

My Experiments in the Classroom

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More often than not, in the school set up, it is the *product* that gets rewarded instead of the *process*. The final assessment paper becomes a statement of *capability* instead of being a statement of *progress*. What is happening wrongly influences, and sometimes overshadows, what can. If a child is not reading, we say that the child cannot read. Most times, this inaccurate conclusion stems from a belief that a parent or educator might hold about the idea of capability. The belief might be that some children cannot learn, or some children cannot learn a particular subject, or in a particular way or that some children just do not want to learn.

I did not hold any such belief. At least, I thought I did not. And, when I pursued an MA in Education from the Azim Premji University, whatever beliefs relating to children's inability to learn I might have had were also questioned constantly. What I gained from the two years of studying various perspectives on Child Development is that learning to teach is gaining perception of why children do not learn or learn to fail. But nothing led me to believe that children cannot learn.

However, even well-intentioned stakeholders with a firm belief that every child can learn might find it difficult to translate this belief into practice. Sometimes, we do not have the adequate tools to turn the *cannot* into the *can*. Sometimes we might lack sufficient insight into the context of the child and thus not be able to reach the root cause of why the child is not learning and, mistakenly, conclude that the child cannot learn.

In this article, I wish to revisit some of the practices I tried to incorporate in my classroom as I worked with children in and outside of school settings, to ensure that every child is included in the learning process in a way that every child can learn.

Grouping and differentiated learning

Grouping children in different and creative ways works very well to counter the effects of a one-style-fits-all approach which may put certain children at a disadvantage. While assigning groups, I would also provide options for different kinds of engagement within each group.

During one such endeavour, children of class IV in a school in Tamil Nadu wrote poems on food and

nutrition to display in the school canteen. They worked in groups and within a group, one member would think of ideas, another could draw, a third would create the poem and one would write it down. The tasks of each would rotate for one activity to another, say, writing welcome messages for the entrance. Through this process, by the end of the term, all children had written a poem, either for the school canteen, the garden, the entrance or the classroom.

In class VI, we made an *All about the Solar System* book. Each child could choose the kind of writing they wanted to engage with. Some children chose to write a factual piece, some a narrative, some wrote an imaginative story, one child wrote the introduction, some children who were absolutely refusing to write, labelled pictures and illustrated the book, while one of them wrote the title and the summary. In this way, every child was involved in the learning process and worked on some writing skills at his/her own level. But having one end-product, which was jointly created, made sure that every child was part of the learning process and believed that he/she not only *could*, but *did*, learn in a visible way.

Flexible seating arrangements

Sometimes just changing the seating arrangement of the classroom enables a facilitator to ensure that every child is learning. I especially like the use of a circular seating style as it instantly allows all children to not just look at the facilitator but also at each other. This simple act of looking at one another goes a long way in enabling inclusion and participation. I have also tried huddled seating for storytelling. Huddling gives children a feeling that they are part of some important, secret activity and this usually encourages the 'disrupters', or ones who would wander off, to also join in. I have also found that huddling creates a sense of ownership and team spirit, which enables children with low motivation levels to take an active part in the process of learning.

Apart from what it does for participation, I found that changing the seating arrangements helped me escape patterns and labels that might have formed during the classes. Dissociating children from their fixed places and patterns made me see them in a

completely new light. I feel like this broke the *pre-emptive chain*. Surprisingly, it also broke boundaries for children, especially those of gender and groups, such as the last benchers.

Establishing personal connect with the curriculum

The founder of the school I currently work at recently reminded us that *every child is a context*. While I think that this is completely true, it is also true that the education system cannot account for each and every context. Accounting for even local context poses a huge, unresolved challenge to curriculum and resource creation. In such a case, a system that accounts for each child would be nothing short of the ultimate education fairy-tale!

However, in the day-to-day work of teaching, it does not seem so elusive. While it is still a huge challenge, trying to think of ways in which personal stories, histories, nuances, interests and just about anything can be included in the class goes a long way in making sure that every child is learning. Some anecdotes from my experience of trying to do this, still stay with me.

One of these is from an *edu-drama* class which was conducted outside of the school setting. One child (K) would refuse to take part at all and just stand against the wall.

We built a warmup routine where every child would start with standing against the wall, talk to the wall about his/her day and then come into the circle before we would start class. So, K's behaviour became normal, accepted, shared and also fun. This was step 1. The second part that made this work was that I did not force him or shame him, but also did not ignore him or discount him.

Gradually, he saw that he could trust the space and that we were trusting him. He chose to slowly become a part of the main lesson. We eventually stopped the ritual of starting at the wall and replaced it with other strategies/activities.

The other experience was with a child in class VI who refused to take part in the social science class. I started talking to him after class about his interests and his life. I got to know that he likes collecting stones. So, we started talking about the Stone Age

and I asked him to imagine that he is from the Stone Age and we used his stone collection to see what kind of tools could be made with them. This served as an initial factor to motivate him and see how the subject could be connected to his personal life.

However, such an approach is not free from its own problems, one being that a teacher does not usually have the time or space to personally engage with each child and many times, he/she may also lack the flexibility and autonomy required to make such inclusions.

I have found that talking to children during playtime, bus-time, waiting time and getting to know about their life and context whenever one finds the opportunity can guide teaching-practice and even teacher-talk a lot. Even if it is subtle, the references to children's lived realities helps in including them and making them a part of a distanced curriculum. I would use anecdotes and experiences from children's lives to create examples in the class. I also used any details that I could find about the children in Reading Comprehension passages that I created as part of worksheets or even assessments.

What I have reflected upon are just a few practices that I have used and that have worked reasonably well. They do come with their own set of challenges and feasibility problems. But to me, eventually, whether every child can learn or not comes down to whether the adult (parent, teacher, school principal, textbook author or any other stakeholder) in his/her life believes that the child can learn. I do not mean this as a personal or sentimental belief, but as an informed, examined belief in the idea that every child can learn, and that every child can learn everything. What can and does differ is the learning curve, but learning can happen.

As I mentioned, in many ways, the system fails certain children and they do not learn. This failure to learn can easily be equated with an inability to learn. And as long as we can watch out for that misguided conclusion, and truly believe that given the right context, conditions and processes, every child can learn, we will see ways in which we can build our classrooms to ensure that every child does learn.



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