

An Observed Class

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Classroom observations have always been seen with a sight of doubt from the teachers' end and, being a teacher, I also realise the authority a class observer has whether communicated or symbolic. It gives a feeling to the teacher that the observer is on a higher plane and that by the end of the class the observer will point out the issues with the class and the way they were dealt with. As a teacher, I too have seen this happening and others will also agree that observation is more in the mode of inspection of the class than a way of helping out the teacher in some possible way.

In the Azim Premji School, the meaning of classroom observation has been seen in a different perspective. Here, classroom observation is meant to help out the teacher in such a way so that he is able to see those things which he would have missed out in the flow of the class. It's seen more as an assistance to the teacher in observing the micros of the class than a fault finding mission. These type of class observations involve a lot of patience and thought of converting a challenge into a learning opportunity.

I was in 5th class of EVS. The teacher was prepared as the classroom observational plan was already shared with him. The topic-Water - was quite interesting though common. So as a process I had a discussion with the teacher concerned and he had shared his plan with me, giving a brief of what he would be doing in that period. It looked like a smooth plan: there were some activities, some discussion points, some writing work and a brief small group discussion. On the whole, the lesson plan looked well balanced and together, we went to the class.

The teacher started the class with a recap and students were quite participative, so now the teacher moved to the plan of doing some activity on 'safe drinking water' as a part of his agenda. It was to bring awareness in the students that how water gets polluted and becomes unsafe for drinking. The idea of the activity was to have a transparent glass of water and mix some dust into

it and ask the students that is it now fit for drinking? The expected response was 'No', when the teacher would have followed it up that mixing of impurities make the tap/ ground water unsafe for drinking.

When the teacher started off with this activity, he took a glass and poured some water from a water bottle and asked one of the students to come and take a sip from it, he came and took a sip. So it showed that the water is fit for drinking. Now on the next stage the teacher mixed some chalk powder to the water and asked now can anyone drink it? It was anticipated that the answer would be a big, one -voiced NO butit was a silence..... why? What happened? The teacher asked again can anyone drink it?

'Yes', said one boy.

It was a challenge to the teacher. 'I can drink it', he said, 'but you will have to keep the glass still for some time'.

I, who was an observer in the class, also had no clue regarding the solubility of the chalk powder in water as I had never tested it. But my misconception was that chalk would get dissolved in water. (Now I am calling it a misconception).

It was a challenge to the status of a teacher, which was clear. Now the teacher posed another challenge by adding more complexity to the situation. He said that 'Ok, maybe with chalk powder you will be able to drink it, but now let me add mud and sand and dust,' which he actually did and then asked the class, 'Now can any one drink it?'

Here the situation looked as if the plan would be executed as a demo class to the observer. But kids being kids now had a different line of thought: again one of the students said, 'Yes, I can'.

'How?' asked the teacher.

'I will pour the dirty water in the RO mechanic's inlet and get portable water from the tap,' was the reply.

This was another level of challenge the students posed for the teacher. The teacher also didn't

want to lose his face. So he said, 'Fine, but what if you don't have an RO machine?' The idea was to bring the students to the pre-decided and expected response, but the students were not ready to give the standard response which was as expected as per plan. Silence..... once again!

Then, a mild voice: a girl said, 'Yes I can do it without RO'.

At this, the teacher ran out of patience and he said 'Fine. You may be able to do it, but the idea is to say that if the impurity is mixed with the water, it becomes unfit for drinking.' And then the period went on as per the plan of the teacher. The class got over.

After the day was over, both of us sat together to discuss on how the class went off. In the meeting, the teacher acknowledged that because of some of the students the class went for a toss, and his plan got derailed, etc. Over the discussion I asked him what if he had asked those who still felt that water can be made fit for drinking to prove their claim. As teachers we can always throw up challenges and ask them to prove the opposite. So in that feedback session I shared a plan with him for the next day that he would continue the topic and ask those who felt that the water could be made fit for drinking should come forward and show us how they intended to do it. Let them make a list of the materials needed which we would try to provide. Let's see how it unfolds.

Next day teacher went to the class openly and went on with the discussion we had. It came as a surprise that almost 75% of the class was ready to show

and prove their claims. So he made the list and arranged for the required material. It was a surprise that many group of students who had no clue of distillation and other techniques of separation were using them in practice.

One group of students was boiling the water in the glass over a candle and the vapour was being collected and condensed vapour was being collected in a separate glass.

Another group was using three water bottles which were cut open. One was used as a sieve and the water collected in it was filtered again using a piece of clean cloth, followed by a layer of stone, sand and charcoal.

Though there were limitations of the equipment and the experience, the theoretical part of the process was intact. One student showed me how he would have separated chalk powder from the water. I could see it that the chalk powder became a sediment and the water above it was clear and transparent. Though chemically it might not have been fit for drinking, physically the process of separation was clear.

The best part was that for all of us it was a pleasant surprise that the students of 5th class knew more than what we had anticipated. We had never thought that the students would know these complex separation techniques. Now I think that maybe we underestimate our students and keep them confined only to a certain level unless they clearly show that they are capable of doing much more than what we are making them do.





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