

My focus in this article is on methods of teaching to facilitate the social and emotional wellbeing of a student with a developmental disability, who was waiting for a chance to be included in the class, and the role played by peers in achieving this.

The context

While most of the world was trying to adapt to online teaching-learning in the aftermath of the pandemic, we tried an alternative with the *Gram Panchayat* (GP) libraries. This was a simple model to connect the school and school children within a five-kilometre radius of the GP library. We met learners of all age groups every day, engaged for a few hours in which the emphasis was largely on experiencing things, such as touching and feeling the physical attributes of materials; watching patterns and processes, as when green and red colours are mixed, they can give ranges of brown colour based on the amount of primary colours used; playing with colours, making fingerprints, vegetable and leaf prints; doing physical activities, like laughing, jumping, running and then realising that they feel thirsty after these; cognitive actions involving a lot of thinking, such as asking questions and reflecting on possible answers and interacting in an atmosphere that was light and enjoyable. As this was the start of the learning-recovery phase, there were language and maths activities for children from classes I to VII. We made a timetable together with the teachers of three schools around the GP Library, Ujjini. It focussed only on foundational literacy and numeracy activities. The worksheets produced by Azim Premji Foundation served as a reference. On one such day, we had planned these activities: sketching/painting each child's favourite place, story-building, picture-reading, and reading aloud followed by counting activities.

In the sketching activity, most of the children drew their school, a few drew their homes. As part of the counting activities, we began with identifying smaller quantities in the book and gradually moved

towards larger ones. This activity was for 14 *Nalika* students from classes I to III. We chose a few concrete objects for them to count and then moved to pictures and then matched quantities mentioned in the pictures with an equal number of objects. We then moved towards the entrance of the library and went up and down the stairs, counting them as we did so. There were ten steps in the first flight of stairs and ten more in the next. Children would count the number of steps going up and count in reverse order as they came down. They did this in twos and threes, until finally, one student stood on any step, while the others shouted out the number. The objective of this activity was to enhance ordinality and cardinality in children.

There was a child in my class, called Ruby, who would attend the activities every day, but remained isolated. Her classmates and teachers at the school said that she did not speak much and was marginally developmentally delayed. Ruby would listen to the instructions for other activities but would continue to do some painting or sketching activities by herself. She refused to participate and only watched the other activities. On that day, however, Ruby suddenly said, '*Yerike ilike krama*,' (ascending and descending order).

The rest of the children were intrigued and asked her what she was saying.

Ruby pointed to the staircase and said, 'This is ascending and descending order.'

Another student cried out with joy, 'Yes, Miss, she is right!'

Another student explained, 'Coming down the stairs is decreasing order and climbing up the stairs is ascending order!'

Ruby explained with the action of climbing stairs, 'Count 1, 2, 3...'

Ruby has a little trouble talking due to which I found it difficult to follow her, but her classmates could understand her better because they were

familiar with her both inside and outside the classroom. All the children picked up the pulse and started counting while going up the stairs 1, 2, 3, 4... and then in reverse while coming down the stairs. We then also tried identifying the next and previous numbers by referring to specific steps. For instance, one child would stand on the fourth stair and the remaining children would name the next stair as five and the previous one as three. We had collectively established a method for answering – children who knew the answer would raise their hands and would be given a chance to answer, one at a time. We played this game until everyone got a chance. Ruby was specific about the choice and method of self-knowledge construction, although she was learning at a different pace from the rest and was probably waiting for the right moment to respond. As a subject practitioner, this class offered me a hands-on experience in designing an inclusive classroom or an inclusive educational method. There was an immediate shift in the way the teacher and the rest of the class saw Ruby the moment she uttered, '*Yerike ilike krama!*'

This day was fun-filled and satisfying with one concrete form of learning. Historically, researchers state that learning, meaning-making, and knowledge construction occur in a stressless, peaceful and relaxed environment. I would say mental health or social and emotional wellbeing has a direct connection with the quality and pace of knowledge construction. After watching the functionality and fun of learning at the GP library, Ujjini, many other libraries in that district tried this model and thrived in this process of comprehensive learning. These learning groups around GP libraries are called the *Gram Panchayat* Library Learning Units, which continue to function today even after regular schooling has begun. Now, these classes are run on specific days with teachers and the librarian planning daily events and activities. The community is happy to see their children being engaged in these learning activities.

I have heard from the librarian that Ruby is a regular visitor to the library and goes through all the books in the library. Although Ruby has difficulties in reading, she points to the pictures in the books and tries to construct stories around them and enjoys narrating these to the librarian.

During my visits to her school, the teacher also mentioned that Ruby seems to have developed an interest in creating stories by watching a picture. Also, now she has started taking part in the general classroom activities, a little slow perhaps, but she wants to respond. The teacher also stated that since the library incident, the rest of the class also makes visible attempts to talk to Ruby and include her in their playtime. Now Ruby has friends, she talks, laughs and runs in the corridors during lunch breaks like the rest.

Being human, we tend to have prejudices, however, as teachers or practitioners, it is our responsibility to stay consciously unbiased. Every learner has different capabilities and it is for us to provide them with the right opportunities for expression.

Earlier, teachers and Ruby's classmates would swamp me down with comments, such as 'Ruby doesn't talk', 'Ruby doesn't know anything', 'She does not play with us', etc. After listening to all this, at first, I too had stopped making conscious efforts with Ruby, because I had assumed that Ruby would not be interested in the classroom processes. However, this question arose in my mind: 'What is the use of implementing inclusive education if children do not feel they are included?' It seemed to me that not being included in the class is the first instance of inequality an individual with diverse needs is presented with, and the individual is not even in a position to recognise and fight for this right. The role of teachers becomes irreplaceable because students spend a large part of their lives in school with them. The role of primary school teachers is even more pivotal because this is the phase of children's lives when basic attitudes are established. Facing prejudice at this point in life can have devastating consequences.

Students like Ruby are often a part of our classrooms and have been there even before the pandemic. The pandemic created a greater awareness of socio-emotional wellbeing, making us more empathetic. Ruby was just waiting for the right opportunity to participate, which illustrates that, as a teacher, my primary responsibility is to create opportunities for each child in the classroom, irrespective of their learning levels.

This class showed me that the emotional wellbeing

of children is the primary requirement for comprehensive learning, and it can be achieved through inclusive education design as one of the

methods. Inclusive education, then, is a process and not just a destination.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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Both as a social and a learning process, learning happens best in an inclusive environment with cooperation and collaboration where everyone feels cared for and is exposed to diverse backgrounds and viewpoints.

Suresh Sahu, Constitutional Values in School | Sadbhavna School Programme, p 18