Parents' trust in school led to children's inclusion

T Gajalakshmi

In my classroom, some students were very mischievous, and I found it challenging to change their behaviour both in school and in the classroom. About 50 percent of the children came from the Irular (Narikuravargal) community, and their learning process was shaped by their environment. For example, they would spit, bring sharp objects like knives or blades to school, and use inappropriate language. Recognising their unique learning needs, I focused on providing tailored support to help them succeed.

First, I spoke with their parents about their behaviour. I advised them to discourage the use of bad language and to check their school bags for sharp objects regularly. Then, I began closely observing the children's activities. I planned a few activities specifically for these children to redirect their energy to focus on positive learning. I assigned them responsibilities and supported them in completing tasks. Gradually, I noticed some changes in their behaviour. I helped them develop skills to manage their emotions and behaviour by teaching them the techniques of deep breathing and counting to ten when they felt angry. This proved effective. I rewarded positive behaviour with praise, privileges, or small incentives, which encouraged the children to repeat good behaviour.

Apart from the behavioural aspect, the students from this community faced several unique challenges in accessing education, which significantly impacted their learning experiences. Some of the key challenges included:

- Many students from this community came from low-income families, making it difficult for them to afford school supplies, transportation, and other educational resources.
- Frequent relocations due to housing instability disrupted their education, causing gaps in learning and difficulty in establishing consistent relationships with peers and teachers.
- Irregular attendance, often due to personal or family issues, led to significant gaps in learning, making it hard for them to keep up with their peers.
- Stigma or discrimination which they faced due to their background, lead to feelings of isolation, which impacted their self-esteem and motivation.
- Experiences of instability, trauma, or stress often led to mental health challenges, affecting their focus, attendance, and overall well-being.

Some students struggled with reading due to dyslexia and other learning disabilities, which made decoding words difficult, leading to frustration and loss of motivation. Many students had packed schedules filled with homework, extracurricular activities, and family obligations, leaving them little time for reading. Additionally, distractions in their environment, noisy or chaotic surroundings, made it hard for them to focus on reading. Some students lacked a conducive space for reading or the necessary support from peers and family to encourage them.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving educators, parents, and the community. By providing engaging materials, fostering a supportive environment, and offering targeted interventions, we helped students overcome barriers to reading and cultivated a lifelong love for literature and learning.

I engaged parents in the educational process through regular communication and involvement in school activities. This helped strengthen the support network for the students. Using role play, puppets, and drama, I created a positive atmosphere; addressed bullying; and promoted respect for others. This helped children develop social skills, such as sharing, taking turns and communicating effectively.

As a result, the parents of these children began trusting the school and interacting with the teachers whenever necessary. The children's behavioural issues were almost completely resolved, and they all became unified as one group. These children no longer had time to fight or wander aimlessly; they were consistently engaged in activities like reading storybooks, gardening, drawing, colouring, and craftwork. They took on responsibilities in class and school-level activities, such as participating in morning assemblies, maintaining the classroom, and joining competitions. Additionally, they were more focused on their academic work.

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The school belongs to everyone...

Kusum Lata Sharma

Like in other schools, in our school too, all the children sit together during the mid-day meal and enjoy their food. The children and I manage the arrangement together. While I take care of the food and its taste, etc., the children are responsible for ensuring that all children wash their hands before meals, hygiene is maintained during food preparation, and the seating arrangements for the children are proper, etc. The duties assigned to the children are shuffled among them.

One day, I was looking at the arrangements of the mid-day meal along with the children and I was pleased to see that everything was in order. Generally, after seeing that all the arrangements are in place, all the teachers gather together for tea and discuss teaching approaches, the behaviour of children, and related topics. That day, while we all were talking, my attention was drawn to the seating arrangement of the children. I saw the children from Sapera Basti (snake charmers' settlement) sitting together in one row, the children from Muslim families seated in another row, and the rest sitting in a separate row altogether. I observed this sitting arrangement for the next 4-5 days and discovered that all the children consistently sat in separate groups.

I started paying closer attention to the behaviour of children and their conversations. During a casual conversation with one child, I asked, 'Why do you sit away from the children from Sapera Basti? Did you fight?' The child replied, 'No Ma'am, those children are from a different section of society and work as rag-pickers. That is why we don't sit with them.' This comment struck me. I asked, 'You don't even sit with Sameer (a Muslim boy), do you?' He replied, 'Yes, Ma'am, we sit separately!' I began to wonder why they played together but sat in different groups while eating meals. I did not like this discriminatory practice.

The next day, when the bell rang for the mid-day meal, I joined the children in their dining area and told them, 'From today, I will sit with all of you for my meals.' The children seemed quite happy to hear this. However, I noticed that some children seemed uncomfortable to see me sitting with the children of Sapera Basti. I told them, 'I will have my food here

every day, but tomorrow I will sit in another row.' Then I asked the one serving the meals to give me a plate. She gave me a plate the way she gave to the others and served me my meal. After eating, I picked up my plate, washed it, and kept it in the basket. The next day, I sat in a different row and followed this pattern for a week. During meals, I would also have casual conversations with children about what they did at home the previous evening, whether they completed homework or not, and so on.

Gradually, in the hope of sitting next to me, I noticed that the children had given up sitting according to their caste, religion, or the place they belonged to. They began sitting wherever they could find a place and seemed to enjoy having their meals together. Sometimes, young children would bring food from home and would be keen to share it with me. They would feed me, and I would also share my food with them. After a week, I had to leave for a 5-day training workshop. Upon my return, I was pleased to find that the children were still sitting together and having their meals.

I also talked to my co-teachers about the issue and helped them understand that rather than making these subtle patterns of discrimination a big issue, it is important to identify them, talk about them, and think of alternative ways to challenge them.

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Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal

Teach children the way they want to learn

Madhumalathi

I would visit various government primary schools during my work with the Bangalore District Institute and the Government Model Senior Primary School (now, 'Bangalore Public School), Puttenahalli was one of them. It is a big school with over a thousand children. I remember a teacher, Madhumalathi, who taught all the subjects in the Kannada medium class IV. With an experience of three decades, she never doubted any child's abilities and could identify students' needs, and the kind of guidance they required and planned her teaching accordingly.

Among her many useful practices was one in which she divided the class into three groups to facilitate the teaching process – FLN-level students, middle-level students and high achievers. She did this only to help her in her teaching process, not to separate them in class; it was done with no bias to make any child feel inferior or superior to the rest. She clearly understood why children's learning progress varies so much and they were engaged in the learning process according to the type of positive reinforcement they needed.

To improve children's learning, she prepared two simple questionnaires separately to assess their learning level progress. One questionnaire she gave to the students at the beginning of the academic year and the other, at the end of the academic year. This was for her own understanding. It helped her identify the kind of help each child needs – whether they need practice sheets, remedial teaching, printed resources, or library books – and respond earnestly to these needs of the children.

'Instead of teaching children like we want, we should teach them in the way they want to learn. Then, children learn according to their abilities. If we measure everything without even responding to their needs, all effort will be wasted. Shouldn't we consider the needs of these children the same way we consider the interests of our own children? These children have no other facilities; they will learn nothing,' she once told me.

Another noteworthy practice was how she managed the library session. The school has a very large library with many children's books. Room to Read has provided four levels of books published by Pratham Foundation according to children's learning levels. The library session is once a week and before the library session, the teacher herself would go to the library and take out the books that suit the needs of the children in her class. Then she would group these into picture books, storybooks with minimal text, bilingual books, books with fewer pictures and more text, and storybooks without

pictures. Next, she would select a story and read it aloud. After telling the story, she would discuss it to gauge if the children had understood the story. Children were asked to repeat the story; draw pictures of the situations of the story and display the pictures in the library.

After this, the children were free to pick a book of their choice and read it. They were encouraged to keep a book diary in the library and write down their thoughts/opinions about the books they read. Children were also encouraged to tell stories of their choice. It was very heartening to watch the whole class become engrossed in the reading process during the library period.

'There are so many good books in our school, what use are they if we put them in the cupboard? If we understand which kind of books a child needs and provide it to them, we can instil a taste for reading in them. If we don't, we do great injustice to the children who don't have any such advantages at home. Let the children participate according to their ability. If nothing else, at least let the child notice the book. Not all children may read books. Some listen to the story. Some draw pictures. Some tell the story themselves. Some people just see the visuals. But this is a part of learning for them, isn't it? If we confine children to lessons, is it not as if we have deprived them of the opportunity to come to school, mingle with everyone, and become one with everyone by being involved in everything? Who knows which children have what talents? If it comes to light, it is great. But letting everyone get a chance is most important,' were her words.

Madhumalathi, Government Model Senior Primary School, Puttenahalli, Konnakunte, Bengaluru. (As told to Raghavendra Herle)

Inclusion in education is possible only through consistent efforts

Poonam Bhatia

There was a 7-year-old girl, studying in class II. She would stay aloof in the class. It was as if she wanted to hide away from everyone. When someone asked her something, she would shy away, and her eyes would well up. I was new to this school and felt worried for this anxious girl.

I spoke to the other teachers about her. I asked them if she had a mental or physical problem. I was informed that the girl had been like this since she enrolled in the school. I called her parents to school to talk to them. Her mother seemed troubled that with their poor economic situation and their daughter's dark complexion, no one would marry her. I was quite shocked and asked her if she planned to get the child married right away. Not right away but whenever they would try to get her married, the child's dark complexion would be a massive burden for a poor family like theirs, she told me. I tried to make them understand that they should not discuss her skin complexion with the child, that marriage would happen when it has to happen and that it would be better if they focused on her education now. I advised the girl's parents to meet with me every 15 days.

I started engaging with the girl. Her complexion was quite dark, and I had never imagined that her complexion would have such a profound effect on her self-esteem and identity. However, society and the people around us intentionally or unintentionally impact us deeply. The girl never spoke; she would not utter a word when I asked her a question. Gradually, I started talking to her every day and requested all the teachers to interact with her the way they interact with other children because it was clear that the child was otherwise fine mentally and physically. We need to work patiently with such children. During this time, I gave her picture books and other small books to read. Through our consistent interaction and the help of books, the girl slowly started feeling at ease.

It was quite a challenge for us to make her understand 'herself' so that she would feel that she was just like the other children and was comfortable being with them. We wanted her to play, study, enjoy and be mischievous like other children. I wanted her to be able to express her feelings openly.

I learned about several psychological aspects of this issue by reading books and interacting with academicians and doctors. Following this, all the teachers collectively brainstormed for solutions. For example, during classroom activities, we consciously started involving the girl. While making a human chain, we would hold her hand. We would call her if we needed children to help in the class. She would also be encouraged to tell a story and so on. In addition, we would conduct regular conversations and discussions with the girl's parents. Gradually, she began to initiate conversations by herself, using simple words to express her thoughts.

One day, in a low voice, she told me that some children tease her because of her dark complexion. As she told me this, her eyes filled up with tears. How can one expect a child to concentrate in class and enjoy studies when she is struggling to understand her existence? I tried to counsel her and emphasised that anyone can be born with any skin colour. I told her if she focused on her studies and became a good person, she would earn the respect of the people around her. That is why, it was important for her to focus on her studies. After this, she felt at ease and began playing, dancing during festivities, studying, and so on. But of course, all of this did not happen in a day.

In reality, this is an ongoing process. Now, the girl has enrolled in class IX in another school. She has found her place in the mainstream. However, she is still not very expressive, but we are pleased to know that she has developed some self-confidence. We are not sure if her skin colour would limit her aspirations anymore, but we believe her education will empower her.

We never know when our children, adorned with various colours of our social fabric, are forced to deal with difficult situations. It is easy to introduce 'inclusion' as a concept, but it is a challenge to execute the strategies for inclusion. As teachers, we often tend to lose faith in the process, as it is a long and tedious process the rewards of which are not reflected immediately.

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Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal