

Diversity, alternative schooling and the RTE

Within the last two decades Elementary Education in India has seen the emergence and entrenchment of ambitious macro programmes like the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), and the more mammoth Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The canvas of Elementary Education that is being looked at through these programmes is vast, diverse and complex. Yet when viewed through macro lenses we are faced with the homogenising brushes of generalisations and number games, and with the challenge of losing sight of important specifics. This has often resulted in de-contextualised programmes which are mismatched to the needs of many learners and teachers and therefore remain irrelevant and ineffective.

At one extreme the problems of poverty and low educational achievement continue to be multidimensional and complex, while at the other end the spectrum gears up for the challenges of the global world. Within this huge expanse if we want to regard schools as places where all children will learn, regardless of their home circumstances, then it is vital to build informed understandings of specific contexts and diverse needs of young learners and find ways of actively engaging with these during learning transactions. For this purpose schools, classrooms and learning spaces will need to respond meaningfully to the socio- historical, linguistic and cultural contexts of children who study in them. Without this, several children will slip by the fold of alien classroom interactions and continue to remain excluded and marginalised.

My intensive experience inside school classrooms over the past few years suggests that not only are many children unable to actualise their potentials within the demands of mainstream classrooms, for a large number of children the experience of early schooling is in fact one of facing rejection and acquiring a low self esteem. These experiences can have a long lasting negative impact on a little child. I have been deeply concerned to find that for many young learners whom I work with; schooling can become a barrier to learning. These same children have

been found to blossom and actualise their potentials in more informal learning spaces. Surely this is a matter which requires some serious thought and reflection?

As a teacher of young learners, I have often struggled to break through the branding and labels that many school going children wear on their sleeves as it were. From a young age children in schools often get labeled as “the bright ones”, “the duffers”, “the mediocre” and so on. These labels seem to determine their role and status within classrooms and to a large extent within the larger spaces of school and life. Like many other teachers I too have tried to engage with classroom practices that are driven by achievement scores, learner outcomes and performance aggregates while at the same time trying to honour learner diversity. This often meant doing a balancing act between the conflicting objectives of producing measurable “results” and attempting to advance classroom practices based on a respect for democratic processes. It has meant facing the challenge of matching curricular requirements with the diverse needs of learners and with an understanding of the caste, class, culture, language and gender dimensions that inform classroom life. It has meant often experiencing the helplessness of failure. As a consequence I have been nagged by questions like how do I address difference in the classroom? How do I provide a non- threatening environment to children from diverse and sometimes marginalized backgrounds who have internalized rejection, and are afraid to explore and who dare not risk the humiliation of making mistakes? How do I provide challenges to children who are bored? How do I enter the impenetrable barriers behind which vulnerable, fragile little selves hide, afraid to answer and be laughed at or to be abused, afraid to be rejected; children who prefer the comfort and shelter of silent non participation?

Through several years of classroom experience I found that the situation is not simply a matter of altering the framework of classroom expectations and competitiveness. There are several more complex issues at work that need to be addressed while evaluating / assessing children’s performance. Evaluating diverse groups of learners through pre determined quantifiable tools of measurement has

often felt like trying to add or subtract unequal fractions without addressing the underlying issues of their comparability or equivalence. As a teacher I have often felt that I was being compelled into comparing children on measures that did not take into account their socio- cultural and linguistic difference and which were skewed in the favour of some cultural groups as against others. This difference became mind boggling when one witnessed the same measures of achievements being used across schools. This meant children from well-endowed elite schools at one end of the spectrum being compared with children from resource poor and depleted schools at the other end. In a system that is so obviously skewed, the struggle for keeping intact the self esteems and self-confidence of disadvantaged children can be daunting. Within the RTE mandate of a 25% quota for children from disadvantaged and weaker sections of society in all private schools, such issues will now assume a greater significance within and across schools.

Teachers within the mainstream educational system need to be equipped to understand their learners and feel in charge of the learning environment for each child. If classrooms are to honour learner diversity then it is important that teachers are able to take a culturally sensitive stance while negotiating learning. This requires opportunity to get to know children and how they learn. It also requires sensitivity on the part of teachers to the ways in which children are similar and the ways in which they are different. Teachers need to learn to ask for and receive the support which equips them to act, based on knowledge of culture, cognition and schooling. Yet, within the present educational scenario in this country, teacher support of this kind is abysmal and several classrooms continue to experience a major social distance between teachers and learners and between centrally devised learning pedagogies and learners.

Large scale assessments of performance aggregates and learner outcomes, research and academic reports, and available documentation of Elementary Education experiences have been unequivocal in stating that standardised, pre-designed or centralised curricula and in-service programmes have not been able

do the trick. Teachers have been locked into instructional practice dictated by administrators and policy boards. Centralised, pre-designed in-service programmes and school curricula have been shown to be inefficient in informing classroom processes and practice; especially within situations of diversity. Their distanced objectivity has made them mechanical and ineffective for addressing the complexity of classroom realities.

Teachers need to feel more in control of their situation. They need to be supported with access to knowledge, and tools of cultural appreciation and critical enquiry which will enhance their potentials to engage with their day to day class room reality. Teachers need to respond to children's experiences and not to their overt behaviours. For example over the past few years I have found that a child's silence in the classroom need not be a lack of awareness or knowledge, but can in fact be the culturally learned behaviour of a sensitive child, borne out of respect for an older person or a behaviour which is acquired as a coping mechanism through an existential existence which requires young children to constantly negotiate situations of challenge and risk. Yet, one often finds such children are over and over again at the receiving end of harsh judgements or punitive action, which only ensures that they go further into a shell and remain out of reach of classroom interactions. Over years of classroom based experiences I have come to carry many such little faces in my head.

With the Right to Education Act coming into effect from April 2010 all children in the 6 to 14 years age group, in this country, are to be brought under the mantle of schooling. Once Education is a Fundamental Right, it becomes mandatory for the State to provide free and compulsory schooling. This can only happen if children from diverse backgrounds are able to experience school as a positive learning experience, which widens their knowledge, skills and confidence levels. This also requires that teachers and classrooms are sensitive and accepting of the particular needs of children who are interacting with the world of school for the first time. Young learners also need to be gently and gradually prepared for

making the transition from home to school, so that they begin to enjoy the experience of school and feel accepted and not threatened by it. This means preparing young learners with adequate skills and knowledge for engaging successfully with the expectations of schooling and of the world of written words. It goes without saying that unless new entrants experience success within school learning and develop positive self esteems; they are not going to be able to learn confidently and independently.

As more and more children in India are brought under the mantle of schooling, we find many of them are unable to cope with the expectations of school, and as a consequence issues based on school efficiency, classroom participation and school retention continue to be causes of concern,. Young learners from marginalized backgrounds are particularly vulnerable, as they struggle to build tentative and fragile relationships with the world of school and with the larger world of written words. Sixty odd years after attaining independence we find that there are still large numbers of young learners in this country who are struggling to meet the expectations of schooling, while many others who are unable to cope simply drop out of the school system.

Under this situation it is vital that alternative and innovative programs for building bridges between the worlds of home and school are strengthened, and that these are not wiped out under the mantle of the RTE Act. Such school programmes enrich knowledge building by providing opportunities to build deeper insights of diverse learning situations and experiences. They play an important role towards strengthening the participation of a wider group of children within mainstream schooling. It is important to devise mechanisms for supporting and building strong links between such alternate learning spaces / programmes and the mainstream school system. These can then serve to enhance and support school learning and make it meaningful for young learners from varied backgrounds.

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