

Equal Learning Opportunities for All Children

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When children, who have infinite potential for learning, start seeing school as a place they fear, where they may be beaten, teachers instil a sense of ownership and self-respect in them by trusting their ability to learn, showing affection towards them, and respecting diversity. This task is challenging, but the human-professional efforts of teachers make it possible.



Figure 1: Sitting in a circle helps the teacher observe, include and give each student the opportunity to learn.

When we started the Azim Premji School in Tonk in 2012, we began by trying to identify those children who would be prioritised for admission. After discussions among ourselves, we agreed to first enrol children from marginalised communities who were either not attending school or struggling to learn as expected. To identify such children, we visited the upper primary school in Bamor village, where teachers had information about the children in the village who had dropped out of school. They provided us with a list of children who had left school and also those who, despite being in classes IV and V, had not acquired basic reading and writing skills.

We enrolled these children in classes I to V based on their age. Accordingly, 14 children were admitted to class V; 70-80 percent did not have an understanding of letters or vowel sounds nor the ability to form meaningful words. One

of these students was a girl terrified of the mere mention of the word 'school'. Her perception of the school was that it was a place where one is beaten and maltreated. She had seen other children being beaten in school and had herself been punished by teachers. Whenever we tried to meet this student in the village, she would run off. Her guardians would say, 'What can we do? We keep telling her to go to school, but she does not listen.' It took days before she gathered the courage to meet us.

The school was started with 85 children, including school dropouts of different ages, as well as children at different academic levels and socio-economic backgrounds. Our challenge extended beyond the teaching and learning processes; it also involved uniting these children from diverse backgrounds and fostering a collective sense of community among them. Often, giving admission to

children from diverse backgrounds in the school is itself perceived as inclusion, but mere enrolment does not ensure inclusion. For that, processes at the classroom and school levels are even more important.

To create an inclusive atmosphere in school, we did various things, like we organised fun activities during the admission process itself. These activities helped us become familiar with the students and create an atmosphere of comfort between us.

Children started mingling with us. As a result, not only did the school enrolment numbers increase, but that girl who was afraid of even the name of 'school' also agreed to come to school. Other children who had a similar fear of school also started to come.

We started to work with these children, believing that every child brings with them a boundless potential to learn and that all of them can learn. We were clear that children learn best when they feel safe, valued, loved, and confident. With this understanding, we started to work with them. There is a pressing need to think of and work on various aspects of inclusion. For instance, how the school perceives children coming from various social, linguistic and economic backgrounds. Contrary to our assumptions, children's ability to observe, feel, and perceive their surroundings is quite sharp. They can very quickly gauge from the gestures of adults the kind of opinions they hold about them.

There was a clear understanding among the teachers that all children should feel a sense of equality and have no apprehensions of discrimination. We also brainstormed over how all children could be included in the school processes because, in general, children, be it at home or school, are given only instructions. It does not even occur to adults that a child of 8 to 10 years can do some things using their own judgement. Another aspect is that within the school system, a child's understanding of their environment is completely disregarded. If a 6-year-old's learning is planned in alignment with the sense of language and environment they bring to school, the results will be different.

To build connections with the children, we tried to include their local language, folk songs, and folk stories. The children were exposed to some of their childhood songs that were connected, in one way or another, to their environmental experiences. For example: 'Aa re baadal kaare baadal aao zara jhoom ke, apne sang thandi hawa laao zara jhoom ke,' 'Banjara namak laya, oont

gaadi mein,' and so on. These are children's songs deeply connected to the lives of these children.

As a result, all those children, who firmly believed that they could not learn reading and writing, gradually started enjoying the stories and poems they listened to. Initially, they would recite poems in groups. Once their fear of others laughing at their performance was dispelled, and they realised that they would be encouraged, their confidence grew. Soon, they began presenting short poems and stories of their own during the morning assembly. As a result, the older and younger, those who were at advanced levels and those who were trailing in studies, everyone started to feel at ease.

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After the admission process, inclusion does not result only from making the learning processes inclusive and comfortable, but the other school processes also need to be inclusive. To do this, various committees, such as the Mid-day Meal Committee, Safety Committee, Sports Committee, Library Committee, and Assembly Committee, were formed to ensure children's participation in school management. Every child from all grades, ages and backgrounds had the opportunity to participate in these. Along with the children, teachers were also required to be part of all these committees. As children began to take on responsibilities and realised their importance, they developed a sense of ownership over the processes and activities. They began to fulfil their roles with greater confidence. This confidence began to be reflected in their classroom as well. Such inclusion fostered a collective sense of 'community' among the children and helped them understand how to organise and manage tasks efficiently.

Along with all this, we also tried to understand the different areas of their interest through which children could express themselves more creatively. Some children prefer to express their thoughts through speech, while others prefer to do so through drawings. Singing children's songs, performing them with gestures, and expressing ideas visually are some of the key forms of expression amongst these. The experience of expressing oneself through drawings was facilitated by the art



Figure 2: Students preparing to paint with colours.

teacher. Children attempted to depict the stories and poems they had heard or read through pictures. They found this method very appealing. Children's work served as evidence that every child wants to connect with this mode of expression if given the freedom to represent their world through their experiences. This is possible only when teachers step beyond the boundaries of different subjects and perceive the connections between those different fields of knowledge. By doing so, they open new pathways for children's learning, making the process more accessible and dynamic. Such teaching activities not only provide opportunities for all children to participate but also help them identify and nurture their talents. For example, children illustrated scenes from their surroundings during Diwali and described them exactly as they had seen and experienced them. When teachers allow children to choose their preferred medium to express their experiences, activities like drawing, discussing them, and translating those ideas into linguistic symbols become as much a source of joy as writing about a festival like Diwali.

These examples strengthen the thought that each child is unique and that when teaching is connected to their personal experiences, learning becomes effective. This approach allows teachers to understand each child's background. A key principle in this process is to avoid comparing one child to another. Every child learns differently, so why do we subject them to relentless comparison daily, instilling in them a sense of inadequacy? This erodes their confidence in learning, and the children

who struggle in certain academic areas begin to drift away from those areas. Similarly, children whose experiences find no place in the classroom also start to feel excluded.

This journey of teaching and learning was enjoyable and exciting for both children and teachers. Children were coming to school happily and were learning. Through the combined efforts of over four to five months, eight to ten children who previously feared school and were learning significantly less than our expectations began reading stories and poems, discussing the texts and expressing their thoughts through various mediums. Now, these children had the opportunity to work equally on all language skills. There was no visible separation among different age groups and even among children at various learning levels; there was a sense of ease rather than of separation. This made the environment more comfortable, and now, at least within the four walls of the school, feelings of hierarchy and discrimination were not displayed among the children. This was a significant sense of achievement for the children. For us, it was an exhilarating realisation that with the appropriate environment and processes, children can learn to read and write well and move towards better human values.



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The processes described above taught us that incorporating children's linguistic, cultural, social, and economic backgrounds into the classroom can enrich it as a resource and transform it into a significant opportunity of learning for all. This depends on how the group of teachers working with children from specific environments view those aspects. The perspective of the teachers towards children's diversity and their ability to make necessary changes in their own behaviour and classroom processes determine whether they view this diversity as a resource or an obstacle. If this diversity becomes a resource, it will make it possible for children to achieve their learning objectives. It is certain that if teachers have this perspective, they will find solutions.

Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal



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