

Approaching Wellness through Dialogue

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Teachers do their best to make the classroom learning experience for children constructive and positive. They try to ensure that conflict does not occur, which means maintaining an environment where children do not get involved in any conversation that can potentially lead to conflict. This includes forming a shared understanding about refraining from discussing uncomfortable issues. This orientation starts in primary classes and reflects in their behaviour and thoughts by the time they reach secondary education.

Time and again, scholars have expressed concern over the scope for children from oppressed communities to express perplexities about their daily life experiences, which are rooted in the prejudices, stereotypes, taboos, and discriminations they or their family and community members experience daily. This article discusses, firstly, the need to create spaces for children to talk about problematic and conflicting issues within the classroom and secondly, the role of teachers in facilitating such spaces and makes a few suggestions about the dynamics of these spaces.

Creating safe spaces

Students feeling safe and comfortable in expressing themselves without fear, threat, and discomfort is vital in ensuring their wellbeing within a classroom. There are students from different socio-economic backgrounds in the classroom. In creating a safe space, a teacher makes sure that all these children talk to each other respectfully; nobody uses disparaging words which they may have heard in their homes or communities, there is no discrimination and children articulate their grievances without feeling threatened or uncomfortable.

And even though some children in the classroom might not experience this stigmatisation in school, they may experience it in the community. Similarly, some children do not use disparaging words in class but hear their parents using them for a particular community/communities at home. In such cases, creating a safe space does not seem enough. What

needs to be done to bring out in the open these issues that are taboo; that create discomfort and conflict in some children?

Brave spaces: the next step

If a 'safe space' is the vision of a regular classroom, a 'brave space' is an area a teacher creates at regular intervals with and for students where they can talk about their daily-life experiences. For example, a classroom should be a 'safe' space where the students feel included, irrespective of their differences. It creates an environment where students can make mistakes and learn from them without being judged. It is devoid of fear and full of support. The same classroom could create a 'brave' space at periodic intervals, at least initially, to talk about conflicting issues. A brave space would enable students to talk about, for example, a casteist slur inflicted on them, the discrimination they experience belonging to a religious minority, and the humiliation they undergo because their parents have a certain occupation. This also becomes the space for students to join a dialogue with these issues and learn to talk about them. It removes biases, prejudices, and stereotypes they hold for other cultures or groups as part of society. The choice of what and how much they want to share rests with the children. This initiative helps children from marginalised communities recognise their experiences with others; voice and reflect on these.

Let me illustrate this with an example of how complicated issues bother children even in the primary classes. In 2015, I was teaching class IV, and it was three days before Christmas. I wanted to allow my students the chance to express concerns that were otherwise prohibited, as per the school's protocol. So, I suggested to my class that we write letters to Santa Claus. Knowing that Santa gives gifts, why not write two things that make us most happy and two things that worry us to our core that we cannot tell our parents, teachers, or any other adult?

Those letters brought up the deepest concerns

of my students -- poverty in the family, domestic violence, dropping out of school, molestation and abuse, extra-marital relationships of parents and gender discrimination at home. Until that day, I had no knowledge of these aspects of the lives of my 10-year-old, class IV students. This made me think about what was lacking in my classroom because of which they could not share their apprehensions with anyone. Did it affect their overall wellbeing? Did they think about it while studying, sleeping, and during meals? How were they dealing with it?

What would a classroom look like if one started discussing these issues within the school? Was I equipped to handle any situation that might arise from such a discussion? What were the precautions and preconditions for talking about these issues? When would I finish my syllabus, test preparation and more? These questions are rooted in the limitations of the current educational system, and one needs to find ways to navigate these challenges within the classroom. Creating *brave spaces* can be one of these.

^{class}
(1) Santa ~~class~~ please come my ~~par~~ parents for Delhi. And my all family my come to Delhi. My chacha not hitting to me and buaa also not hitting any my father lot of rupees. My father not take a rupee in a udhar please Santa class.
2) My sister not say a abuse and reading a lot of and my sister is Krishna and Radhika Krishna ~~teach~~ is a not class moniter but please Krishna is a classmoniter to Santa Claus please my sister ~~not~~ is a work hard She is pass on final exam.
3) And I am also say a to you for my father not drink please Santa clause please.
1) My grandfather and grandmother not a die and my grandfather not a money is lost for to is not working and my grandfather few tacter take my grandfather tacter ~~to~~ not xes ident.

Figure 1A. A child's letter to Santa Claus

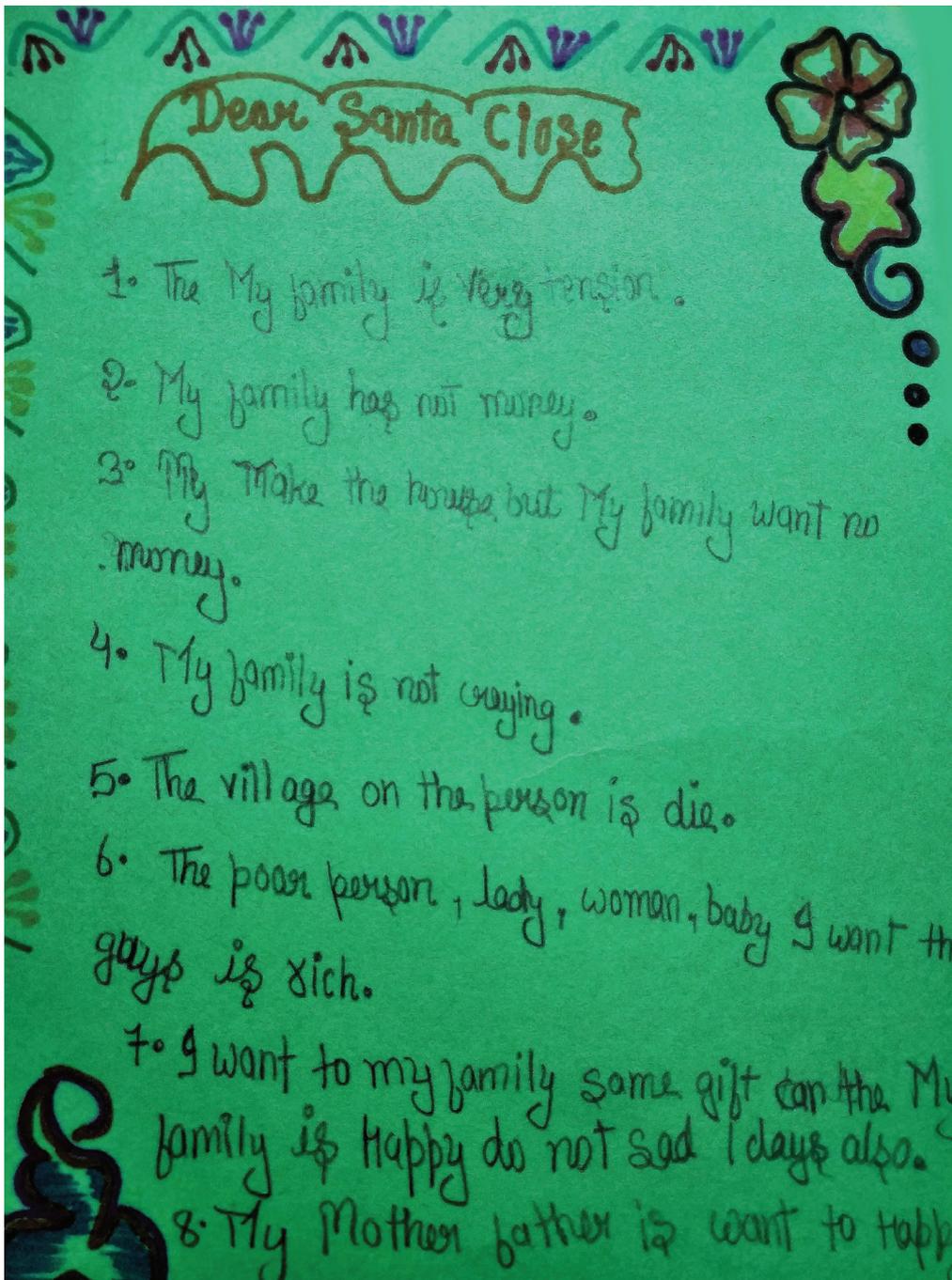


Figure 1B. Another child's letter to Santa Claus

Periodic Dialogic Circles

One of the other solutions can be using Periodic Dialogic Circles (PDCs) in which the students and the teacher sit together and talk about matters that concern the students. The authority of students' knowledge is valued highly in these sessions, so they get to choose issues that matter to them. The PDCs highlight the importance of dialogue in supporting *brave spaces* and in reducing prejudices against other people/communities. Following are a few precautions and preconditions for creating PDCs.

1. There is no goal or agenda in PDCs

Agendas act as barriers to a free flow of thoughts. For example, an agenda of sharing stories for fifteen minutes, followed up by a discussion, etc; could get mechanical for students, like work they need to finish in an hour. This could also act as a pressure on students who might not be comfortable with sharing and talking. Instead, students should talk about anything that matters to them. It is likely that they may not directly or immediately come to the issue but after a few initial PDCs, they may open up. It

is not the number, the goal, or the outcome that measures the success of PDCs but the slow and gradual process of sharing, which creates the setting for deep dialogues. The facilitator will have to be both patient and persevering.

2. *Meeting at regular intervals*

In the book 'On Dialogue,' the author David Bohm recommends arranging dialogues at fixed intervals. He writes that if such a group meets at fixed intervals, it lessens the dependence on the facilitator, and participants learn to get into a dialogue by themselves. This is an orientation towards empowering oneself with the process of dialogue without outside support. This could be fixed for every Saturday morning or once in two weeks. It is the regularity which will help them to start talking about thought-provoking issues.

3. *Topics for dialogue vary*

They could include friendship, anger, punishment, goodness, justice, religion, caste, sex or body image. The facilitator has to be strong and stable ensuring that the social location does not influence (or intimidate) how and what children share, especially those belonging to oppressed communities. The facilitator also needs to be careful of becoming the authority figure in that circle and know when to lead from behind.

4. *Large groups for diversity*

Forming a large group of about 20 members allows for diversity, that is, the exchange of diverse thoughts in the group. A facilitator can decide to have two groups of twenty students each in a class of forty students. This also depends on the resources and the classroom context. For example, there may not be enough space in the classroom to form a circle, or the school may have a dearth of teachers because of which the class cannot be divided to form two PDCs. In such situations, one will have to make an extra effort by calling a group of students early in the morning or asking them to stay back for an hour after school.

5. *Active listening is a precondition*

The skill of 'active listening', which is a way of communication, is an essential precondition of PDCs. A PDC will not work if there are opportunities only for talking, but nobody listens. Sharing concerns is a process of

meaning-making, which is unsuccessful without listening to what the other person is saying. Active listening means showing respect towards the person speaking so that they know that the listener is engaged with what they are saying. For children in a primary classroom, the skill of active listening could simply be understood as being attentive to what the other person is saying and showing respect towards them.

6. *Teacher as facilitator*

A teacher knows the students well, meeting them on regular basis. It is expected that she also knows the community well. She is responsible for making the classroom a safe space. She is also an authority figure for students. Her role as facilitator is crucial in creating a brave space. While donning the hat of the facilitator, she becomes extra cautious of her being the authority figure. As a facilitator, she does not have to control the group or expect them to behave and talk in a certain way. She does not have to assign work or have expectations. She has to be open to diverse perspectives, act as a catalyst in the free flow of discussion and resist the urge to intervene or correct. For example, in a follow-up, self-level-reflection session, her role would be to encourage students to reflect on: 'How did I feel while sharing a concern? How did I feel while listening to someone? What was I thinking?' This would help students consolidate their experience from the session. It is also the facilitator's job to ensure that there has been readiness for the discussion and that no judgemental statements are made.

7. *Encouragement is key*

In her book, *Children as Philosophers: Learning through Inquiry and Dialogue*, the author, Joanna Haynes, shares an anecdote that might help us here. She writes, 'In a review, following a term's work in an infant class, one seven-year-old said, "I've enjoyed philosophy a lot, but I'd like to know what Kathryn thinks." Kathryn had barely spoken in the group, and others expressed a similar wish. These comments from her peers signalled to Kathryn that her friends were willing to listen to her, and their interest in her gave her some gentle encouragement to make her views known.' Many times, students do not speak up, and one might mistake their diffidence for unwillingness to share. In such situations, encouragement from facilitators and peers helps.

A student might not be sharing because of some self-esteem issue; or because she or he is scared; or because he or she feels that his/her views are not worth sharing. The facilitator has to create an environment of encouragement and sharing among peers.

8. *Neither consensus nor resolution*

The process of dialogue does not have to be mistaken as a conflict-resolution building exercise. It is also not that all the students would come to a common ground and agree with each other. The PDCs evolve as a process. It is possible that all such consensus-building, conflict-resolution and problem-solving may or may not happen as part of the process, but that is anyway, not the objective.

Scaffolding through third-party material

In the initial few PDCs, it will not be easy for students or facilitators to open up and begin a dialogue. The facilitator could take the help of third-party material to provide a starting point. For example, the facilitator can read out a story or a newspaper

report. They can also show artefacts, movies, documentaries and photographs; play music or share their own experience on issues that are closely related to students' lives. These materials will provide the scaffolding and help children use their imagination and experiences without revealing too many personal details or identities which they may not be comfortable disclosing.

Suggestions for PDCs

The age of the students in a primary classroom also decides the material the facilitator uses. Here are some examples.

Primary classroom - age group 6-9 years

Professor Heid Leganger- Krogstad suggests the use of stories; children at this age can be asked to investigate their understanding of the narrative further by being asked:

- Who do you want to be in the story?
- Why do you think the persons x and y in the story acted as they did?
- What do you think they thought before they acted and after?



Figure 2. Basic representation of a dialogic circle

- What would have happened if (...)?
- What would you have done if you were person x?

For example, the book *Bhimrao Ambedkar: The Boy Who Asked Why* is about a boy raising questions about his daily experiences with caste discrimination. For the Initial PDCs, the facilitator could use such stories and their illustrations as a read-aloud to involve the children in the discussion and follow this up with the questions above. This would create space for the children to discuss the issue without discussing their personal stories.

Primary classroom - age group 10-13 years

Professor Heid Leganger-Krogstad suggests that, at this age, children are interested in factual knowledge and see the need to organise the information they hold into systems and structures. Reading art and symbols could act as mediating tools to help students articulate this need to systematise. They learn to understand the interpretation, know that all the answers are equally valid and learn to listen to their classmates. They focus on observation – the material, colour, shape, size, centre, periphery, focal point, and technique; no observation is neglected or rejected.

For example, the teacher could ask them to interpret the various symbols for Peace - ☺, 🤝, 🕊️, 🌈.

They gather around, observe and interpret, some might recognise colours, some recognise shapes, some look for a story, while some might relate to something they already know. This exercise helps during the initial PDCs in letting students know that they can voice their opinions without fearing the right or wrong of their responses. There will be no judgments as there are no correct answers.

Recognition of experiences

Classrooms need safe and brave spaces to build a holistic environment for children. Periodic Dialogic Circles are one of the many ways of creating such spaces. Teachers can explore new ways depending on the context in which their classrooms are situated. The idea is to look for ways that contribute to the children's mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The idea is to make a space for them to speak about feeling marginalised and listen to others and themselves; it is to recognise their experiences and inform them that they have a public voice to speak and make people hear them. It also shows trust in their personal experiences and knowledge: to ensure that they grow without fear and with a voice of their own that they are unafraid to assert.

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