

Bringing the Last Child into School

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When I started working in 1997, I set out with a dream that all children should be in school, with the assumption that this idea was directly linked with the vision of an equitable world. I believe many of us have worked on these lines. Whether it is the state, communities, parents, all of us adults find ourselves believing/working on the premise that schooling is necessary as well as productive. But as we grow from a naïve young person to a critically thinking adult (unlikely to have become this through our own school education!), there is a realisation that this is far from the truth. Some questions arise that may need to be examined beyond the classroom setting: Is education merely a tool for the industrialised world, for modern civilisation? Do we learn a sense of equality across gender, religion, caste, class and develop constitutional values, or is it actually the opposite that is strengthened through this system? Will this education build a sustainable world?

These questions, these doubts, persist when we look at what the *products* of this system are capable of; when we look at the way the so-called civilised world is functioning. But even, given this situation, it is in our limited role as teachers working in the classroom space that we can find the immense potential for change within the system for the children we meet every day.

Some essentials

Love and affection

Interaction between any two human beings can be a positive and enabling experience for both only if there is affection between them. Marginalised children are loved and smiled at probably only within a small circle of people in their own families and community. They are not the children who would be smiled at in the shops or on the roads. Their colour, their class, their religion or community, their appearance - can be enough for attracting discrimination. Therefore, as a teacher, when you welcome the children with a warm smile or hug, they know that you care about them, they get an acknowledgement from *outside* their social group.

This effort is not a mere strategy, but a spontaneous response when we love the children we work with. Simple gestures of affection, whether a smile or a greeting, rather than the formal *Good morning, ma'am*, work wonders. Children begin to learn that the world is more beautiful because of them. The school becomes a place where they are wanted for who they are.

Respect and dignity

In mainstream culture, the marginalised child's language and life are not given the status they merit. It could be the work the child's parents do or where she lives or the games he plays – everything is considered to be inferior to mainstream aspirations and the child bears the burden of this marginalised status and, therefore, treatment. Their language is unlikely to be the one that commands respect in the job market. On the contrary, these differences are often markers, or socially understood shorthand, for the lack of general ability considered to be the indicators of several short- and long-term material advantages. These attitudes, in turn, give rise to numerous psychological outcomes related to respect and dignity.

Respect and dignity come through in various forms, the simplest form being an acknowledgement and respect for the other's language and therefore, culture, way of life, identity and knowledge as rich and distinct. The strengths of a multilingual pedagogy are far too many to be mentioned here but beginning a conversation from the child's position is important.

As a teacher who is not fluent in the child's first language, when I speak even a sentence in the child's language, I tend to be seen differently in the child's eyes. It is as if the child feels: 'You value me, you want to speak to me, you are trying to connect with me, you are part of my life,' I do not know all of what goes through the child's mind, but she accepts me differently. In such instances, I am only trying to communicate or maybe just joke around, but the child is communicating back with me, accepting me because I have accepted her. Many times, I

get a sentence translated to the first language of the child and write it down to refer to and when I ‘read’, ‘speak’ it out from there to them, the sparkle in the child’s eyes and their looking at me directly to guess what is happening, is a beautiful response. Dignity also comes through by accepting the other’s life, without judging it as being inferior or superior. This means not just *allowing* or *tolerating* but encouraging children to share information about their lives. A clear message must be that their life can be and should be brought into the classrooms through conversations, writings and other forms of exchange and no one can laugh at it. Nowadays, our teachers in *Muskaanⁱ* have also started teaching English vocabulary to children through kitchen experiments and their traditional foods are being cooked in the class.

As we acknowledge the marginalised child, we also need to lower the stature that has been traditionally granted to the *savarn*, or the upper classes, to which the majority of teachers belong. Simple assumptions and attitudes need to change. For example, the feeling that I have been protected to the point of incapacity and I would feel completely lost if I did not have any money on me to reach another place even within the same town or accepting that there is as much or more violence in middle-class homes as there is in working-class families, but the walls of the big house ensure that the neighbours do not get to know are some of the attitudes society needs to change. Then, there are pre-conceived notions of appearance. If the rich did not have a continuous flow of water at home, they may not have been able to come out as clean-looking as they do or reach school on time.

These are things that I would often share when children shared their experiences and, as a result, were self-dismissive. Popularly-held beliefs, such as the superiority of allopathic medicine to work miracles without understanding the contents of traditional medicine, but dismissing it as superstitious and backward, shows how knowledge, too, has been categorised according to the economic class and social group it emerges from. Equality of all human beings needs to come through in our interactions.

Sense of learning

Learning gives the human mind a shot of adrenalin, a kick. Any one of us who has had the opportunity to have learnt something and is conscious of that, will know what I am talking about. The school as an

institution justifies its existence for being a space for learning. Yet, what children mostly experience is a feeling of being dulled.

Children, by nature, are inherently creative, intelligent, critical and open for learning, but school often, does not offer meaningful interactions and learning. The hours of sitting in a classroom become a drudgery and the absence of a sense of learning brings a sense of being a failure for not understanding what is happening, though a perceptive child may begin to understand that there is a problem in the transactional process of learning that punctuates most school classrooms. As teachers, I hope we have realised that, while passing an exam is important and should not be compromised, marks are not what matter. *Learning* is what matters.

This sense of learning may be to do with learning a skill or a concept or getting a new thought. Thus, even the sense of being able to solve a sum with meaning, or understanding that what was simply a design or a pattern to them is a real script they can create or decode, or that they can say a complete sentence in English, are all experiences which help a child to understand that formal school could be a place for them.

Bringing in community knowledge into the formal learning space and doing things, rather than only depending on books and the blackboard, would involve the child in the learning process in a more real way. Seeing the seed through its germination process, understanding the trees in one’s vicinity are some of the topics that make the real content of life and should be brought into our learning spaces, through the traditional teacher and not necessarily the teacher with a B Ed. This real learning is the purpose of our schools and it also reassures the child of this purpose and determines if she finds it a space for herself or not.

Talk and dialogue

The need to question the *status quo* and enhance independent and critical thinking is crucial and this is what is lost the most in mainstream schooling. It is, therefore, important for us to create opportunities to get children to speak up and share what they feel about different things inside them, around them, in the world. Analysing situations, the ways in which we function, gives all of us a chance to reflect. This requires the teacher to ask questions and give suggestions. While this could be incorporated within the pedagogy of transacting

any concept, it has its stand-alone value also. A weekly sharing space to discuss social norms and personal responses could lead to the habit and culture of thinking, evaluating and acting, rather than only accepting and fitting-in.

I recall a class where we were discussing why schooling is important for children of marginalised communities and why they should not give it up. The children started the conversation from the viewpoint of a desire to achieve something big and then went into the need to regain the dignity of the marginalised communities and show the *savarn* what a child from a specific community was capable of. This, then, veered into the idea that each one of us is unique and could try to steer our lives on different paths that work for each one of us individually and that more options would be open to us through education.

Women's work and status, caste hierarchies, emotions of anger and pain –there is nothing that children do not observe and understand. They are constantly forming opinions and unconsciously converting these opinions into behaviour. Moral Science lessons are not what we need; we just need non-judgmental and open-ended discussions.



Expression

All human beings are a bundle of experiences, memories, emotions. These are largely what make us persons. There is nothing that crosses your life and stays with you that cannot be expressed in a setting. This could be death, abuse, pain, love, anything. As adults, we hesitate in bringing in volatile topics or terminology that is abusive. But we should try to actively bring these into the classroom as these are part of the child's mind and memory. We need to discuss these with them in ways that are non-violating and non-abusive. Depending on the academic level of the child or the subject that we are teaching, we could even modify the form in which the expression is expected. Sharing through drawing, writing, speaking, acting are forms of expression which should be encouraged in all settings. This could be unstructured, or initiated through questions such as 'What did you do last night? What is it that you fear? How did you make a new friend?' Articulation and ventilation serve in varied ways for the one who feels as well as the listener(s).

Stepping outside the classroom

Exploring the familiar

It is enabling for everyone when we step out of the class and take a walk, whether in a most familiar place or a new one, as a group that has set out to observe, discuss, learn. It is a pity that most interactions are now getting defined by the computer and the phone, but still, the opportunities we build will help us to understand people and nature through our own lenses.

At times, I would take the young girls in my class to make a payment for a phone bill or to post a letter. For the children walking with their teacher in a public space and for the teacher, her/his experience of walking with the children in a public space brings new insights. Walking through children's localities and neighbourhoods and asking them to explain or introduce the places provides us new insights and perspective to a location. Community elders could also be encouraged in this endeavour.

We also learn, that whether it is the jungle or the roadside, children find it more authentic to share their knowledge and ways of understanding things in the real world than in closed rooms.

Crossing cultural boundaries through stories and storybooks

Most of our textbooks still lack interesting stories

that could help us understand and engage with the diverse cultures of the people of India and/or the world. Since ‘lessons’ in textbooks are only taught for the questions that follow the chapter and are often value-laden and representative of the experiences of the privileged child and in keeping with the middle class’s notions of childhood, the importance and relevance of diverse storybooks representing and honouring the lives of marginalised young people everywhere are completely lost. The educationist, Krishna Kumar’s prescription was - a story a day. We can figure out what works best for our school.

Stories that reaffirm the children’s realities are as important as those that help us peep into the lives of another reality. Whenever we put forth a story in which a child may have been hurt because of mob lynching or a narrative around one’s violation of rights, the reader always tends to understand that person. When we hear an 8-year-old speaking against Pakistan (in interactions with children, one sees the animosity they feel for this country that they refer to as the ‘enemy on the west’), one wonders if this hatred would deepen or would it dissolve if one had read stories about children on the borders, instead of receiving lessons on animosity or distorted versions of history. In *Muskaan* libraries, we have been consciously trying to bring in books that present varied realities as well as publish books that speak of our children’s realities.

Recognising different emotional needs

One can see that it is an uphill task for children from marginalised backgrounds to attain 12 years of formal education. If one could calculate effort, then, probably the marginalised child needs to put in at least 50 times more effort than a child from a privileged background to change the flow of his/her river than the child whose direction is already set through his/her birth. We often hear that a determined child can overcome all barriers, but I prefer to believe that it is our determination and flexibility, and not the child’s, that are being tested.

Teachers’ role in learning

While some of the triggering circumstances could be resolved through the above efforts, the likelihood of a child not continuing because of our lack of effort and sensitivity is not lost on me. An emotional bond and trust with the teacher are important for most children, but for some, this may become the critical factor. One can recognise

such children through certain symptoms: they may not be mixing with others in the class; avoiding participating in a discussion; might be having a difficult time at home; or feeling excluded by the majoritarian group in the class.

It is a personal expectation and a lot of hard work, but I see it as part of the work that we choose as teachers and especially as teachers of children who may not have the privilege of having a counsellor or a mother who can afford to give up work or avail maternity leave and take care of them, or a family which spends quality time on holidays. I am not suggesting that children are deprived of love, but there is a tendency that the very vulnerable families are not able to provide the emotional strength that is needed when simultaneously negotiating new and difficult paths in life. Formal education is an untrodden path for these families and communities. If I chose to work with the marginalised child, I also need to recognise that s/he needs support from me.

Real life stories

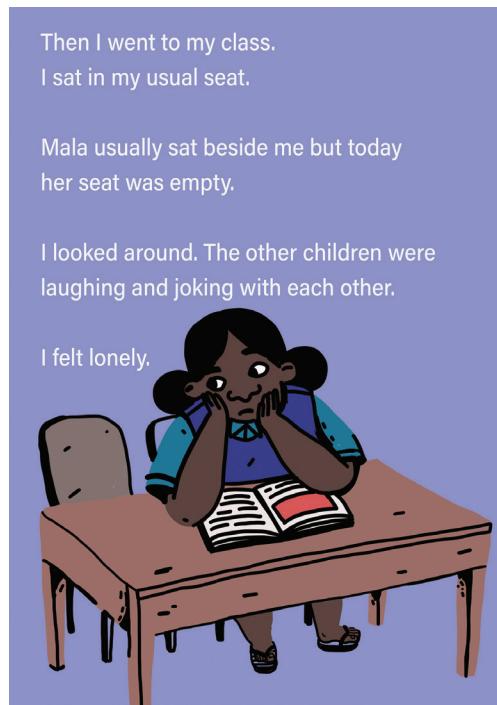
Dharmendra, an Ojha Gond child, has six siblings. Though his loving mother cares for them, she lives on the roadside and her life is as displaced from her original tribal roots as one can imagine. Dharmendra studied hard till class VIII before he fell into the routine of scrap-picking on the roads as that was his family’s only source of income. I believe if I could have been more consistently an aunt to him, like a mother’s sister, his life would have taken a different course. But I was, probably a sympathetic teacher, at best.

This was also the case for Anjali, a *Pardhi* girl. She was always running away from home, dreaming of another life she wanted for herself, but an illness caught up with her and she succumbed to it when she was just 8 years old. I think as an adult, I was there, but not as much as she needed. Children’s needs and personalities vary, some need more attention, others less. As adults, we have to be able to stretch ourselves for the children we bring into our lives, not by birth, but our own choices.

Being part of the marginalised communities, living in abject conditions and/or living a life of discrimination can be real deterrents to learning. Trudging through the path of 12 years of schooling, 3+ years of graduation before reaching the institutions of higher education is a continuous test of children’s mettle and being alienated and discriminated against institutionally shows how

urgently we need to look at the way our institutions actively discriminate.

As elementary school teachers do our behaviours push out children or pull them in is something, we can be conscious of and change. Moving away from the idea that our schools and learning spaces are neutral, exist in isolation, are not conscious of caste and class, are merit oriented and recognising that



Going to School Alone; Author: Simran Uukey,
Illustrator: Kruttika Susarla; Muskaan (2019)

schools, more often than not, actively replicate the socio-cultural context they are situated in, means rethinking the relevance of our schooling practices and envisioning various kinds of support systems to nurture a democratic space that is inclusive of diverse realities, which truly enable learning in every child.



Munnu: A boy from Kashmir; Graphic Novel by Malik Sajad;
Fourth Estate (2015)

¹ Muskaan is a non-profit, non-governmental organization working with marginalized communities living in the bastis in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.



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