

Eliminating Discrimination and Exclusion

Towards a 'Sadbhavna Vidyalaya'

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VOICES

The school is an institution that helps children imbibe constitutional values by making them aware of these. To enhance learning, and help children thrive both in the present and as adults, schools must create an atmosphere of empathy and equality. One of the most important ways to ensure this is by treating children equally in school by including them in various activities in the classroom, the sports field, and the daily assembly, and respecting their independent thoughts and opinions. The school brings about modifications in the behaviour of children and prepares them to build a better future for themselves. It also motivates them to think about society.

Among the children coming to a school, we see diversity in economic, social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds and differences in customs and ideologies. The behaviour of children in school reflects the differences in their familial and societal backgrounds. The causes preventing children's education from progressing as a result of these behaviours should be identified and discussed in the classroom and outside it.

I have had the opportunity to work with children in classrooms that are socially, physically, religiously, culturally, and ethnically diverse. There are barriers to achieving inclusion that I have personally faced, and, in this article, I would like to share my experiences and the steps I took to help children rise above commonly held misconceptions about gender, caste, class, religion and other differences.

Gender segregation

The first challenge I encountered in my classrooms and schools, in general, was gender discrimination. Although children may not even be aware of it, and we teachers may not acknowledge it, gender-based segregation is all around us. While I am teaching different subjects in a classroom where students must work in groups, I have noticed that typically boys choose boys and girls only girls in their group. We could observe the same behaviour while they are sitting together, talking, reading in pairs and

during outdoor games. Both the boys and the girls were also not sharing their personal items, like pens and crayons, with each other.

I believe such behaviour in youngsters is a barrier to an inclusive society, so I established a dialogue-friendly environment in my classroom. For instance, I mentioned to them that Neelam from their class is a highly talented dancer and artist; would they not like to learn these skills from her? That Vedika and Diksha write beautiful songs and stories; so, would they not like to learn this from them? That Devraj who is great at sports, inspires others to participate; would they not want to play with him? We also discussed the challenges involved in learning from peers and how to seek help from them in the classroom. I encouraged the children to cooperate and emphasised that both boys and girls could be friends. I made them realise that they assist their mothers with household chores like sweeping, bringing water, and washing utensils, and their fathers with work in the garden and bringing groceries home – all this with complete ease. And whether they are boys or girls, all of them want to play, read, write, travel, and have fun; other than physical differences, there are no differences between a girl and a boy.

I made the children sit in a circle, boys and girls alternately, to teach them the value of working together. While forming groups, we kept this in mind as well. Today, there is no gender segregation in my class; the children play together and show one another compassion. When I return to the classroom from training programmes or some other work, the students tell me about their experiences of teaching and learning from each other in my absence. I once missed a half-day of school. When I returned the following day, I learned that Harish had been injured. He became a major source of worry for all the other children, so, we went to meet him. The children were pleased to see that Harish was getting better. Everyone gave him advice on what he should do to be safe and recover quickly. We talked to Harish's guardian who was also delighted

to meet us.

I enjoyed and appreciated watching the children show concern for their classmate because I could see the human values being instilled in them, which would likely empower them to grow up to be excellent citizens regardless of gender.

Economic disparity

The disparity between rich and poor families was another barrier that I observed in my classroom. It has such an impact on children that they do not value themselves or their families. 'We are not well-off', a child claimed, 'which is why nobody visits us. People visit a rich person's home often.' But I pointed out to the children that this was not true. 'Take a look at our school. Children come here to study from different types of households. No student is subjected to discrimination in our school. In the classroom, everyone learns in the same way and is given the same opportunity to speak and ask questions,' I explained. Then, to prove the child wrong, a few days later, the other students and I visited the child's home and spent some time with the family. The child felt happy about it.

Caste differences

Children talking about caste among themselves and declaring, 'I belong to this caste, and you belong to that caste,' was the third barrier I observed in my class. Children may observe this in their homes and come to believe that only members of specific castes perform certain tasks, such as blacksmiths, barbers, cowherds, etc. This discriminatory system can still be seen in villages. Children observe this behaviour of others in the community and begin to emulate it.

I discussed the issue with them and inquired, 'What difference does it make if someone belongs to a particular caste? First and foremost, we are all human beings.' I gave them examples of the two hands, two legs, and other body parts that all humans have. The children began to think about this. 'Anyone with free will and the desire to work can become anything in today's world,' I told them. In our school, all students are treated equally. The school does not discriminate against the caste of any child. All the children eat lunch together, study together, and play together. They have also understood that everyone's work is valued equally in society. Because we cannot do all the work ourselves, a blacksmith who makes iron articles is

just as important as a farmer or a shepherd. We rely on the work of others to complete our own and to live as we do.

After many such discussions, we no longer see any caste discrimination among our school children. When parents of children visit our school, they are all treated equally. This also shows them that we teachers too do not discriminate.

Social exclusion

I discovered a case of social exclusion – the boycott of some village members by the people of the village and society. This exclusion has a significant impact on the children, altering their perceptions and thoughts. Children are unable to think for themselves about such things; they observe their family members and other elders and begin to follow them. Ragini, a girl in my class, was shunned by society, and as a result, along with the other children, her neighbour and good friend, who also studies in her class and used to share articles like pens, notebooks, and colours etc., stopped sharing these with her; she stopped playing, studying, and even sitting with her. I asked the children why they were behaving like this, and I learnt from them that Ragini's family had been ostracised by the village society and they were forbidden from visiting or communicating with anyone in the village. This came as a complete shock to me, and I told the children that what they were doing was wrong. 'Look, Ragini is coming to our school to study. We are not discriminating against her in any way. We make her sit with the other children while reading, writing, and playing. They have lunch together, listen and respond to her. She, too, is a human being. We should treat her with love and respect, keeping human values in mind. How would you feel if someone treated you like this?' I asked. The children understood and went back to being friends with Ragini. We went to Ragini's house one day with the entire class. We chatted and had tea with her parents. To emphasise our rejection of social ostracisation, we asked the children to bring milk for the teachers' tea from another ostracised family in the village. At first, they were hesitant, but now they regularly get milk for the school from this family.

All these incidents provided me with the opportunity to better understand children, learn about their social and economic ideologies, and consider how societal attitudes that create discrimination and

segregation in society also make children submissive and prevent them from thinking independently. It is our collective responsibility as teachers to instil

values of compassion, empathy and fellowship which ensure everyone's growth and development.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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The social and emotional needs of children should be integrated into the concepts and outcomes of learning. Several pedagogical practices can be adopted for promoting this. Important among these are play, drama, arts, group activity, activities with scope for assent and dissent, loud reading, active listening, open discussions and independent writing. Such activities contribute to the all-round development of children.

Chikkaveerasha S V, Socio-Emotional Learning through Project Work, p 27