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Nurturing Wellbeing in School Part 2

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All opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Azim Premji University.

FROM THE EDITOR



Three decades after it was first published, I bought Dr Seuss' *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* to gift to my 7-year-old, new friend. Flipping through it, I found myself cringing at the use of 'you'll be the best of the best', and 'you will top all the rest'. How our sensibilities have changed over time! Competition in classrooms has made way for cooperation. Be it the African philosophy of 'ubuntu' or our own, 'sadbhavna', there is a focus now on togetherness, fraternity, and inclusion in classrooms.

Wellbeing is a complex concept and while a wellness-focused school culture is key, it also requires a very individualised focus. Children function at the level of emotions. Their wellbeing depends on how the school, teachers, other students, and the entire ecosystem make them feel. The stories and experiences of teachers out there among the children are so many and so varied, is it any wonder then that we are here with this, Part 2?

There were times during the editing of this issue when we could simply not focus on the intricacies of language because the content was so overwhelming. Our authors made us dwell on the question, 'What exactly is inclusion?' 'Does it stand merely for letting children with disabilities study with the rest?' They reminded us that for children from marginalised communities, the school is the only space for their holistic development; that in many government schools, there is a large number of non-enrolled children who come to school with their enrolled elder siblings. There are several pieces in here that should make us all stop short to consider how a child who is excluded feels. How does a child whose family life is full of strife feel in school? Why does a child come to school with unkempt hair? Why does another feel that no one would visit their home because they are poor or belong to a lower caste?

Conversations have emerged as the single most important activity that teachers can carry out in their

classrooms to understand what is going on in their students' lives. While group conversations based on reason and logic regarding biases against religions or communities seemed to bring down some social barriers, teachers' chats with children, individually and informally, have shown to have provided vulnerable children with emotional wherewithal to carry on. One author has used the term 'trauma lens' for how we need to watch out for signs of distress in children.

Several authors have reiterated the power of storytelling in helping children to open up about their life experiences. There are suggestions about what kind of stories to choose and how to build dialogues around them. Authors have also emphasised the use of mixed group activities to foster affection, trust and respect among children of different identities.

It was immensely heartening to read about the efforts schools and teachers are making to sensitise children to essential and life-enriching values. In Part I, we carried a piece on the 'Sadbhavna Vidyalaya' initiative that is being implemented in schools in Chhattisgarh. In this issue, we bring you the voices of three teachers from these schools who are modifying their practices to help children build relationships based on respect, kindness and cooperation.

The copy of Dr Seuss is lying in my drawer. I'm still not sure if my young friend will open up to the wonder of the innumerable possibilities the book shows her or if she will internalise the very ideas that we do not want our children to be exposed to – to be better than others.

Before you turn the page, a reminder that this is your magazine and we want to hear your voice here, so do keep sending us your valuable suggestions.

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Building Fraternity in the Classroom

Amman Madan

In this reflective piece, the author highlights the importance of empathy and acceptance of difference as part of growing up and taking our place in the world. Traditional biases and prejudices, which can limit a child's emotional growth, are very common and teachers and adults must break the chain to set children free to lead more inclusive lives.

Students come from many different communities, classes and genders to my university. When they are leaving after finishing their studies, I often hear them say remarkable things, such as, 'I used to avoid people from *that* community. But I realised here that they are actually all right. I even made friends with them.' I also hear them say, 'I never thought I could be just friends with a man/woman, but now I am.' Sometimes, they also say that they made friends with people who are of non-binary gender.

This is not unique to my university. It is happening in schools and campuses around the country, though, of course, there are many obstacles to the creation of a feeling of fraternity. How does one understand this? When do people begin to overcome their fear and hatred? How can we support and hasten this?

There can be many causes of fear and hatred. Sometimes there is a long history of oppression of one group by another. At one time, I was running a mobile library which I would take once a week to the outskirts of a village and was very happy that many *dalit* children were coming to it. I saw in the centre of the village a beautiful banyan tree and suggested to the children that we shift the library there. More people would be able to come, I reasoned. But their expressions changed, and they insisted that I do not move there. The banyan tree was right where the people of the dominant caste lived, and these children were sure that they would be heckled and harassed on the way. They would rather stay far away from there.

The causes of fear, aversion, dislike, and hatred may be the struggles which take place between groups over resources, power and respect. There can be many different histories and social situations which

lead to tensions between social groups and genders. This is often further fanned by organisations and leaders who think that with greater animosity and fear, their own stock will rise. The eventual solution may lie in creating a more just social order with a more equitable distribution of resources. Meanwhile, schools and youth organisations can play an important role in building a culture of affection, respect and dialogue as well as the sense of equality which comes from these.

Creating situations for cooperation

When groups *compete* with each other, fear and distrust tend to increase. However, research shows that when members of different groups and genders come together to *cooperate* for a shared goal, they begin to trust each other and lose some of their fear. For instance, a Canadian economist, Matt Lowe, conducted an experiment in Uttar Pradesh where he brought together youths of different castes to play cricket together. He formed some teams with a mix of castes and some teams with players of a single caste. He found that players of different castes began to develop greater trust and liking for each other when they were in mixed teams. Many other studies confirm this tendency. When different communities come into contact as competitors their relations can deteriorate. However, when they come into contact as collaborators or when they are working in cooperation with each other for a shared goal their affection and respect begin to increase. The American psychologist, Gordon Allport, was one of the early scholars to point this out in 1954. He said that this does not happen automatically. It needs support from authorities, otherwise things may fall apart. It is also helpful if the different communities come together as equals and are not very different in status or power.

All this is difficult to do in the community at large. How does one, for example, bring together people who live in different neighbourhoods? How does one bring them together as equals when they are part of a social structure in which one must work as a servant to the other? Or when there is a long-held

belief that women are inferior to men in intellect and temperament?

When children from different communities and genders come together in schools to live, learn and play, many possibilities open up. A number of teachers have tried out games in which children must cooperate with each other. For instance, they could form teams of girls and boys of similar abilities (mixing different levels of skills can backfire!) and the animosities between them would decrease. Many teachers have also tried out 'cooperative learning', where children work in small groups with a common objective. Children of similar abilities have to cooperate to do activities like gathering information about the plants in the garden or together making different parts of a poster. They often end up becoming friends and gaining respect for each other. All these strategies have been shown to increase affection and trust between children of different identities.

Changing how we classify the world

When people come into contact with each other to cooperate rather than to compete, their classification of the world begins to change. We usually act in our world through habitual categories that we have made for ourselves. A child begins to think 'This is red and flickering, so it is hot and will burn me. I will stay away from it.' After a while, this is a taken-for-granted fact: everything which looks like fire, is to be avoided without a second thought. Our classifications are intertwined with our feelings and attitudes. The sight of fire may generate a horrified fascination and a sensation of fear, and the child wants to stay away from it. Similar things happen with people – we see pictures in the news every day of men with beards and checked scarves holding guns and begin to think that anyone who looks like that is dangerous and not to be trusted. There develops hatred and suspicion for people who look like this, and we want to stay away from them.

To take another example, children in all-white schools in UK and USA were shown pictures of black and white people and asked who they liked, who they thought were good and who they wanted to be friends with. A large majority of the white children picked photographs of white people. However, when the same experiment was done in schools where there were children of different skin colours, the white children picked photos of several different, non-white people they liked and wanted

to be friends with. They no longer showed a special preference for white people.

In the case of these children, it was the contact that changed their views on people from different ethnicities. There are many other ways of changing classifications and attitudes. Contact can be difficult when you do not have many members of other communities in your classroom. India's education system is becoming increasingly fragmented with only the poor of a particular area in government schools and the rest in a spectrum of fee-paying private schools for the poor to the very rich. There is also a residential segmentation with different communities living in different neighbourhoods or villages. Still, there are many things which can be done to change the way young people classify the world.

Some approaches

A widely-used strategy is to regularly show videos and read stories which present members of other communities and genders in a positive light. For instance, a study was conducted in England where primary school children read storybooks in which the main character was a refugee. It was observed that they showed a distinct increase in their liking of people who were recent immigrants to their country. In India, my research colleague Dhruva Desai reads children's stories in a low-fee private school where there are no Muslims and only a few *dalits*. He consciously chooses storybooks in which the main character is a girl who is trying to break stereotypes, or which depict the pain that casteism can cause to children and adults.

Which way to use to change children's cognitive and affective classification of the world depends, among other things, upon their age. Several researchers say that children may have developed a bias against communities and genders even when they are as young as five. At that age, they generalise too much and find it difficult to see that everyone is not the same. They struggle to understand that there can be good people, too, in the communities that they are biased against. Children above the age of 8-10 years find it easier to understand this.

The nature of the stories, too, makes a difference. Just having stories with a mixture of identities may not make much of a difference. For instance, if some North Indian children dislike and mock South Indians, then just having a funny, adventure story whose protagonist's name is Subramaniam may not be enough to change their bias. They may like this

Subramaniam but still carry on with their beliefs and attitudes about other South Indians. What seems to make a greater difference is when Subramaniam's South Indian identity is repeatedly emphasised, and he is depicted as carrying the good qualities of South Indians. Very young children may just ignore this example which goes against their bias and remain unmoved. But older children are more likely to try and see things differently after enjoying the story. Paradoxically, emphasising identities helps in changing the classifications made by people. It also helps in changing the feelings and attitudes that they bear towards various other social groups.

Using subjects to overcome prejudices

Many of the principles of building fraternity can be easily integrated within ordinary school classrooms. It is possible in language classes to select stories and plays that shift and break our stereotypes. Discussions about them in the classroom help to change the feelings and attitudes which children carry. Teachers can also build cooperative learning into their daily activities. It has been shown to not only promote fraternity but also enhance students' levels of learning and their enjoyment of the subject they are studying. Games can be organised in ways which promote cooperation, rather than competition, between social groups.

Many educationists believe that our school curriculum can also more sharply focus on resisting the hatred and fear that we see in the world today. For instance, it may help to pay more attention to the way different social groups are depicted. The academic study of human beings plays an important role in this and can help a lot in changing how we classify the world. Rigorous work in social science has helped us understand that prejudices are misplaced and do not correspond

to reality. For instance, teaching the history of how caste emerged and took its present form can shake up many of the biases people hold. It will show that people have actually been moving between different varnas according to the rise and fall of their fortunes. Castes are not watertight compartments in the way that those who want to consolidate their caste supremacy would like us to believe. We have a great deal in common, much more than what the leaders who spout hatred think. Biology can easily show that there is actually a great overlap of genetic material across all the castes and indeed across all the people of the world. Academic research helps us understand that the difference between men and women comes more from social conditions and culture than from biology. Rigorous academic study also shows that violent acts in the name of religion are usually due to the desire for power or revenge and do not come just from religious beliefs. A greater emphasis on these issues in school curricula may help to resist the classifications which separate people and keep them apart.

There is a lot that we can learn about how to promote fraternity in our country and the world. When I look at what is happening in schools and universities where people from diverse and unequal backgrounds come together and become friends, I gain a lot of hope. Educational institutions and youth organisations can contribute a lot to building trust, friendship and equality between social groups. They can draw from their own experiences and also from research in the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, social psychology and so on, for this.

Hatred, contempt and fear are not inevitable. We can indeed learn ways of overcoming them. This work needs to start from kindergarten itself.



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Current discourses on teacher wellbeing often revolve around causes of stress and burnout among teachers and recommendations on how these can be remedied. This article delves deeper into what teacher wellbeing entails, why it is important and how institutions can foster and sustain a happy school culture that nurtures emotional intelligence and allows for the actualisation of the potential of every individual. It then explores some of the ideas on how teachers and leaders can further their own as well as their learners' wellbeing.

Importance of teacher wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing has become increasingly important in the wake of elevated levels of stress of modern life, smaller family structures that lack support from extended family and neighbours, and declining emotional resilience, particularly in post-COVID-19 times. These factors affect not only the teachers' own wellbeing, but also thrust on them the additional responsibility of dealing with learners who are going through these challenges. Only when a teacher experiences wellbeing will she be able to empathise and deal with the challenges of meeting the diverse socio-emotional and academic needs of the learners. The need for ensuring teacher wellbeing is most aptly articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh as quoted in *Teaching to Transgress* (Bell Hooks, 1994): 'The practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.'

Teachers play the most crucial role in building a safe and nurturing environment needed for learner wellbeing. There is adequate evidence from research about the positive impact of teacher wellbeing, directly and indirectly, on student learning as well as on a positive and flourishing school culture. Teachers who experience wellbeing are able to bond well with their students, have better skills at managing class interactions, create a safe and positive classroom climate and are

sensitive to the needs of diverse students, often providing them with the support they need to make progress. They are also able to cash in on the social capital that schools provide them with, in forming networks of the professional community, upon which they draw support for meeting personal and professional goals.

Ensuring teacher wellbeing is also important from the administrative and financial perspective as it leads to better productivity, greater job satisfaction and reduces attrition. Caring for teacher wellbeing also leads to an understanding of issues that are a threat to wellbeing and enables the creation of work conditions for teachers to engage positively with their learners and colleagues, attain success in what they do and experience job satisfaction.

Dimensions of teacher wellbeing

Wellbeing is the state of experiencing satisfaction with life, marked by feelings of happiness, contentment, and purpose. It is often associated with the individual's ability to cope with life's stresses, build and sustain relationships, be healthy and fit, and be purposefully productive in achieving their goals.

However, wellbeing at the workplace has a socio-ecological dimension as well. While teachers' wellbeing is to a great extent dependent upon their own competence in dealing with emotions, managing relationships, and achieving personal and professional goals, it is significantly influenced by factors related to all aspects of their working life – from safety and security of the physical environment to emotional safety that comes from being valued, appreciated and heard; and having genial and trusting relationships with colleagues, learners and the larger school community. Teachers' perceptions about the quality of their work, the effectiveness of their instruction and the 'value addition' they bring to the learning environment and learners' achievements, also contribute conspicuously to their job satisfaction and feeling of wellness.

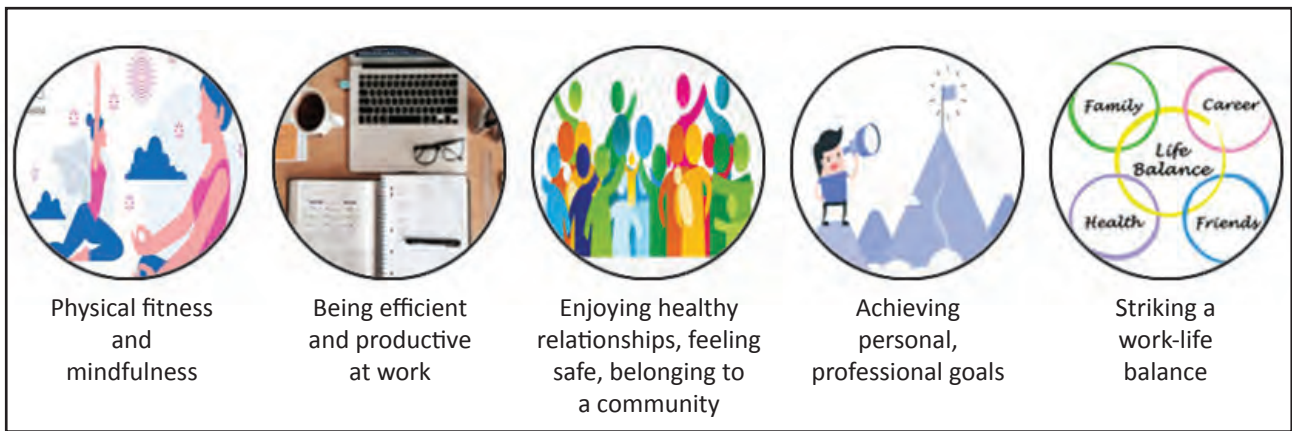


Figure 1. The personal, social and ecological dimensions of teacher wellbeing

Socio-emotional competencies as enablers for wellbeing

The Consortium for Socio-Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2013) suggests five socio-emotional competencies that are instrumental in the attainment of teacher wellbeing and also impact student learning outcomes.

- Self-awareness: Being self-aware is to understand one’s emotions, goals, values, strengths, and limitations; it helps develop a positive state of mind.
- Self-management: The ability to regulate one’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviour; it allows one to manage stress, set realistic goals and adapt to these, if and when needed.
- Social awareness: Being socially aware involves understanding social norms, and expectations. This understanding enables one to be perceptive to others’ socio-emotional needs and be empathetic and compassionate. Teachers are in a better position than anyone else to understand the diverse needs of their students, identify resources and garner support from the wider school community.
- Relationship building: Being able to build strong and trusting relationships with learners and colleagues is key to creating a warm and supportive work culture. The ability to listen actively, communicate clearly and feel connected enables one to experience belongingness to the community. It allows for mutual cooperation and amicable resolution of differences, so everyone feels safe and cared for.
- Responsible decision-making: Knowing oneself gives one the confidence to make decisions when needed. Teachers, in particular, need to make well-informed decisions throughout

their workday across all domains of their work, from student seating and grouping, selecting appropriate teaching-learning and assessment strategies to providing very specific feedback and support to help learners improve. Some of these decisions require careful consideration on moral and ethical grounds to make sound choices so as to be just, fair, and mindful of the wellbeing of those in their care.



Figure 2. Socio-emotional competencies (CASEL, 2013) as enablers of wellbeing

However, teachers possessing adequate socio-emotional competencies may also be at risk of stress and burnout for reasons beyond their control and which emanate from the external environment. Highly charged and self-driven teachers are at a greater risk of experiencing frustration and stress when, because of extraneous reasons, they are unable to meet their goals. For instance, resolving behavioural issues requires an ecosystem of

collaboration with colleagues and leaders as well as a shared understanding of positive disciplinary measures and processes of amicable conflict resolution. In the absence of these, teachers are likely to feel emotional exhaustion and frustration. Yet another threat to their wellbeing comes from top-down instructions on syllabus completions and other administrative work that eat into their time, impeding the fulfilment of their professional goals. The issue is compounded if the work culture of their school does not encourage the creation of learning communities, within or outside the school, which could offer them support.

Nurturing teacher wellbeing

Nurturing wellbeing is the collective responsibility of both teachers and school leaders. While teachers themselves need to work toward developing their own competencies that lead to wellbeing, leaders at the workplace must be committed to creating a positive school climate that affords teachers autonomy, professional development opportunities, and possibilities of developing trusting relationships with learners and colleagues. Such a culture is reflected in distributed leadership, transparent and clear two-way communication, and collective decision-making.

What teachers can do for themselves:

- Schedule a 'me-time' and space for self-care: Teachers need to do this consistently every day. Some routines that add a 'feel-good' factor for teachers are: spending time on fitness, pursuing a hobby, meditation, or something as simple as talking to someone they value.

- Slot some time for professional development: Teachers who read up or discuss with colleagues the latest development in education, reflect on their practice and incorporate new ideas into their teaching, report gains in confidence and self-esteem. They perceive their professional practice as effective and successful and enjoy a greater sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction.
- Network and build relationships with students, colleagues, other staff and professionals outside school: Teachers consistently report that having healthy relationships with students takes away the stress of managing classroom behaviour and instruction. Similarly, genial relationships with colleagues not only ease their work through collaboration but also makes it richer and more joyful.

What school leaders can do:

- Treat everyone with respect
- Give each teacher a voice and involve them in decision making
- Provide autonomy
- Create a safe space for discussing teachers' problems and finding solutions so that they may share, learn and grow together
- Organise opportunities for unwinding or showcasing non-teaching talents. These events create umpteen opportunities for teachers to feel valued and appreciated and bond with each other, creating a sense of belonging to the community



Figure 3. Nurturing teacher wellbeing

Three practices from a 'happy school'

Iqbalia International School (IIS), Hyderabad, was recognised for its transformative practices by the Adhvaith Foundation in 2017. The following practices were instrumental in creating an ecosystem that nurtured the wellbeing of teachers and learners and created a happy school culture.

1. Teachers' circle time

Every Saturday, while the students lead the morning hour, teachers gather in the hall for circle time and each one shares an experience that affected them positively. Initially, when this practice was started, teachers struggled with this – clearly, our minds dwell more on unpleasant experiences. Over time, conversations flowed spontaneously, and teachers commented on how they gradually learnt to take notice of positive experiences around them, think about and savour these more often, and how this left them feeling 'good' about themselves as well as those around them. This practice helped teachers know each other better, created opportunities for building relationships and fostered a feeling of belongingness and camaraderie.

2. The 3-5 meeting'

Once a week, all subject teachers met for 90 minutes (two periods) which was planned in their calendar. The agenda was to discuss any classroom strategy that worked well for them or any struggle they faced, with the entire team pitching in with possible solutions for the latter. This provided teachers with a safe space where they could discuss their struggles, seek help, and find solutions to their everyday problems. It provided many teachers with the platform they needed for professional development and brought out the best in each. Not only did this help in increasing teaching effectiveness across the school, but it was also instrumental in establishing a collaborative practice as a norm in the school, with teachers using this space for working together to plan lessons and sharing resources, inviting each other to observe classroom practice and learning to give meaningful feedback. This system served as a powerful tool for ongoing professional development at school and created a learning culture that benefitted students as much as it did the teachers.

3. Teacher-Leader

The teaching community is diverse with each teacher having a different set of skills- some of which might not be fully optimised for lack of opportunities. The 'Teacher-Leader' approach opened up the doors for each one to bring forth their best, and with a

culture of support, the less confident ones also eventually took up responsibilities of their choice and did well. While preparing the events calendar for the year, teachers were free to choose events they could lead and pick their support teams as well. They had all the autonomy they needed to plan and conduct the event as they deemed fit, within the resources available and ensuring the outcomes were achieved. At the end of the first year, teachers had this to say: 'I didn't know I had this in me'; 'It gave me so much time to plan and execute an event of my choice. I had always wanted to do it this way, but with so many events to manage, never had the time'; 'I had never compered before; felt good when my students and parents complimented me on my pronunciation. I think we limit ourselves too much and are hesitant to take on new things. I wouldn't have done it if I had to do it alone. Having a supportive team really helped.'

Central to all these practices that were pivotal to transforming the school culture and ensuring the wellbeing of teachers and learners, is an empathetic and compassionate leader, who willingly shared both her expertise and her authority to bring out the best in her team.

Sustaining the 'happy culture'

Wellbeing is not a 'stage' that once achieved will remain for good; it can be disrupted by trauma to socio-emotional self by events in personal or professional life. To ensure that teachers continue to be happy and content with personal and professional performance, it is essential that their wellbeing be measured periodically, and adjustments made to the system as a whole.

There are a number of tools and methods that offer valid and reliable measures of teacher wellbeing at school; from questionnaires, surveys, and group discussions to personalised one-on-one interviews as and when the need arises. Whatever the mode of data collection, the focus must be on the information that is truly representative of the observable constructs of wellbeing. Three important and interconnected aspects are usually considered as valid measures of work-related wellbeing:

- Professional effectiveness: Success at quality teaching, meeting professional obligations, professional growth
- Work-related stress: Teaching loads, administrative and additional duties, commuting issues, strained relationships with learners or colleagues

- Sense of belonging and connectedness emanating from strong relationships with learners and colleagues

Taking teachers’ opinions and perceptions around these three parameters allows leaders to build a fairly reliable measure of the status of their wellbeing. However, creating a safe climate as well as clear communication for the purpose of data collection is a prerequisite to ensuring responses are no-holds-barred and candid. The data then can be safely used to draw meaningful inferences and serve as a basis for decision-making. A particularly

useful tool borrowed from management science is the iterative PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle which helps institutions embrace quality through continuous improvement.

School leaders are able to gather reliable data for evidence-based action planning, continuously check for the impact of their actions, and adjust plans when intended outcomes do not happen. It also helps them identify factors that might endanger wellbeing and take appropriate preventive measures to strengthen a happy work culture that promotes wellbeing for all.

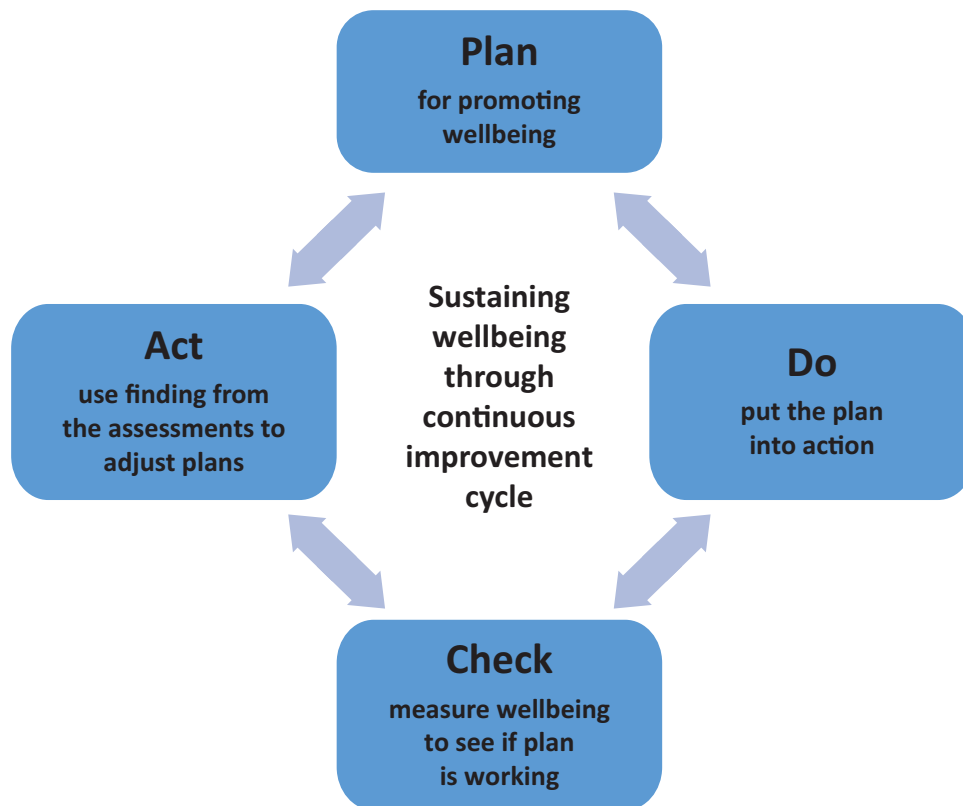


Figure 4. Sustaining a happy work culture

Endnotes

- i A triangular curriculum structure consisting of Subject Matter, Self-learning and Social Learning.

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The most critical part of the care of a child with a disability is early intervention. Parents and teachers need to look out for developmental delays in the early years. If any development milestone is missed or delayed, first a paediatrician should be consulted and, on their advice, the child may be referred to an organisation and school which cater to their needs. At such a place, counsellors and psychologists employ methods such as diagnostic tests to understand the difficulty the child may be facing and create a plan for the interventions required.

Pallavee Datta, Children with Disabilities in Regular Schools, p 64

Childhood Traumas and Healing in an Educational Space

Shivani Taneja and Savita Sohit

Critical discussions regarding the quality of formal education have been around pedagogy, content, language and academic subjects. But as more and more children from all backgrounds enter our school spaces, in addition to these aspects, it would be helpful to examine children's lives a little more and touch upon the aspect of their well-being.

Here, we share experiences of our school run by Muskaan,ⁱ for children from vulnerable backgrounds. All our children fall in the category of urban poor and have been working to earn since childhood. Many are also children of denotified tribal (DNT)ⁱⁱ communities living in and around Bhopal city.

Childhood Realities

Sohini was around 11 years old when she came to us. She was furious with her mother for having left the family and vowed never to speak to her. She was also angry with her father for not repairing their house and for drinking every day. When her elder sister married at a young age, she felt further let down. A very bright child, she did well in academics but was poor in her social relationships. It would be impossible to help her cheer up if something upset her.

Amar had been in a hostel for a year where the warden would make pornographic videos of the boys. Amar's parents, daily wage earners, finally withdrew him from the hostel when he ran away from there and enrolled him in our school. Here, he would often get into physical fights with other children and if the teacher tried to intervene, he would hit the teacher as well.

Rohit's father would look after the children at home while his wife would go scrap-picking. His alcohol addiction led to his death when the four children were aged between 1 to 10 years. His own two sisters had died by suicide. Rohit's young mother in her mid-20s is continuously taunted by her in-laws. Rohit would often not sleep at home and would be thrashed for this by his paternal uncle. While in school, he would often beat up his younger brothers.

Trauma in socially vulnerable groups

As you read these life sketches, you may feel that these children come from more difficult circumstances than others. But the truth is that a large part of our urban poor, DNT groups, *dalits* and *adivasis* have been facing repression and discrimination over generations, which has left a deep imprint on their psyche and functionality. Consumerism, deprivation, land displacement, forced evictions, urban squalor, unemployment, violence and substance abuse are impacting the marginalised in ways like never before. And it may be true that more and more children than we can imagine are leading traumatised lives.

Legacy (Methot, 2019)ⁱⁱⁱ is evidence of the long-term effects on indigenous peoples of the Americas caused by colonisation. Methot speaks of the intergenerational trauma, elaborating how colonisation and the residential schools have left their imprints on people, and even those who have not lived this trauma, bear the impact of it. Dr Kolk^{iv} also writes of adverse childhood experiences and their long-time impact on adulthood. 'Traumatic experiences have a more pervasive impact when they are experienced during the first decade of life' (than a single traumatic event – such as death or a violent or life-threatening situation) because this impacts a child's framework of the world altogether.

Research and writings around indigenous communities and Black groups, more when written with an insider perspective, are giving us insights into the mental make-up of children who so far, the privileged world only referred to as 'difficult' and branded negatively with 'poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and lack of concern' on behalf of their parents. In a 2013 study across 200 schools in Chhattisgarh, about 40 percent of teachers had negative views about children's educability, while only about 13 percent had positive views.

When these children enter our school spaces, we need to have a 'trauma lens' and not adopt the trajectory of blame or a colonial mindset that

their lot needs to be 'civilised'. As we examine their childhood, we are compelled to see what the children are going through from birth (or even pre-birth).

Basic needs cannot be limited to food and shelter but should include affection and respect. In the absence of these, substance abuse, recklessness, and suicide attempts become a part of coping mechanisms. As children grow up, they sometimes experience these realities directly or indirectly in the ways their parents negotiate the world. Discrimination, abuse and disconnect with the world are the norm for a *dalit*, DNT or *adivasi* child in our country.

Intergenerational trauma

For the denotified tribes, this vilification started with the colonial concept of them being 'thugs' but for the *dalit* communities, this is the curse of the Hindu *varna* system. The more these communities have interacted with the privileged sections of society and the state, the more they have been forced to bear rebuke and alienation. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 allowed the state to separate the children of 'criminal tribes' for reform. More and more children becoming part of child protection systems in our country come from such vulnerable families. This alienation and removal of agency for these social groups since times immemorial have not been corrected even in post-independent India. May it be a shop, a school, a police station, a hospital, or any government office, they are shooed aside as if they are not humans.

It would not be hard for us to understand how it would impact a person's mental makeup when she/he is being belittled regularly. There is an absence of control in life because anyone can harass you, detain you, or move you out of your home. There is no way to respond to this kind of repression that comes from an external source as that is much more powerful. This subjugation then builds up and finds an outlet on people you actually love, as they are the only ones vulnerable to you.

Resilience is different from healing. Communities are resilient. There is an extensive effort to support and provide a safety net for children. A child would be fed by others when his parents are not available; another one would sleep in her neighbour's house if her house leaked when it rained. But people have not been able to heal. They carry wounds, and these are transferred from generation to generation unless there is a conscious intervention to stop this intergenerational trauma.

Reflections on healing

For the healing to begin, we need to train ourselves first to be able to see each child for their uniqueness rather than the categories that society has classified them into. We need the macro picture to understand the background, but in our classrooms, it is at the level of each child that the healing has to happen. We have consolidated here what we feel has supported our children, though this is not always enough.

Children need to feel loved

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.

It is okay to feel pain

With a lot to manage, we sometimes switch off our emotions. This does not mean that we stop feeling, but by ignoring and suppressing feelings, we stop responding to them. Therefore, when a negative emotion comes out, it may be more extreme than required and is possibly a response to another time. For example, in school, something as trivial as their elbows colliding can lead to a fistfight. Some children are able to move out of this urge to defend themselves in a secure and trustworthy environment, but for some, this survival mechanism to overpower the other is very high. As children grow in years or after an episode, they are able to recognise that they are getting provoked. Most are able to talk about their feelings when a safe space is created – for some, this may be in a group session and for others, it could be a one-to-one conversation.

Expressions in writing, art, and body movement fulfil therapeutic purposes. Children learn to let go when they are able to engage with the pain. Future choices in life are then made from a fresh space than through pent-up emotions.

I can influence and control

In school, we consciously try to build and strengthen the children's agency. We like to ensure that children have a say in many matters; they have complete freedom to choose what they eat, how they dress, the language(s) they speak, what they write or draw,

and their feedback of us.

This participation gives children a sense of control and confidence. They understand what it is to live without fear, and that this should be the 'normal' way of life. Usually living in fragile environments, inside the home or outside, children are targeted only for who they are, in terms of their caste. Therefore, their body and mind are often in a 'flight' or 'defence' mode. But as we work on their agency, gently acknowledging what they are feeling, they learn to claim their space. A group of children from the *kanjar* community initially felt threatened and wanted to leave school, when an adolescent picked on them by calling them (abusively) by their 'community name'. There was a discussion in which the students spoke to each other, face-to-face, seeing what the impact was of one person's comments on the others, and an acknowledgement that the world has made each of us a little more cruel to the other, and to see if there was space for forgiveness.

How am I behaving with others?

At times, people are unable to see that their behaviour is impacting another to function in a specific way. When I call my classmate by an insulting or offensive name, how does he feel? What do you feel when someone asks you to share your story? How can I show that I care? What is my tone, is it respectful? It is through such conversations and reflections that adolescents and children need to be facilitated to understand the impact of their behaviours. Listening, understanding, expressing, apologising, and moving forward in relationships need to become necessary skills to resolve our conflicts and control our web of emotions. Running away from the damage we cause cannot be our auto mode.

Managing the negativity that comes from outside, there is a level of immunity or a hard core that is built inside each person, but it is only a survival mechanism. Expression of anger and management of anger or resentment, reasons behind these feelings, and giving space to another and to oneself, need to be part of conscious conversations as well as actions within our space.

Communicating with another

We create a lot of opportunities for children to express themselves. There is very rarely a child who is not able to open up. As children share, they learn to trust the world. Experiences of hunger have brought the whole class to a standstill, where each child in the group is connecting with the other. Conversations on death enable children to share their unresolved

emotions. A child often wants to talk about these things but cannot find an adult she/he can speak to. We, therefore, include conversations in many of our lesson plans.

You are more important than your mistake

Children tend to get pulled up for actions that are not in their control, or they do not know how to correct that deed. After repeatedly experiencing this, children tend to avoid situations where they feel they may be under a scanner of any sort.

We begin to take accountability for our actions when we know that we are not going to be punished, we are not 'bad'; that it is okay to falter, to hesitate, to not know – this is another kind of scaffolding children need. Sharing a problem and seeking support is an essential skill in life. As we learn constructive coping mechanisms in life, stories of children and young people feeling overwhelmed by poor marks, or the unknown, may reduce.

Friends and teamwork

For many, schools are spaces where children interact with people outside their families. But actually, social hierarchies play out here also. For children who come from these marginalised groups, their diffidence to mix with other children is very acute. Also, making yourself invisible is a learnt behaviour to avoid having to bear someone's wrath.

As adults, we may need to consciously encourage friendships and collaborative work, thereby helping them in understanding how to function with others without power structures in play. Making a big jigsaw together, doing a farming activity, and preparing a common chart are some such activities.

Friendships work as an anchor when things are not going well at home. As children settle into their school space, they also turn, often unconsciously, to their peers for support and solidarity in the choices they are making. For example, even a decision of whether I come to school every day is influenced by peers. It is rare that within children's own limited spaces, they find role models or people who encourage them in believing in their dreams and aspirations.

Physical touch is important

A hug or holding hands as you walk, as long as the adult knows that they are showing care (as allowed to a family member) and are not crossing boundaries and there is space for the child to withdraw, should be the norm in our schools. While being conscious of children's privacy and protection concerns, the human touch soothes in many ways, especially

when the adolescent/child is neglected in family environments. It was a surprising comment from the author's daughter when she came home from school and happily shared that her teacher had 'patted my head as she spoke to me'.

The ease of touch is extended to the whole class. During discussions and sharing, or circle time, the class is encouraged to hold each other's hand which helps them to feel in tune with each other. They learn to empathise with others, provide support and not laugh at another's difficult moments.

Connecting with oneself

Meditative exercises in which children are asked to close their eyes and feel the different parts of their body; feel their heartbeats by placing their hand on their hearts, help them connect with their inner selves. Some children find it difficult to close their eyes or stay with themselves. A child shared how, while scrap-picking, she put her hand in a pipe which had a rotten animal, and the stink would not go off her hands. Distancing her hand while describing this, she curled up her nose. It is unlikely that she had shared this with anyone before.

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

Endnotes

- i Muskaan is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation working with marginalised communities living in the *bastis* in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.
- ii The British Government had listed over 150 communities under the Criminal Tribes Act which allowed the administration to forcefully 'settle' members of these communities into camps from where they could be called upon as bonded labour, and to separate children from their parents. It was considered that



Shivani Taneja has been working amidst people of denotified tribal backgrounds and impoverished communities in and around Bhopal for 25 years. She believes that education cannot be seen as an isolated academic phenomenon, and as educationists, we need to see a child's wellbeing and critical empowerment as core to their educational journey. This reflects in her concerns and work priorities, such as the building of children's collective agency, mental health amidst difficult childhoods and social justice. A teacher at heart, she enjoys being part of a classroom every day in Muskaan and observing and learning from students' responses to pedagogic interventions. She may be contacted at shivani@muskaan.org



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Summing up

A teacher needs to be in tune with what is impacting children's wellbeing; what is the daily context of the child: is there violence, what does the child do when she is hungry, what is the child seeing and hearing? The healing is not immediate as the damage is layered and we need to be with the child as she/he finds their internal self. 'Alone work' is as important as teamwork. Depending on available skills, we need to encourage the child to participate in many activities involving artwork, movement, dance, music, and games. The fuller a life is lived, the greater, the chances are of it finding an internal balance.

As a country, we have failed the children of our most marginalised communities. While we need to undo this damage in our classrooms, the State also needs to recognise how discrimination and targeting isolate people and put an end to unequal citizenship and move towards reparation and justice.

School as an Extension of the Family

Anil Singh

The marginalised sections of our society have been notably impacted by the nearly two-year-long school shutdown that started in March 2020 and the subsequent health, employment and social security concerns. Even among them, children are in a dire situation since they have watched in silence and have been dealing with anxieties, uncertainties, and deprivations. While adults found ways to deal with circumstances, children typically had few choices. For children, a school is a place where they interact with other children, express themselves, make new friends, learn new things by engaging in creative pursuits and get opportunities to feel a sense of achievement. While doing so, they are temporarily away from the stressful environment of their homes and surroundings, which helps them recover greatly from any emotional crisis. In theory, it seems like a nice idea, but in practice, there is a great need for awareness and sensitivity towards this at the school level.

We must remember that children from communities with low socio-economic status also struggle with expression and under these circumstances, teachers' efforts and responsibilities are greatly compounded. It would be wonderful if the school could foster a sense of self-assurance, love, security, and belonging along with emotional support; where the teacher, as an adult, can support children by offering companionship and trust and help children in taking care of themselves in challenging circumstances.

Most of the students in our school live in slums. During the lockdown, several people lost their jobs. The largest industry for employment – construction – remained closed. People also used up their meagre savings to cover daily expenses; and are currently burdened with debt while their incomes continue to be low. The resultant stress is being felt by the entire family. Here are some of our experiences with children in difficult circumstances and how we are trying to support them in ways that we can at school.

Children in challenging circumstances

Mehak is a 9-year-old girl. Her father is a sanitation worker. He was unemployed for almost one whole year. He went back to the village with his family for a few months. But even in the village, sustaining the whole family for a long time without farming was difficult. At least in the city, some work would be available, so they came back. Now there is a shortage of everything, every day. Food expenses are met by taking loans. Occasionally, some work is found, but an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension prevails in the house all the time.

When the school reopened, Mehak started coming, but she was very scared. The way she used to mix, play, and have fun with the rest of the children earlier, had changed. We observed and understood that there was a need to talk to her. In the morning *sangeet sabha*, she continued to sing for some time, but her face was dull. The three of us, teachers, divided this work amongst ourselves – my job was to talk to her during play time and get her to speak about her thoughts and feelings. Another teacher, Ankit, took on the responsibility of sitting and eating with her. The third teacher, Sonam, took on the responsibility of helping her to participate more in the class. At our school, we have a daily meeting to discuss each child and the class process for the day. We document it daily.

While talking to Mehak, I came to know that no one in her house had eaten the previous night. Not much money was available. I kept talking to her while walking in the field. I talked about the struggles of my family in the early days. Also, I told her that bad times pass. She spoke about the fight between her grandparents. I also mentioned not being able to buy new clothes or pay my tuition fees as a child. We talked almost every day. Ankit shared his breakfast with Mehak several times. We used to gather many children and pool our food and share it. Sonam told me that Mehak composed a poem on birds and flowers in class. She also made a poster of this poem and put it in the classroom.

After some 15-20 days of this planned work, we realised that Mehak was almost back to her usual self. She not only played with other children but also actively participated in class.

We know that Mehak is in school only for six hours, and for the remaining 18 hours, she has to live with and face her family in the same difficult circumstances. However, in order to make these six hours emotionally beneficial and assist the children in regaining their lost confidence and seeing themselves as a part of the larger society, we must become aware of and sensitive to them. We may not be able to make any permanent or direct change in Mehak's life, but we can definitely help her to take care of herself as an individual and overcome this difficult time.

Roshni, 13 years old, came to Bhopal from Jharkhand. She has been in our school for three years. Her father has remarried and works as a painter. When Roshni came after the school reopened, she looked very weak. Although she has never been very healthy, now, because of the frequent visits to their village, the shortage of food there, coming back and staying locked in at home, staying away from school, etc., her health has deteriorated. Getting a hot, fresh lunch at school was a really big deal for her. We noticed improvements in her health since joining the school and understood the importance of eating right at least once a day. Earlier, in view of the many practical difficulties in running the kitchen, we had decided to close it and bring our own food. Then we realised that for some children, the school lunch is a big relief and should be continued at all costs. We found many donors and kept the kitchen running. Roshni was the most important beneficiary of this kitchen, as she was in dire need of the food.

Roshni spoke only Bhojpuri. We started talking with her in broken Bhojpuri. Ankita, her sister, also used to come to school. Both were almost the same age. They were more like friends than sisters. But the atmosphere at home was not favourable. Then, there was also the issue of the stepbrother. When the parents were out for work, they were left with him for prolonged periods of time. Also, they were coming to school regularly but would not participate in the daily activities. It was as if they were doing everything mechanically. We discussed this issue in our daily meeting. We realised that they were doing all the household work, but there was no recognition for it, nor did anyone understand its importance. During that time, we organised *Umang*

Sports Fair in the school, and along with two other children, Roshni and Ankita were entrusted with the task of coordinating the entire event. Ankit, the maths teacher, was in their team. And then some magic happened! Ankita and Roshni were planning each day's activity with us. They were selecting teams of children, making a list of essential items, and keeping all the accounts. Both wrote reports together for each day of this three-day event. We had an appreciation session for Roshni and Ankita's work in the morning *sangeet sabha*. We told everyone that their mother and father had gone out to work and that Ankita and Roshni, along with taking care of their younger brother, did all the household chores, came to school regularly, and took care of the event also. Everyone clapped for them. On behalf of the school, Namita gave them a storybook each. In the coming days, Ankita got better at Hindi and Roshni started doing well in mathematics. They will go to class nine next year and feel sad that they will have to leave this school.

Gopal is 12 years old. He lives with his grandparents in a nearby hut. He has four buffaloes and runs a small milk dairy with his grandparents. Early in the morning, after feeding the buffaloes, he goes to distribute milk on a bicycle and then comes to school. The parents are in the village but there is probably some family dispute due to which neither they nor Gopal visit each other. His grandparents have been everything to him. The grandfather passed away during the pandemic. This was the most difficult time for Gopal. The school remained closed. But sports teacher Vijay and I kept meeting him regularly. When the school reopened, he started coming to school after doing all the household and dairy work. He needed the 'school family' very much. We felt the same way. One day, we went to his dairy with all the children. We took food from the school kitchen, and everyone had it there. His grandmother started crying emotionally. She spoke these words in Bundeli with a huge lump in her throat, 'Gopal is not an orphan; the school is his family.' She gave jaggery to all the children.

What can anyone do to compensate Gopal for his family? If the school is with him and takes care of him, then this is enough for Gopal. Gopal supplies milk to the school and keeps an account because this is his livelihood. But yes, sometimes he brings buttermilk for free, and *kadhi* is prepared in the school kitchen, and everyone eats it with pleasure. At Anand Niketan, our morning assembly is full of songs and music so that the children start their day

in a joyful, free, and participatory environment. A daily podium session for the children to put forth their points of view has been successful to a great extent in bringing their pent-up thoughts and feelings to the fore and helping the teachers get hold of several threads of the children's personal lives. Teachers have also started sharing their thoughts, creating an atmosphere of equality in

the process. It is a great relief to the children to know that their teachers lead normal lives like them; they too have their own fears, anxieties, and shortcomings, and together we can give each other emotional support. In the cases of Mehak, Roshni, Ankita, and Gopal, it is clearly seen that this school environment and process helped them tremendously.

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



Anil Singh has been active in the field of education, especially school education, for the last 15 years. Along with teaching Hindi language and social sciences, he integrates theatre with the everyday activities of students. He is especially interested in storytelling. His articles on his classroom experiences and other issues in education are published regularly. He has been associated with an alternative model of education at the Anand Niketan Democratic School, Bhopal. At present, he is working with *Parag* as faculty in its professional development initiatives. He may be contacted at bihuanandanil@gmail.com

Socio-Emotional Skills for Conflict Resolution

Anuja Venkataraman

Teachers in classrooms have several expectations from children. These include expecting them not to get overexcited and scream when something interesting happens; not to get so angry with a friend who has hit them that they also hit them back and aggravate the situation; to be able to share stationery or books if needed without feeling possessive about them; not to fight over things like who will sit next to the teacher in the bus on a school trip, or argue about who will borrow the duster from the next class, or answer the question next; and to be able to wait their turn.

What seem like reasonable expectations from an adult viewpoint are sometimes quite challenging for young children. Not only do many everyday challenges have a cognitive angle, but they also have emotional and social bearings.

Learning about the link between the ability to manage conflicts peacefully and the emotional intelligence of a child can be very useful. It can help teachers manage their own expectations, as well as plan what and how to teach so that students can learn, grow and fulfil some of those expectations. It can also help students and teachers spend a happy day at school.

Intrapersonal intelligence is about how we manage our feelings, while interpersonal intelligence is about how we respond to the feelings of others. Both of these are crucial to our ability to behave in a constructive, problem-solving manner.

Social-emotional learning

Teaching students about emotions can be very valuable. Emotional literacy includes being aware of one's own emotions, managing them, having the motivation to overcome setbacks, having empathy, and developing social skills like communication and conflict resolution. Social-emotional learning involves helping students learn about all these different aspects.

Self-awareness is fundamental, without which no other emotional learning can happen. We can

manage our emotions only after we become self-aware. Remaining motivated when faced with setbacks, also known as *resilience*, is what keeps us going despite frustration, fear, and failure. *Empathy* is the bridge from our emotional to our social capacities (Tricia Jones, 2003). Empathy requires self-awareness and an ability not to be so overwhelmed by a person's own emotions that they cannot understand the other person's feelings, needs and beliefs. *Social skills* include being able to communicate, build healthy relationships and being able to resolve conflicts.

Self-awareness, resilience, empathy and social skills are the building blocks for being able to learn to handle conflicts constructively.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict Resolution is the process of managing a conflict constructively such that both sides achieve their goal, and the relationship between them is improved. Being able to manage conflicts is an important skill for the individual, not only for the present but also for the future. It also helps to create a more supportive and safe community and shows an example of a non-violent method of negotiating and making decisions with respect and goodwill.

Typically, the conflict resolution process involves steps such as the following:

First, both the persons in the conflict calm down and agree to solve the problem together. They agree to not call each other names or use put-downs and respectfully enter the conflict resolution process. Then, each of them takes turns expressing their feelings and needs using I-messages. (The format of the I-message is as follows: *I feel ___ when ___ because ___ and I need ___*). Along with speaking, it is also important to listen to the other person very carefully and then try to come up with solutions that work for both and choose the best one.

Partnership of Conflict Resolution and Emotional Intelligence

Every step outlined in the above conflict resolution process has an accompanying requirement of emotional awareness, restraint, and expression by the child. To understand the steps, we will use an example of two students – Arhan and Archana, who are fighting over a doll.

Step 1: Calm down

Teachers and caregivers may have experienced how ineffective it is to tell a screaming, anxious child or an angry, hurt one to calm down. Even adults rarely have the capacity to listen to directions from their own minds to not be nervous, stop worrying, and be calm in stressful situations. How can they help children to learn how to ‘self-soothe’ or calm down?

Calming down involves learning to recognise one’s feelings – self-awareness – and then quickly being able to identify a way to handle one’s rising emotions. This emotional skill will prevent the brain from getting hijacked into a fight-or-flight mode. Students can then use their calm minds and hearts for creative and critical problem-solving.

Arhan was playing with the doll when Archana suddenly snatched it away. But Arhan was able to recognise his frustration and recalled the strategy of deep breathing taught by his teacher to get rid of the anger ‘cloud’ forming over his head. He took deep breaths and with every breath out he imagined the anger cloud getting blown away. This helped him calm down enough to be able to resolve his conflict more effectively.

Step 2: No put-downs or name-calling

A part of managing emotions is the ability to control or delay impulses. A child who has calmed down may resist calling the other names. One can avoid calling names either out of obedience to rules or through genuine respect for the other person. Avoiding hurtful behaviour due to obedience to rules is risky and could be inconsistent, while authentic respect comes from meaningful connection. If students feel connected to themselves and their feelings, they respect themselves and others. Respect from empathy could work much better in restraining name-calling than rule-based respect.

Arhan remembered that Archana was his friend and that before this argument they had played

together several times. This affection helped Arhan to stop himself from calling Archana angry names, although she had so clearly wronged him by snatching away his doll.

Step 3: Express feelings and needs using ‘I-messages’

To be able to use the ‘I-message’ during a conflict, students have to be able to identify their feelings, have the vocabulary to express them, and also feel safe enough to express a genuine feeling. A student’s ability not only to articulate their true feelings, but also to identify them, and their capacity for self-awareness depends on classroom safety. A student may not know exactly what she/he is feeling in a threatening or disrespectful atmosphere. To aid the process, teachers can help to develop a safe classroom atmosphere where students are encouraged to connect to and express their feelings.

Arhan’s teacher would frequently use circle time for students to come together at the end of the school day and reflect on their day. Some basic rules of speaking and listening were co-created, which helped Arhan learn that the feelings of Archana and the others were just as important as his own. During the conflict, this sense of safety and connection to his own feelings helped him express his view of the situation to Archana.

Step 4: Listen carefully to the other person

Listening can be done in many ways. These include ‘not really listening’, ‘listening to find fault’, and ‘listening carefully’. Not listening happens when the fight-or-flight chemistry is aroused by conflict, and our brain is full of angry and defensive thoughts while the other person speaks. When we are listening to find fault, we tend to pounce on an argument opposing our own and attack it. Careful listening begins with genuine attention, works with respecting an open heart and mind, and ends with understanding and empathy. Empathic listening becomes possible when the ability to assimilate the perspective of others is developed and is an important building block for creativity and critical thinking for constructive problem-solving.

Arhan had been given the practice to listen authentically through classroom exercises of deep listening, paraphrasing and setting and practising communication rules. This helped him listen carefully to Archana’s side of the story without jumping to conclusions or finding fault with her.

Step 5: Look for solutions that work for both

Creative solutions come from paying attention to genuine needs for which empathy is needed. This needs safety in the classroom because inquiry and expression of needs can make us feel vulnerable. Safety is also very important to encourage creative, critical thinking. On feeling threatened, we downshift our thinking which invokes the feeling of helplessness, not looking for possibilities and feeling unsafe to take risks or challenge old ideas. Real thinking which involves making connections, higher-order thinking, and creativity is not possible in an unsafe environment.

Archana and Arhan's safe classroom environment supported them in calmly thinking of ways to solve their conflict.

Step 6: Choose the best solution

Finding a solution that works for both requires those in conflict to manage feelings of impatience, frustration, disappointment and fear that come along the way. To remain motivated, they need to be able to hope and maintain optimism despite setbacks. Finding a solution that works for all also requires social skills, like sensitivity to others, problem-solving, and effective communication.

Arhan and Archana had seen other children making up after fights. Though they took some time to reconcile, they ultimately decided to play with the doll together as Arhan understood that Archana had been waiting for a long time and lost patience and snatched the doll as she could not think of how else to play with it.

Using SEL as a foundation for Conflict Resolution Education

A few things schools can do to lay the foundation for conflict resolution by supporting social-emotional learning are as follows:

Create classroom agreements

Students can be taught and supported to create agreements collaboratively. This will go a long way in creating an environment of safety and openness, both of which are needed for the fearless expression of important issues, and work towards resolving conflicts. Simple rules like taking turns and listening patiently when others are speaking can be co-created from a very early age.

Some ground rules for classroom communication can be developed. These include no interruptions,

put-downs or judging, having respect, honesty, fairness, some non-negotiables, like the right to pass (and not share views) and willingness to forgive. When students feel ownership of the rules, they are more willing to follow them.

Build a vocabulary of emotions

The ability to identify feelings helps in communication for conflict resolution. The vocabulary of feelings can be taught in playful and creative ways, such as using the arts and giving voice to ideas through colour, movement, metaphor, gesture, symbols or direct verbal explanations. Vocabulary helps students develop self-awareness as they use these words in reflecting and writing about their lives. They also develop empathy when sharing reflections.

Students can be taught about anger management – recognising signs of anger building up, developing strategies to calm anger before it hijacks the brain, preventing anger eruption by understanding the pattern of how their anger is triggered, and what they do that sets off other people's anger. They can learn how fear and shame work and how to manage them using stories, arts, and other ways.

Speaking and listening

Authentic speaking and deep listening ensure safety in classrooms. Deep listening is a precondition to active listening, and it involves listening without questions, interruptions, or immediate responses. Deep listening encourages authentic speaking – as students can look inside for what they want to say only when no one is prompting them, asking them questions, giving reassuring comments and guiding them, etc.

It can be first practised in pairs, and then in a sharing circle. Listening circles can be a powerful tool to build the classroom community.

Conclusion

Students can be supported from a very early age to become aware of and manage their feelings, remain motivated despite setbacks, develop empathy for others, and build social and communication skills. This can be done by encouraging students to collectively create classroom agreements about how to communicate and interact with one another; by helping them build a vocabulary of emotions through arts, music, books, and symbols; and by building communication skills and empathy by

encouraging authentic speaking and deep listening. This emotional and social learning not only holds

intrinsic value but is also an important foundation for constructive conflict resolution.

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Nurturing wellbeing is the collective responsibility of both teachers and school leaders. While teachers themselves need to work toward developing their own competencies that lead to wellbeing, leaders at the workplace must be committed to creating a positive school climate that accords teachers autonomy, professional development opportunities, and possibilities of developing trusting relationships with learners and colleagues.

Jwairia Saleem, Rethinking Teacher Wellbeing | Beyond Stress and Burnout, p 6

Children's Voice in Children's Stories

Jyoti Deshmukh and Shivani Taneja

The school is an institution which we believe ensures children's wellbeing, yet all the decisions in and about schools are taken by adults. Many times, adults who do not even know children's realities are responsible for the way a school functions. This belief that adults know more than children, needs to be examined. This article explores how children can be encouraged to share their interpretations of school life through storybooks, and also advocates for the enhancement of children's agency in children's literature.

School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya (Muskaan, 2022) is a story written by Nikita Dhurve, a Gond tribal resident of an urban slum settlement, Ganga Nagar in Bhopal. The story starts with her excitement to join a school with her friends that soon turns into disappointment with their classroom experiences. They feel lost in the ways in which the school functions. The teacher speaks in a language different from their home language, Gondi, and when they try to seek clarifications, they are reproached. The children do not want to quit and give up their dream of formal education, so they start looking for ways out of this situation. Through this negotiation, the young writer raises relevant questions on teaching pedagogy.

The story in class

The book was introduced to a mixed group of 20 students in the age group of 10 to 15 years in our school, studying in class V. It seemed quite magical how easily the children connected to the situations unfolding in the story. There are a couple of sentences in Gondi in the story, and these when read out, elicited requests from children. 'Do read it out again'. 'What was it that was said?', they asked. Based on the flow of the conversation and some familiar words, they were trying to guess what was being conveyed. There were no Gondi children in the class, but the children had Gondi-speaking friends. As a facilitator, one could sense that the excitement was not only because it was a language that they were somewhat familiar with, but it had more to do with the root of the story. Ragini Lalit, in

her reading of the same story to a group of children in Himachal Pradesh, also found that the children in the hills associated with Nikita and her friends immediately.ⁱ

Sharing experiences

After the storytelling, the children were facilitated in sharing their experiences with prompts, such as 'What do you think about the four girls?' 'Have you ever felt lost in school?' 'What would you do if you felt lost?' 'Have you ever asked an adult to change their way of functioning?' The children were enthusiastic about sharing their views and we had to ask them to hear others' stories. These were shared orally, and some children also wrote them. Three kinds of stories emerged.

Experiences in school

A 10-year-old boy shared that in his village school, the teacher would write something on the board and ask the children to copy it; if the children were not able to write or made mistakes, they would be beaten with a 'fresh green stick taken off the tree'. 'We would keep thinking of excuses to be able to get out of the room. I did not feel like going to school at all, but family members would force us to go.' A similar experience was shared by an 11-year-old girl who wrote, 'Sir would ask us to memorise, but I just could not do that. I would really try but I couldn't. So, when he hit us with a stick, I would be very upset.' There was also one girl who wrote, 'Sir would gaze at us, moving his eyes from top to bottom.' She could not share this with her mother but told her that this teacher did not teach them well. Her mother asked her to leave her studies.

A 14-year-old girl, who began her education journey only a year ago, wrote about her earlier attempt to be part of a school. 'When we went to school for the first time, we were there for only three days. We could not study there. Initially, we thought that it was because it is a new place. I hoped that the man there (the teacher) would not hit us.' My friend assured me he would not and that we should open the book and sit. But it was an empty notebook.

The teacher filled the board with big sentences. I didn't know how to read, but the teacher said he wouldn't teach anything else. So, my friend said, 'We'll study in some other school.' The teacher did not seem to care and just said, 'Yes, go'.

As facilitators, we tried to get at least a few positive experiences of school, but there were none.

Experiences associated with their language and the outside world

An 18-year-old adolescent shared that when she spoke to friends in her language (Pardhi), other children would feel that they were talking about them and would complain to the teacher. 'At lunchtime, the children would sit far from us and distance themselves from us saying that we are Pardhis.' A similar experience was shared by a child from the *kanjar* community. She wrote, 'When I used to go to school earlier, children in my school would ridicule us and our language. If someone made fun of them, how would they feel? Nobody should taunt us because we speak a different language.'

Experiences of putting forth their views to adults

A 14-year-old girl shared that often her mother would send her out for alms, she did not like that. Her mother would also get angry with her if she did not go scrap-picking. She was very scared of her mother (and continues to be) and was not able to tell her that she did not want to go out to beg. But one day, she gathered courage and told her mother. Her mother stopped sending her out to beg and enrolled her in school.

One of the authors also shared a personal experience of her school life, 'When I was in class X, the math teacher, Tiwari Sir, would always call me to the board and without explaining the problem, would instruct me to solve it. When I could not do it, he would pull my plaits. This went on for several days. I would feel scared of him and wanted to miss his class. One day, as he finished the class and left, I found my courage and ran after him. I asked him point-blank why he did this to me. Sir coolly responded that he wanted me to do better. I didn't know what to say in response. But he stopped pulling my plait after that. I also stopped feeling scared of him.'

The children's expressions clearly indicated the following:

1. Children recognise discrimination. They may not

be able to differentiate or analyse whether it is due to language or caste or something else, but the experience of being made to feel small is one that many children of marginalised communities imbibe from the world continuously, that too at a very impressionable age. This is likely to have a significant and lasting impact on their personality as they grow up.

2. Children's negative experiences are layered in their minds. The details of how they were beaten have left imprints on their minds and this is described vividly in their expressions. Often, children share details, such as who all were there, and other aspects which may not have a bearing on the experience *per se* but are significant to the child's memory. It is probable that she/he believes that this vividness makes it more real and believable, or simply that she/he is yet not able to isolate the incident from its details. Expressions of this nature have therapeutic value for the children if when they voice it, an adult validates what they have felt and gone through.
3. When these experiences are shared in the classroom through a group process, each child realises that this did not happen only to 'me'. Even when children are very small, they are able to critically analyse using this 'data' – a set of experiences – that this is part of the functioning of society and is not 'my' fault. This is necessary for an education that is premised on the values of social justice.
4. In our culture, the fact that a child and an adult (teacher, parent or any other person in the form of a guardian/senior) can think differently, that what a child thinks is also valuable, is not acceptable. Therefore, such discussions do not take place in classrooms.
5. While children could share experiences of hurt or anger towards somebody who they had categorised as 'against them', it was not easy for most of them to view their 'protector' in a situation where they are challenging him/her. There is probably a logic that works in the child's mind, and it is difficult for them to create a concept of 'self' without this person in the frame.

It is clear that a story like *School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya* can be used to open up many conversations among students of different socio-economic groups.

The participants may have difficulties with one or many aspects of school life, such as the teacher's behaviour, learning difficulties, adjustment with peers, violence and abuse. Such discussions are opportunities for reflection for the school too.

The interaction described clearly suggests the need for the school system to adapt itself to children rather than the other way around. Anjali Noronha, in a review of this story, also finds the experiences described therein as universal to most children.ⁱⁱ

Agency of children in stories

As seen above, stories allow us to start conversations in a safe space. They do not need to be very personal but must provide the data or content from where we can begin to reflect and deliberate. And for this, we need books where the child is in the centre; not only as a character but in his/her complete personality which may throw up stories where the child's worldview is in conflict with that of adults, or there are different views within a group of children.

A critical aspect of the story *School Mein Seekha aur Sikhaya* is that children have been given a voice in this story at several levels. Firstly, the story is written by a child; secondly, what the children are feeling has come out in the story; and lastly, the children are collectively making a plan and implementing it. The teacher is the one person who understands and accepts the children's viewpoint, which lends a sense of resolution and a happy ending to the story. This may not always be the case in life. It is, therefore, more important that the agency of children is clearly established.

Agency has been defined by Bandura (2017)ⁱⁱⁱ as 'to intentionally produce certain effects by one's actions'; Mathis (2016)^{iv} as 'Agency is considered here as making one's identity and perceptions visible and actively acknowledged by others to enhance and empower the personal, cultural, and social aspects of one's life'. Mathis adds that authors and illustrators have the power to create situations and characters that would further enrich the agency. The story under discussion manages, through the text, to present the cultural background

and aspirations of a child from a marginalised community, while the illustrations provide us with a context to the protagonist's life conditions.

There is a lot of children's literature around us that touches upon the school. However, most of the storybooks revolve around children's integration into the mainstream system with the idea of preparing a first-time school-goer for school or a similar setup. There are only a handful of books where the child's agency inside the school space is demonstrated. Of the many books on this theme published by Pratham Books, *The Right Way School*, written by Shabnam Minwalla (2020), stands out for giving space to a child's natural personality, whether it is about being inquisitive or the way she dresses and looks. *Vidroh Ki ChhapChhap* (Muskaan, 2020) is another such book where the writer Rinchin portrays the teacher as a person very friendly to the children whose child-centric pedagogy makes her the students' ally, but the story takes a turn when it is evident that she is functioning from her adult position. If she really wants to accept the children, there needs to be an internal transformation.

Most books are written by adults, where the perception of a child from an adult's eye (or what their memories of childhood are) determines the content. But if we encourage children and young people to be the authors of their storybooks, it would be a start to building a space for children to share what they think and feel and to respecting children's perspectives.

Is there a possibility of opening up discussions and questions on school processes, when stories which give children's voices a space enter the school? Thomson and Johnson (2007)^v emphasise that teachers too will have to acknowledge the agency of children, viewing them as 'being extremely creative, possessing a great deal of insight and knowing.' When adults, like the teacher in Nikita's story, are willing to listen to children, recognise their own weaknesses, and identify how our behaviours and our methods are alienating children, then probably we will take the first step in developing the school as a safe and happy space for all children.

Endnotes

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Socio-Emotional Learning through Project Work

Chikkaveerasha S V

VOICES

Children's learning is linked to their emotions; we cannot separate the two. Learning in children can be effective and lasting only when it is connected with their emotions. The closure of schools on account of the COVID-19 pandemic for nearly two years has hampered not only their academic learning but also their social and emotional development. Therefore, it has become imperative today, more than at any other time in the past, to lay emphasis on the social and emotional dimensions of children's learning activity. This aspect of learning should become a part of the activities and the classroom process.

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, reading aloud, active listening, open discussions and independent writing. Such activities contribute to the all-around development of children. Here, I am going to present my experience of such an attempt and the insights gained from it. What follows is a narrative of the project I entrusted the children with, the processes involved and the ways in which it helped in supporting the social and emotional needs of the children.

Experience of Yojana Mela

We planned a '*Yojana mela*'. To begin with, we discussed with the teachers the projects on which the children could gather information or data on their own. From the topics that came up, we decided to choose the topic of sources of water in the villages. This topic was chosen because, besides sustaining life, the significance of water extends to social, cultural, and historical domains. The children would need to dig for information pertaining to this topic in their village.

We initiated the project with 30 students of classes V, VI and VII in a unique way by screening a documentary titled *Water Wives*, which deals with the scarcity of water in Rajasthan. The screening followed a discussion on the horrors of water scarcity and the importance of water conservation.

The children were asked to identify the sources of water in their villages. There were children from three different villages namely Jambaladinni, Hirehunakunti and Tarivala and their experiences were different. We then divided the children into ten groups and gave each group a project to work on. The following were the topics for project work:

1. Water sources that existed in your village twenty years ago to the students of Jambaladinni.
2. Water sources that existed in your village twenty years ago to the students of Hirehunakunti.
3. Water sources that existed in your village twenty years ago to the students of Tarivala.
4. The current sources of water in these three villages
5. The misuse of water in your village
6. The quantity of water used by a family or household for drinking in a period of a day, a month, and a year; the possible ways of saving water and the quantity that can be saved
7. The articles published in newspapers on the issue of water and the ideas presented there
8. Toilets and use of water in toilets
9. Water use in agriculture and irrigation
10. Steps taken in your village for rainwater harvesting

The children prepared their reports within a month after the orientation based on their discussions with their parents, elders and leaders of the village and the members of the village *panchayat*. We discussed these reports with various groups consisting of children from various classes several times and gave them suggestions for improving the quality of the reports. The children participated enthusiastically in collecting data and in discussion on the reports

The *mela* day was fixed, and the presentations of the group reports by all the students were scheduled. The villagers were also invited to it. This gathering of the students was different from other such meets of students for several reasons. The information shared at the meeting was gathered by the students themselves. Their knowledge was

a part of their own experience. Hence, they had command over what they presented and discussed. Apart from other things, the children discussed the problems of water conservation and gave valuable suggestions for the proper use of this vital resource. The villagers were delighted and impressed to hear from the children certain things they did not themselves know. They also contributed their ideas to enrich the discourse.

When the children were assigned this project, we had some hesitation. We had our doubts about their competence in performing such a task. But the enthusiasm with which they collected the information and data and presented their ideas made us feel proud of them. The experience also taught us the effectiveness of involving students in what they learn and the importance of including student-centred learning practices in our pedagogy. The teachers who had witnessed the participation of the students in this project are now giving importance to this method of teaching to enlist active participation from the students.

Just before writing this article, I interacted with the students and tried to find out what they had learnt from the project. I was surprised to learn that the students had not forgotten the things they had learnt even after several months. When asked how they could remember the details so well, they replied, 'How can we forget what we ourselves did, sir?' The experience of the students, the responses of the teachers and the insights I got from this have prompted me to infer that the project-based method can be a very good means of facilitating social and emotional learning among children.

Scope for SEL in yojana mela

Students' meetings

Students' meetings were held frequently for assigning project work, sharing responsibilities, and discussing the data and information collected. These meetings gave students a platform for the free expression of ideas without inhibitions and the resultant freedom from the fear of being judged right or wrong. This helped them in developing the capacities of self-expression, leadership, decision-making, self-confidence and in exploring solutions to problems and being committed to a purpose.

Group-work

Children worked in groups of five to six. Each group had children of different learning abilities, but they worked in the spirit of cooperation, participation and responsibility. This was a platform for practising

the principle of mutual learning. Children from class VII guided the students from classes V and VI. The junior students liked interacting with their seniors. It was a great experience for all to mix and learn with students from other classes, transcending their 'grade barriers'. They were exhilarated to work in groups and to witness the success of their group. Their exhilaration remains etched in my memory.

Independent writing

The children were encouraged to write down what they discussed with others and what they observed on their own. This gave them an opportunity to express themselves – their ideas, feelings and insights – on their own and they found this a comfortable and enriching experience.

Reading aloud

The children were asked to read aloud what they wrote to their own groups and in meetings with other groups. This gave them an opportunity not only to read confidently but also to listen to others and to be sensitive in appreciating the ideas, feelings, and perspectives of others.

Interaction with community

Interacting with the community to gather information about the community's experience of issues related to water (the facilities they have and the problems they face, etc.), sensitised the children to the issue of the water crisis and helped them develop an awareness of the world around them. Interacting with members of the community helped the children develop social relationships with them. They also realised the importance of active listening, cooperation, and mutual support.

Appreciation for meeting deadlines

The children were given deadlines to complete tasks, and they were appreciated for completing these on time. They were asked to analyse their performance and think of improvements. Then, they were gradually given tasks of higher complexity and provided with guidance, encouragement, and support in accomplishing those. This achievement of setting a goal, improving their performance, and then setting a higher goal, gave them confidence and stability. The appreciation they received motivated them to do better.

Presentation skills

After completing the project, they were asked to prepare posters on their completed activity and present these before an audience. Listening to the questions of the audience with attention,

responding to them with patience and accepting valid criticism honed their presentation skills.

Water and human values

As mentioned earlier, discussions were held on various aspects relating to water, like its sources, use and misuse; the quantum of water used in a household and village over a day, month and year; water used in toilets; and the possibilities of water conservation. These discussions helped the children develop an awareness of the importance of water for life and appreciate the human values associated with water. There was an improvement in their understanding of several issues as noted below:

- The connection between all living beings and their dependence on water
- The need for learning about cleanliness and hygiene
- The importance of awareness of water-related hygiene, water sources and water distribution systems
- Democratising water distribution so as to enable all classes of people to access water equitably and to reject the systems of privilege in accessing the sources of water
- Proper use of water resources and prevention of misuse
- Conservation, respect for nature and the rights and wrongs of conduct in relation to water
- Wise and legitimate conduct in relation to water, like availing the water facility legally and honouring the social responsibility of paying water bills.

In retrospect

When I look back, I realise how minimal my role in the entire project had been. My task was only to frame some questions, based on which the students themselves went about the project on the sources of water and other water-related issues, brought out significant information and presented their findings. They learnt the skill of asking questions, collecting responses, analysing information and presenting what they had understood before an audience. Their participation in students' meetings and group work, attempts at independent writing, reading aloud and interaction with the community, and learning to meet the deadlines were all commendable. Besides cultivating the art of presentation and decision-making, they also developed self-awareness and a sense of social relationships. They learned to think, explore, infer and critique; thus, they were introduced to what may be considered higher-order learning skills.

Their activities included arithmetic and language skills, environmental awareness; their learning had an emotional and social dimension, and above all, it involved a sense of human values centred on the importance of water and environmental awareness. The class became an ideal place for the all-around development of children. Hence, I consider this collective student-centred project work as a great example of how a well-conceived project can engage students in various aspects of learning.



Figure 1. A student gathering information about water-related issues from a grandparent



Figure 2. Project presentations by students during the Yojana Mela



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Gender inequality refers to the disparities between men and women in society. This divide has existed since antiquity and is still present in the social, economic, political, scientific, entertainment, and sports sectors in the 21st century. Discrimination against women is a key result of actions and behaviours that are carried out based on gender. Because of this, instances of female foeticide continue to exist today. For multiple reasons, hundreds of girls are not allowed to attend school even today. Although a lot has changed over the years and women are making contributions in many different professions, a sizeable portion of society is still affected by this imbalance. As a result, gender disparity is pervasive in society even now in our daily interactions, but it does not seem to bother us. These behaviours must be changed as soon as possible; only then will we be able to see the true significance of the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights and make progress toward true equality.

Gender disparity is a result of several little actions and behaviours. Many schools assert that they treat all students equally and do not engage in gender discrimination. But during my 12-year teaching career, I have witnessed and experienced the gender inequalities that exist at the school level.

One day, I received a call from a student. She wanted me to explain some Hindi questions to her. Midway through the call, she said she would need to hang up as her brother had just returned from work and she had to serve him food. This made me question whether girls are still considered only suitable for domestic duties in modern society. If there is a sister in the house and the brother comes from outside, then, in the absence of the mother, should the sister serve food to him? And why should only mothers and sisters serve food? From childhood, boys and girls are assigned different household chores.

Through language, pictures, and stories, the division of household chores is based on gender. Schools also play an important role in promoting this difference. The strongly-held belief that household

work is the responsibility of girls and women and work outside the home is the responsibility of boys and men will begin to change only if we have in-depth discussions and ensure the participation of both boys and girls in school tasks.

When boys and girls are asked in class about their dreams, boys express their wish to join the army, or police force, or become doctors when they grow up. However, a majority of the girls choose a teaching career or question why they should continue their education since in the future they will only be required to do household work.

Whenever I ask my students about their professions, most of the girls give similar answers. This compels us to think that even though women go out to work with men today, due to social practices, only a few professions are considered suitable for women, one of which is the teaching profession. I am a teacher myself. During a conversation in the family or with others, whenever I mention that I am a teacher, everyone praises me saying that teaching is the best job for women because due to the fixed timings, along with the job, they can also give time to their families. Society has already decided what kind of jobs women should do, which is the reason girls are not able to think beyond these professions.

Here are some examples of practices promoting gender discrimination in schools:

- Using language that promotes gender inequality. Like if a boy cries, he is silenced by saying, 'Why are you crying like a girl?' There are many boys who are shy by nature and face difficulty in doing certain tasks assigned to them. They are also mocked with, 'Why are you feeling shy like girls?'
- In the class, separate seating arrangements are made for boys and girls right from primary school itself. The difference in behaviour is not very visible at a young age, but by the time they reach the upper primary, such a difference can be seen clearly.
- There are also separate rows for boys and girls in the morning assembly.

- When made to stand in queues, girls are always in the front and boys stand behind them.
- Traditionally, girls are in charge of leading the morning assembly.
- Activities like art, singing, rangoli, and decoration are included for girls, while boys are preferred for speech, debate, and poetry recitation.
- There is more participation of girls in cultural programmes.
- Boys participate in sports like running, cricket, and football, while for girls, games like carrom, Ludo, kho-kho, kabaddi, and badminton are organised.
- Tasks like cleaning the classroom and blackboard, and keeping the girls quiet are assigned to girls, while the boys are assigned the responsibility of keeping the whole class quiet, lifting buckets of water, moving or removing table benches, etc.

When I joined this school, Government Middle School, Banari, I came across many things that are knowingly or unknowingly contributing to promoting gender inequality. With a little thought, efforts can be made to remove this inequality in the school. I am a teacher therefore it is my duty that my approach to teaching be such that I can play my role in bridging this gap of inequality.

- We, along with the entire staff, have made some small efforts to break the stereotype that some sports are only for girls, or some are only for boys. We gave the girls the opportunity to play cricket and football alongside the boys.
- Arrangements were made to sit and eat the mid-day meal together, and the boys were also involved in the work of serving food.
- We decided to cultivate a garden in the vacant space behind the school. The place was very dirty – overgrown and filled with garbage. So,

all the teachers and children cleaned it together. Both female and male teachers took equal responsibility in this work. The children were also inspired by this, and both boys and girls actively participated equally.

- I observed that in cultural programmes, only girls participated in the dances. I have started trying to involve boys in dancing as well. I came to know that they felt shy about dancing because they were never called upon to participate in dancing. I talked to the children and explained to them that they should look at dance only as an art and show their skills to everyone. Thereafter, boys also started participating in dance programmes. Some boys told me that if I had not come to their school, they would not have had the opportunity to participate in dancing at all.
- In the classroom too, I have made certain modifications to remove gender inequality:
 - A democratic seating arrangement in the classroom for boys and girls.
 - During peer-to-peer, group learning, forming pairs or groups of boys and girls for activities.
 - Involving both boys and girls in role-play, etc., while teaching language.
 - Giving the responsibility of cleaning the classroom to both boys and girls.
 - Involving the girls in making science models.
 - Ensuring that both boys and girls participate equally in the assembly programmes.
 - Talking with them about what it means to be a girl and a boy; dividing their views in terms of tasks and sharing my point of view; asking the boys to help their mothers with household chores at home.



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Social-emotional intelligence is inbuilt in children. Social and emotional competencies aid us in expressing ourselves, understanding others, adapting to change and coping with daily demands, challenges, and pressures. Introducing social-emotional learning strategies in the school has a long-term impact on children’s moral values and ethics, at the same time, it passively boosts their academic progress.

Raising resilient and socially and emotionally intelligent children is a challenge for parents. The years from birth to five are crucial for a child’s brain to develop socio-emotional skills. A child’s lifelong progress and success largely depend on nature (genetics) and nurture (care, nutrition, stimulation, surrounding and teaching) during this period of time. The school where a child spends almost 15

years of their early life must provide the child with ample support and opportunities for social and emotional development.

Socio-emotional learning includes various aspects such as self-awareness (who am I?), self-management (what I should do? How should I do it?), responsible decision-making (what is right? What is wrong? What is good or bad?), social awareness (self-identity, others’ identity), relationship skills (care, consideration, sympathy and empathy). Mastering these aspects allows students to be rational and ethical. Hence, in a school, the teachers have to collaborate and work together in understanding each child and helping them with these. There are other stakeholders that play an important role in this, as Urie Bronfenbrenner mentions in the ecological model.

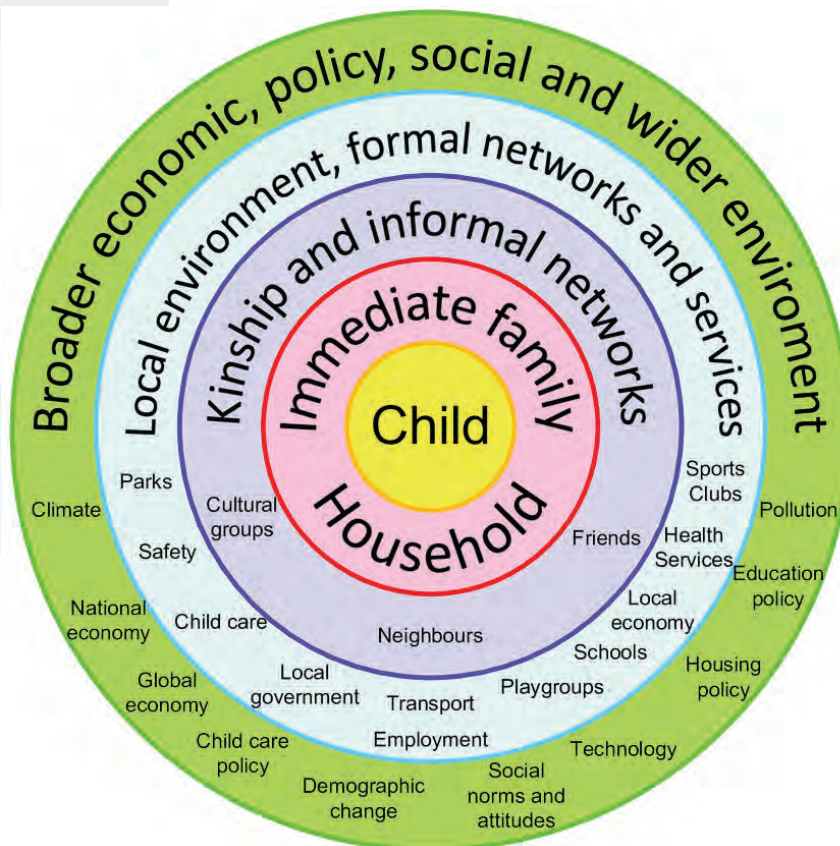


Figure 1. Diagram by Joel Gibbs based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model.¹

The school is a mini-society. In our school, we teachers bring into the children's routine various activities to encourage socio-emotional learning and development. In a classroom children complain, cry, tease, fight and disturb each other. Social-emotional learning helps them to identify and manage their emotions. As teachers, we help them achieve positive goals that are founded on important socio-emotional values of showing empathy, maintaining positive relationships with others, and taking responsible decisions.

We encourage the sharing of experiences, incidents and life events. Instead of just reading stories of great personalities, we share stories from our own lives. We try and provide care and physical and emotional comfort by creating a safe and secure environment for children to express their thoughts and opinions and share their difficulties and troubles. We have dialogues with each student based on their needs or situation. We practise secularism inside the school campus, treating everyone equally and giving equal opportunity to all.

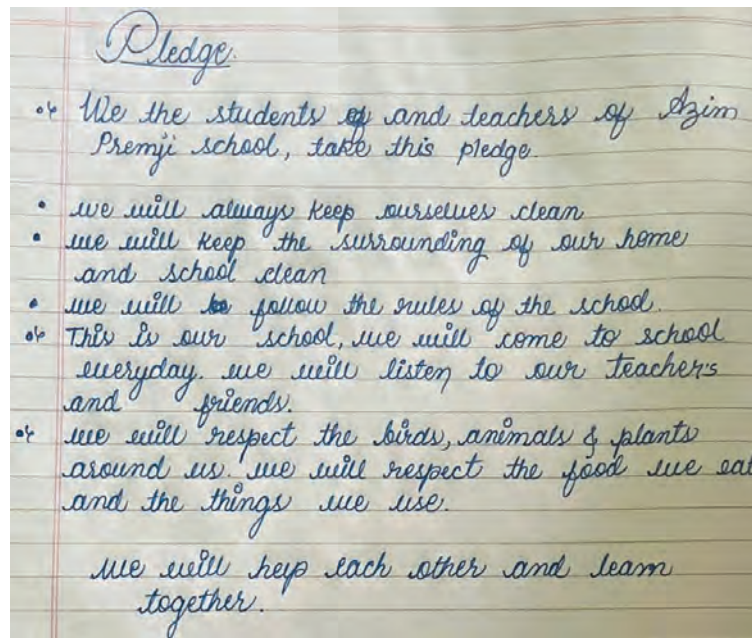


Figure 2. Teachers and students together taking the pledge in the morning to respect everyone and everything around them

Self-awareness and social awareness

To create a joyful atmosphere, teachers engage with students in fun activities, like dancing, action play and circle time. We keep the atmosphere lively by greeting the students with hugs, high-fives and other gestures of welcome that they choose from a given set. We try to understand how their day is going, how they are feeling, why they are feeling certain emotions, etc. This also helps the children to understand themselves. To orient them towards self-realisation and self-motivation, when tests are conducted, the papers were given back to them so that they get a clear idea of their performance, what they could do and what they need to learn better, which helps them set goals for themselves for upcoming tests.



Figure 3. A teacher greeting children joyfully as they enter the classroom

Self-management

Managing emotions means not suppressing emotions, which is a sign of good emotional health. A girl from class II lost her bottle in the classroom and was crying loudly. It was her manner of expressing herself that she had learnt. Now, it was for the teacher to deal with this situation. In such situations, the teacher must help the child to learn to regulate her emotions and find a solution to the problem at hand. In this case, the teacher first helped the child to stop crying and then they began to search for the bottle and found it. In doing this, the teacher indicated to this child and all the other children in her class that when faced with a problem, instead of crying, they must think of how to find a solution to the problem.

Sense of responsibility

The students of classes VI and VII have learned to work collaboratively and cooperatively in conducting various activities and programmes without the support of their teachers. On September 5, Teachers' Day, the students organised a cultural programme for the teachers. When they got to know that there was not enough time left to complete all the events planned, they did not panic but handled the situation intelligently by cutting down various activities and they managed to complete the programme as per the schedule. This was indicative of the maturity and calmness they have developed over a period of time through practice and participation.

Student-led committees that have discussions and meetings where students express their thoughts, opinions, and ideas also foster their sense of responsibility besides creating a sense of belonging and engagement among them. This is particularly important for developing a positive school culture, where students feel valued and respected.

Responsible decision-making

There are various committees and groups in the school and students are encouraged to bring in suggestions to make these vibrant and lively. A boy named Arvind who is in the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) group was doing well in maths but not so well in English. When he scored less in English, his English teacher asked him to bring the class teacher's signature on the test paper. The class

teacher had a chat with him and discussed how he could do well in English too. A heart-to-heart talk with children also helps them to understand and take responsible decisions. The boy has taken the teacher's talk positively and is now participating well in the English class too.

Conclusion

In our school, we create a safe and fear-free environment that enables students and teachers to interact comfortably with each other and with other support staff. We play together, share our happiness and sorrows, express our emotions, and support each other.

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

It is important to note that socio-emotional learning is not only critical for students to lead successful and fulfilling lives, but it is also essential for their academic success. By fostering a positive and supportive learning environment and providing the necessary resources and support, our school is consistently trying to ensure that students have the socio-emotional skills they need to succeed in life.

Endnotes

- i Housing Children: South Auckland, The Housing Pathways Longitudinal Study - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bronfenbrenners-ecological-model-Diagram-by-Joel-Gibbs-based-on-Bronfenbrenners-1979_fig1_311843438



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Children Who Feel Better, Learn Better

Lalita Yaduvanshi

An experience based on trust deepened several bonds and gave me the opportunity to reflect on our expectations of children to modify behaviours. It made me realise how the school provides a supportive learning environment for both, the students and the teachers. Opportunities to grow and imbibe better life values (while feeling safe in the school environment) present themselves to us every day. These provide us with a foundation for reflection and help us live meaningful lives. I would like to share an experience that I had with a student in class II. Her story started last year when she was still learning to come to school in the month of September after the COVID-19 pandemic. She was absent for a major part of the time which was a cause for worry for all teachers because without coming to school and without regular learning she was bound to be left behind. At regular intervals, her class teacher and other teachers would talk to her and explain why it was important for her to come to school regularly, but in vain.

In early June this year, she came to class II. I held her hand and made her promise that she would come to school every day. She agreed with an innocent smile that she always had on her face. Messy hair, dirty uniform, missing study materials – I did not know where to start with her. I was at a loss for how to explain to her how much she would lose by not imbibing good habits and not keeping pace with her studies. I also spoke to her and her father.

This year, the storytelling activity was done in an innovative way during the school assembly. Stories were told with the help of puppets. A puppet corner was also created for the children in the classroom. I observed that she had started attending school more often since the puppet show began. Sometimes she could be seen playing with a bird, and sometimes, arranging things in the class. Sometimes, she would complain about other children who did not use the puppets properly. Soon she started coming to school every day. And again, the question of how to help her make up her mind to read and write arose. We, too, did not have

any ready-made answers. But something had to be done.

We formed two groups for informal communication along with reading and writing so that children could be motivated, we could get to know them well, and over time, we would be able to see positive changes in their efforts to learn. During that time, the girl learned to read a simple story and a poem. She started doing her homework every day. She loved receiving assignments, and most importantly, our continued interactions created a respectful relationship between the two of us.

After some time, she started learning in the class along with all the other children. Her reading was still slow. Then a 'Smiley Flower' created a stir among the children. A *Smiley Flower* was given to children who made 'good efforts' towards all-around development. Their 'good efforts' were described in two to three lines and this *Smiley Flower* was handed to them in front of the whole class. One day, she asked, 'Will I also get it?' I said, 'Yes, everyone can get it. Everyone can do better in one area or another. You can do it too.' Her efforts seemed to improve.

Meanwhile, another incident took place. Her hair was rarely combed. I told her, 'You must come to school with your hair neatly combed.' She replied, 'Mummy doesn't do it.' I said, 'Okay, we will talk to Mummy.' I borrowed a comb from a senior student and combed her hair and tied it into a ponytail. 'Go home and show it to your mother and tell her to make a ponytail like this for you, every day,' I told her. That day, she went through all her classes twirling her ponytail and looking in the mirror. I do not know what she thought, but there was a smile on her face.

She was a changed person when she came to school the next day! She seemed to bring with her a belief in herself to move forward and to learn with joy. Now, every day after lunch, she comes to me, talks a lot, reads, and narrates a story or two. She has broadened the horizons of her learning. She goes to the English Room in her free time and tries to

read. Now the other children do not tease her; they provide emotional support wholeheartedly while working with each other in a group.

This was more than just an experience; it was a learning opportunity for me. The experience of good health and happiness is important in trying to understand the aspects of wellbeing in the school environment. This includes mental and physical health, physical and emotional security, and a sense of belonging, purposefulness, achievement, and success. These keep us motivated to move on and help us connect with each other, which creates a pleasant working environment. For this reason, formal and informal communication within the school group on key aspects is extremely important. Children's success in and out of school depends on their ability to use their capabilities in a democratic culture. Therefore, efforts should be made to improve the academic performance, behaviour, and social adjustment of children in the school environment. Teachers and the school staff should also do the following:

- Have conversations with children
- Be aware of effective and innovative methods of teaching concepts
- Help students improve their psychological and physical abilities to face challenges and avoid boredom
- Provide emotional support to students
- Use appropriate judgement on aspects related to physical fitness
- Help students develop the ability to communicate
- Help students to be able to build meaningful and trustworthy relationships
- Bring a little flexibility to school processes
- Create opportunities for cooperative work

As a teacher, I feel that it is very important for a teacher to be motivated, skilled, passionate, honest, and reflective in her work. The healthy culture of the school goes a long way towards providing meaning to the workplace. It is helpful in furthering the energy and effectiveness of everyone. There is a direct link between children's wellbeing and academic achievement. Taking care of the well-being of children is an important condition for achievement, and achievement is essential to wellbeing.

Given below are some specific processes to nurture the school environment, which all of us teachers and school administrators together continue to strive to establish in our school. The strong supportive relationships they build provide children with the emotional resources to move out of their physical comfort zones and explore new ideas and ways of thinking, which are fundamental to academic achievement.

Among our efforts towards building a nurturing environment are the following:

- A happy start to the day with everyone gathered in one place to hear the children's presentations. Additionally, they conduct themselves with the feeling of having a respectable opportunity to express their opinions.
- School time has been used to deepen our connection with children and each other, whether in the classroom, playground and library or during the mid-day meals and community visits, etc. Informal conversation between teachers and children is an opportunity for everyone to take a break, eat and chat with friends, study together, help each other, learn about family circumstances, etc.
- Children want to confide in someone and once they choose a teacher, the teacher needs to play the role of an advisor. In such a situation, meaningful dialogue is necessary, which is done in a group or individually depending on the situation. For this, a group has also been formed.
- In primary classes, the duration of a period was extended. When children have short class periods, they are less likely to experience multiple modes of teaching and learning, ask questions, reflect on their learning, and get time to speak their minds. As a result, their sense of academic engagement suffers. So, work is being done on various methods of learning with the children based on the long duration of the period.
- Efforts towards creating a reading culture are on, and most children in all classes are able to make a connection with reading. They choose and share reading material related to their needs and interests on different platforms. The effect of this is boosting their conceptual and practical abilities, which makes them feel better. They also write in their diaries.

To put it simply: 'Those who feel better, can learn better.'



Figure 1. Students of Azim Premji School, Tonk engaged in classroom activities



Figure 2. Students of Azim Premji School, Tonk on the playground



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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

Eliminating Discrimination and Exclusion

Towards a 'Sadbhavna Vidyalaya'

Savitri Sahu

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

Some Simple Activities to Manage Emotions

Shalini Solanki

Children do not come into the world with the ability to control their emotions, get along with others, or handle stress. However, as stress and emotions are a natural part of life, it is critical to learn to cope with these. The activities mentioned below help children in gaining the understanding, disposition and abilities necessary to control their emotions; have empathy for others; set and achieve objectives; make balanced decisions; and build healthy relationships.

Positive self-talk

Positive self-talk implies being kind to oneself. It is a trait that can help children change their internal narrative, for example, 'I could do better next time' or 'I want to learn from my mistakes, not be held back by them.' Positive self-talk helps in combating stress and anxiety and boosts confidence. I gave my students three activities related to this topic.

First, to determine whether it is positive or negative self-talk, I gave them various examples, such as 'I am a failure and I will not complete this exercise' or 'I have the will to construct this science model,' so that they were able to distinguish between negative and positive self-talk. The second was an activity done with their desk partners. In this activity, desk partners had to substitute each other's negative self-talk with positive self-talk.

For instance:

Partner 1 (negative self-talk): I will fail this English exam. My parents will scold me.

Partner 2 (positive self-talk): I have studied diligently for the exam, and that will help me do well in this exam.

After this activity, we had a discussion. I posed questions to them giving examples of negative self-talk and asked them questions like, 'What would

Negatives	Positives
I can't	I can
I won't	I will
I will try	I will do it
I am not confident about...	I'm confident
I am unsure about...	I'm sure
My life is boring	My life is the best
I don't look good	I look the best
I don't deserve attention or success	I deserve attention and success
I am powerless	I am powerful

Figure 1. A completed worksheet with negative and positive statements

the opposite of this sentence sound like if it were positive? We also had a discussion on the benefits of using positive self-talk and the drawbacks of negative self-talk.

Next, to encourage positive thinking in various aspects of their daily lives, I gave them a worksheet with certain negative statements and asked them to change these into positive ones. This worksheet further stressed the idea that when we talk negatively about ourselves, we prevent ourselves from pursuing and attaining our objectives. It may also stop us from attempting new things or engaging in activities that we may find enjoyable.

Decision-making

I gave one of Robert Frost's poems, *The Road Not Taken*, to my students in class VII. The last three lines of this poem stood out in particular: *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/ I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.* In these lines, when Robert Frost came to a fork in the road, he had to decide between two options that would forever alter the course of his life. All of us are faced with choices and opportunities and

must make decisions throughout our lives. Early instruction in decision-making helps children avoid making wrong and hurried decisions and helps them to make well-informed choices.

We did two activities. First, I questioned my students about their preferred games. Some students preferred dodgeball, while others preferred to play football. I asked them to choose a game they wished to play among themselves. I had to ensure that everyone in the class had a voice and was heard. My main problem was that my girl students were not as outspoken as the boys, despite all the talk and initiatives to demonstrate that gender and other forms of discrimination have no place in our democratic society. However, this time the girls expressed their wish to play dodgeball after an extensive discussion and voting. The students then met to establish how many and on what basis to form the teams. All this was part of the decision-making process which they completed independently; I played no part in this.

After this, we completed a worksheet on making decisions in which they had to choose between two

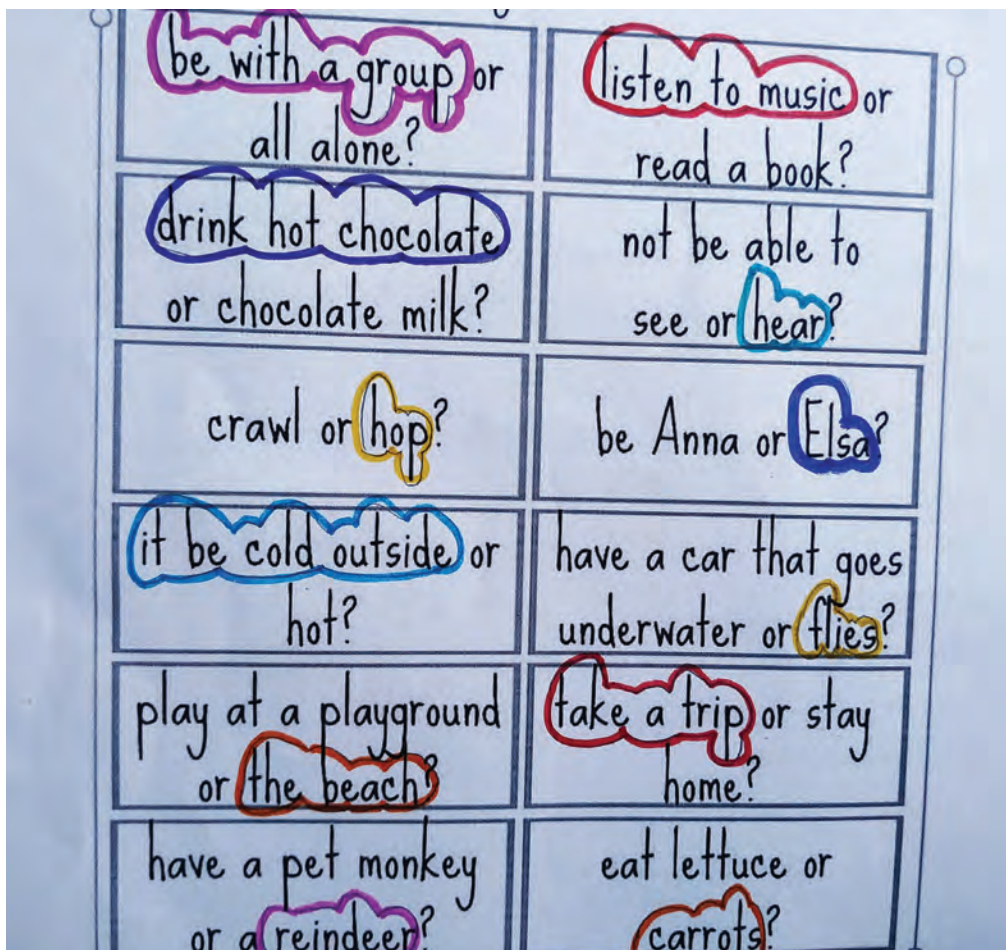


Figure 2. A completed worksheet in which children made some simple choices

options. It was an enjoyable exercise. They had to make their decisions and justify their choices.

The following day, one of my students led the entire class in decision-making. Some of my students wanted to play dodgeball, but this student took the initiative and wrote down in two columns, the pros and cons of playing football. The class discussed these points in detail, and everyone ultimately chose to play and practice football because the student gave them reasons for every point mentioned in the two columns. Students learned that reasoning is crucial to decision-making and it becomes easy when one has clarity about the reasons for their decisions.

Managing stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety are common reactions to changes and difficulties, which are a part of everyone's life, even during childhood. We frequently believe that stress and anxiety are terrible emotions brought on by negative circumstances. However, even the anticipation of happy occasions (such as school events, vacations, or social hobbies) can sometimes be stressful. When there is something that needs

to be anticipated, modified, or protected, children experience stress and anxiety. When something important to them is in jeopardy, they become anxious. Many of my students are stressed and anxious when they have to speak in front of the class or at the assembly. To get over this nervousness, I engaged them in various stress-relieving activities.

The first thing that comes up when you search for or read about ways to alleviate stress and anxiety is meditation. However, at times, it might be challenging for a child to meditate. As a student, I used meditation for stress-busting. However, my students are very active and prefer activities that require movement. So, I looked for ways other than meditation. Following are a few activities that I did in my class:

Throw away your stress

I asked the students to draw a large bucket on a sheet of paper and fill it with (write inside it) all the stress they were feeling. Exams, parental pressure, menstruation, etc. are a few examples. After they made their stress bucket, they did these certain activities.

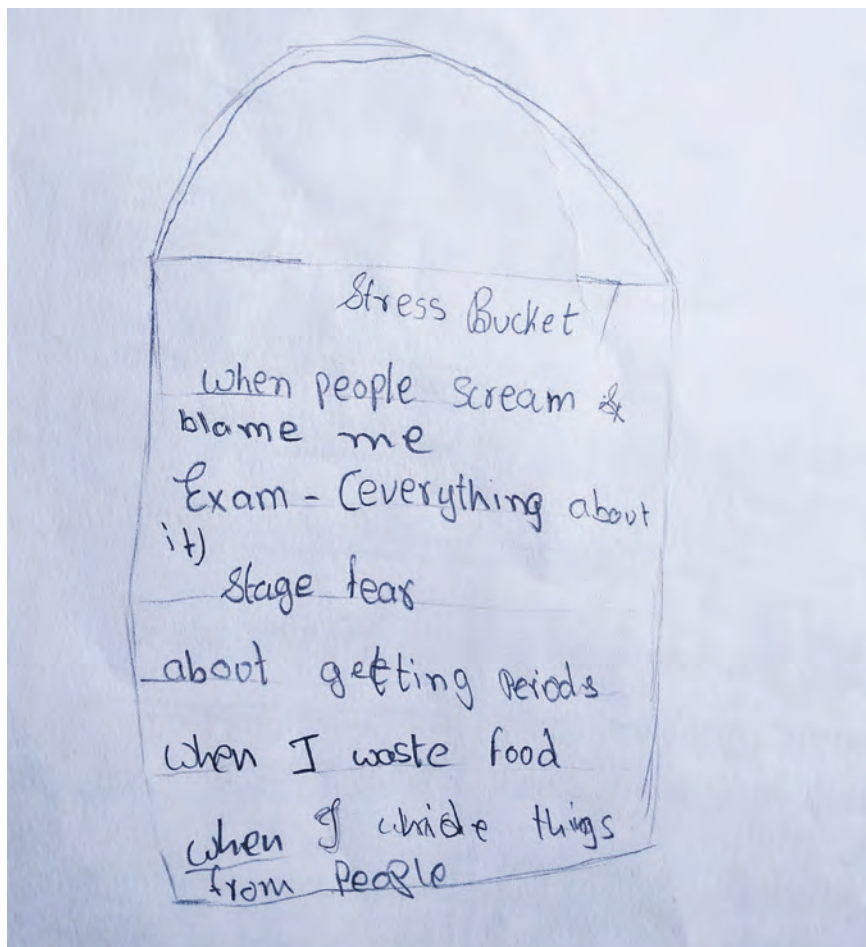


Figure 3. A student's stress bucket

Drawing activity

I encouraged students to use coloured chalk on black paper to draw things that make them happy or something in the recent past that had made them happy. They enjoyed using coloured chalk, rather than a pen or pencil, for this exercise. Using coloured chalk instead of white chalk can also alleviate a child's mood.

Doodling

Doodling is a relaxing activity because it does not demand any structured or expected outcome. I gave my students sketch pens and asked them to doodle freely. I also played some calming music to make them feel relaxed. In those 25 minutes of class, their minds were completely occupied in the creative activity rather than the anxiety of any kind.

Talking to a tree or a plant

We have a money plant in our classroom. At first, my students thought it awkward to communicate with a plant, and they laughed, but once they discovered that it helped them release stress rather than store it, they began to take it seriously. A student remarked that after doing this assignment, he felt as if someone was always available to listen to his problems.

To conclude, while a lot has been achieved for the socio-emotional welfare of our students, more remains to be done. Simple activities and actions can significantly fulfil their social and emotional needs. As educators, we need to continually talk about this dimension of their personalities so that in addition to improving their chances of academic and professional success, we also nurture their social and emotional skills and provide them with a secure and positive learning environment.



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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.*

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The Importance of Listening to Children

Sukriti Lakhtakia

For any instructor at a primary school, a chirping chorus of ‘Ma’am! Ma’am! Ma’am!’ is an everyday affair. In my personal experience, children buzz and hop about all around you until you lend them your ear and listen to what they have to say. The message to be conveyed is usually not at all as urgent as it sounds, and it may be as simple as asking ‘मैम, क्या मैं पानी पी लूँ?’ (Ma’am, may I drink water?) or ‘मैम, क्या मैं toilet चली जाऊँ?’ (Ma’am, may I go to the toilet?) or sharing with excitement, ‘मैम, आज मैं लंच में पोहा लाई हूँ!’ (Ma’am, I’ve brought poha for lunch today!). But it comes with such urgency that one might think that the child has an ultimate secret to share!

The gap between hearing and listening

It is easy to forget that there is a difference between *hearing and listening*. Hearing is a purely physical response by our bodies; our ears are designed to register sounds that occur around us. Listening, on the other hand, is a cognitive response. In other words, listening to someone means that we are giving our attention to what is being said and how it is being said, so that we may respond to the speaker. Keeping in mind this contradiction, hearing and listening to children are two different things.

In my five months at school, I have been a teacher of class I, and one of my most important learnings has been the value of listening to what the children have to say. Many children, especially those in government schools who come from low-income backgrounds, fail to find an audience who is willing to or has the time to listen to their thoughts, ideas, imaginations, fears, and worries. Parents may have to work long hours, siblings (if any) might either be too old or too young, and extended family might be living far away. On top of this, the average teacher at school has little patience and energy to spend on what they generally consider to be children’s irrelevant chatter.

Caught in the middle of all this indifference, children very quickly identify and latch on to anyone who makes time to listen. In fact, holding a conversation with a child is sometimes more interesting than

with an adult, simply because children’s unexpected responses, unconventional manner of thinking, and their still unstructured belief systems are likely to surprise.

Teacher as a listener

As an instructor at school, it becomes important to create the right opportunities for children’s oral expression. A recurring learning outcome given by NCERT for primary classes is, ‘to develop the ability to describe an event in detail, to be able to respond to a given imaginary situation and share their everyday experiences’. These learning outcomes are connected to socio-emotional development in children from a young age. For all of these, there needs to be an active listener who absorbs the shared information, processes it, and responds constructively to prompt further thinking. The teacher at school is the ideal person for this. It will also be helpful because the teacher can read between the lines and learn more about a child through what is being said.

Lived experiences

One day at school, as I entered the class, Ruby (age 8 years) came running up to me to tell me that she had been bitten by a scorpion the previous night. I was shocked, and asked her to tell me more: How did it happen? Are you all right? What did your parents do? She said, ‘मैम, मम्मा-पापा ने तो कुछ नहीं कहा, मैंने खुद से बोरोप्लस लगा लिया।’ (Ma’am, mumma-papa didn’t say anything, I applied Boroplus myself). I was amused as well as relieved to hear this because it meant it might not have been a real scorpion after all.

Ganesh, 7 years old, was unusually silent one day. When I asked him, he said, ‘पापा की साइकिल चोरी हो गई। हम मंगोड़ी खा रहे थे और कोई आया और साइकिल ले गया।’ (My father’s bicycle was stolen. We were eating *mangodi* and someone came and took away his cycle). In the following days, I asked him every day if the cycle had been found, and he said no, but he started greeting me with a smile while coming in and going out of the classroom.

Hari Om, 5 years old, affectionately called Duggu, used to come to school with tears in his eyes, and his first question was always, 'मैम, छुट्टी कब होगी? हमरे भईया कब आएँगे? (Ma'am when can we go home? When will my brother come?). He was completely miserable at school, and it was no wonder that he hated coming every day. I realised that his ability to think and learn was also being affected. I learned that Hari Om was an orphan and over weeks of observation, I also suspected that he might have a learning disability. But the foundation for fostering a relationship with him has been listening to him, holding friendly conversations with him, and creating a fear-free environment so that he is able to express his feelings. He even gave me the name of *Choti ma'am*, and as his tears dried and his smile appeared more frequently, he started to express a willingness to learn. In the pictures below, I drew him on his slate and labelled him, and so he drew me (Figure 2). When I asked him, 'अच्छा, ये मैं हूँ क्या? मेरे बाल कहाँ हैं? और मेरे हाथ और पैर?' (Oh, this is me, is it? Where is my hair? And my hands and feet?) He responded immediately by adding all these details to his drawing.



Figure 1. My drawing of Hari Om on his slate



Figure 2. Hari Om's drawing of me, *Choti ma'am*.

The children feel free to tell me what they truly feel – there have been a few occasions during classroom activities when children have bluntly told me, 'Ma'am, this isn't fun!'. Admittedly, after a moment of disappointment, I consider their frankness, an indication of their comfort.

Children's storytelling with the butterfly tool

One of the finest sets of conversations that have emerged in my classroom has been with respect to our butterfly tool. In beginner-level mathematics, with concepts such as counting and developing a quantitative sense of numbers, the use of a *ganitmala* is encouraged. This is a string of alternately-coloured beads in sets of 10. For children of primary classes, one of the suggested ways to convincingly navigate movement on the *ganitmala* is by creating a playful context, such as the *ganitmala* is our garden; the beads are flowers, and a piece of folded paper serves as our butterfly that wanders our garden. I have made and re-made several butterflies for my class, because they have been misplaced/lost/torn/taken by the smaller children.

One day, when I arrived in class and saw that our butterfly was missing again, I exclaimed in exaggerated exasperation: 'ओहो! हमारी तितली तो बहुत दिनों से नहीं दिखी है, पता नहीं कहाँ उड़ जाती है बार-बार! क्या पता वो कहीं गिर गई हो या उसे चोट लग गई हो?' (Oho! Our butterfly hasn't been seen for so many days now. Where does she fly away so often? What if she has fallen somewhere and is hurt?) The children responded thus:

Vaishali: मैम, तितली शायद अपने गाँव गई है। (Ma'am, she may have gone to her village).

Anuj: हाँ! इसलिए इतना टाइम लग रहा है वापस आने में। (Yes! That's why she is taking so long to return).

Ruby: मैम, उसका घर बन रहा है। (Ma'am, her home is being built).

Me: अच्छा! ये बात है क्या? बात तो सही है, घर बनाने में टाइम तो लगता है. उसका घर ईंटों से बनता है क्या? (Okay! Sounds right. Making a home takes time. Is her house being built with bricks?)

Rishi: नहीं मैम, तितली फूलों में रहती है, उसका घर फूलों से बन रहा है। (No ma'am, butterflies live in flowers, so her home is being made of flowers.)

I found this entire conversation extremely interesting. The children were imagining and creating a story all by themselves and building on each other's imagination! Sometimes, I express genuine disappointment about our missing butterfly, and one or two children quickly fold paper and hand it to me, saying something along the lines of: 'मैम, ये लो, हमारी तितली की बहन आ गई।' (Here ma'am, our butterfly's sister has come). When we solve questions on the *ganitmala*, I remind the children of the context every now and then. For example, if the paper falls, or if a child is holding the paper too tightly so that it might tear, I tell them in false alarm: 'अरे अरे! हमारी तितली बहुत नाजुक है, उसको ध्यान से पकड़ो।' (Uh oh! Our butterfly is very delicate, hold her carefully). One day Anuj said: 'मैम, तितली को बुखार है, वो बहुत गरम हो रही है।' (Ma'am, our butterfly has a fever, she is burning!).

With Hari Om, this continuity in the story has worked – he is at the pre-number concept stage and slides multiple beads at once while counting randomly. I told him, 'हरिओम, तितली अभी बहुत छोटी



Figure 3. Children working with the ganitmala with the butterfly tool

present in body and mind, and that you respect them enough to give them your time and energy. After all, one adult listening to another adult with attention is a sign of respect and children also deserve as much respect as anybody else. It also

adds to children's safety and sense of belonging which makes for a sense of increased wellbeing, enhancing learning to make schooling a place to learn skills for life.

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



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To create a joyful atmosphere, teachers engage with students in fun activities, like dancing, action play and circle time. We keep the atmosphere lively by greeting the students with hugs, high-fives and other gestures of welcome that they choose from a given set. We try to understand how their day is going, how they are feeling, why they are feeling certain emotions, etc. This also helps the children to understand themselves.

Farzana Begum, Focus on Socio-emotional Learning, p 33

A School Transformed by Teachers' Concern and Care

Sunita Suresh Rao

A socially and emotionally conducive environment is a prerequisite to enable any kind of learning in children and to contribute to their overall development. In this article, I would like to present the experiences of the children of Kannada Boys' School (KBS), Vijayapura and the creative and positive efforts of their teachers to extend emotional support in extremely difficult situations. Criminal charges, alcoholism, death of a parent, and desertion are some of the issues faced by them, leaving deep emotional scars that need teachers to be alert so that they are able to identify and provide the emotional support required not only for academics but also for the children to grow up to be mature, independent adults.

Children's context and background

A majority of the people of Vijayapura (earlier known as Bijapur), are dependent on agriculture. However, the lack of timely rains has resulted in their migration to other districts in search of livelihoods. People from other states who have migrated to this town in search of a livelihood are surviving on small jobs. As a result, a school near the railway station has several children coming from different parts of the city. In addition to many of them being neglected by their parents, most of them are being brought up by a single parent. From having a few hours of freedom from caring for their children to being able to utilise that time to earn a daily wage, parents have many reasons to send their children to school. It also includes the fact that children are assured of at least one meal (mid-day meal) when in school.

Already facing financial difficulties, these communities were hit hard by the pandemic. Two children from different families who attend this school lost their mothers to the COVID-19 pandemic. One child's family comprises four children studying in classes I to V. Their father, a daily-wage worker, comes back home late and drunk every night. He does not care for his children. The children are very young and need the help of someone to feed, bathe and dress them.

They come to school wearing torn and dirty clothes and without any breakfast. The scenario was worse during the pandemic as their father had no job and because the school was shut, children did not get even a single meal in a day. The other child has a preschool sister and although the father takes care of them, the child has to bring his little sister to school, and she has to stay with him in school all day.

Due to such neglect, and lack of proper care and support, children are unable to learn at school. Loss of livelihood, alcoholism and single parenting are some of the many circumstances that have a profound impact on children.

Teachers' efforts

The school has 81 children in classes I to VII and most of the children are struggling with similar circumstances. However, three teachers at the school have found ways to tackle the situation. They are all concerned and care about the children and so they have acquainted themselves with the backgrounds of the children in their class. The three teachers - one for the *Nali-Kali* classes, one for classes IV and V and one for classes VI and VII are working round the clock as a team focusing on the learning and all-round development of the children. As a first step, where job losses and deaths have resulted in poverty, the teachers organised rations for the families.

They also took steps to bring about some changes in the school and in the ways that children were being taught. As an example, there are two children from a family. While one of them is studying in class III, the other is a 4-year-old who is being cared for by the school staff during this time. Although one is able to appreciate the fact that this family is sending their children to school regularly, sending both children does present a problem. In another case, two children who had lost their mothers were coming to school without even having their breakfast. They were unkempt and lacked a sense of school discipline. The older children were given the responsibility of combing and oiling their hair,

with the oil, comb and mirror being provided by the teachers. The uniform provided by the school helped as the children did not have proper clothes. Despite all their personal problems, children in the current year have been able to successfully achieve the learning outcomes of the previous two classes because of the constant encouragement from the teachers. As every individual child is being taught through the 'to each according to their ability' method, an observation is that most of the children in the class are becoming fast learners. And since these three teachers are aware of the refurbished learning outcomes, complementary practices, such as the teaching protocol, can be observed in their classroom processes. Teachers also prepare and use TLMs for effective learning (Figures 1-3).

Ensuring emotional support

Three children who had lost their mothers and were studying in the *Nali-Kali* class would, in the beginning, dissolve into tears remembering their mother if the teachers said something harsh to them related to their learning. Therefore, the teachers took great care to be gentle with them, give them personal attention and show concern. From parents not being able to afford books to children not being able to take care of their things, the situation has been very trying for the teachers as well but they have ensured a supportive atmosphere by being kind, calm, encouraging and appreciative of even the smallest achievement.

The changes and the progress achieved in learning can be attributed to the interactions that the teachers have had with the children and parents, activity-based learning, the teaching-learning process based on the learning level of each child and treating the children with respect and love.

Attendance and home visits

Regular attendance is very important, so if any child is absent for three consecutive days, the teacher personally calls parents and enquires about the child. This has convinced the parents that the teachers care about their children.

A meeting with parents is held every month or two where the performance of the child is discussed. If parents are absent from the meeting, home visits are made and the child's performance is discussed with parents, which makes them involved with the child's studies.

When a new child is enrolled, the teachers find out about the family background, thus helping the child to settle down and get accepted by the class.

Discipline

Once children enter the school campus, they are allowed to leave only after school hours. Cleanliness is maintained throughout the school. As the toilets are provided with sufficient water and are properly used by the students, they are well-maintained and kept clean. Children do not waste the food provided under the mid-day meals scheme.

Other approaches

All the teachers work in coordination and do not hesitate to learn from each other. They also share the classroom learning materials and resources. Understanding the purpose and importance of the programmes and facilities in the school, they ensure their proper implementation and maintenance. According to the teachers, providing meals, milk, bananas, peanut candy and eggs has elevated the levels of energy and enthusiasm in the children.

The school and the community have begun to appreciate and respect the learning achievements and changes in the children. The main reason for this is the change in their attitude of understanding the children and actively working towards bringing about an all-around development in them by creating an environment conducive to their learning. This school is an outstanding example of how the way we view, address and treat children impacts their learning.

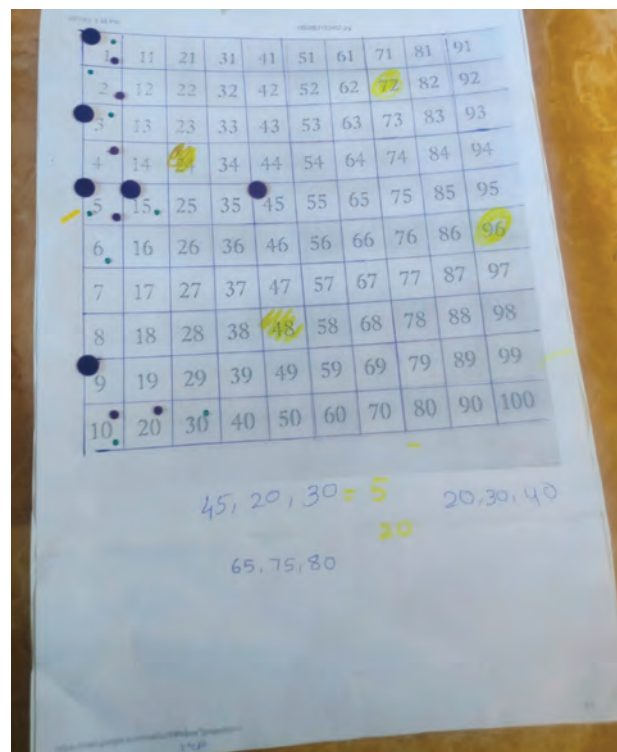


Figure 1. Representation of some specific number multipliers in 1-100 number charts.



Figure 2. Finding LCM of two numbers using a scale or number line

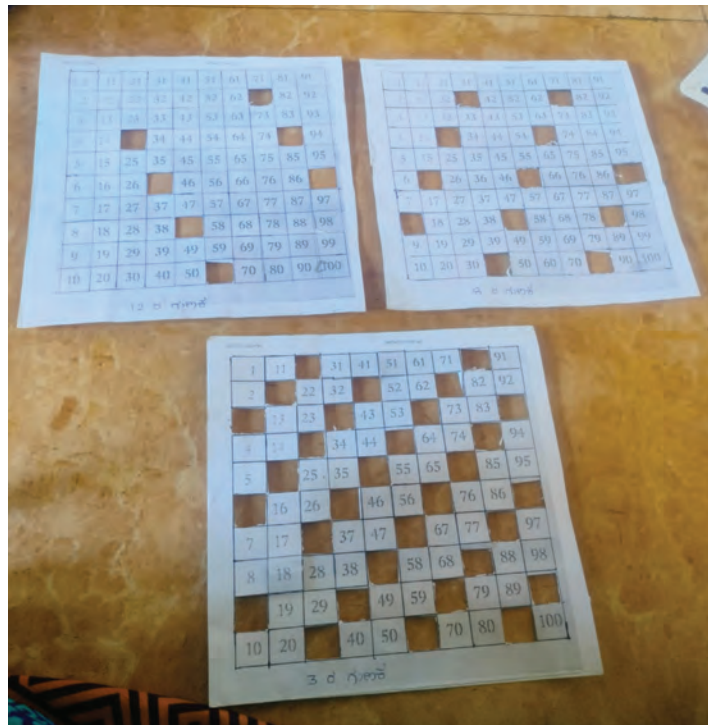


Figure 3. Representation of 3,8 and 12 number multipliers in 1-100 number charts



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Socio-Emotional Support for Children with Learning Difficulties

Mala R Natarajan

What is dyslexia?

Children with dyslexia are as smart as other children, yet display a gap between their potential and their academic performance. Their academic difficulties are not due to a problem with their intelligence (their IQ is usually average or higher). Only, their brains are wired differently, impacting how they receive and process information. These children could face difficulties in reading, spelling, writing or mathematics. In addition, they could also display difficulties in executing functions, like organisation, planning and prioritisation, and impulse and emotional control.

In a school environment, a child is required to display the acquired academic skills for the most part of the day. When a child struggles to read, spell, copy from the board, write an answer or do maths, most often, teachers and parents feel frustrated, and peers tend to mock and ridicule the child. The child is labelled as 'loser', 'lazy' or 'slow'. Well-meaning caregivers and teachers relentlessly urge the child to practice in order to improve their academic performance. The overwhelmed child struggles to break out of this image and to integrate with peers. Very often, these experiences scar the emotional wellness of the child and manifest as stumbling blocks in learning and other achievements.

A child's emotional wellness is directly influenced by peers, immediate family, school teachers and workers. A child who is happy in some environments is distressed in others. For instance, a child with reading difficulties could be good on the race track. Participation in track-and-field events would make him happy and stress-free, giving him a sense of wellbeing. On the other hand, the failure faced in reading sessions, and possible ridicule might leave a deep scar; as a result of which, this child may gradually retract into a shell inside the classroom. What a stressful life for a school-going child with baggage that could wear him down!

How to help this child

Assessment

Reiterating that children with dyslexia are as smart

as any others in the class, they, nevertheless need to be taught in the way they learn, that is, in the unique learning style that each one requires. The Individualised Education Plan (IEP) that uses the strengths of the child to develop the required skills forms the basis of this support system. These remedial sessions are systematic, structured, multi-modal and integrated with the approach of Multiple Intelligences.

This supportive action is possible only after a child is suspected or identified with dyslexia as the cause for the academic struggle. Systematic observation (using a checklist) of the child's performance by the child's teacher(s) would help to identify the nature of these difficulties. If required, an assessment (conducted by a special educator or trained psychologist) using standardised tools can be used to determine the areas of difficulties, the associated sub-skills and the extent of difficulties.

The assessment report can facilitate multi-pronged interventions. In addition to being the basis of remedial support, the report might recommend activities to build and sustain the essential skills needed. It also brings into focus classroom accommodations and concessions for board examinations.

Classroom and examination accommodations

Classroom accommodations help the child focus on learning rather than spending their effort on the sub-task, the skill for which has not been acquired by her. For example, a child with difficulties in the mechanical aspects of writing would be expending all her efforts in copying from the board/book or writing down the notes, with little or no bandwidth left for understanding the same. If she were given permission to use a voice recorder or photocopied notes, this child would be able to scale up her efforts to gain from the classroom session.

Similarly, every examination board offers a variety of concessions for children with dyslexia in high school. Some boards offer exemptions from mathematics (when the child has difficulties with numbers) or from a second language (when

the child has definite language difficulties). Other concessions include additional time, the use of a calculator, the support of a scribe or a reader etc. These supportive systems remove the stress of dealing with the difficulties posed by dyslexia, thereby giving the student a stimulating environment of performing well in other areas.

Classroom processes and peer group sensitisation

Life at school is not only about exams and academic performance; day-to-day activities could pose challenges too. Take, for instance, read-aloud sessions that play an important role in the teaching-learning process in schools. Some children with dyslexia could have a good understanding of the language but may face difficulties in reading and this individual read-aloud session could be an extreme challenge for these children. As a natural response, a child with dyslexia is likely to withdraw into a shell, lose interest in class and perhaps even drop out of school.

In such a situation, the teacher could adopt the 'phrasal reading' and the 'buddy system' after she carries out model reading. The teacher could encourage the struggling reader to group the words before the verb into a chunk and similarly the words after the verb into another. As a result, instead of reading word-by-word, the child would read by pausing briefly between short meaningful phrases. Model reading by the teacher followed by a group reading familiarises the children with text and new words. A 'reading buddy' provides the required scaffolding while phrasal reading provides support by chunking. This builds confidence in the child to participate in class activities without the fear of being shamed for his reading difficulty. The 'buddy system' not only helps the child with dyslexia but also helps all children exhibit a caring and responsible disposition towards them.

This is achievable only when peer sensitisation is done by parents and teachers. Helping students understand dyslexia and the difficulties it poses, giving equal opportunities, recognising the strengths of children with dyslexia, and tackling bullying of these children are some steps in this direction. This permits a better understanding of disabilities and establishes a social responsibility of providing appropriate support to help children with dyslexia reach their potential.

Recognition of talents

A school day is not just for academic work. Many opportunities arise for the display and

consequent recognition of a child's innate gifts and talents. These build self-worth. Very often, the unsatisfactory academic performance of children with dyslexia leads to a bias and they are also side-lined during the selection of children for activities that require non-academic skills, such as participation in the Annual Day. It is important for teachers to recognise that for a child with dyslexia, the opportunity to harness innate talents is very significant – the recognition of their talents builds their confidence and consequently, their interest in school. The strengths pave the way to better learning and overcoming the problems that arise due to their needs.

Play

Play is an important route for socio-emotional development. An environment that fosters inclusive play gives the child with dyslexia the required opportunities for building executive functions through peer learning. What better strategies could there be for equipping oneself with life skills like impulse control, flexible thinking, organisation, self-monitoring etc?

In addition, play is an accepted alternate route to many literacy skills. For instance, language development takes place very organically, as it provides many opportunities for hearing new words and their usage in different contexts and then applying these correctly. Similarly, concepts of more-less, big-small are an integral part of play. Many games include counting and scorekeeping, thereby giving opportunities for building numeracy skills. The non-academic ambience fostered by play can nurture a child with dyslexia.

Where does one start?

The above supportive measures are possible only when all those most involved with the child – parents and teachers – are aware of the child's neurological condition and accept it. Hence, it is essential to conduct awareness programmes that bring to the fore the various aspects of this neurological condition. Schools could collaborate with professionals in this domain to conduct such programmes. Enlightened parents and teachers would be able to interact with the children with dyslexia with an appreciation of their strengths and an understanding of their deficits. Not only would they be able to establish a nurturing environment but will also be able to proactively take the first steps towards appropriate intervention.

Together, these supportive actions by the team

(parents, teachers and the school), embrace, empower and elevate the children with dyslexia, providing them with the essential socio-emotional

scaffolding that enable them to be productive and happy individuals.



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Stress and anxiety are common reactions to changes and difficulties, which are a part of everyone's life, even during childhood. We frequently believe that stress and anxiety are terrible emotions brought on by negative circumstances. However, even the anticipation of happy occasions (such as school events, vacations, or social hobbies) can sometimes be stressful. When there is something that needs to be anticipated, modified, or protected, children experience stress and anxiety. When something important to them is in jeopardy, they become anxious.

Shalini Solanki, Some Simple Activities to Manage Emotions, p 46

Children with Disabilities in Regular Schools

Pallavee Dutta

Neha, a precocious 7-year-old, is a student of class II at one of Bhopal's leading schools. A darling of her teachers, she is a leader among her peers. Doing well academically herself, Neha loves to help her classmates with their assignments too. So full of life is she that it is easy to forget that she is blind, and her textbooks are punched (Braille), not printed.

Neha had no formal education until the age of four. Her parents had done their best to home-school her since most schools around their home were not equipped to educate students with disabilities. They were also concerned about their child – how she would cope in a regular (mainstream) school and because she would be much older than most of her classmates, if she would be isolated, or worse, ostracised. It was then that her parents first learnt about and brought Neha to *Arushi*, a non-profit organisation working with children and adults with physical and intellectual disabilities.

As part of their foundational philosophy, *Arushi* seeks to take children and people with disabilities out of environments that cater to 'special needs' and empowers them with the life skills that enable them to assimilate into 'mainstream' society.

Why and when special schools are needed

While children with disabilities between the age of 2-6 years are eligible for regular schools, the decision to send them to one is subjective and based on the nature and severity of a child's disability. Children of this age group with a mild or moderate disability have a better chance of assimilating well into regular schools.

Children who have visual or hearing-related disabilities can go to regular school at any age since their disabilities are purely physical and not intellectual in nature. Children with Down syndrome, autism and other intellectual disabilities, whose development milestones are delayed can also attend regular schools but require support and training for school readiness before they can do so.

When children with disabilities study in a mainstream school, the interactions between them and the rest can create disability champions and advocates among non-disabled children. Children without disabilities develop an early awareness of the needs and abilities of children with disabilities which goes a long way not only in creating a rightful place for people with disabilities in society but also in building an empathetic, just and equitable society.

The most critical part of the care of a child with a disability is early intervention. Parents and teachers need to look out for developmental delays in the early years. If any development milestone is missed or delayed, first a paediatrician should be consulted and, on their advice, the child may be referred to an organisation and school which cater to their needs. At such a place, counsellors and psychologists employ methods such as diagnostic tests to understand the difficulty the child may be facing and create a plan for the interventions required. Caregivers who are overprotective or live in denial of the fact that their child has a disability stall the process of the child getting suitable treatment and support to gain independence and control over their life.

School readiness programme

Special educators at *Arushi* focused on teaching Braille to Neha, while occupational therapists helped her with other skills of daily life, such as mobility. They started with oral and sensory exercises to enable her to read Braille. Along with this, they assessed her calibre and her readiness for mainstream education. It took them nearly six months to determine that Neha could not only successfully integrate into a regular school but would also thrive there.

Koshish, at *Arushi*, is a school-readiness programme for children with disabilities under the age of five who are not enrolled in regular schools. Here, children with cerebral palsy, learning difficulties and other physical disabilities and developmental

delays are equipped with basic school readiness skills, so they can be admitted into regular schools at the earliest. After an assessment to determine the nature and cause of their disability, a detailed plan for their therapy is prepared. Children with intellectual disabilities receive occupational therapy to improve coordination, eye contact, attention spans, sitting for extended periods and focusing on tasks at hand so that they can adjust in a regular classroom.

Children who have speech impairment receive speech therapy. Instructors determine if the child has a hearing impairment too. If so, they determine the need and effectiveness of a hearing aid. If they discover that the child can hear without aids but is still not speaking, speech therapists use alternate means to assist these children. These therapies are long-term and continue much after a child integrates into a regular school.

Using the play-way method, special educators acquaint the children with auditory, visual and tactile stimuli. Guided by factors such as the readiness of a child to learn and their emotional and physical abilities, educators employ multiple strategies to equip children with the skills and tools they require to thrive in a world beyond the narrow confines of their 'special' spaces and to grow up to live and work independently.

While Braille, sensory and mobility exercises formed the focus of Neha's training, *Arushi's* strategy and therapies for each child are tailored to fit their needs. For instance, children with Down syndrome experience not just physical limitations, but also developmental and social challenges and may often struggle with speaking clearly. Their regimen includes speech therapy, building eye contact and honing social skills in tandem with gaining academic knowledge. Their socialisation skills are another developmental area that instructors in *Koshish* focus on. Without this training, these children cannot adjust well in a mixed classroom.

Caregiver counselling

Neha's parents were counselled about their apprehensions about sending her to a regular school. Counsellors explained to them that schools for the visually impaired, while well-meaning and supportive, would limit Neha's learning and experiences. The company and behavioural influence of non-disabled children would be a catalyst in Neha's growth. That it is the right of the child to have all the opportunities non-disabled

children enjoy, to reach their potential. *Arushi* also extends parental counselling to ensure that the children experience the same empowerment at home as at school.

School admission and after

Alongside her skill training in Braille and occupational therapy, Neha was equipped with preschool curricular learning, so she was up to speed with her peers in this aspect too. All the hard work done by Neha, her parents and her teachers culminated in Neha enrolling in a government school in 2021, directly into class I, appropriate for the now six-year-old.

Neha continues to visit *Arushi* after school, where she receives additional support in academics that she needs and help with other aspects of school life and her extra-curricular development. Theatre, music, dance, yoga and craft play an important role in the development of children with disabilities and *Arushi* employs all these means to provide an environment for holistic development. Theatre plays a critical role in personality development. Paper cutting, folding and pasting improve hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills, especially for children on the autism spectrum.

Work with educators

An important role in this entire journey of a child with a disability to study and grow alongside their peers without disabilities is played by the teachers in schools and much of the success of these children in the regular school system depends on them. It is, therefore, crucial that these teachers understand the need for children with disabilities to study in regular schools and support this in every way that they can. Also, the main reason cited by mainstream schools that deny admission to students with disabilities is the lack of trained staff. To overcome this, *Arushi* organises trainings and awareness programmes for school teachers and administrators that focus on dispelling myths and misconceptions about disabilities and emphasise the importance of having children with disabilities study in mainstream schools.

They conduct orientation workshops in which teachers share their classroom experiences with experts who help them understand the needs of children with disabilities. The teachers are acquainted with updated teaching methods, pedagogy and strategies that they can employ in classrooms where there are children with

disabilities. The educators also learn ways of identifying and assessing learning and other difficulties children may be experiencing. Over the years, over three lakh government school teachers in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have attended these orientations and trainings.


To support their work in schools, *Arushi* provides teachers with teaching aids, such as charts of alphabets in *Devnagri* and English along with the corresponding symbols in Braille and Sign Language. It has also created video tutorials on teaching Braille and mathematics to children with visual challenges and on teaching Sign Language to

those with hearing difficulties.

General tips for teachers who have children with disabilities in their classrooms

- Initiate a buddy system and seat them with other students who are willing and able to assist them
- Encourage peers to volunteer as scribes, note-takers and readers
- Allow extended time in texts, exams and assignments
- Repeat instructions to ascertain instructions and questions have been understood well

Braille An Introduction



Do you know what is written here?
It is: I want to be a lawyer.

Like devnagri and Gurumukhi etc. Braille is also a script. Braille script is used by Blind persons to read and write. Braille was invented by Louis Braille in 1829. Braille script is based on six dots. These six dots are referred as the Braille cell. Each cell comprises of one Braille character. To write Braille script Blind person uses Stylus and Braille slate. Braille slate consist essentially of two metal or plastic plates hinged together to permit a sheet of paper to be inserted between the two plates. While writing on a Braille sheet (drawing sheet) it is to be written from right to left and then reverse the normal numbering of the Braille cell. Blind person reads these raised (embossed) dots with the help of their finger tip.

① ④

② ⑤

③ ⑥

Total 63 combinations are possible using these 6 dots.
Some combinatiois given below;

Braille cell

Braille Chart									
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
⠁	⠃	⠉	⠙	⠑	⠋	⠗	⠈	⠊	⠚
k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t
⠅	⠇	⠓	⠝	⠕	⠖	⠞	⠘	⠗	⠟
u	v	w	x	y	z				
⠥	⠦	⠡	⠣	⠤	⠄				
A Number sign (⠠) is used before the alphabets 'a' to 'j' to convert them to numbers.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
⠠⠁	⠠⠃	⠠⠉	⠠⠙	⠠⠑	⠠⠋	⠠⠗	⠠⠈	⠠⠊	⠠⠚

Figure 1. Understanding Braille, a teaching aid

When a child with a visual disability is in the classroom:

- Maximise teaching through touch (tactile)
- Use 3D models instead of pictures where possible
- Describe pictures if models are not available
- Use voice instructions and cues instead of gestures or expressions
- Seat students with visual disabilities in the front of the class

When a child with hearing difficulty is in the classroom:

- Maximise teaching through visual aids
- Provide written copies and visual aids for any instructions given
- Turn on captions in any video used in the classroom
- Seat them in the front of the class so that they can lip-read with ease

मेरी कक्षा में कुछ विकलांग बच्चे हैं



दृष्टिहीन बच्चे के लिए..... नाम लेकर पुकारें।
'ए' या 'तुम' कहने से वह बीखला जाते हैं।
उन्हें स्कूल के गेट से लेकर सभी रास्तों से परिचित करा दें।
कक्षा से शौचालय तक-
प्रिंसिपल के कमरे तक-
और खेल के मैदान तक।

दूसरा बच्चा सुन नहीं सकता और शायद बोलता भी न हो। उससे जब बात करें, या पढ़ायें, ताकि वह आपके हाँठ पढ़ सके और इशारे समझ सके।



एक तीसरा बच्चा भी है जिसके अंग उसके बस में नहीं लेकिन दिमाग उसके काबू में है।
वह वहीं व्हील चेयर पर बैठा है।
उस पर हँसे नहीं बल्कि हर जगह सीढ़ियों के स्थान पर चढ़ाई-उतराई के लिए रैंप बनवायें।

Figure 2. Some simple tips for teachers who have children with disabilities in their classrooms

In summary

Arushi has supported over 500 children in integrating into mainstream education. Behind each of these success stories is a school teacher who was willing to go the extra mile to help every child in their classroom succeed. Aware of the special measures required, these educators

supported the student's journey in ways that may be different from their usual work with children. Each such teacher is a catalyst in creating a space for children with disabilities to lead enriched lives in regular schools and consequently find their rightful place in society.

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



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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.

Shubham Raturi, The Elephant in the Room | SEL Deficient Teaching, p 50

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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Ragini Lalit explores what it means to create critical learning spaces for children and young adults that are centred on hope and compassion. She is particularly interested in the use of children’s literature and performing arts in education. She is currently working as a Research Associate in the Interest Group for Dialogue, Fraternity and Justice at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She can be reached at ragini.lalit06@gmail.com

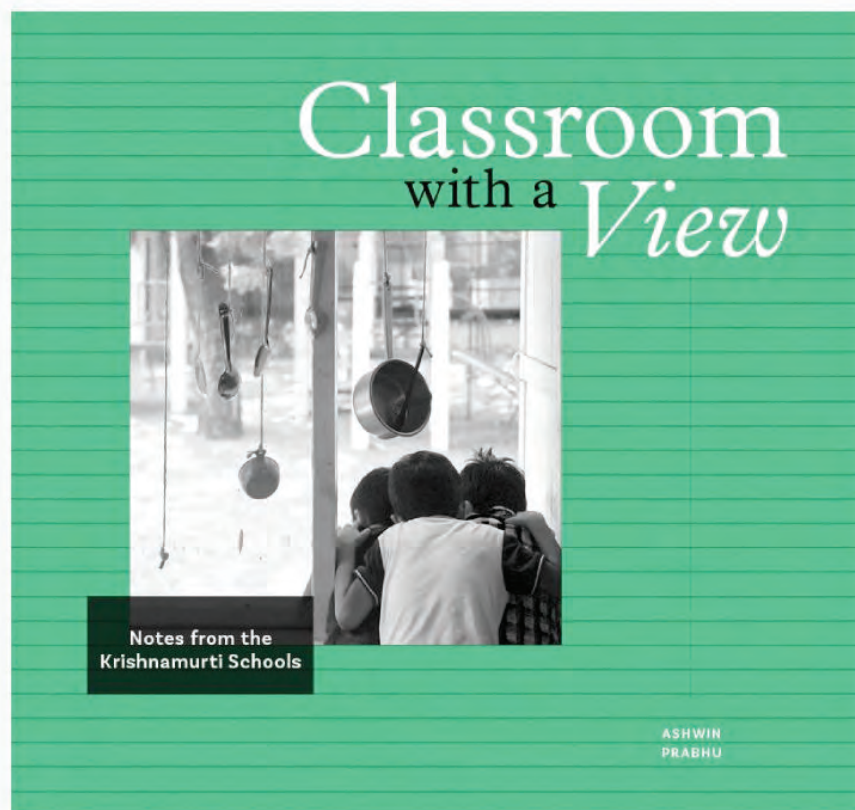
Classroom with a View: Notes from the Krishnamurti Schools |

Book Review

Ankur Madan

Classroom with a View: Notes from the Krishnamurti Schools by Ashwin Prabhu is a visually attractive book. Elegantly designed, with an unconventional layout, infused with black and white pictures and J Krishnamurti's quotes on education as chapter breaks, the book immediately attracts your attention, beckoning you to pick it up. The text, written in simple language is likely to find a wide audience, particularly among teachers, parents and school administrators. The author of the book,

Ashwin Prabhu, made a shift from a corporate career to teaching in a Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI) School, intrigued by the teachings of Krishnamurti and reflecting on his own schooling experience. Referring to himself as a *sutradhaar* (narrator), the book appears to be a tribute to what he has gained from the five years that he has spent teaching and understanding the philosophy that guides the KFI group of educational institutions and the practices that commensurate as a result.



Title: Classroom with a View: Notes from the Krishnamurti Schools
Author: Ashwin Prabhu
Publisher: Tara (April 2022)
Language: English
Paperback: 224 pages
ISBN-13: 978-8195317356
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Foregrounding the book in the question, *'What is school a place for'* the author takes us on a journey of describing these practices and the educational philosophy of Krishnamurti that guides them. Several anecdotes in the form of conversations between teachers and students, observations kept by teachers and the author's notes enliven the descriptions.

The publisher's note by V Geetha of Tara Books builds a case for wider application of the practices described in the book by reaching out to teachers in regular schools through workshops and conversations with alternative school networks. She attempts to allay the general impression about the KFI schools belonging to the elite-alternative category and their practices being impractical for adoption by regular schools. The widely acclaimed ideas of Krishnamurti on learning and education of children, such as freedom from fear, punishment and authority as being central to the learning of all children, irrespective of context, are highlighted in her note. Prabhu too makes a similar attempt at the end of each chapter.

The first chapter, titled *'Knowing Oneself'*, focuses on the importance of self-enquiry – the centrality of the idea in Krishnamurti's educational philosophy. Prabhu describes, in detail, *Astachal*, the practice of 'watching the sunset over the western hills' followed at the Rishi Valley School. Underlying this practice is the importance of quietude or stillness for both the children and teachers after an active workday. Experiencing silence together is indeed a beautiful exercise to help children focus and draw attention to their inner selves. Prabhu describes how younger children resist the practice at first but later through gentle persuasion and persistence, begin to value it. Other practices, such as circle time and culture classes are also described as contributing to the same purpose but through the medium of conversation and dialogue.

The second chapter in the book is devoted to the importance given in the KFI schools to the study of the environment – natural, physical and social. Prabhu describes the practice of *Area Study* – the learning methodology that is adopted for teaching social science subjects. Going beyond the prescribed textbooks, group projects are designed in a way that the senior students have an opportunity to study a geographical area in their vicinity over a period of time, through a multi-disciplinary lens, using the experiential approach.

Using the dichotomy of studying versus learning, the author segues into the next chapter where the emphasis is on solving real-world problems through discovery, creative thinking and multidisciplinary approaches. The idea of the *'Design Lab'* is described with the example of how a question from a student in the classroom led to a project of making soap for in-house consumption. Prabhu concludes that such projects lead to learning that is both tangible as well as intangible, the intangible being valuable in terms of encouraging children to contribute to a common goal without the sense of competition. Teachers feel that such projects allow them to cater to the individual strengths and learning styles of children instilling values of cooperation and collaboration among them. This spirit of cooperation and experiential learning is extended into the next chapter, where learning through different art forms like folk dance and theatre are explained as vital tools for learning.

Krishnamurti said, *'One can learn about oneself only in the mirror of relationship'*. The book is infused with examples of practices based on this thought – the importance given to eating together, the engagement of the children in community work, and the dignity attached to manual labour (through the rota system), wherein all children are expected to participate in the washing of plates and keeping the dining area clean that all point to the importance associated with the values of building relationships, mutual respect and a feeling of community. Prabhu describes these practices as means of nurturing sensitivity in children.

The last chapter examines the widely pervasive notion of fear that manifests in different forms in children attending schools in India. As an illustration, the author uses the conventional examination system to point out how children experience fear and stress due to the larger-than-life image of exams and the impact this has on their learning experiences. At the KFI schools, achievement-related stress and fear are allayed by adopting practices that preclude rewards and punishment, and by keeping the everyday school environment non-competitive and free of comparison by adopting Mixed Age Grouping in organising classes and designing curricula.

As a reader, the book appeals to me in multiple ways. I enjoyed reading the rich, descriptive accounts of the practices with examples and conversations with children and teachers. Almost all the practices

described in the book appeal to and resonate with my own beliefs about the education of young children. Hence, at first glance, the book achieves the purpose of being a comprehensive collation of the translation of a philosophy of education into practice.

As an educator, however, I am left wanting more. The description of the pedagogical practices in the book is somewhat opaque. These are explained as interpretations stemming from Krishnamurti's educational philosophy, but the attempt to explain the rationale behind these seems a bit half-hearted, particularly to a reader who may not have such a deep insight into the educational philosophy these subscribe to. If the intention of the book (as claimed by the author and the publisher) is to showcase how these practices need not remain the bastion of the alternative school system and can be adopted by regular schools, then, the book falls short of meeting that objective.

I also feel that the author could have delved more deeply at the outset into the phenomenon of the alternative school system and, its history and relevance in the contemporary context of India. The book's appeal and potential lie in being able to convince the larger majority of us who belong to the mainstream to see the possibility of embracing these practices in the regular school system. However, to do that, it is important to first dispel the mysticism that surrounds the alternative school system and set the context within which these practices are located. Minakshi Thapan's *Life at School - An Ethnographic Study*, in that sense, is a much better exemplar of a deeper, subjective interpretation of Krishnamurti's philosophy as viewed by the teachers and students at the Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh.

As a reader, I constantly struggled to form an image of a teacher in a KFI school. Considering the central role that she plays in executing the practices described in the book, somehow there is very little said about the teacher herself. Who is this person? What is the journey that a teacher goes through in embracing and internalising these educational ideals? What are some struggles, challenges and reservations that she experiences and overcomes as she goes along? What role does the institution play in supporting and scaffolding her learning and growth through this journey? I wish that a chapter was devoted to answering these questions. To me,

the teacher comes across almost as a prototype, a perfect, fully prepared superhuman who almost always knows what to do and how to deal with the difficult questions that the children ask every day at school.

In a similar vein, the book presents the children studying in the schools as being homogeneous in their thinking and in their ability to imbibe the values and learning intended from the practices. The author narrates a few anecdotes of children questioning the practices and how teachers use constant dialogue and reason as a means of allaying their concerns. But are there no instances when a precocious adolescent has resisted or questioned a practice, or parents have disagreed with the school's policies?

I wish the book had given us some glimpses of the challenges and failures faced in realising these educational ideals on an everyday basis and how therefore, the practices too, have undergone some modification and reinterpretation over the years. The somewhat monochromatic view of presenting the best practices almost in the form of success stories alone does not do justice to the academic potential that a book of this nature could have. A deeper, critical and more analytical view of these could have helped educators to use the book more meaningfully, as a means of assessing the application of the ideas in their own settings.

In conclusion, I think that the book scores very well in narrating in a fair amount of detail, the practices that have organically emerged from J Krishnamurti's extremely insightful educational philosophy that resonates with the progressive vision of school education for the country. Schools in India, irrespective of their affiliation and context, can gain from learning about this educational philosophy and its translation into the values and practices described in the book.

Enabling the school to become a place for children to come to without the fear of judgement and comparison, developing values of aesthetic appreciation, sensitising children to their community and using real-world problems to teach science and the social sciences, are all excellent examples of pedagogical leaps that we must take in order to bring about educational reforms in the country. While the book showcases this well, teachers and school heads should be careful in embracing the practices without developing a

deeper insight into the thought behind the ideas and the pitfalls and challenges that they may face. The readiness and preparedness of all stakeholders involved – teachers, parents, children and the community – is important as is a realistic assessment

of the available resources before implementation. Having said that, viewing education reforms on a continuum, as a journey to embark on, is important and there can never be an ideal time or level of readiness to get started.



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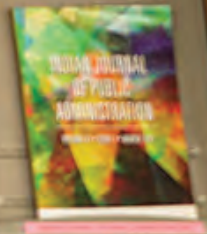


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