

Asset thinking: The mindset for inclusion

[hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/economy/asset-thinking-the-mindset-for-inclusion-101684387524019.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/economy/asset-thinking-the-mindset-for-inclusion-101684387524019.html)

May 18, 2023

ByHindustan Times

This article is authored by Jwairia Saleem, assistant professor, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

Despite the mandate on equity and inclusion both by our Constitution and legislature, the status quo in our institutions is far from inclusive, with few takers among the teaching fraternity. Most teachers view the resulting diversity in their classrooms as an impediment to achieving intended outcomes. Since teachers are inadequately prepared to provide socio-emotional support and academic interventions to all students admitted through universal enrolment drives, many students face hostility and alienation and soon drop out of the system. The compulsion on inclusion has backfired, making it a bitter pill for both - teachers and students alike. A closer examination of the issue reveals a fundamental flaw in the way we approach inclusion and highlights the need to celebrate diversity before embracing inclusion.



Government school (HT PHOTO)

The right to free and compulsory education (RTE) 2009, made education a fundamental right for all children. The National Education Policy NEP2020, explicitly lays down the operationalisation of this fundamental right through inclusion and positive discrimination of children with disabilities (CWSN) and children from socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), ensuring quality education for all. However, most teachers find diverse classrooms debilitating. Unaware of or ill-equipped to implement inclusive practices, most teachers have descended into a state of helplessness, frustration or, worse still, apathy.

A scrutiny of our approach to inclusion raises several red flags. For one, the rhetoric that surrounds differences and diversity is steeped in the idea of 'otherness,' often viewed through the lens of the dominant culture. Yet another is the use of labels to categorise specific groups as 'different' and 'wanting' in some way. This exacerbates the notion of the 'other' being of a lesser value- less desirable and therefore must be 'tolerated' or 'patronized'. Such an approach reduces every effort towards inclusion to a charitable enterprise- an act of benevolence and not a matter of right of those being 'included'. These inherently biased notions about diversity have led to deficit thinking, where first-generation students or students coming from impoverished background are seen as 'different' and 'lacking' in some ways. It's hard to imagine a pleasant environment and healthy relationships when positive discrimination begins to reinforce the 'otherness' – rather than build bridges and bonds of sharing and caring. We often see this play out in our institutions, where children admitted through RTE, or reservation quotas are seen as the 'less fortunate' and dependent on the benevolence of others. Often excluded from those that come with a cultural capital by virtue of birth or upbringing, these children form cliques of their own. The exclusion they suffer scars them for life often manifesting in low self-esteem, diffidence or worse still-anger and resentment. Despite their 'education' the ostracisation continues in the social, personal and professional spheres.

In contrast an asset-based mindset views every individual as having unique strengths and adding value to the school community. Their differences can bring new perspectives, their stories add richness and new dimensions to learning that can be inspiring and thought-provoking for all learners. A child from an agrarian family probably knows more about farming and animal husbandry in ways that the teacher herself may not. Similarly, children from forest communities may have rich knowledge about the ecosystem and the flora and fauna that inhabit it. Teachers with an asset-based mindset use this indigenous 'out-of-text-book' knowledge and experiences to enrich their lessons in ways unimaginable, greatly benefiting all learners. Not to mention the connections and trusting relationships that are forged between the teachers, students, and the community. Such relationships form the backbone of a strong culture of learning at school, where learners benefit from each other as much as from the teacher, where learning is a joy, and progress is ensured for all.

Developing asset-based thinking is no rocket science--all it requires is a genuine desire to know the 'other' and value their uniqueness and work with them for mutual benefit. The first step is to reflect and identify one's biases and be rid of them. By focusing on what others lack, we often fail to see the wealth they possess and lose out on making use of it. A game-changer would be for teachers to begin asking themselves: 'What do these learners know? What can they do?' and 'How can I incorporate their knowledge and skills for a more engaging and fruitful lesson?'

When this happens, teachers will not just accept diversity but want it. They will no longer preach 'tolerance' but will demonstrate and promote acceptance of the 'others' in the class, valuing their unique contribution to making teaching and learning enjoyable.

This article is authored by Jwairia Saleem, assistant professor, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.