

Building an Inclusive and Safe School Culture

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'I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the Gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door.'

The above vignette is taken from *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), an autobiographical account of Omprakash Valmiki's birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the 1950s. The author here shares his feelings about being excluded from a school event. It clearly depicts the anguish he had to endure as a child due to practices that created an unsafe and unwelcoming environment for children like him. Discriminatory school practices based on a child's abilities, caste, gender, language, community or religion can lead to poor social and emotional skills as well as poor academic performance. It is easy to understand how feeling unsafe physically, socially and emotionally can actually hinder one's ability to listen, think clearly and learn. Whether we feel safe or not influences our emotional experiences which in turn influences our social experiences.

An inclusive and safe school culture

We are familiar with the term 'inclusive education', a constantly-evolving concept. With the advent of both, large-scale programmes (such as the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) aimed at the universalisation of elementary education and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) of 2009, our schools are increasingly becoming multi-ethnic with children from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This would require restructuring school cultures, policies and practices to facilitate the participation of all students, including those with disabilities, children from linguistic minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, that is, children belonging to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and girls (NCERT).

It is necessary to shift from a narrow and mechanistic view of inclusive education to one that is beyond the inclusion of children with disabilities alone and takes into account wider aspects of exclusion across the country. Inclusive schools do not view individual differences as problems to be fixed but as opportunities for enriching the teaching and learning processes. The idea behind inclusive education should be to question and challenge homogeneity and include culturally plural communities. For these policies and acts to be effectively implemented, it is vital for the school culture to be safe and inclusive.

Safety in schools would mean a safe environment for a child to look forward to; an environment that supports learning. School safety efforts would take cognisance of all hazards that might affect the wellbeing of children. This would include safeguarding from abuse, violence, accidents, socio-emotional issues, etc. The school is required to provide a positive environment with no punishment, bullying, harassment, intimidation or use of any derogatory language within the school premises. When children feel at risk, they may not be able to focus on learning, or they might stop attending school altogether.

Creating a socially and emotionally safe school

Creating such an environment requires continuous and comprehensive attention to the infrastructure, the health and hygiene systems and the psycho-social dynamics within the school with the intention of focusing on safety and security as a prerequisite for learning. School authorities need to have clear procedures of conduct for teachers and school staff, their professional training and effective classroom management. Promoting a socially and emotionally safe environment in school enhances children's ability to learn, build friendships and lead a healthy life.

We often see that a safe school plan focuses mainly on physical safety, such as infrastructure, accessibility of resources etc. Creating a truly effective, comprehensive plan would require processes across the school system where teachers, students, school staff and parents work and learn together about how safe they feel and collaboratively develop a vision of how they want the school to be, developing a positive behavioural system and developing themes that shape vocabulary and reflection (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

A complex set of factors come together to make a school safe and inclusive – social, family, and community. Besides these three interactive factors, one most crucial factor is the school environment, including rules, hidden norms, relationships between students and adults etc., which influences the healthy development of a child across all domains. There can be three overlapping interventions that can enable teachers and school administrators to create a safe and inclusive school.

1. *Developing a comprehensive school plan*

How often do we hear the term ‘zero tolerance’ in schools and colleges? Have you noticed how it is being advertised as a positive policy? Zero tolerance is the response to the misbehaviour of students in schools which means that the school will severely punish students for any kind of misbehaviour. Usually, it ends in rustication from the school. When such a response to misbehaviour becomes a school policy, the school staff, teachers, principals or parents also feel the need to comply and not raise any questions. The assumption behind the zero-tolerance policy is that the removal of disruptive students from schools will make the school a safe place for others. But does the policy actually achieve its goals? These schools not only fail to make schools safer but also increase the incidence of dropouts and problem behaviour (Farberman, 2006). More attention needs to be paid to a system that allows everyone from school staff to parents to the community to identify areas of concern, find the resources and skills, plan for positive change and then evaluate the progress.

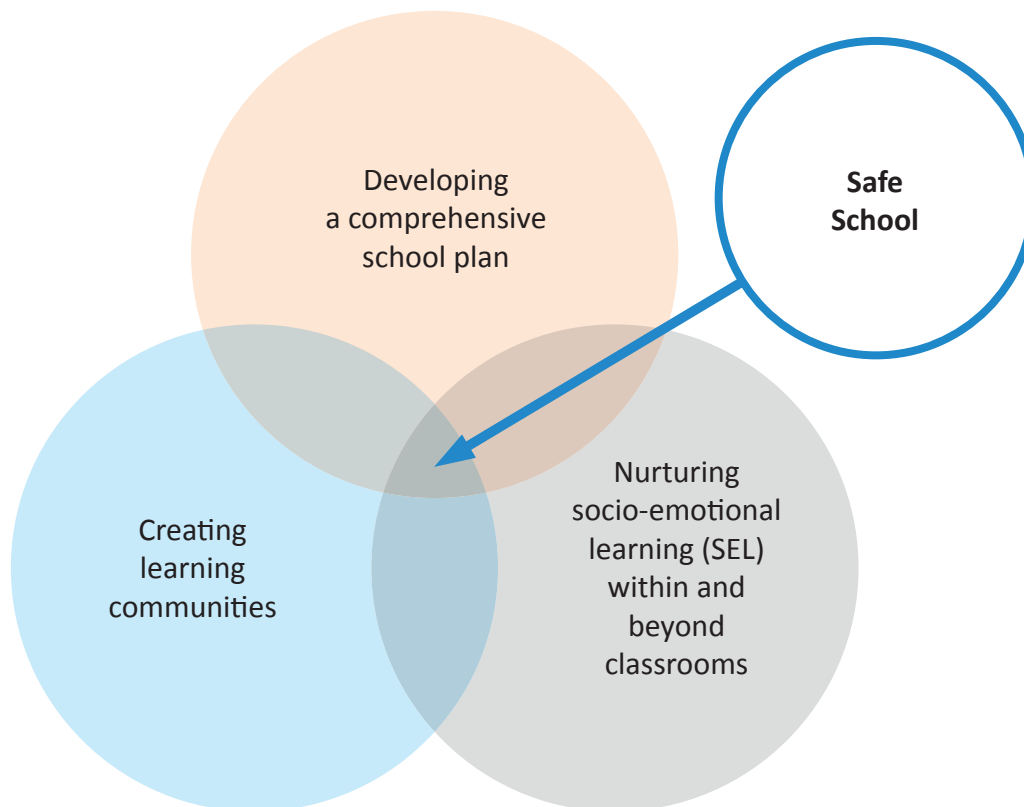


Figure 1. Framework for an inclusive and safe school



Figure 2. Steps to achieve inclusion in schools

It is crucial to look into all the school practices that can lead to discrimination, such as task divisions during mid-day meals, or selecting teams during sports or seating arrangements. There can be a series of steps that one can look into in conjunction with parents and the community to address these concerns.

a. Prepare for inclusion

Establishing urgency is crucial to gain cooperation from all the school members. We often see that data from the National Achievement Study (NAS)ⁱ, or any other large-scale study helps senior functionaries to take appropriate decisions regarding learning gaps or the learning loss faced by students. Similarly, data on how and why students are dropping out, the emotional state of students, their relationship with the teachers etc., can be collected and presented to establish the urgency. A team can be built with all the relevant stakeholders in the process. The team should include people who share the vision, who have the authority to take and implement decisions, who have the expertise in the domain and those who have demonstrated leadership in the school.

b. Implement changes

The first and most important step towards implementation is communicating the vision of the plan. A baseline study can begin with a self-assessment tool administered by the school principal to understand the current level of inclusivity and scope of growth, the barriers to change and the findings can be used to build an action plan. The plan should include measurable objectives, tasks to achieve these objectives, data collection tools and methods, a progress check for each objective and an individual responsible to oversee each objective. For example, if the aim is to ensure collaborative teaching and planning, then the objectives could be: to use a variety of models of delivery to meet the needs of students and to avail professional development

opportunities regarding instructional strategies for diverse students. Short-term wins can motivate individuals to work with zeal towards a goal and can be the stepping stones to greater success.

c. Sustain inclusion

A critical step to sustain inclusion is to reflect on the work done and to identify what works and what does not. That information can be used to make improvements. With time, the professional learning of the team also begins to expand through seminars, workshops, sharing and reading. Identifying the professional needs of each teacher and other school staff can help in organising effective professional development activities. Documenting the changes can guide the school processes and procedures. To sustain inclusion in a school, administrative involvement and support are as critical as the teaching-learning process inside a classroom.

2. *Nurturing socio-emotional learning within and beyond the classroom*

We know that learning does not take place only in the formal setting of a classroom; it takes place in the playgrounds, during midday meals and morning assemblies, in the corridors, in the library etc. It cannot be force-fitted inside a school curriculum.

The recognition of schools being central in nurturing socio-emotional learning (SEL) in students needs to be at a structural level and at the individual level. Some believe that SEL is woven within subject domains and can be taught while transacting the curriculum. It is believed that no separate programme is required since all the required skills can be learnt directly through daily experiences, regular conversations, and relationships. But it is essential to provide a supportive environment for such teachings to be impactful even within the existing school curriculum. Without a socially and emotionally supportive environment, the school curriculum is empty and can have no significant impact on the development of children.

In my experience, special classes in SEL are not as effective as an integrated approach to it in the daily teaching practice. A teacher who gives children opportunities to express themselves, share their experiences and participate in classroom decisions is not only helping them achieve the stated learning outcomes but also nurturing several socio-emotional skills, such as collaboration, ethical decision-making, problem-solving etc. A teacher may ask pairs of students to answer this question: 'How would you like me to make sure that I listen to your questions?' As the students discuss this, they also discuss which approach would be fair and not hurt anyone's feelings. The teacher and the students can mutually decide on one method and follow that. Another teacher comes into the classroom and reminds the students of the protocols to be followed inside a class. Both practices communicate expected behaviour, but the first teacher showed respect towards the students by demonstrating a concern for their feelings and providing them with an opportunity to determine rules for the class. This method is more effective than the traditional one of announcing and reminding the children of the rules of the classroom in which they have no say. Both groups may follow similar processes but the first one helps students develop a sense of responsibility.

Developing a safe and inclusive classroom also helps students to take risks or make mistakes without any fear of punishment or humiliation. During classes when teachers show their own vulnerable sides or display their own emotions through a personal story or personal experience it deepens the bonds between the teacher and the students which is crucial for developing positive socio-emotional skills. Younger children particularly are more interested in listening to their teacher's childhood stories.

Circle time can be a very effective pedagogical tool to build a sense of community. This activity allows students to get ready for the day, and to learn. In situations where children do not find any space to voice their concerns or thoughts at home, they can feel included in the school space. It is imperative to follow a protocol (decided in collaboration with the students) to not take information outside the classroom and to respect each other.

3. *Creating learning communities*

Learning communities are groups of individuals

who come together regularly to share their work, learnings, reflections, and suggestions. Creating a platform to share successful practices is effective in identifying the problems and resolving them to integrate SEL practices into existing processes. Some ways to build learning communities are as follows:

- Conversation circles that include all voices of teachers and school administrators on specific SEL topics such as how to improve student-teacher relationships. It can follow the rules of focused group discussions
- Study groups in which teachers read and discuss SEL-related texts, materials and research
- Action research groups that reflect on the implications of SEL-related activities. It can also research the impact of the work done on the ground and take steps based on the reflections
- Online communication platforms on SEL teaching practices, such as *WhatsApp*, discussion forums, conference calls, video calls
- Learning journal with articles by teachers can be published and disseminated across the teacher community

Conclusion

Promoting students' experience of feeling physically, socially and emotionally safe enhances learning and healthy development of students. It is necessary to follow a series of steps to concretise this goal. Systematic interventions and processes create the foundation for safe schools. Social and emotional dimensions of feeling safe influence each other; social experiences, like being bullied, lead to stress from fear of being bullied again.

Physical infrastructures can also send subtle messages on what kind of behaviour is expected. For example, school metal detectors can be seen as necessary equipment for several reasons, but they can also send a message that violence is normal, and it can happen anytime, or seating arrangements based on gender may send the message that boys and girls are different and should not mingle with each other. One key factor in making a student feel safe in school is to have a place to go to before, during or after school. That space need not be a physical space always but also can be a trustworthy individual.

It is not practical for any teacher to create a separate SEL course or programme for students. It

can be easily integrated into the academic and non-academic domains of school life. There is a variety of online resources which can be applied in the

classroom on how to integrate SEL into teaching-learning processes and other school practices, such as sports, recess, assembly etc.

Endnotes

i National Achievement Survey (NAS) is a large-scale survey of students' learning undertaken by the Ministry of Education, Government of India.

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