Reinforcing Democratic Systems in Class

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School is a place where besides scholastic learning, children also learn how to socialise with others. While it may reinforce existing social inequalities, it is also a space where these can be discussed and deliberated upon so that children may learn to challenge these in the real world. The school also plays a vital role in helping a child locate themselves within society, it becomes imperative that beyond dialogue, through our actions and praxis, we help children redirect their energies for personal and social transformation, laying the foundation for a democratic future.

Classroom dynamics

Aap hume maarte kyun nahi ho? (Why don't you hit us?) was an oddly specific question I was asked by the students as I started teaching in the Government School of rural Kharsia, in Chhattisgarh, as a part of my Associateship Programme. During the initial days of my school visits, I was met with silence and curiosity. Often, the silence would override their curiosity in the presence of a teacher, the authority figure. But in the absence of the teacher, it was utter chaos, with students fighting among themselves.

While discipline was equated to pin-drop silence, it was achieved by the teacher having to shout over a crowd of 20-25 students. This seemed effective in the short-term, but the result was students using the same methods of shouting and beating each other to reach a solution when their classmates did not heed their 'orders'. Students had internalised what the adults around them practised. To run my class, not only did I need a better alternative to how students' behaviour could be managed but also provide them space to unlearn old patterns of behaviour.

Discussions toh, miss, bade logon se hote hain, humare sath thodi! (Discussions take place with big people, Miss, not with us!) This was a remark from a girl in my class as I sat with the students to deliberate on classroom practices that they thought should be in place to ensure learning. Her statement made me realise how children's perceptions of power stem from the way they see it practised. Often, they are expected to act in a certain way in a certain environment without an appropriate conversation with them.

In the common perception of viewing children as blank slates, adults in authority believe these conversations to be beyond their age. In my understanding, this is also a form of power, privilege, and exclusion in the larger society. In classrooms, people in authority, who are equated to power, freely make undemocratic decisions. This position of dominance is often accepted as, and equated to, expertise in certain areas. These traditional classrooms reinforce the *status quo* and limit critical thinking and self-reflection.

Reinforcing democratic processes

Given the chance to talk about classroom norms not only allowed students to discuss what classroom practices they would follow, but also why. This allowed the students to:

- Understand the importance of dialogue and the process of democratic decision-making, acceptable practices in the classroom, the importance of talking and listening in discussions, and learning that to listen we must also pay attention and stay silent occasionally.
- Critique and question classroom practices, for example, the use of corporal punishment, which led to a discussion on their belief of whether students can really learn when they get beaten.
- Co-create norms unique to their classroom, -based on the challenges we faced during classroom interactions.

The discussion was part of the proactive behaviour management practices, where clear behavioural expectations were stated. As an educator, it gave me the opportunity to set reminders and pre-correct undesirable behaviour.

Teachers' role

Every classroom is different, with its unique set of students. While understanding the needs of

my students was part of a continuous and longer process, we established certain enablers to proactively manage their behaviour during our regular classroom transactions.

Instead of shouting at the highly energetic students, we developed a mutual understanding to use call-and-response strategies, such as 'Marco-Polo' or '1, 2, 3 eyes on me' to grab the attention of students in the classroom regularly. This was especially helpful in the primary classes as the students did not have the same attention span as their older counterparts. The students practised it even in my absence to get all their classmates settled for classroom transactions.

To further build self-management and self-awareness, we regularised meditation in the classroom. Initially, it was just on Saturdays, where sitting calmly without giggling for even four minutes was a huge task. But slowly, students eased into it, resting, sometimes taking support of the wall, as soft instrumental music played in the background. This helped in cultivating emotional resilience and awareness among the students.

Ma'am ka tabiyat kharab hai, aaj pareshan nahi karna. (Ma'am is unwell, don't disturb her today). One of my students went around whispering this in everyone's ears, on one of my sick days, for them to remain calm and focused during their class. Gestures like these of kindness and compassion become a reflection of democratic dialogues and praxis we hold in a classroom space. It shows not only their awareness of their surroundings but also self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making skills.

Buddy system

As an educator, in this attempt to create student-centred and democratic classroom experiences both to reinforce acceptable conduct as well as establish an equal partnership among the students, my role was to identify what the students struggled with. Understanding my students holistically consisted of home and community visits, which helped me connect the varying cultural and behavioural responses that I was receiving in a classroom.

A case in point was that of Anu, who would be regularly absent from school despite living right next to it. He was loud and responsive but struggled to write or focus on class. Irrespective of his loud responses, he was often ignored and silenced in the classroom. He ended up getting into fights very often and beating up other students in his class, who were a year younger than him. During a classroom discussion, I learned that his mother had left them, and his father was working outside the state. After planning with his classmates, we made a visit to his home. We shared some classroom experiences and encouraged him to come to class. We assured him help and implemented a 'buddy' system.

In the buddy system, students are paired based on their academic and behavioural needs and skills. Anu could easily do mental math and, when encouraged, made the effort to read in Hindi, (our second language) as well as English (our third language). This buddy system encouraged him to actively participate in class, build friendships and take ownership of the learning process of his partner. His classroom learning was influenced drastically and though he struggled to write more than a paragraph independently, he was able to read fluently both Hindi and English by the end of the school year. From being a child who engaged in fighting, he became the one stopping fights among younger students.

In conclusion

Expectations of complete obedience as a form of discipline in traditional classrooms are autocratic and authoritarian, which dehumanise both the students and the teachers in the classroom. Resorting to violence, that is, corporal punishment and verbal abuse reflects the absence of proactive classroom management, collaborative action and socio-emotional learning among the adults and children.

There is a need to perceive students from a humanising lens, where any practice we use within the classroom reflects our understanding of and interaction with the larger society. Being able to view students as active learners, who hold the capacity to participate in democratic decision-making processes is an important step. While school systems have established processes, such as *Bal Sansad* and being part of the School Management Committee (as student representative), children's voices remain largely unheard and invalidated.

It is up to us, as educators, to create processes within our daily routines and classroom transactions which

reinforce democratic practices through dialogue and praxis, further enabling them to participate in school systems and the larger society. After all, democracy is not a mechanical process, but a live, ongoing social necessity.

Names have been changed to protect children's identities.

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