

## The Elephant in the Room | SEL Deficient Teaching

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About three years ago, amidst the looming dread of the second wave of COVID-19, sundry initiatives were undertaken to sustain the studies of children. At the time, I was working with fourteen tribal students studying in class IV. The school was located at the periphery of a hamlet in southern Rajasthan. However, the classes would take place in an isolated temple since schools were closed due to the pandemic.

Rahul, an otherwise calm and pleasant boy, was playing with his friends during recess. The gentle pushing and shoving soon turned into a serious scuffle. By the time I intervened, Rahul had already gripped Ayush and had begun choking his throat. Despite being an adult, it took me significant effort to separate the 10-year-old from almost suffocating the other child. It was beyond my imagination to see a child as calm and composed as Rahul exhibiting such aggressive behaviour.

The incident was shared with the Head Master (HM) after school. The tale that I heard from the HM invoked a sense of sympathy for Rahul. Following the separation of his parents, he had been living with his grandmother. Rahul had been deprived of emotional support as his father had remarried. Even prior to this, the tender consciousness of the child had witnessed numerous instances of domestic violence, something which must have inflicted a lasting detrimental impression on his personality. It is evident that the circumstances had a severe impact on the mental makeup of the child. When the socio-emotional wellbeing of a child is not considered and nurtured, it reflects upon his/her academic performance too. Needless to say, as teachers, we could start by recognising this critical aspect of the teaching-learning process.

### Chasing academic excellence

In an atmosphere where academic competence lies at the core of teaching, it is quite understandable that other instrumental components of a comprehensive education are disregarded. We often see that academically sound students are the ones who are encouraged by the teachers

to participate in extra-curricular activities too. This practice deprives many children of the opportunities that they deserve for the nurturing of their talent. Children possessing a certain flair for arts, sports, music or dance are deprived of the exposure that they deserve simply because their academic performance was found not up to the mark by a flawed system.

The school is a subset of society and students who perform well are at the pinnacle of the social framework while the non-performers are often neglected, humiliated and ignored by both, the teachers and the so-called performers. This division based on performance which creates subgroups within the class, deprives the so-called 'non-performers' of the opportunity to learn from their peers. Various studies have shown that publicly labelling students as intelligent or dull at an early age has a lasting impact on their overall personality, something which could prove to be a major impediment that prevents them from further exploring their true potential.

As a teacher, I could have become prejudiced against Rahul, had I not been made aware of the emotional deprivations he had faced at such a tender age. It taught me that for a true and complete assessment of a child, her or his background and co-curricular interests must always be acknowledged by the teacher. We would not recognise Sachin Tendulkar as the 'Master Blaster' today had he pursued Aeronautical Engineering neither would we have recognised APJ Abdul Kalam as the 'Missile Man of India' had he gone on to pursue cricket as a career. Hence, holding equal expectations across starkly different parameters from all children of a given class is certainly unsuitable if not absurd.

### Acknowledging circumstances

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates that holistic education is one that ensures the establishment of an inclusive and pluralistic society. But very often, teachers themselves hold biases against tribal and other deprived communities, forgetting the fact that students coming from these

communities are almost entirely dependent on the school for their holistic development.

Many of these students are significantly dependent upon the mid-day meal (MDM) to meet their nutritional requirements and it is no big revelation that MDM has been crucial in ensuring the retention of students in government schools. Many of these schools have a significant number of non-enrolled children who happen to be the siblings of the formally enrolled students. In one such school (Government Primary School, Gundi Ka Bhilwara, Kumbhalgarh), a 9-year-old boy named Rajat would bring along his two siblings (an 18-month-old infant brother and a 3-year-old sister) as they were left in his care while the parents went out to work.

#### *Home circumstances*

Rajat's is just one example wherein circumstances steal away a child's childhood from him as he is forced into premature adulthood. Poor economic conditions have had a significant impact on the child. The teachers are not expected to fight poverty as such but, it becomes imperative for them to acknowledge and understand the challenges emanating from the poor socio-economic background of their students which, in turn, hampers their wellbeing considerably. The child who has not completed his homework might have slept on an empty stomach and the one who could not reach the school on time may have had to take his sheep grazing in the fields.

#### *Caste-based exclusion*

Another significant social evil that is often observed in the classrooms is the caste-based divide between students. Such undesirable practices can be dealt with effectively if the teacher intervenes in a proactive manner, however, in some cases, teachers themselves carry biases towards children coming from certain communities. Caste-based discriminatory practices are still evident in many parts of the country, whether rural or urban. To win this battle, we shall need unbiased teachers who are concerned with the overall wellbeing of their students, regardless of the caste/religion/creed that they belong to.

#### **SEL in the classroom**

A classroom deficient in SEL-centric approaches can be identified by closely observing the behaviour of the students. For instance, even if a child has grade-appropriate competencies related to language and mathematics, poor socio-emotional

conditioning is reflected through their faculties of expression. These include the lack of an ability to express oneself freely, being self-aware, being capable of teamwork, having a sensitive attitude towards the hardships of peers and adjusting one's behaviour while being aware of the likes and dislikes of the people around.

Unfortunately, these aspects are not accorded the attention that they deserve. Teachers need to consider and recognise the fact that these abilities must be at the core of the teaching-learning process. As a society, we must also realise that good academic performance does not ensure socio-emotional conditioning and that empathy, self-awareness and self-regulation have a reinforcing impact on socio-emotional health.

While these findings are corroborated by the testimonies of teachers who claim that a significant amount of their time is being consumed in conducting duties related to the maintenance of records and checking workbooks of the children. Therefore, they do not get sufficient time to work through an activity-based approach with their students. This paper-based conduct of teaching does more harm than good to the overall learning of the students. Through this approach, we might cater to the abilities pertinent to Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), but the fact that FLN is merely a component of learning and not learning itself, must not be ignored. Factoring SEL into our teaching plans and assessment techniques is an integral part of the process and not just an option.

#### **SEL in the 21st century**

SEL and classroom processes go together. In today's fast-paced world, mere good grades and certifications do not help an individual in the long run. The ability to work in teams, express one's opinion freely and effectively and develop an analytical outlook that results in creative solutions, are essential for growth and success. Such attributes cannot be verified by certifications and good grades alone; they must be acquired by an individual to keep pace with the ways of the world. Academic knowledge of a given subject can be acquired at different stages of life but the intrinsic abilities of communication, creative thinking, cooperation and problem-solving need to be nurtured right from the early stages of learning. Sadly, the public education system is not just devoid of these critical aspects of human development, but it also seems to be unaware of them.

Our classrooms can be transformed into enriching learning spaces provided the teachers acknowledge SEL as an instrumental aspect of classroom processes. This realisation would suffice to kickstart the whole process of transforming our classrooms into effective and conducive learning spaces for our young learners.

### **In a nutshell**

Today, those working in the sphere of education find themselves immersed in looking for ways to bring about learning recovery. The problem with this quest is the fear of it being limited to academic achievement alone, to the neglect of aspects of emotional growth and learning, for that process would lack the sound basis of human values

and would restrict itself merely to a superficial academic approach. Furthermore, the skills required by professionals today cannot be taught through an academic approach alone as these are acquired and developed by immersing oneself in an atmosphere conducive to acquiring and honing the skills of cooperation and collaboration, sympathy and empathy through the process of socialisation, something which our learners are not being prepared for appropriately. Sensitising the teaching community about SEL must be the prime directive of our educational system so that we not only generate competent professionals of the future but also create compassionate, aware and sensitive citizens for our society.

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

### **References**

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