

Bridging Social Distance Through Curricular Interventions

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I will start this article with an illustrative example of work done with a group of schools located in the south-western fringes of the city of Kolkata. There is a strong presence of an informal economy in the neighbourhood, by way of kite-making, *zari* work, embroidery, etc. and children are often engaged in these activities to augment their family income. Given the hardships encountered by the families on a daily basis, education is relegated to a position of low priority for the families and children are reluctant to attend schools where they are not able to fit in properly.

Creating learning environments

Teachers' approach

If we want every child to benefit from learning opportunities, a supportive and encouraging learning space is needed, especially for children who face several kinds of impediments, as do the children from the schools that I am talking about. As they are from migrant families, the main reason for their poor learning achievement is the socio-linguistic barrier, as the medium of instruction offered in the schools is Bengali. The gap between home and school language is no doubt a big impediment to learning, but it is the social distance of the teachers with the children and their inability to respond effectively to their students' distinct and differentiated learning needs, which is primarily responsible for the low levels of motivation in the children.

As the key agent in the classroom, it is the teacher who is responsible for setting the overall tone of the classroom and it is around the persona of the teacher that the children's primary socialisation and learning have to take place. This was, somehow, missing in these schools. We were familiar with the social context of these children as we have been working in this area for quite some time in an interesting project in collaboration with the city police, where education centres have been set up inside police stations. Ironically, it is these safe spaces *within* police stations that were able to provide children with a fear-free and secure

environment because of the emotional connect and bonding that was created between the adults and the children concerned. The teachers from our organisation who were placed in these centres also played the role of caregivers.

Safe spaces

In these centres, the teachers took special care to give children a sense of belonging and their parents to feel welcome and involved. The majority of these children face subtle to direct forms of social exclusion due to their linguistic and/or religious background and have a stigma attached to their 'potential criminality' due to their family circumstances, as this part of the city also has a high crime rate. However, the children who come are eager to learn and are seldom absent.

Through our work with children in these neighbourhoods, we came to realise that for learning to be effective, what is needed most is an anxiety-free, emotionally safe space that is inclusive in nature; a space where children are able to express themselves without fear or inhibition. Hence, when we were approached by the government to provide similar support to the primary schools in the vicinity, we were happy to help.

At our first interaction, the teachers expressed their inability to handle the layers of complexities that they knew they would have to face. They knew that teaching the textbook was not the way because of the language barrier but did not know how to come out of its trap. They said that the textbooks were pitched at a much higher level compared to where their children were, but they admitted that they were part of a system that gives precedence to *completion of syllabus* over children's *learning*. It was clear that they felt like cogs in the wheel and not in control of things. This lack of autonomy and agency on their part was projected on the children who, in turn, were made to feel inadequate and unworthy. The classrooms were bare, unattractive and poorly maintained. Absenteeism was rampant and discipline was difficult to enforce.

Ringling the changes

Classroom makeover

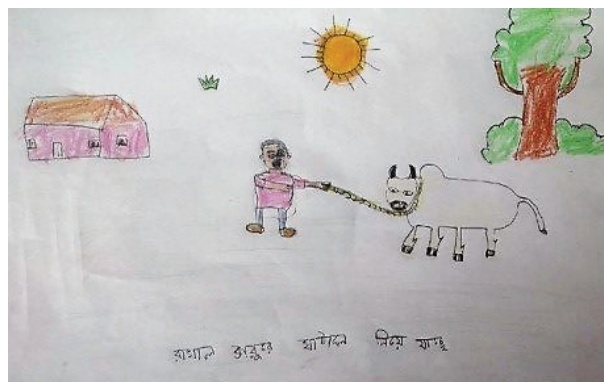
Since a warm and supportive environment is one of the preconditions of learning, it was decided that the creation of such a space should be the starting point for the transformational journey that the teachers would embark on. The first step was literally to clean up the classroom space jointly by the teachers and children. Then, they sat down to prepare some charts and posters to brighten up the classroom walls. Each group was assigned a task – one group worked on the classroom rules, another group prepared an emotion-mapping chart, while a third worked on preparing a number graph. The children made self-portraits on paper plates and wrote little notes under their pictures, expressing their likes and dislikes. Soon their classroom started looking attractive and colourful: seeing their own handiwork up on the wall gave the children a sense of pride and belonging.

Besides, it was the first time that they had sat together and worked in groups with their teachers sitting around them. While working on their charts and posters, they interacted informally with one another and also with the teachers. This opportunity of being physically and emotionally close to their teachers helped the children relax and open up. They were active and excited, yet there was no lack of discipline as the teachers had originally feared. Although, after this experience, they went back to their usual mode of sitting in rows and reverted to the formal mode of communication, this small exercise had brought about a subtle change in the classroom climate.

Interacting through conversation

To sustain the good beginning, it was now necessary to introduce some activity that would make it possible to break down communication barriers. Since schools are conservative spaces, the activity had to be something that was part of their regular teaching. We felt that an easy entry point for this was an important area spelt out in the curriculum but rarely followed by teachers in our schools: *oral language development*.

Though it is universally acknowledged that *oracy* is the foundation for literacy, the focus in primary schools is on teaching reading and writing in an isolated manner as if these have no connection with the spoken form of language.



Conversations are central to language development - the exchange of thoughts and ideas, listening to others about how they feel, and what they experience – are also socially and emotionally enriching processes. Through conversations, both children and teachers, get to understand one another better. But it takes practice for the teacher to have the kind of authentic conversation that is needed to break down inhibitions and get children talking in the true sense of the term, rather than just answering questions. Talking is one of the principal agents of learning and yet in the traditional didactic mode of teaching, classroom talk is dominated by the teacher and the children are seldom given the chance to express their responses beyond choral or one-word answers. Through this, children become programmed to a passive learning atmosphere, which has a negative effect on their motivation and achievement.

Real-life examples

CASE STUDY 1

When Nandita, one of the teachers who we were working with, decided to have a conversation class with her class III children, initially, she found it difficult to let go of her 'teacher's' voice and talk to the children in a conversational tone. She then thought of a simple activity.

Nandita prepared some chits in which she wrote down some random conversation topics – *pebbles, shop, sweets, street*, etc. and asked the children to come in pairs and pick up a slip. They were told to discuss the topic with their partner and then talk about it to the class. Initially, the children too had problems in switching their mode – they felt awkward and were trying to use the same stilted language that they used in classroom interactions. But when a child broke the pattern and said that her uncle had an *alu-chaat* shop, the barriers suddenly broke and everyone started responding and interacting spontaneously and the teacher also seamlessly joined in the conversation.



The change in the classroom climate was palpable and the children became genuinely engrossed in the activity and did not want to stop. The flow of information did not remain one-way. It came from children as well, based on lived experiences. Later, Nandita said that through this simple activity, she had come to know much about the personal lives of children, which she had not been aware of in all the months of her association with them. *Authentic talk* is thus an important building block not only for language development but also for teachers to have a better understanding of children's interests and their social contexts.

CASE STUDY 2

Since the emphasis on reading and writing is unavoidable, Nandita decided to try out a different approach to writing: making children write about things as an *extension* of their drawing. They were first asked to draw whatever they wanted to and later when they finished the drawing, she asked them to talk about their drawing and why they had chosen that topic or theme. This really set them thinking and she scaffolded the process by asking questions.

After that, she asked them to write down whatever they had discussed. It was difficult to break the mould as most of the children fell back on drawing the usual stuff – a house with mountains at the back and the sun in the sky. But some showed originality. One child had drawn the picture of a waterfall and told the teacher how his father had taken him to see a waterfall. Another child drew an owl and said that she thought it was the prettiest bird, while another drew the picture of a cow being dragged by a person, a scene which he said he had seen near his house.

All the children had been struggling with the school language and Nandita was surprised at how this simple activity produced so much language and motivated all of them to overcome their fear and inhibition and start writing. They could do it because they felt connected to their writing as it had come out from their inner feelings and experiences.

Overcoming the fear of learning English

Teaching English was another area that teachers found very challenging, particularly with these children. Their own lack of confidence in using the language coupled with children's low level of exposure made it very difficult for them to negotiate the texts, which again were at a much higher level than what the children were capable of. The wide gap was slowly creating a fear of English in their minds, though they still wanted to learn it, as English is a language of aspiration for them.

To remove this fear, we felt that music and rhymes would work well as a strategy. Music is a delightful way of teaching-learning a new language since it has no language barrier. English action rhymes such as *When you're happy and you know it, clap your hands* or *In the morning, in the morning, I brush my teeth everyday* – done with actions, helped to create an atmosphere of safety, familiarity and pleasant associations. The use of the *Total Physical Response* (TPR) technique while singing the rhymes helped the children learn new words as well as some language structures without making a conscious effort to do so. No translation or explanation was needed as children were able to infer the meaning from the action and could easily relate with whatever was being said. The teachers were delighted to see that their students had suddenly acquired a lot of English vocabulary without being taught explicitly.

For any new learning to get internalised, reinforcement is important. So, this was followed up by some games and structured conversation sessions, where these new words and structures were used. For example, in the game *Simon Says*, the word chunks *clap your hands, stamp your feet, shake your leg*, were used. For conversation, the structure *What do you do in the morning?* was used – and children could easily respond, using the lines from the rhyme that they had just learnt such as *I brush my teeth, I comb my hair, I take my bath* etc.

The *repetitive* pattern of the rhymes, where some new words are introduced in each line while keeping the structure intact, made it easy for the children to use language with confidence and without feeling inhibited. The teachers saw how repeating rhymes helped children overcome their inhibition of the language. Some of the keywords were then written on the 'word wall' for developing a sight vocabulary – *hands, feet, teeth, hair*, and so on. The rhymes and the games had also helped the children to get familiar with the sounds of the language and

the way words are pronounced, which was a good preparation for the next step, namely, making *letter-sound connections*.

So, all the three key elements of learning a new language – learning new words, learning new structures and learning the letter-sound relationship were made possible using something that children enjoyed doing very much. Lowering the affective filter through the elimination of fear and anxiety helped in creating conducive learning alertness.

Steps to learning

This is an illustrative example from an initiative that has just been started and is designed on the premise that all children *can* and *will* learn if the learning is made relevant to their lives; if it is presented with empathy and understanding; and, has the involvement of the teacher in the entire process.

The cognitive strategies that were used to bring about a shift in the classroom interaction had been distilled out of our experience of the last thirty years of working with marginalised children across diverse geographies and social contexts, either through supplementary learning centres or through community-based learning camps or within the formal structure of classrooms in government schools. Here are the salient features:

- Promoting classroom talk as an important tool for language development and for development

of higher-order cognitive skills, social and emotional development.

- Displaying artefacts jointly prepared by children and teachers for building ownership and creating a warm and conducive environment.
- Introducing music, games, stories and rhymes to enable multi-sensory channels of learning.
- These activities are helpful for achieving the desired learning outcomes while being thoroughly enjoyable for both children and teachers. They are also helpful in eliminating fear and anxiety and in creating learning alertness in students.

These simple and small steps in the larger scheme of things had two very important outcomes for the teachers and children. One, the teachers realised that it was possible to achieve the desired learning outcomes *even without textbooks*, an ‘aha’ moment for them when they went through some of the learning outcomes and mapped them with the pedagogical processes that they had just tried out. Second, and the more important, perhaps, was the shift that such activities had brought about in their classroom environment – a definite change in the emotional climate. Undoubtedly, this was just a small beginning and, as long as the larger reality of the system remains unchanged, teachers like Nandita have a long way to go. But then, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step – a step that Nandita had already taken.



Shubhra Chatterji has been working in the space of School Education since 1986. She has worked as a teacher, curriculum developer, pre-school incubation expert, teacher educator and designer of teacher preparation programmes. She has worked in a variety of socioeconomic settings and is the Founder-Director of *Vikramshila*, a resource organisation that works across the country on issues of educational quality and equity. This organization began its journey by providing teachers support to rural NGO-run pre-schools and has evolved alongside the children it serves, and now works across the K-10 spectrum across several states of India. Most recently, Shubhra Chatterji has provided technical expertise in rewriting the ECE curriculum for the ICDS system in West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Assam. One of her abiding areas of interest is ‘Language Learning in Early Years’. She can be contacted at shubhra.chatterji@vikramshila.org