

How we can make school celebrations inclusive

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Blog

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Representative image

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A young mother excitedly read out the school circular to her 6-year-old, telling her that she was required to come to school the next day for Christmas celebrations wearing clothes in any of the three Christmas colours of red, green and white. The child's face fell when she realised she did not have any 'nice' clothes in the colours mentioned.

The mother messaged me, and I immediately suggested that we go buy her a new dress. The mother replied that we could do that but what about the other children in the school who may not be able to afford this sudden expense? Kicking myself for not thinking better, I told her I completely agreed with her. We decided that she would explain this to the child. I wondered whether a child of six would be able to understand but, to my surprise, she did. Not only did she wear what she had but went off to school happy and excited about the Christmas celebration.

I remembered how a few of my schoolmates, from back when I was in school, did not come to school on the days we wore 'coloured dress'. They avoided being in settings that would make them feel 'less' than others. The struggle to fit in is real and life-long for most of us but harder for some.

Inclusion is complex. An inclusive school or classroom is welcoming and diverse. It is valuable for all because, in its right spirit, it provides an atmosphere of learning in which children are exposed to differences – in how they look, dress, learn, think or behave. They learn about different points of view. This understanding alone – of others' beliefs, values and opinions – may be the most valuable lesson that a child will learn in school that will help them grow up as a well-adjusted, respectful, open-minded and tolerant adult. It enables them to acquire two of the most critical life skills – conflict resolution and creative problem-solving.

The school or the classroom is the most suitable space for children to learn to listen to, understand and respect others' points of view. It is here that these can be internalised most effectively. If we cannot help them learn these in school, we fail our children. If our children cannot learn to read and respect others, the failure is ours.

Coming to the matter of Christmas celebrations in schools, I know the norm – not just for Christmas but for all other celebrations. Children come to school in traditional or festive clothes and celebrate festivals together. The problem is not with the idea; the problem is that we do not question the norms and ideas that must change to suit our times.

Christmas, for instance, can be celebrated in many other joyous ways to create the feeling of warmth and togetherness that is the true spirit of the festival. What if instead of a dress code, the children are given craft paper in the three colours and asked to create crafts that they enjoy, or are guided to make Christmas paper hats that they can gift to each other to wear and take photos to keep for life? A Christmas film can be screened for pre-schoolers. Schools can invite carol singers or people from the community to tell the children how the festival is celebrated in different parts of the world – the possibilities are countless. The only condition is that whatever the teacher/school decides to do must embrace every child in its joyous fold.

In our school and classroom setups, our only beacon for inclusion in any situation that we plan is to ask ourselves this one question – does it make the last child in the class happy; does it make them feel included?

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