

I too Can Get an Award! Mountain Climber's Award: A Case Profile

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Introduction

Individuals have “different learning styles”. This is an oft-stated principle with regard to learning and is also underscored as a pedagogic reality. However, are teachers prepared for how this difference is manifested in the classroom, and subsequently how the individual student experience is positioned?

In this article, I will attempt to describe the experiential dimensions of disability through the journey of a young adult who grew up with developmental delays in a form of a letter from the parent of that child. The interactions are set in a social world charged with competition, dominance of instant responses and a high frequency of dismissal of responses that are low on speed and action.

A Letter from a Concerned Parent

Dear Teacher,

Warm greetings from all those parents whose children are on the fringes of academic competence and are labelled as “children with special needs or with learning difficulties”. Schooling is more of a radically life-altering experience for children considered not typical and their families. In the contemporary social fabric, schooling is the only way to avoid social death and economic dependence. Parents whose children do not attend school, or find academic success difficult to achieve have many a trial and distressing moment, this is true of all so-called “non-performing” children.

Parental Diffidence: Parental Action and Collaboration

Parents often encounter the first signs of developmental delays in their child during infancy, before he/she starts school. However, paediatricians reassure them by saying that every child grows at his/her own pace. Sensitive paediatricians try to sooth parental distress by allowing them to hope for the achievement of typical milestones at varying pace. Of course every discipline has professionals who underplay emotion with a will to “not keep parents in the dark”. Hope of dreaming for the future of your child is crashed by proclamations “your child will never reach zones of achievement.” Do teacher training schools stress upon the principles of individual variation and a *range* of normal development as principles of curricular pedagogy?

Teacher, I would like to share this journey of neuro-atypicality for two reasons. Firstly, by law, classrooms now have to be inclusive and secondly, schools are places that reward neuro-typicality much like an average paediatrician. As an input for classroom processes, it will be useful for you to know that parents go through stages of shock, rejection, depression and denial, and finally to a state of acceptance when their child is diagnosed with a developmental disorder. This coming to terms with their child's limitations is fuelled by frequent jolts of distressing experiences, often immersing parents in a cycle of “chronic sorrow” (Cameron, Snowden & Orr,

1992). School should strive to build a space where children with special needs find stability and some attention as there is a need to build parental hope and initiative to nurture their child within the collective anonymity that confronts children with disabilities. The presence of “well performing and quick to respond children” pushes quiet and slow to warm-up children off the radar and dampens their spirit due to low performance which inevitably results due to not enough attention being paid to these children.

Teacher you are responsible for 45 wards, each trying to excel in examinations, and have years of experience with varying competency labels such as “children with special needs” or “children with learning difficulties”, which are mere euphemisms. Your responses and actions are steered by the parameters that monitor teacher performance, and marks secured by the children become indicators of your competence. Low performers bring down your efficiency. It is natural to be dismissive of a policy of inclusion where varying intelligences are bundled together. Our children, who are also victims of the social cycle, nonetheless derive emotional strength from everyday routines such as going to school. Moreover, they need to sustain links to mainstream academic-social interactions to feel included in the bigger social sphere. As parents, we need to learn to be organized, and provide insights for our child and circumvent the danger of negativity in atypical children. (Barbour, 1996; Gorman, 1999).

Examining the Errors: Academic Push as Emotional Strength

Amidst correcting piles of notebooks in the staff room before the next class, the note book that has “pesticide” instead of pesticide or “sulfuric” for sulphuric (since only the latter is being recognized as the correct spelling) in a science test is an unnecessary obstacle to speed. Unpredictable styles of comprehension and

communication surface with regular frequency. The pressure to catch up with pending work disallows that one moment required to decipher patterns that make certain narratives “illegible”. A phrase such as “figh-ween” may actually be a child’s attempt to say “fight between”. The addition of 3-4 marks may give a boost to the child’s drive to perform. Perhaps a close collaboration between the teacher and the parent can save such children from falling off the margins (Barbour, 1996; Gorman, 1999; Sabornie, 1994).

Diverse Learning Behaviours: Innovative Interventions

Alas! Teacher, your time is for the typical collective that is the “class as a group”, not for the groping individuals. Hence, it is easy to casually dismiss a *para* that is a summary of a narrative and reads “When I was talking to man called umbrella man and my golden rule and things did not follow as he again did the same thing.” This is because ideally it should read. “I had to leave aside my belief in the golden rule of trust as the umbrella man had cheated us.” You do not have enough time to see zigzags in sequential patterns and know that the child’s thoughts are cluttered as a result of slow sequential processing of thought.

As an involved parent, during a child specific intervention in a private school in New Delhi, 1998-2003, I recognised the mismatch between oral expression and its transfer to written text. The solution that proved to be most useful in this regard was to reduce the syllabus and use focus evaluation by preparing the child with a limited text. This helped us to train the mind for analysis of specific texts rather than cluttering the mind with sequential overload by exposing it to unlimited reading material.

Teacher, the inner world of the child lies in the errors that he/she displays. The joy in an “aha” discovery is overwhelming and connects you to

the perceptual world of children. Children's errors reveal their mental state and unique interpretation of norms. Theorists have called this a deep rupture in communication; however decoding and traversing this difficult terrain is possible through human effort. The trajectory of teaching is like a river; let us not forget that the stream that meanders creates tributaries.

Teacher, we empathize with your being rushed off your feet. Yet, this race with pace pushes children who express differently into corners to continue their struggle for survival. Their deficit becomes their destiny, turning them into "bodies who continue to be stationary or in a state of 'dys-functional' motion in the absence of an external force." It is important to be cautious and avoid the trap that Chandler (1994) recounts, "that school achievement has become equated with self-competency, and the loss of competence has led to feelings of inadequacy, depression, withdrawal and an uncaring attitude" (p. 163). He adds that for others, "poor school performance [leads] to dependency and learned helplessness as a maladaptive style of coping" (p. 163).

Classroom Identity

The challenges for the struggling child are not just limited to the increasing complexity in textual content or the child's inability to cope with long narratives and rules of syntax. The problems include being part of a classroom collective and its various classroom rhythms such as weekly tests, annual day productions, etc. One way to deal with this is to train the child to write in points and guide him/her to create one phrase for each point.

As a teacher your schedule is too packed to think of trivial things such as the agony and despair the child may experience when his/her friends get 2/2 with a "Good", while she receives a hurriedly scribbled "seen"—like some alms dropped for the urchins who come

running at the traffic light. Intolerance and impatience with deviation epitomizes our societal zest for order, and so we inherently avoid stress to face that one skip in the beat of the rhythms of life. Sometimes there can be elemental beauty in chaos. Disorder is basic to all creation. Have you ever thought that even nature has days without sunshine, when we get rain, which we look forward to? All children, irrespective of the colour of their blazer, can contribute in their own way to the organization of the school. Why do we forget that education is like lighting a lamp, not filling a pail? Some wicks take longer to catch the flame.

School Calendar and Individual Rhythms

For parents and educators, routines could numb the sounds of the varying cadences of individual voices. The chorus of "Yes ma'am/sir" immediately after "Have you understood?", drowns the lurking queries and silences of children below the so-called expected "margin". The tacit assumption here is that "there will be some who will not know"; the class needs to move on.

Jobs seem to make us flow with the tide of the school calendar, and we allow the cycle of school events to absorb our time, space, and soul. The role and responsibility of being a competent teacher diffuses the larger professional goals and the will to be a compassionate teacher. Please teachers, do not lose or submerge the desire to evolve and derive meaning from your profession. Involve parents as they have instinctual insights that can fuel pedagogical action (Jeynes, 2012).

The Flame of Hope Burns on

Indeed, the human spirit is soulful, always looking for something. The dormant zeal to give every child his/her due does find sparks in many teaching-learning interactions. A parent of a

child with Down's syndrome once called me to report about the perseverance of a class teacher in bolstering the confidence of her child. She said, "The teacher made my child sing alone in front of the whole class." The social and emotional efforts of the parents and the teacher towards achieving this feat for a neuro-atypical child are comparable to trainers for Olympian sports, and the feat is worthy of a gold medal. The triumph of the teacher and the mother embodied in the conversation made me remember the story of Helen Keller. However, we often forget that the persistence, patience and faith of Helen Keller's teacher made her (Helen Keller) achieve what she did. I am sure that like us, she must have had moments of despair where she must have wanted to throw up her hands in frustration.

I would like to recommend to you some excellent curricular pieces that comprise the pages of the texts that some of us teach. In particular, I would like to draw your attention to a lesson in a class VII Hindi textbook *Saras Bharti* entitled "Vardharaj". In the story, a Guru expels a boy named Vardharaj from his tutelage since he fails to display initiative and drive. The teacher believed in *parampara* and *dharma* (which both translate roughly as 'tradition'), and according to him the absence of *ichcha* and *titiksha* ('desire' and 'endurance') would not facilitate or invoke any *diksha* ('bestowing of power of a teacher'), thereby hindering the path of *shiksha* ('learning'). The child's inertia was seen as a betrayal of his parent's resources and expectations, and out of character in the teaching-learning process. The teacher's parting line to the errant pupil is "Go search for your truth", avoiding the use of "the truth"—a sensitive distinction and regard for individual personhood that allows a small door to remain open for the miraculous return of the prodigal pupil. Vardharaj grew up to write a commentary on Sanskrit grammar the entitled *Laghu sidhanta kaumadi*. His inspiration was

triggered by an observation of the groove made on the concrete wall of a well, made by the continuous rubbing of the rope while drawing water.

Parental Will Amidst Modern Confrontational Approach

Many of us parents seek that external human force to propel the latent spirit in our children that could come from any of you. Quite often, modern professionals stare blankly in our faces to proclaim "the truth", as it becomes their mission not to keep us in the dark of the inabilities that inflict our challenged children. For the parents, their world collapses each time professionals reassert the reality of their child. Brutal truths agitate and imbalance our tryst with struggle, and are a momentary setback to our goals. We feel distraught, but try not to allow despair to overcome us. Our children's sincere searching looks inspire us to not reconcile with the professional's "truth" declarations, and to try and find a way around things. Elevating the competence of our child and providing relevant opportunities becomes our mission. We sustain hope despite statements such as "Nothing can be done", or staff room exchanges such as, "These parents expect too much", or "It is so difficult to deal with unrealistic parents." Thoughts of dumping the schools or abandoning the prospects of education fleet in to blur our dreams, only to be re-focused by our children's prospective questioning, "Why don't I go to school?" Whatever be the child's inherent potential, the backdrop of an expected social reality for the child in the form of a regular institutional routine soon replaces our diffidence.

Being without a school routine would increasingly deplete the emotional and social strength of our children. We look towards you expectantly for that considered external force that will nurture slow bloomers. We look towards you to tend the limping wicks that require

repeated stoking to catch the flame. Our children are not Newtons, but they could be Einsteins (who had difficulty with spellings, and to whom speech came only after he was three).

Like all parents, we dream for our children! Dear Teacher, be the guiding spirit with a difference, ready to join the quest for assisting children who fumble their way to find their niche. Every child could be a winner, let us sustain hope and effort.

Isolation from the social mainstream would be devastating for a child's sense of self-worth when each neighbourhood child's school bus would blow its horn to beckon another day. The hope of every urban child in the present social context links to an everyday routine of school, to be a part of a greater social group. Our children also enjoy the slides, the playground jokes, the discussions on films, the shared stories and everything else that comprises the culture of childhood, and for which a peer group is central. For any type of action, there has to be an "interested adult" to provide a "special bond" in the schooling process to harness the possible.

Possibilities

Teacher, you must have heard of individualized teaching strategies for different learning styles, such as using multisensory methods with parent collaboration and special educators; inclusion needs to be propelled with multiple forces, and your help is essential. As described, specific educational interventions to remediate learning disabilities need to be implemented. We need to have a special focus on supportive social-emotional inputs to avoid isolation and neglect (Prakash, 2012).

Simple psychological interventions can have a positive effect on our children; this could be in the form of educational accommodations that facilitate task participation and completion such as a sealed test paper prepared by special educators (Chandler, 1994). Activities that boost

self-confidence, such as serving as a peer mentor or a teacher's special assistant, help to address the child's need for self-worth. Creating "buddy" groups to promote social participation is another way of helping them.

Listening to the Parent and Above all Creating Parent "Share" Groups

One Last Story: assistance for aspiring and achieving

In a meeting with the Principal, a parent thanked the school for all the flexible and innovative interventions. While expressing the joy of the child and his growing confidence, the parent described how the child was aspiring for the 100% Attendance award in the School award ceremony. The child stated that any other excellence award did not seem feasible. The Principal smiled and appreciated the child's reality check. However, in the next year's awards list, the Principal added a new award—"Mountain Climber's Award", for extraordinary feats of achievement. This further boosted the child's confidence to fly to different peaks.

Sincerely

Concerned parent

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