

When speaking of an inclusive school, it is frequently stated that it is one that children with special needs attend along with 'typically developing' students. But should an inclusive school stand for just this? What about schools where there are no children with special needs that also need to be inclusive? Let us ask ourselves: does every child in the school get the turn to conduct the morning assembly? Is there an opportunity for every child to speak up in class? Do boys and girls share the responsibility for decorating the classroom equally? Most of us will respond with a 'no' to this. If we all work together, we can address many of these concerns and make our schools inclusive in the real sense.

In our classrooms, we frequently observe that certain tasks are delegated to one group of students, leaving the others behind. Whether we realise it or not, this exclusion means that we are also robbing the others of opportunities. The 'smart' and the 'weak' students are divided into two groups by us, the teachers. We also think that only intelligent children can do all activities well and that those who are not academically proficient are incapable of doing other activities as well. The growth of those children as well as that of the school is hampered by this mindset.

Why do we fail to recognise the uniqueness of each child and their capacity for extraordinary deeds? With this question in mind, we set out to create an inclusive environment in the Government Primary School, Giddha (Nawagarh block, Janjgir Champa district, Chhattisgarh). Not only the school, but the entire community came together to support this initiative. Among the activities we carried out were the following.

Celebrating Constitution Day

In order to make our school inclusive, it was very necessary that a foundation of being 'open in thoughts' be laid so that children are receptive to adopting new ideas in their lives.

- On Constitution Day, we wrote and pasted constitutional values and rights on the walls so

that children would be eager to read and know about them. We discussed constitutional values and provided an open platform for the children to share their views.

- We also discussed stereotypes and exchanged views in detail on the work to be done by boys and girls. In the discussion, almost all the children agreed that work should not be assigned on the basis of gender.
- Children were given the freedom to make rules for their school by discussing the policy-prescribed rules of the Constitution. After discussing the rules among themselves, the children wrote down and pasted them on the school wall with everyone's signatures.
- Interfaith prayer came to be included in the morning assembly to inculcate a sense of respect for all religions. Also, children were divided into groups responsible for leading the morning assembly each day. Every child is given the chance to come forward and say/read out the thought for the day or a theme-based idea.

Sitting together for mid-day meals

Teachers and children sit together to have their mid-day meal, and during that time, talk about issues related to children's lives. This makes the children feel comfortable with the teachers and assures them that we too are like them. Along with the cooks and the girls, boys too share the responsibility of serving mid-day meals. Equal participation of all the children and teachers in each task at the school, such as sweeping, decorating the classroom, lifting tables and chairs, maintaining cleanliness, gardening, etc. is ensured.

Change in classroom seating arrangement

We felt that in the regular seating arrangement of students in rows, we were not able to reach every student individually. As a result, some of them were unable to take part in all the activities. We decided to try out a new seating arrangement and thought that we would go back to the previous one if it was

not effective. The new seating arrangement was in the shape of a semicircle and the children loved it. It was effective because it was easy to reach every child, and there was plenty of room in the centre of the classroom for group activities. We now share meals in our classroom and participate in various activities.

Children's Corner

Though the whole school belongs to the children, all their work and their creations remain hidden in their notebooks inside their bags. Every child has a special talent that needs to be showcased. Therefore, we considered creating a Children's Corner in every classroom. We selected the wall beneath the blackboard in the front of the classroom for this activity. Each child can hang up their project work or any of their own creations in this space. It makes them feel special to see their work displayed in front of the class. It also encourages them to do increasingly novel and imaginative things. Children are overjoyed with this their 'special' corner.

Participation in decoration of school

We had a wonderful time and got answers to many questions while doing this activity of painting the school. Along with the children, the village residents gave this activity their full participation by praising our efforts and offering assistance. A class V student who was painting, asked, 'Ma'am, we are beautifying the school with so much effort now, but who will do all this after we leave?'. When he said that, I could see in his eyes the love and ownership he felt for the institution.

Parents' meetings organised

We came to the realisation that there is no connection between the parents of the students and the teachers, and as a result, we had no knowledge of the children's everyday lives, habits, problems or circumstances at home. The parents are also in the dark regarding their children's development and school activities. Considering this, we decided to hold a parent-teacher meeting for the parents of students in classes III-V. A large number of parents attended; they voiced their concerns and offered helpful suggestions. We also showed them the evaluated answer scripts of the half-yearly examination. They were urged to extend

their cooperation for the progress of their children. A discussion on Navodaya Vidyalaya was held, and its advantages were also explained.

The parents had never attended a meeting of this kind before. Not all parents attended, and this may be in part because they had never previously discussed crucial matters involving their children. Even so, every parent present participated in the discussion. Some of the children's grandmothers had come; they were not formally educated, but out of concern for their grandchildren's future, they gave us instructions to teach them well, which was a very positive experience for us.

Meeting parents at home

There are some children who are constantly absent, and their parents did not come to the meeting, so it was very important for us to meet them. We decided to visit them in their homes. There were other reasons too, for example, we observed a sudden change in a very intelligent child studying in class V, who was always ahead in every activity of the class and school, be it studies or any other work. He became sullen and irritable. He did not want to participate in any activity. We asked his friends, but they knew nothing. We also tried to talk to him but to no avail. He refused to fill out the form for Navodaya Vidyalaya and did not even want to come to class. When we went to his home and met his mother, we came to know that there were constant fights in the house because of which the child was getting mentally and emotionally affected. By talking with his parent, we managed to convey this to them. This, to some extent, helped and now the child is slowly returning to his former self.

Celebrating festivals of all religions

The main reason for doing this was that the children did not know anything about other religions. Even those who knew a little about other religions did not respect them, hence it was necessary to do this activity.

We started by celebrating Christmas. We first asked the children what they knew and then talked about why we celebrate Christmas. During this activity, we found that some children were reluctant to participate. The reason was that because of the things they had heard, they were biased against

all religions other than their own. After a long conversation, we were able to allay some of their misconceptions and then, all the children made Christmas caps and had a great time together.

These are the small ways in which our school team (teachers and children), along with members of the Azim Premji Foundation, is trying to make our school inclusive.



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Children need to know that they are wanted and important. When people talk to them and hear them, they feel acknowledged and reassured. There is a sense of security that someone cares. This may mean seeking out the child to meet her in the class, the corridor or any other space. It may simply be enquiring if they have had their meal or if they are feeling cold, but it means a lot to the child who otherwise does not get this attention from his family members who are overburdened in trying to meet their basic needs.

Shivani Taneja and Savita Sohit, Childhood Traumas and Healing in an Educational Space, p 12