

Innovating Processes to Help Every Child Learn

Anil Singh

The guiding principles of the National Curriculum Framework (2005) clearly outline that knowledge should be connected to life outside school, learning should shift away from rote methods and the teaching-learning process should not be mechanical. The curriculum should be enriched in such a manner that it goes beyond the textbook into building a holistic understanding among children. Examinations should be flexible and integrated into the regular classroom proceedings. The school environment, as well as the teaching-learning process, should be democratic.

Post the universalization of elementary education, enrolment in schools has increased at unprecedented rates. Children with varied skills and abilities, hailing from different socio-economic backgrounds, who had been deprived of elementary education are now coming to school. Elementary education is their fundamental right. In these changed circumstances, it is imperative that all children are given a place in schools in a dignified manner, through the means of inclusion. It is a vital need to assure children that they have the ability to learn anything and everything. This is also a requisite for us in our commitment to the values enshrined in our constitution.

Anand Niketan Democratic School works with the vision of inclusiveness and democracy. In the past eight years of its journey, the children who have been a part of the school have not only come from different socio-economic backgrounds but also with varied physical, psychological and intellectual abilities. In this democratic, child-centric, and inclusive environment, all children have reached their cognitive milestones in their own rhythm and pace.

These experiences show that each child can learn. What we need to do is to lessen our anxiety about teaching, suspend our notion of authority as teachers from time to time, gauge the inherent capabilities and inclinations of children, make learning

lively and meaningful for them, value their knowledge and understanding, and protect their individuality and dignity. Then, in no time, paths to learning open up on their own.

In this article, I have presented my arguments through the case studies of five children. There is a multitude of examples that have led us to learn as a school unit. We moulded and innovated our teaching-learning processes in line with the children's needs and they were able to accelerate their learning achievements.

The first child among them is Rohit (7 years old) who lives in a *jhuggi* near the school. His father is illiterate and works as a water supplier and plumber in the colony. His elder brother works in a hotel. His sister is younger than him, but Rohit brings her to school. The second child is Bindu (8 years old) who has come from a village and speaks Marathi. She finds it extremely difficult to understand and speak Hindi. She was nervous that learning is near impossible for her. The third child is Krishna (8 years old) who lives in a buffalo shed with his grandfather. He used to go to a nearby school, but he was expelled for being irregular and for not meeting the expected learning outcomes. He comes to our school now, but his self-confidence has been gravely wounded. The fourth child, Puja (9 years old), has a hearing impairment. Though she has received a cochlear implant, she still has a problem speaking and hearing. She used to attend a reputable private school, but the school authorities deemed that she needs to attend a special school. Her guardian was sensible and following the suggestion of a clinical psychologist, she was admitted to Anand Niketan School. The fifth child is Swati (10 years old) who had speech impediments. She used to stammer when speaking and her speech was often slurred. The feeling of inferiority had taken root in her and she would cry easily at small matters.

All five of these children stayed at Anand Niketan school for anywhere between three to eight years. Not only were they able to do well in the academic

field, but they were also able to overcome their challenges. This strengthened our confidence that by bringing about desired changes in the school and its processes and by expanding our perspective, we can create an environment wherein each child can reach the expected academic achievements at their own pace, tempo, inclination, despite their constraints.

Seven-year-old Rohit was very insecure about his complexion and hair. He was reserved and quiet at school. He was irregular too. He lived in a *jhuggi* near the school. This also caused him to feel inferior as it was along the route to the school. His mother had left the city for her home in the village. The siblings would cook food together. The father would be away from the house most of the time due to his work. Raj, the elder brother, would also go off to work. In such a situation, it was difficult to leave the younger sister alone at home. We told Rohit that he could bring his younger sister to school. There were many other young children who would come to the school. His sister would play with them. As a result, Rohit came to the school more regularly and he felt at ease there.

Nobody could match Rohit in the playground or when it came to climbing trees. Studies, however, could not hold his interest. As teachers, we had a conversation amongst ourselves to attempt to understand the problems Rohit was facing. We decided to form a *kabaddi* team. Every day after school, we would play *kabaddi* for half an hour. An astounding flair for leadership emerged from Rohit. Not only did this lead him to build friendships with other children, but he also gained a commanding presence amongst his peers. He was now a favourite among them; all children wanted to be a part of his team.

Rohit could mimic the sounds of various birds and animals. Once, the children got together to shoot a short film in school. Rohit prepared the background music for the same. He prepared a range of sounds - of the forest, of water cascading, of birds, dogs and cows, of motorcycles, trains, and utensils. Some, he mimicked, and some, he produced through various ingenious means.

Rohit was good at applied mathematics. The maths teacher prepared various problems for him related to everyday life which Rohit solved without breaking a sweat. Owing to his regularity, his friendship with other children and the growing affinity with the teachers, he began to enjoy himself in the classroom.

He began to focus on learning. Along with maths, he also learnt Hindi and English. However, the Social Science class, in which relationships among society, individuals and the government were explained using examples from his life, quickly became his favourite. He investigated the course of a canal that flowed near the school for a Social Science project. He investigated the point of origin of the canal and where it passes through and how many places it branches into. He also studied the period of its flow to figure out which months it flows and when it remains dry. He looked into the number of farmers who used the canal for irrigation and analysed the importance of the canal in his life and the lives of others around him. He put up a good display of his work for this project and presented it very well in the classroom.

Rohit stayed at the school for six years. During this time, he enthusiastically participated in all activities in equal measure. After the slum was demolished, Rohit and his family had to relocate far from the school. He took admission in a government school in class VII and once, later, even visited us at the school.

Eight-year-old Bindu had come from a village in Maharashtra. She could understand Hindi a little but speaking in Hindi was a struggle for her. Reading and writing in Hindi was negligible. She initially struggled in classes in which Hindi was the medium of instruction. For almost a month, she was detached in the classroom, neither speaking nor responding to questions put to her. Her mother informed us that she would cry at home and say that she would not be able to continue in this manner. She was disappointed at the thought that she may never be able to study and learn.

The teachers sat down for a discussion and came up with some plans for her. One of our fellow teachers knew Marathi. He was given the responsibility of slowly initiating a dialogue with Bindu. Meanwhile, we also found two Marathi songs and began singing them during the morning gathering. The morning gathering as an informal, unfettered and voluntary forum has many possibilities. It is a group exercise and there is space for everyone. As soon as it was time for the Marathi song, Bindu would participate with utmost enthusiasm. In fact, she was given the responsibility to lead the song. She also introduced new songs to children. During the podium activity, children would recount their school experiences

from the previous day. Bindu was given the chance to express herself in Marathi and it would then be translated into Hindi for the other children by our Marathi-speaking teacher.

Apart from this, we also looked for some Marathi folktales, which were narrated in the classroom. Bindu had heard some of these previously and enjoyed herself thoroughly. She used her little knowledge of Hindi and added words from Marathi to share new information about these folktales with her classmates. This was a boost to her confidence. Her feeling of inferiority for only being able to speak in Marathi lessened and she formed friendships with her peers. She, then, took on the challenge of learning Hindi, Science and Maths. Once she took the initiative to learn, the school helped her. In no time, Bindu was not only able to speak in Hindi but could also read and, eventually, write in it. The school welcomed her and she embraced the school as well. In the next few years, Bindu became the most regular child in the school and also the one learning at a very fast pace. Now, Bindu is able to converse in English. She has also written poems and stories in Hindi. Because she attended the music classes regularly and developed a passion for singing, she started formal training in music. She also took part in school plays and essayed the role of the protagonist *Mati* from Rinchin's book '*I Will Save My Land*', performing beautifully. This year, Bindu has passed the eighth class. She is preparing to join another school to continue her studies.

Eight-year-old Krishna lives with his grandparents in a buffalo shed. He attended a nearby private school till class III. But he was expelled from the school for being irregular and for not meeting the expected learning outcomes.

Krishna's daily routine begins with getting up at 4 in the morning to bring fodder to the cattle, then clean and help his grandparents in milking the cattle as by 7 am, people start coming to collect milk. He delivers milk to several houses on his bicycle. By 8 am, he comes back and helps his grandmother in the kitchen. He eats whatever is prepared and reaches the school by 9:30.

When he first began coming to school, he couldn't understand anything. He was good at applied mathematics and would often finish his work early in the maths class. He took interest in science experiments. However, science, in general, did not seem to interest him. The teachers at the school sat down to talk about Krishna and decided to make

some different efforts for him.

For an Environmental Studies class, a group of children were asked to go to a nearby dairy and enquire about and understand the different aspects of their work. Krishna was tasked with assisting the group. He took part in this project eagerly and made the children talk to his grandparents. He provided a lot of information about the various operational aspects of a dairy - the quantity of fodder for the cattle and its cost, the quantity of milk, the income from selling milk, medicine for cattle, labour. The children were happy and so was Krishna. This raised his confidence and led to friendships with other children. Consequently, his involvement in the school's regular teaching-learning processes also grew.

Often while walking around, Krishna would pick up old motors, cells, wires, and other discarded hardware parts lying on the road. One day, he found a motherboard of a transistor and brought it to school. He figured out what it was with the help of a teacher. They borrowed new battery cells from the school, installed it, attached some wiring and connected it to an old speaker. When it caught the signal to one of Bhopal's FM radio channels, Krishna's happiness knew no bounds. All the children praised him. The transistor was placed on a table in the school courtyard. The children surrounded it and listened to the songs being played on the radio channel. That day, Krishna was a hero at the school.

The next day, the teacher demonstrated how the transistor system works in class. From that day onwards, Krishna began to come to school regularly. He was so keen on learning everything that he would stay back after school talking to teachers for hours to seek answers and build his understanding. Krishna made three models of different kinds of boats and presented them at the Umang Science Fair at school. In the first model, he used the approach of opposing force that the air leaving a balloon exerts to move the boat. In the second model, he made a paddle boat powered by a rubber band. For the third, he used an old motor to run the propellers placed on both sides of the boat. He also eloquently answered the questions put forth by the visitors at the fair.

With this, his friendship with the teachers and his belief in them also increased. He took initiative

in the teaching-learning processes of the school. Krishna has been at the school for the last four years. He has shown remarkable progress in learning languages (Hindi and English) along with Maths, Social Science and Science.

Nine-year-old Puja has a hearing impairment. Although she has had a cochlear implant, she has always found it difficult to speak and hear. When she first came to school, she would stay completely silent. When other children sang songs and rhymes during the morning gathering, she would only look at them and sometimes murmur an odd word or two. She was fond of this gathering; other classes did not interest her as much. She would wait in anticipation for the art and craft class. She had previously attended a reputed private school. She seemed to be aloof and scared of the classroom processes, the behaviour of the teachers and the pressure of false discipline -- a legacy she was carrying forward from her previous school.

We did not pressurise her to go to class. She would often go to the younger children's classroom and would read aloud stories to them. After about two months, she started participating in the maths class. Fractions were being taught. The teacher knew that Puja was fond of art and craft, so the teacher gave her a cardboard piece cut out in the shape of a circle and tasked her with cutting it into $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, and $\frac{1}{4}$ pieces. Puja immediately took a pencil and scale and mapped out the figures. The teacher told her to colour the shapes with different colours so that they were distinguishable. Puja finished the task in no time as it was to her liking. Doing this task helped her pay attention in class and to understand the basic concept of fractions. After this, the teacher gave Puja many such tasks, some to be completed individually by her and some in groups. This helped her in making friends. Puja also began to do tasks at home and bring them to school.

Due to her hearing impairment, she could not fully enjoy the morning gathering despite her interest in it. The teachers talked amongst themselves and compiled the songs sung during the morning gathering into an audio CD and gave it to her to listen at home. With this, not only was she able to enjoy the morning gathering, but she also began to attend other classes. She became quite talkative and her habit of writing also flourished.

She would sit in the science class for long hours to experiment and to make models. She would talk to the teacher and bring various objects like cells,

motors, wires, and magnets from home. With these objects, she would make electrical switches and do many experiments with magnets.

She began to get along well with her peers and teachers. Her hearing impairment was not a source of obstruction at all in the school. Nobody talked about her impairment nor did they consider it a hindrance. She would earnestly take part in the music class and memorise all the songs. She participated in a play performed at the school's annual function and would readily join group singing presentations in which she would sing without faltering.

Ten-year-old Swati had come to Bhopal from Noida. She had speech problems. She would stammer a lot and as a result, was reluctant to speak. The friendly and uninhibited environment of the school ensures that there is always space for everyone. Though Swati was not used to this, she found it easy to mingle with everybody. Nobody in school paid any heed to her stammer. Teachers would purposefully ask her questions so she could speak and consequently, gained confidence. Swati began to talk openly. She would recite poems and sing rhymes during the morning gathering. Her speech also improved. It seemed that Swati's problem was that she had never been allowed to talk or had been discouraged to talk.

Her mother disclosed to us that the school she went to in Noida had asked her not to come to school a fortnight before the annual function. Neither was she allowed to participate in any activity, nor was she permitted to come to any rehearsal. This wounded Swati's self-confidence. A feeling of inferiority took root in her and that exacerbated her speech problems.

In Anand Niketan school, every day, the language class ends with the enactment of the lesson for the day. Swati would take part in this activity. She would come to school regularly. At the school annual function, she sang one of Bhupen Hazarika's songs - *Vistaar hai apaar...praja dono paar*. The audience was astonished. She did not stammer at all!

These children are full of endless possibilities. Each child has his/her own talent and ability. They do falter in their learning, sometimes due to socio-economic reasons and sometimes due to physical and mental restraints. It is the school's responsibility to look at the potential of these children, identify their needs and limitations, make space for them,

and provide them with opportunities to nurture their abilities; so that they can walk alongside everybody else; believe in their own abilities; and, can learn all that is expected of them and more.

Kindness, flexibility, patience, egalitarianism, and a humane outlook need to be embedded in the customs and conventions of schools. Then, every child will be able to learn everything.

**Names have been changed to protect the identities of the children.*



Anil Singh has been active in the field of education, especially school education, for the last 15 years. Along with Hindi language teaching, he integrates theatre with the everyday activities of students. He is especially interested in storytelling. Anil's articles on his classroom experiences and other issues of education are published regularly. At present, Anil is working on an alternative model of education with the Anand Niketan Democratic School, Bhopal. He may be contacted at bihuanandanil@gmail.com

Looking at education beyond serving the role of literacy and bookish knowledge into the role of shaping a person is imperative. This kind of understanding is built only by interaction and a cordial relationship with guardians.

Jagmohan Singh Kathait, Tied with a Single Thread: Children, Community and Teachers, p 45.