

Total Acceptance

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I will begin this article by stating an obvious fact about ourselves: we are constantly concerned about whether we are acceptable to others or not. The word *acceptable* is actually a bit weak—what we want is to be loved, adored, admired... And the fact of this constant and humming need hits us very hard when we suspect or realise that our peers do not accept us the way we are, faults and all.

In the same way, children's inner lives are not free of this need for unconditional acceptance from quite an early age. They want it most keenly from their peers, yet these same peers are very prone to making alliances that are inclusive and exclusive at the same time, creating *us-and-them* groups. The lines and divisions tend to shift around considerably, making children feel left-out now and then. In one way, this is good, though it also creates a constant sense of insecurity among them. The exception, however, is the child who stands out in class as being *different* and who can become a more lasting target of ostracism.

Who is *different* in class?

Any child can be different if he or she is unable to conform to certain standards, some undefined culture, some unspoken norms. So, it could be the child whose reading or arithmetic skills are significantly below par for the class, or the child who has difficulty managing her attention and behaviour in and out of the classroom. It could be the child who has a physical difficulty of any sort, or the child who engages in *stimming* (a repetitive behaviour that children on the autism spectrum sometimes display as a coping mechanism). Whatever the cause, children in these situations suffer doubly. They have a primary difficulty and are keenly aware that for the other children, things just seem to be easier. But instead of acceptance and affection from peers, they face rejection, ridicule and isolation. It does not seem to matter whether these are gross or subtle – it hurts just as much to be called a name or excluded from a whispered exchange as it is to be hit.

Given that children are too young to be talked out

of such reactions, it has been of interest to me and my colleagues to see what kind of school culture can lead to a total acceptance of everyone, no matter what their difficulties are. We are interested in moving away from a model where the so-called *normal* students are encouraged to accept those who are *different*. Total acceptance could be a very different thing and such a culture would emphasise the essential *same-ness* of all human experience, show that respect does not have to be earned or deserved and even question the deep assumption that each of us is something more than our habits, memories, and attitudes.

Same-ness

Psychological research has shown that even infants have a tendency to prefer those who are like them in some way. Researchers show a baby with two puppets who either like or dislike her own favourite food item. The baby prefers to play with the puppet that shares her likes and is even in favour of the other puppet being punished in some way!ⁱ Studies like this with numerous babies have established that we are born with a strong urge to make *us-and-them* divisions on rather flimsy bases. One clue from this research is that when one emphasises *similarities*, rather than *differences*, it is easier for children to feel empathy, affection and companionship with each other.

Where are our similarities most evident? In all the areas that most schooling is designed to carefully steer clear of! Social interaction and emotional expression are all very much present in any school environment, but adults rarely make these the focus of an education. What if social interaction and emotional expression were at the *heart* of education? It would soon become clear to the children that everyone has their moods, their tangled relationships, their challenges and limits, their love of play and a silly joke and so on.

Everyone needs sympathy and help at some time or other, not only the child with a learning difficulty. In fact, our feelings unite us *all*, adult and child alike, because all of us have our ups and downs;

all of us have our difficulties. Also, when a school is about much more than academic subjects, there is no reason to single out the child who needs more one-on-one reading time in particular. Another child demands teacher attention on the games field, another needs extra assistance in the pottery class and yet another needs a great deal of help in finishing his lunch! In this way, the *same-ness* becomes apparent without us having to articulate it in clichés like, ‘We all have our strengths and weaknesses.’

Respect and affection

A hundred years ago, the writer Max Ehrmann wrote *Desiderata*, a beautiful prose poem, from which one line has always stayed with me: *You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.* Something about this simple statement has helped me tremendously as a teacher. Indian society has become so merit-obsessed and we are so sold on respect and admiration that must be earned or deserved in some demonstrable way.

In contrast, let me paint a picture of an ideal school culture, where the adults’ respect and affection are automatically given to all children, irrespective of their differences. I am not talking about praise or even appreciation. *Respect* takes the form of listening, taking what a child says with the right amount of seriousness, not talking-down to the child and so on. Of course, none of this needs to stop the adults from making strong demands of the children and challenging their behaviour. In such a school, would children pick up the culture without any deliberate instruction? This would help to create a wider atmosphere of acceptance.

It sounds idyllic! I can say from experience that although it is possible to create such a culture among the adults in a school, the children do not unflinchingly follow suit. Sometimes, the temptation to feel superior by putting down a peer is too strong, and there is a repetitive quality to this behaviour—the same targets, the same culprits. Yet what is of value is the strong and continual message from the adults that everyone is a ‘child of the universe’, needing no justification or reason to be accepted by each other. In such an environment, a child with a learning difficulty can feel secure in the love and regard of his or her teachers. The child may, however, still feel inadequate through comparison with peers.

What is the way out? We have regular dialogue

with students and teachers about the destructive nature of comparison, and how we all suffer when we compare ourselves with another and feel either inferior or superior. Even though we know that comparison is futile, however, we still indulge in it from time to time. But as children grow older, there is a definite impact of this culture on them. I believe, they genuinely do not think that a person’s worth is measured by what they can or cannot do. Their relationships with each other are warm and complex and their abilities or disabilities are completely irrelevant to their sense of bonding.

Spinning stories of self

It is tempting to complete the phrase *total acceptance* with the phrase *of who you are*. That is, we also crave acceptance of a personal nature, our stories of who we are, our particular likes and dislikes: in short, of our selves. But I feel that as long as I hold on to pictures of who I am, it is easy to hurt me. Yes, a child may want to replace the picture ‘I am bad at writing’ with ‘I am good at football’. But any picture or self-description is a straw person, vulnerable to being knocked over. One attempt we make at our school is to watch this need to describe ourselves, tell stories about who we are and want to be. Spinning these stories creates a self that must be protected against insult and, conversely, be propped up by praise. These are illusory movements, we see, although we are in the habit of responding to life by doing exactly this all the time.

Everyone says that the greatest psychological challenge faced by children with learning difficulties is that they suffer low self-esteem. Only a world that values high self-esteem will make a problem called ‘low self-esteem’. There is no doubt that having a learning difficulty is a challenge in today’s educational scenario, but it need not become a *problem*. Add a self that is vulnerable to psychological hurt and you have created the problem: you are stuck in a position of offering comfort, false praise, searching for something that compensates the child emotionally. I remember one of our students sharing years after graduating that he had felt uncomfortable with praise for his reading, which he knew he did with difficulty and not very well. It felt patronising, he told us. What was the urge, the need in us, to praise him? Some need to prop up a strong sense of self? When this need to prop up person-hood is not there, everyone is more relaxed.

A great deal of research is going into how we can support the learning of children with various kinds of difficulties and, hopefully, over the next decade or so, all this will bear fruit in our classrooms. It is going to be as important to address the psychological side, the feelings of difference that arise in everyone's minds. While counselling and therapy can address feelings of inadequacy in the individual child, the effects are somewhat limited, I feel. Why not look at psychological well-

being as residing in the class or school as a whole? Resilience, as a property of an environment, a community, rather than of an individual, is more holistic, more compassionate. No amount of individualised counselling and therapy can bring about a shift in the culture of a school, and this is where I believe we should put our energy. I hope that some of the ideas I have outlined in this article will help educators in their journey to create a school culture of total acceptance.

¹ For more such fascinating studies, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRvVFW85IcU>



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