

# Learning Democracy Through School Practices

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In the winter of 2019, I did a limited research study at the Azim Premji School, Dineshpur to understand how democracy plays out in the school and the effect of teaching concepts related to democracy. I worked with classes VI, VII and VIII but the focus group was class VII. I taught them some basic concepts under the topic of democracy as presented in the NCERT Social Studies textbook which was revised post the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005.

## Presence of democracy

### *School curriculum*

Many factors shape the learning of a child. A major one being the school curriculum. However, this inadvertently gets impacted by many other factors, significant among these is the hidden curriculum in a school setting. The school curriculum and the hidden curriculum work in tandem to shape a child's learning.

In the context of the Azim Premji School, Dineshpur, my observation was that the understanding of equality, a fundamental tenet under the description of the Indian democracy, was deeply understood by most students as they were able to discern undemocratic practices in the activities and stories discussed with them. This clearly showed that children had an innate understanding of what was constitutionally wrong, and they could identify instances where this existed.

Academically, (the school follows the NCERT syllabus), the concept of 'equality' was spread over three grades. In grade VII, while I was teaching them about gender inequality, the idea of having equality came from them. The girls questioned why boys were not made to work as they do. Some boys mentioned that they participate equally in household chores.

I showed the students of class VII a short film on gender inequality, *The Impossible Dream*. The film, through humour and wonderful visuals, makes quite clear its intent about the need for men to share the burden of household work and child-raising. The students immediately figured out the problems in it and related these to their lives. They brought out examples of discrimination that they and others face

because of their gender. Then, we linked it to what the Constitution says about equality and surprisingly, class VII seemed to have really internalised this concept deeply. They were quite vocal about the inequality that prevails in their homes, especially in the case of girls, who had to do household chores after attending school, something the boys were exempt from.

When I asked them, 'Do you think you are equal in this school and in this classroom?' They answered in the affirmative. On probing further, 'Why do you say so?' The reply was that the school treats them equally. Some of them even gave the example of their Principal who treated everyone equally and had often stood up against discrimination.

When the storyboard on a character from the chapter titled, *My Mother Doesn't Work* from the textbook, *Growing up as Boys and Girls*, was being read with the students of class VII, we discussed the topic of helping out at home extensively. When we came to the reasons why boys did not help at home, they said that they were simply not asked to help as their parents held the archaic notion that it is not the duty of the boys to help out at home. To this, a boy added, 'I once asked my grandmother if I could give puja (daily religious ritual) to the Lord and she said that it is not a boy's job to do it'. This emphasised the rigidity in households of delegating tasks between boys and girls and how little flexibility exists in the overlapping of these tasks. A girl mentioned that most of the girls have to go back home and help out despite being tired after school because it is expected of them. This theme was debated upon in several groups in class VII and they came up with various arguments for and against this parochial view in the older generations.

The concept of equality was known by everyone from classes VI to VIII. They knew that they could not be discriminated against and if it happened, they could seek help. Therefore, an immediate association with this concept was realised across these grades along with the appreciation to uphold the notion of equality. It did not feel like an alien concept given in the textbook but a more concrete and relatable

one. They connected with it on a deeper level as we transitioned through the chapters in the NCERT textbooks, assisted by the non-discriminatory atmosphere carefully cultivated in the school environment.

### *Class and student representatives*

Each class had two class representatives (CRs) – a boy and a girl. The CRs have a varied set of duties, for example, ensuring the cleanliness of classrooms, disciplining the other children, solving the internal matters of the class, communicating with the teacher on important issues, etc. They have school-wide duties as well. For example, serving the mid-day meals, making sure that the plates were being washed and kept in place, shoes are being kept in place, noting down the names of latecomers.

Apart from these, the school had two student representatives (SRs), again, a boy and a girl, in addition to a judicial officer. All these office-bearers – CRs, SRs and judicial officer – met every Wednesday after school and discussed their duties and responsibilities, made plans to improve their respective classroom environment by suggesting changes in structure or aesthetics, and acted as a bridge between the students and member of the staff. Some of these discussions were also targeted at their capacity-building as leaders. All of this was done through a democratic procedure with the CRs acting as elected leaders of the students and taking decisions for the betterment of the student population as a whole, all the while not exhibiting any form of autocracy and taking into account the views of other representatives. Essentially, this gave them a good idea of what a parliament meeting might look like. All of them cast votes in meetings and expressed their viewpoints.

However, I soon realised that despite it seeming ideal in structure and principles, no one actively put forth any suggestion and the process had been rendered mechanical with students going about their job diligently, but not actively seeking to improve practices. I asked a CR the meaning of the word ‘representative’ in a social studies class. No one, not even the CR, knew the answer. This made me realize that children have the understanding that they are in a position of power because of the votes of others but they could not grasp the concept of working with the people, in this case, the students, as being their duty. The representatives understood the capacity they had but could not extend it to the responsibilities it should translate into. Students also

seemed to be oblivious to the fact that they could question their representative and put forward their demands.

### **Display of model behaviour by teachers**

Outside of the formal school processes, I saw other examples where teachers displayed democratic behaviours. One such example was when I was sitting in the playground and I overheard the Sports Teacher talking to two children who had been involved in a fight. He had made them sit together and asked them a few questions - where their parents worked, did they have any trouble at home and finally, why they had fought. When both the children had explained their side, he analysed the facts, looked at the details and logically discussed the other options that they could have taken. He helped them reconcile. I also saw a few students listening to this conversation. It made me realise how essential this kind of observational learning is for internalising the concepts of problem-solving and in this specific case, of seeing the adult arbitrator presenting them with a fair and unbiased solution after taking into consideration the perspective of each party involved.

### **Reasons behind the familiarity with these concepts**

The high levels of familiarity with the concept of equality sprang from their lens of distinguishing equality and discrimination. This was being developed in school over time. The system – the teachers, processes and curriculum (along with the hidden curriculum) valued equality highly. The link between claiming to be equal and seeing people as equal was present to a large extent. Another example of the same is that no rigid hierarchy existed between the teachers and the Principal. They all sat together in the daily morning meetings and everyone cast their vote on all matters; each one had a voice.

The hidden curriculum assisted this process as well. Unlike most schools where the teacher-student hierarchy is clear through most processes, in this school, most teachers and the Principal were accessible. Any child could run up to them and explain their problems or ask questions. They treated students with dignity. I was surprised to see that in some areas, teachers were at parity with the students. For example, in peak winters, there were no heaters for teachers as it was deemed unfair that only teachers got to use them, not students, and heaters for everyone was not a viable option. This was a stark example of treating everyone equally and this gets observed and internalised by students.

## Teaching democracy

As a part of my research methodology, I taught concepts related to democracy to middle school students, as already mentioned. I chose a few themes that were common to the idea of democracy, that is, the idea of having representatives and questioning what they do, government, equality in the various domains of life and being an active citizen.

### Class VI: Patwari, urban and rural administration

When I taught about rural administration and the representatives (*Patwari*) of the government in a rural setting, I brought out how the media criticises/praises the representatives in newspapers. In classes VII and VIII, I taught about how our chosen representatives fight for our rights and demands in the Lok Sabha. As this underlying theme was taught to them, they brought in examples from their real lives and found the examples given in the NCERT useful.

This theme was extended in the chapter on urban administration too. When we talked about their ward members and chairman, although most of them were aware of these leaders, they could not see them as part of the *Sarkar*. They saw them as people asking for votes and winning elections. After the idea of a 'good city' was given to them by showing them good cities across the world, the students questioned why their own town was not as clean and as well-maintained, which again came back to the idea of those who represented us. Soon, they could link the

role of local governments to welfare and started seeing them as accountable to the people who vote for them and who they represent.

On asking class VI about why there was so much garbage and pollution in one of their localities, the reply was, 'No one comes to clean the road'. I asked them if they ever questioned the local representative. The children replied that if they try to speak up, their families hold them back. A child added, 'Now they even dump our waste in the local park.' Probing them about why they never questioned their leaders made them realise that they are allowed to do that. The NCERT textbook for grade VI did not give a direct example of anyone questioning the government through the local representative.

### Class VII: Media, gender and equality

As a part of creation (higher order of learning; Bloom's Taxonomy), post a week of classes on newspaper literacy, class VII was asked to make their own weekly newspaper in groups of five. They posted a news item asking why sports for class IX have been stopped, '*Kaksha 9 ke sports kyu hua band?*'. Students of class IX reacted to this by calling this 'fake news' and 'not true'. On probing further, class IX admitted that the news was true however, it was written in an accusatory tone which showed them in a poor light. They clarified that it was a 'deal' between them, and the Principal and the decision was consensual, not imposed. The initial vehement reaction was because they were conscious of their



Exercises to know area under urban administration

image since the newspaper was circulated in the entire school. They voiced their misrepresentation. It showcased to the students the power that the media holds in misconstruing information.

When we conveyed this feedback to class VII, they were taken aback by the realisation that they had printed incomplete news. In the discussions, they admitted that they had not cross-checked before verifying the news. Here is when I emphasised the need for writing a balanced news report based on research, which objectively states facts and brings out both sides of a story. Media, as the fourth pillar of democracy, was discussed in the context of the school and was expanded to its role at the national level.

#### *Class VIII: Parliament -- Constitution, organs, functions*

The gap between what the textbook delivered to them about the government and what they had seen in their real lives was substantial for class VIII students. They had not seen the Parliament before, either on TV or otherwise. Therefore, they had the most difficult time connecting with what and why the *Sarkar* is. However, rerouting it through the local government really helped them to make the connection. Moving from the local to the central was helpful in all the three classes that I taught.

Students' understanding of equality and the concept of representatives helped me develop further on the academic concept for the same. The experiences were derived from their school itself so they could critically reflect on these and treat these as real-life concepts instead of reducing them to non-relatable, abstract ideas. Further, they could even identify the areas where they saw these ideas failing in practice, especially, at the school level. Though the students were not suitably aware of the political framework at the national level, they were quite familiar with what was available to them – their local leaders and school leaders who they knew was responsible for their well-being and whose actions if required they could question. Also, the CRs were aware of the power they wielded, but also knew that their actions could be questioned, and they could be asked to relinquish their powers if they fell short of the demands of their roles.

Even for concepts like equality, freedom and justice, students brought examples from their surroundings to class. This linking helped them with understanding higher-level concepts under these topics and extending those to the examples given in

the textbook.

#### **Focus group discussion**

During my work with this school, I also conducted a focus group discussion with children of class IX to check their understanding of the same. Three groups of ten children each were formed. *Group 1* had children who were very active in class, especially in voicing their opinions and being aware of things. *Group 2* had children who were neither too active nor too passive in class. *Group 3* had children who were not active at all. Most of the ideas around democracy and government were understood well by the three groups. Clear linkages were seen between how their class functioned with how the government did.

Apart from this, *Group 1* had leads on the procedural aspect of democracy as they had many students taking part as representatives of the school. They were aware that they could be questioned, hence, they should question their leaders.

*Group 2* seemed to represent the more common mentality; students knew that asking for votes was like a trap and questioning the government could mean getting killed or just being disappointed. This group considered it too much of a bother to get involved in.

*Group 3* saw the government as a parent who takes care of the poor while being aware of the fact that it is involved in corruption and it also works to find those involved in corruption.

In terms of examining if the concepts taught in the three classes (VI, VII and VIII) helped students to understand these ideas, the outcome was positive and to a large extent, it helped. However, not all groups could come up with the names and functions of the three organs of the government. Moreover, they could not recall the name of their local ward members, which was an outlier case scenario because some of them were politically aware.

#### **Conclusion**

As seen from the examples above, as a concept, democracy needs to be lived practically. One can provide children with a suitable environment where they feel equal and do not hesitate to voice their questions and opinions. Children make quick associations with things they can see concretely. This happens with concepts that are lived and practised too. Similarly, in this case, when the school space is continuously helping them to understand this concept in practicality, it is easier for them

to understand the details given in the book and extending it to the situations and scenarios that the texts present. That, then, helps them question what

they are studying and apply the same in their life outside the school.



Newspapers made by class VII



Discussion on types of news



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