



Who Decides Where I Belong?

Ritika Chawla

“The bell rang. I took out my tiffin box from my bag and left the classroom. I climbed down the stairs and went to sit at my usual place in the shed area. Looking through the iron grill rods, I saw a group of girls from my class sitting in a circle under the tree. Some other kids played in the ground. I finished my lunch and went and sat next to the bai. Bai is my only friend in school. She works in the office and calls me ‘Shaktimaan’ to tease me, but I like it. Each day at school seems the same, each lunch break... I walk around looking for familiar faces each afternoon.” –Sneha*

“The school Annual Day is coming up. I’m very excited. This is the only time of the year I feel wanted. I love dancing and I’m good at it and all the groups planning a dance performance want me in it. This is different from other days in class. Every time a teacher gives us work to do in a group, no one takes me till the teacher tells them to. Even if the groups are divided by the teacher, I am given the easiest thing to do like collecting pictures. I know I have problems in writing and remembering things but it is not that I do it on purpose. Why can’t I be part of groups in class too and not just for dancing?” –Sonal*

These two stories of Sneha and Sonal are true. They both are classmates in grade 8 of an inclusive school. When I say ‘inclusive’, I mean that this is a school where children from all types of socio-economic backgrounds and learning difficulties along with neurotypical children study in the same classroom. Children with learning difficulties or disabilities are provided extra support by the school and teachers by way of remedial classes, parallel classes in Math and English, different curriculum, different

assessments, etc. All the teachers and the staff know the children with special needs irrespective of whether they are teaching them or not. The parents are kept in loop for every decision taken and a strong communication bond is built involving parents, teachers, principal and at times the school counsellor. Yet, there is something that neither the school nor the parents can control or change for children such as Sneha and Sonal. It is the ‘other’ students in the school.

Sneha has Down’s Syndrome and due to that her disability is ‘visible’ to others. It’s not like children in her class never approached her. In the beginning when a new student joined her class, she tried talking to Sneha but kept away once she felt that Sneha was an extremely sensitive child. Though in general her classmates never bothered her or teased her, Sneha does lack friends in a way. Her life, unlike other children’s, is not about ‘girls stay-overs’ or teenage birthday parties to which she rarely gets invited. She is asked out only when the whole class is being invited but not when it is a few special friends a child is inviting.

Sonal on the other hand did not really lack friends as such. She’s a wonderful dancer and liked participating in all extra-curricular activities. Hence, she realized that she was ‘not intelligent enough’ only when it came to academic work. Yet, these subtle forms of discrimination hurt her and she does not share her feelings with her parents or teachers as she feels they might worry too much. She is also part of the parallel class with fewer children and even though this has helped her build a special bond with her English teacher she stills vies to be in the regular class.

**Name changed to protect identity.*

For children like Sonal, being part of inclusive settings is tough and for children like Sneha it becomes even worse because their disability is clearly visible. Being treated as equal by the school teachers and staff or with more sensitively such as being part of the school annual day does not cover up for what these children go through on a daily basis. In situations where these children were teased or made fun of, their teachers intervened and reprimanded other students. There were times teachers held circle time to make students understand the diversity in class and be sensitive to others' needs; they even had one-on-one conversations with both the child with special needs and his/her peers. But beyond a point even their peers are children and 'lecturing' them can work negatively. Hence, to what extent could teachers really interfere in such matters? How much could they really control or change for these students? Could they really influence student behavior to such an extent? In the long run maybe yes, but not immediately.

Most students have a friend or group of friends based on things that commonly interest them or to fulfill their basic need for sharing and expressing thoughts and feelings. But at some level, children with special needs seem to be lacking this. As mentioned earlier the school provides additional support to children with special through parallel classes. Even children who are struggling with Math and English due to other reasons such as low scores are part of these classes. Though most children said that parallel classes are helpful but those who have never been part of these classes prefer not to be sent there.

On being asked about the experience of the students once they leave the inclusive school setting, the principal of this particular school mentioned that children who were 'normal' came back and thanked the school, feeling gratitude for having being exposed to an inclusive setting. For example, when they experienced diversity in their universities or work places they were more sensitive towards others; but none of the students with special needs came back to talk about their experiences and share if they too had a good time during their schooling. Were they really happy in

school just as all other students? I'm sure each child in school has a different experience from all others but there are some things that we all cherish all our lives and most important of those are the friendships we form at school that at times last a lifetime.

Being in the education space for last four years, I have come to realize that there is a lot that needs to be changed and a lot more that can be changed. There are many dilemmas that I can think of pertaining to inclusive settings, such as if I were a peer or even the teacher of these students I would struggle to understand whether to be empathetic or treat them as any other "normal" students. Would these students do better in special schools or sending them there is a form of exclusion worse than having them treated differently within inclusive settings?

I understand that inclusion is probably the way to be if we want to reach out to every child in this country, and it can be implemented better if we train teachers appropriately, have special educators in all schools, involve parents and community to shift mindsets, change assessment formats and improve curriculum and pedagogy. The question that is difficult to answer is: is there a way to make sure that all children have a great schooling experience despite their special needs? Is there a way to curb exclusion completely? This is a complex issue and as mentioned earlier requires teachers, parents, counsellors and special educators to come together to find a solution. And for that matter the solution might lie in smaller steps such as the teacher dividing the task herself instead of leaving it to the students or making children understand the value of the process of working collaboratively rather than being merely grade-oriented. Encouraging peers to accept children with special needs as they are, rather than feeling pity or keeping away from them. I know that children with disabilities know about their limitations but the least we can do is not to make them realize these constantly but accept them for the being they are with due respect. To bring about such a mindset change in the society we need to build awareness and propagate inclusion among our communities.

One thing is apparent - we have a long way to go before we bring about this attitudinal and behavioral change among our students. Inclusion is a far-fetched dream for the Indian education system, and we stand at the brink of the change. This change has to be first in the perspectives of teachers, schools and other institutes, parents, peers and the community at large. Also, this change has to be top-down and bottom-up; with policy

changes at the top and practice-based changes at the bottom. Till we involve parents, teachers and other stakeholders at every step including the children with special needs themselves and their peers, bringing about inclusion will continue to remain a huge challenge.

Ritika is currently working as Program Manager-National Fellowship with India School Leadership Institute, an organisation that trains school leaders/principals/head teachers. She has recently completed MA (Education) from Azim Premji University and is an alumna of Teach for India (TFI). During her TFI fellowship she taught in a municipal school in Mumbai and also worked on a project to get her school building reconstructed. This article is a part of her detailed study on 'Understanding Teachers', Parents' and Students' Mindsets in and towards Inclusive classroom settings' as part of masters programme. She can be reached at ritika@indiaschoolleaders.org.