

Emotions within the classroom are often treated as obstacles to be sidestepped or effectively regulated in order to move towards the real business of teaching and learning. Within the rhetoric of objectivity and reason, emotions take second place; often held responsible for 'poor' judgement. The devaluing of emotions means that certain kinds of traits are celebrated more than others in the traditional classroom, like obedience to authority; or a 'well-behaved', silent classroom is often presented as a model class. Yet in our everyday lives and work, we find that one's emotions are neither individual, peculiar nor unique experiences to ourselves alone nor are they trivial. The work of scholars like Winan, Worsham and others pushes us to investigate how emotions connect 'embodied learning experiences to social structures and belief systems, past and present.' (Winans, 2012)

If we look back to our own experiences of being a student, we might find that *what* we learned is intimately tied to the embodied experience of *how* we learn. Especially in classrooms that engage in discussions of difference, power, 'otherhood' or privilege, where deeply held notions and assumptions regarding differences might be challenged, strong emotions are invoked. This is perhaps because one is asking students to interrogate something so personal, and so fundamental to their lived experiences and belief systems, that it might be considered beyond questioning.

To share an example, while reading Ismat's *Eid* (a folk tale published by Tulika Books, in which a tragicomic chain of events is set into motion when Ismat buys a pair of pants that is too long for him) with a group of 8-to 10-year-olds, the conversation with the group veered towards a student comparing the characters of the story to 'Pakistanis who are in the news these days', 'who create trouble' and 'who wear a *burqa*'. The strength of this student's conviction and the intensely emotional judgement on an issue that was prominently in the news at the time (post the hijab ban in Karnataka schools) prevented this student from engaging with any

other questioning. Questions like, 'What makes you think they are Pakistani? Have you ever seen someone wearing a hijab in your life?' The certitude of an emotional stance regarding the 'other' came through very strongly even at the slightest challenging for this 8-year-old. While over time, through carefully facilitated reading sessions and conversations, teachers were able to create a space for dialogue around the deep-seated 'othering' of a particular community that some children held, it was clear how emotions are socially and historically constructed, lived bodily and woven together with one's judgement and thoughts in complex ways.

### Addressing discomfort

As educators, we might view our role as a socio-political one and one of the things we hope for is to create opportunities and spaces for students to question oral and written language, unjust acts, and unfair policies in former or present times, as well as in texts. Keeping this in mind, our classroom circles might explicitly or implicitly hold values, such as respecting each other in the group and making space for everyone's opinions, thus valuing disagreements in the responses that come up and dialogically mediating such a space. But within a classroom seeped in such reflection and action, a question that comes up often is - while centring care and wellbeing of all members of a teaching-learning community, how do we better deal with the discomfort that analyses of power structures and dominant cultural beliefs might bring about?

For instance, when talking to young students about gender, it is inevitable that conflicts around norms and stereotypes will arise, and we will touch upon the larger structure of patriarchy that envelops us all. Some will hold notions like, 'boys are stronger than girls', or that certain traits are 'feminine', and certain 'masculine', maybe there could also be a struggle with the idea that someone whom the class views as a 'girl' does not see themselves as such. This can be particularly difficult with students in younger grades, as the skills of and capacity for reflection and discussion might still be developing,

and the resistance to engage with the knowledge that the world might be different from what one has (comfortably) experienced might cause intense emotions of discomfort. How can we address this discomfort while also building worldviews founded on care, love, and equity?

In facilitating language classes with a group of 9-to 14-year-olds, I noticed that many of our conversations around the concept of personal pronouns in the English language (I, you, he, she, they etc.), for instance, were mediated by conversations around what pronouns we innately use for ourselves in our daily lives and in the different spaces we occupy. In our group, there were some who held different gender identities in their *basti* (where safe spaces can be harder to find) and in the classroom (where one could express oneself with less judgement) and there were others who could reflect on the fluidity of their gender identities and how much of it is socially constructed. To create a classroom culture where confusions are welcome, where 'icky' feelings are collectively shouldered, and where 'messiness' is accepted, I found that rich and sensitive stories like *Guthli Can Fly* (Muskaan, 2019), *Nawab se Nandini* (Nirantar, 2006), *The Unboy Boy* (Pickleyolk Books, 2013), *Ajooba* (Eklavya, 2018) helped us meet characters who fight stereotypes and seek happiness in finding what is true to them. As a result of continuously affirming our identities and sitting together with our emotions, I noticed after a few weeks that the group would, on its own, check what pronouns to use for each other, and refer to each other by their chosen or preferred names rather than their birth/legal names, even outside of class, for example, a child called Pooja may choose a different gender-identity and prefer to be called, Aman.

Often the resistance to analyses of power structures and latching on to dominant cultural beliefs in classrooms signals a complex cry for recognition and care and results from feeling one's self threatened. Scholars like Megan Boler in their work on the 'pedagogy of discomfort', feel that compassion and hope are important facets of it. The pedagogy of discomfort 'recognises and problematises the deeply embedded emotional dimensions that frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony.' (Boler, 2004, p. 118) In doing so, it invites not just members of dominant groups but also members of marginalised cultures to re-examine the dominant

values that are inevitably internalised. If the pedagogy of discomfort takes away someone's worldview (which according to critical pedagogy is necessary to disrupt and shatter), in compassion is the possibility of replacing the vacuum with something else. Thus 'compassion is one bridge between those suffering a pedagogy of discomfort and those who have invited new ways of being fully alive into a world replete with imperfections.' (Boler, 2004, p.129) The creation of this bridge must be as essential a task of an educator as the critical questioning of existing realities.

### **Compassion and hope**

Compassion also opens doors to begin imagining newer and more equitable and just worlds founded on hope. If a learning community (class) can collectively and willingly interrogate that their privileges come at the expense of the freedoms of others (or that what they perceive to be static and inevitable structures of power are in fact historically and socially constructed), then hope in the possibility of a shared, transformed future through collective action might help us move beyond cynicism and critique. For instance, when the families of students in our classroom situated at the edge of the Delhi-Haryana border were threatened with eviction notices, it was in the process of documenting the histories of their communities, their own families and what went into the making of the *basti* as it exists today, that most students found a voice to feel hopeful against structures of power that till that point had seemed larger-than-life and static. In this way, 'critical hope' is one that pushes beyond simply dreaming of a better day into consciously thinking about how to work towards that collective action (Freire et al., 2021).

This framing of responsibility also anchors us in a web of social relations wherein our actions matter and have consequences. This kind of hope is not naïve, that is, it does not mean that we become unthinkingly optimistic, or believe in platitudes and rhetoric like 'only hard work leads to success' or 'this is the destiny for people like me'. Instead, we try to work in dialogue with others to transform the present, unjust situations into other possible futures. Hope, both for a shared future and in each other, is part of being well, both individually and collectively, in the classroom such that education which is empowering or liberating also heals and holds us with care and compassion at its core.

A few months back, when a group of 6- to 10-year-olds in a *basti* were very excited to join the procession for Ganpati *visarjan* (immersion) and were trailing behind a loudspeaker on the road, their teacher asked them if they knew the history behind the practice of immersing Ganpati. What ensued then was a discussion on religious practices based on caste identities – why touching an idol was (and is) denied to some – and finally on the question of whose religion it really is. This emotional willingness to inquire into systems of domination as well as to engage in the difficult work of allowing one’s worldviews to be altered, requires dialogue and trust and is a responsibility of the facilitators. Hope in the classroom, and more specifically critical hope, reminds us of some of the ways in which being critical and compassionate go hand in hand.

### Conclusion

A common response to the ideas of social justice, critical hope and compassion in the classroom is one of wanting to protect children. This comes from the dominant perception of childhood as one of ‘innocence’ or ‘naivety’. Similar, too, are our perceptions in discussing children’s literature, or children’s films or what we regard as ‘child-friendly’ as adults. Children’s supposed innocence is pointed at as a perceived lack of subjectivity of any kind.

Children’s books are often expected to fit the tropes of being ‘simple’, linear narratives for the *tabula rasa* of children’s minds, which must be protected from violence, abuse and any type of structural conflicts. Moralistic tones are fairly common in children’s literature written by adults. Yet, children experience conflicts and live amongst the rest of us in all the ugliness and beauties of everyday life. Experiences of childhood are far from simple or homogenous and are often deeply political. We attempt to sidestep difficult conversations all together in primary school hoping to protect the children from certain realities. However, this approach can be misguided, especially when addressing learners from marginalised communities, whose lives exist in the continuum of struggles against oppression. What these learners need is not to be ‘sheltered’ from real life while leaving their material circumstances unaltered, but the acknowledgement of the realities that are stacked against them, as well as the tools with which to work towards a different future. To this end, compassion and critical hope seem to offer a bridge between the dismantling of worldviews that critical education demands of us, and the envisioning of possible futures that are built on foundations of love, justice, equity and dialogue.

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