

Building Fraternity in the Classroom

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In this reflective piece, the author highlights the importance of empathy and acceptance of difference as part of growing up and taking our place in the world. Traditional biases and prejudices, which can limit a child's emotional growth, are very common and teachers and adults must break the chain to set children free to lead more inclusive lives.

Students come from many different communities, classes and genders to my university. When they are leaving after finishing their studies, I often hear them say remarkable things, such as, 'I used to avoid people from *that* community. But I realised here that they are actually all right. I even made friends with them.' I also hear them say, 'I never thought I could be just friends with a man/woman, but now I am.' Sometimes, they also say that they made friends with people who are of non-binary gender.

This is not unique to my university. It is happening in schools and campuses around the country, though, of course, there are many obstacles to the creation of a feeling of fraternity. How does one understand this? When do people begin to overcome their fear and hatred? How can we support and hasten this?

There can be many causes of fear and hatred. Sometimes there is a long history of oppression of one group by another. At one time, I was running a mobile library which I would take once a week to the outskirts of a village and was very happy that many *dalit* children were coming to it. I saw in the centre of the village a beautiful banyan tree and suggested to the children that we shift the library there. More people would be able to come, I reasoned. But their expressions changed, and they insisted that I do not move there. The banyan tree was right where the people of the dominant caste lived, and these children were sure that they would be heckled and harassed on the way. They would rather stay far away from there.

The causes of fear, aversion, dislike, and hatred may be the struggles which take place between groups over resources, power and respect. There can be many different histories and social situations which

lead to tensions between social groups and genders. This is often further fanned by organisations and leaders who think that with greater animosity and fear, their own stock will rise. The eventual solution may lie in creating a more just social order with a more equitable distribution of resources. Meanwhile, schools and youth organisations can play an important role in building a culture of affection, respect and dialogue as well as the sense of equality which comes from these.

Creating situations for cooperation

When groups *compete* with each other, fear and distrust tend to increase. However, research shows that when members of different groups and genders come together to *cooperate* for a shared goal, they begin to trust each other and lose some of their fear. For instance, a Canadian economist, Matt Lowe, conducted an experiment in Uttar Pradesh where he brought together youths of different castes to play cricket together. He formed some teams with a mix of castes and some teams with players of a single caste. He found that players of different castes began to develop greater trust and liking for each other when they were in mixed teams. Many other studies confirm this tendency. When different communities come into contact as competitors their relations can deteriorate. However, when they come into contact as collaborators or when they are working in cooperation with each other for a shared goal their affection and respect begin to increase. The American psychologist, Gordon Allport, was one of the early scholars to point this out in 1954. He said that this does not happen automatically. It needs support from authorities, otherwise things may fall apart. It is also helpful if the different communities come together as equals and are not very different in status or power.

All this is difficult to do in the community at large. How does one, for example, bring together people who live in different neighbourhoods? How does one bring them together as equals when they are part of a social structure in which one must work as a servant to the other? Or when there is a long-held

belief that women are inferior to men in intellect and temperament?

When children from different communities and genders come together in schools to live, learn and play, many possibilities open up. A number of teachers have tried out games in which children must cooperate with each other. For instance, they could form teams of girls and boys of similar abilities (mixing different levels of skills can backfire!) and the animosities between them would decrease. Many teachers have also tried out 'cooperative learning', where children work in small groups with a common objective. Children of similar abilities have to cooperate to do activities like gathering information about the plants in the garden or together making different parts of a poster. They often end up becoming friends and gaining respect for each other. All these strategies have been shown to increase affection and trust between children of different identities.

Changing how we classify the world

When people come into contact with each other to cooperate rather than to compete, their classification of the world begins to change. We usually act in our world through habitual categories that we have made for ourselves. A child begins to think 'This is red and flickering, so it is hot and will burn me. I will stay away from it.' After a while, this is a taken-for-granted fact: everything which looks like fire, is to be avoided without a second thought. Our classifications are intertwined with our feelings and attitudes. The sight of fire may generate a horrified fascination and a sensation of fear, and the child wants to stay away from it. Similar things happen with people – we see pictures in the news every day of men with beards and checked scarves holding guns and begin to think that anyone who looks like that is dangerous and not to be trusted. There develops hatred and suspicion for people who look like this, and we want to stay away from them.

To take another example, children in all-white schools in UK and USA were shown pictures of black and white people and asked who they liked, who they thought were good and who they wanted to be friends with. A large majority of the white children picked photographs of white people. However, when the same experiment was done in schools where there were children of different skin colours, the white children picked photos of several different, non-white people they liked and wanted

to be friends with. They no longer showed a special preference for white people.

In the case of these children, it was the contact that changed their views on people from different ethnicities. There are many other ways of changing classifications and attitudes. Contact can be difficult when you do not have many members of other communities in your classroom. India's education system is becoming increasingly fragmented with only the poor of a particular area in government schools and the rest in a spectrum of fee-paying private schools for the poor to the very rich. There is also a residential segmentation with different communities living in different neighbourhoods or villages. Still, there are many things which can be done to change the way young people classify the world.

Some approaches

A widely-used strategy is to regularly show videos and read stories which present members of other communities and genders in a positive light. For instance, a study was conducted in England where primary school children read storybooks in which the main character was a refugee. It was observed that they showed a distinct increase in their liking of people who were recent immigrants to their country. In India, my research colleague Dhruva Desai reads children's stories in a low-fee private school where there are no Muslims and only a few *dalits*. He consciously chooses storybooks in which the main character is a girl who is trying to break stereotypes, or which depict the pain that casteism can cause to children and adults.

Which way to use to change children's cognitive and affective classification of the world depends, among other things, upon their age. Several researchers say that children may have developed a bias against communities and genders even when they are as young as five. At that age, they generalise too much and find it difficult to see that everyone is not the same. They struggle to understand that there can be good people, too, in the communities that they are biased against. Children above the age of 8-10 years find it easier to understand this.

The nature of the stories, too, makes a difference. Just having stories with a mixture of identities may not make much of a difference. For instance, if some North Indian children dislike and mock South Indians, then just having a funny, adventure story whose protagonist's name is Subramaniam may not be enough to change their bias. They may like this

Subramaniam but still carry on with their beliefs and attitudes about other South Indians. What seems to make a greater difference is when Subramaniam's South Indian identity is repeatedly emphasised, and he is depicted as carrying the good qualities of South Indians. Very young children may just ignore this example which goes against their bias and remain unmoved. But older children are more likely to try and see things differently after enjoying the story. Paradoxically, emphasising identities helps in changing the classifications made by people. It also helps in changing the feelings and attitudes that they bear towards various other social groups.

Using subjects to overcome prejudices

Many of the principles of building fraternity can be easily integrated within ordinary school classrooms. It is possible in language classes to select stories and plays that shift and break our stereotypes. Discussions about them in the classroom help to change the feelings and attitudes which children carry. Teachers can also build cooperative learning into their daily activities. It has been shown to not only promote fraternity but also enhance students' levels of learning and their enjoyment of the subject they are studying. Games can be organised in ways which promote cooperation, rather than competition, between social groups.

Many educationists believe that our school curriculum can also more sharply focus on resisting the hatred and fear that we see in the world today. For instance, it may help to pay more attention to the way different social groups are depicted. The academic study of human beings plays an important role in this and can help a lot in changing how we classify the world. Rigorous work in social science has helped us understand that prejudices are misplaced and do not correspond

to reality. For instance, teaching the history of how caste emerged and took its present form can shake up many of the biases people hold. It will show that people have actually been moving between different varnas according to the rise and fall of their fortunes. Castes are not watertight compartments in the way that those who want to consolidate their caste supremacy would like us to believe. We have a great deal in common, much more than what the leaders who spout hatred think. Biology can easily show that there is actually a great overlap of genetic material across all the castes and indeed across all the people of the world. Academic research helps us understand that the difference between men and women comes more from social conditions and culture than from biology. Rigorous academic study also shows that violent acts in the name of religion are usually due to the desire for power or revenge and do not come just from religious beliefs. A greater emphasis on these issues in school curricula may help to resist the classifications which separate people and keep them apart.

There is a lot that we can learn about how to promote fraternity in our country and the world. When I look at what is happening in schools and universities where people from diverse and unequal backgrounds come together and become friends, I gain a lot of hope. Educational institutions and youth organisations can contribute a lot to building trust, friendship and equality between social groups. They can draw from their own experiences and also from research in the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, social psychology and so on, for this.

Hatred, contempt and fear are not inevitable. We can indeed learn ways of overcoming them. This work needs to start from kindergarten itself.



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