jobs, popular culture informed by social media, an array of new student interests, and the evolving identities of young people born into the third millennium.

While the pace, and manner in which classroom diversity is taking shape needs a critical look, as educators, we must welcome and prepare for greater diversity. This raises the practical question of how we can build a school and classroom culture for this new diversity.

## The practice of working with diversity

As educators, engaging with diversity involves not just developing empathy towards the different circumstances that children come from, but also engaging with it in a pedagogical sense. In other words, it is asking key questions, such as how I can include the lived experiences of all my students in my teaching and learning; and what can children learn from each other, not just conceptually, but also to build a social understanding of the world they inhabit. A diverse classroom means more opportunities for children to learn about each other and to appreciate the social fabric of society. To engage in this form of diversity is to also show acceptance towards all different types of backgrounds.

In a recent webinar,<sup>1</sup> on inclusive practices, Murari Jha, a mentor teacher from a government school in Delhi spoke of the gap between how education is structured and taught and who the children are. One of the cultural gaps he referred to was celebrating a hundred percent attendance of students to motivate them to come to school, in a community where there are children who work to support their families and often miss school. He went on to talk about the practice of a reflective diary-writing exercise that his class does, which helps him construct his teaching and provides space for children to feel heard and understood by the teacher and their peers. Such a practice can be classified as a practice of co-agency, which argues for learning to be a shared endeavour between the teacher and student.

When a classroom culture is built on the idea of co-agency, it creates room for students to take on a sense of responsibility for their own learning, leading to a greater possibility of children discovering how they learn. For instance, if we consider a student having a reading difficulty and

the lesson requires students to read a short story and answer questions. A classroom with co-agency will incorporate *open-endedness* and *choice* for all students. The possible choices can include the choice of story, choice in how much time one would take to read and answer a question, choice in the process of reading – having the option to do it alone or in pairs or listen to it using text-to-speech technology, choice in the questions or the number of questions, choice in answering through an audio note and so on. It is important for this choice to be extended to all students because making choices available only to those with a difference will inextricably make students feel othered. A student with reading difficulty in such a classroom is less anxious and free to develop their skill of reading and learning at a pace that works for them. This type of choice and open-endedness help all other students since they find room to understand how they learn as well as develop their own unique ways of learning. Co-agency is not the same as giving free choices to students, it includes teachers raising questions for the students to reflect on their process and how they can improve the same – making learning a shared responsibility.

Other than principles and practices, understanding diversity is also about the day-to-day ‘small’ efforts (and reflections) in getting to know students. Kavya, a middle-income high school teacher, is an avid listener of world music. She makes an effort to listen to the music that her students are listening to and has brief discussions about it at different intervals throughout the year. This is her way of connecting with children based on her interests, which inextricably facilitates a kind of unique connection that she has with students that no one else in the staff room seems to have.

### **Underlying principle of enacting inclusion in diversity**

In exploring the idea of diversity and difference in the classroom, it is important to understand the vulnerability of that difference in relation to the dominant feature of a given space. If we take a common example, such as left-handedness (10% of people are left-handed) we might find that a left-handed student sits in a different way to be able to write effectively; may struggle with handwriting due to a lack of proper training (and the fact that most writing systems taught in India follow a left-to-right format); and may be perceived as clumsy due to how spaces and objects (desks, scissors, measuring instruments, etc) are designed for right-

handed people. In rarer situations, the child may be labelled negatively for being left-handed. As an educator, one might respond to this by taking necessary steps, such as offering flexible seating so that it helps left-handers, training for handwriting (and/or concessions in handwriting standards) and building awareness towards normalising left-handedness.

Most of these approaches may be common today for left-handedness but when we extend the same to other forms of difference, such as disabilities, learning difficulties or gender identities, where do we stand? At a fundamental level, dealing with such differences is no different from the approach we would take in the case of left-handedness. With disability and other intersectional issues, there are more variables to consider but the starting point should be the same.

From my experience as a teacher-educator, I have found that teachers do not always see this as the starting point. This is because the work of teaching children with disabilities or difficulties is yet to be embraced as the work of regular school teachers and not of the special educator alone. The idea that children with disabilities can only learn from a specialised set of instructions or techniques is a deeply entrenched one. To reiterate, the starting point for the practice of inclusive education is not a set of special strategies or so-called best practices, it is building and making your current practices more inclusive than they are and abandoning those that are exclusionary.

I conclude this essay with the following (interrelated) points:

- As many scholars of inclusive education have highlighted, the mindset of an inclusive educator considers difference or being different as a fundamental part of a person. When we consider this, we will find that the ability-based categories that we might place children in, such as the *good*, *average* or *dull*, will fade away and we will be able to see them as individuals with differences.
- Inclusive practice is less about ‘best practices’ and more about building on what we know (our strengths and interests, as Kavya does through music and Murari through his inquisitiveness about students’ life experiences). Inclusive practice is the development of a kind of pedagogy that enables the participation of all students and is compounded by ideas, such as the ‘growth

mindset' (a belief that one can learn through effort and improve the process of learning and that learning is not an innate ability).

- For inclusion to come into practice, educators need agency (and autonomy) to structure and

practise education in a space where there is liberty and a commitment to ensuring rights for all children to learn, to belong, to grow, and to a life of self-fulfilment.

#### Endnotes

- i *Supporting Teachers to Develop Inclusive Classrooms* – to watch this webinar, use the link or scan the QR code.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hucxfxN\\_cA4&t=3063s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hucxfxN_cA4&t=3063s)



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