Why We Need Responsive Schools

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'No, sir, they will not respond, sir.'

It was in the 1990s and I was at a non-formal education centre (we still had them in those days) for working children in Kerala. The children ranged from 8-12 years, had worked the whole day and were in this centre at night. Their instructors were trying to teach them basic literacy skills and finding it difficult as the children were tired and uninterested. I looked at the primer being used – it seemed to have nothing to do with children's lives at all! That was when I asked if we could converse with the children through an interpreter and was told they would not respond.

However, we went ahead. I asked them if they could name all the tools they used during the day. There was a little hesitation in the beginning, but they began and were soon pouring out a long list and so fast that the instructor was finding it difficult to write them on the blackboard. We then discussed what each tool was used for, what its alternative was and so on. As the board began to get filled with the words used by the children, it became a 'learner-generated text' with sufficient repetitions and patterns to enable us to use as material to introduce reading.

Years later, conversing in a remote village in Jharkhand with a boy who had joined school late (he had been herding goats), I asked him how he managed to recognise each of his goats when they looked alike. He glared at me in surprise, 'Why? Can't you recognise children when you see them?' And we went on to discuss the intricacies of herding goats – from keeping the flock together to knowing when to turn the herd back in different seasons, to using herbs if an animal was unwell. This boy was under 'special training' for having joined school late; the other students would not interact with him and the teacher was not sure if he would ever learn as he never spoke in the class. Yet, here he was, an expert in his area and winning the admiration of his classmates.

More recently, in a Dharavi slum school in Mumbai, interacting with supposedly 'backward' students of class IV, I asked them what they did the whole day and what they ate. I discovered that many of them enjoyed biryani. On asking if they knew how to make it, some fifteen children raised their hands. I asked one of the boys to tell the class. He began, midway, he was interrupted by a girl who said his method was not 'correct'. That led to a fine debate between the two on the nuances of making biryani!

As everywhere else, the teachers were surprised at how articulate the children were, as they had never heard them speak. A few minutes later, when children revealed that there was a local *biryaniwala* they liked and I asked them how much profit did they think he makes every day and the children stunned their teachers by immediately breaking down his expenses and incomes in detail and making calculations. 'But, they're always so poor in maths and uninterested!' said their teachers.

Teaching in a changed scenario

It is always a little surprising to discover how teachers and other adults are astonished that children who are supposedly dull are not so at all! For some reason, we are unable to see the rich knowledge they bring in from their own lives outside the school. They often have a deep understanding of their environment, for instance, think of a tribal child; of the materials of a ragpicker; of those who cook, provide childcare and of the numerous other dimensions that somehow do not get treated as 'knowledge' and do not figure in our textbooks or classroom processes.

This is not really the teachers' fault as they have stepped into a system created in another time and context. When I began working in education in the 1980s, only around 40% children were in school and a large proportion dropped out before completing class V. The system in place was one that was geared around those who could afford to be in school, could attend every day, were supported at home and could manage in the language of the school. Just two decades later, more than 90% children were in school. This meant that the *majority* of children now in school were from groups that traditionally never attended school. They were not

first-generation learners – since all generations learned a great deal – just first-generation school-goers.

A major consequence of our success in bringing children to school has been that the student profile has changed. In most government schools and low-fee private ones, we now have students who do not have the middle-class background or the cultural capital that our curricula, textbooks and processes assume. For those who are poor, it may be difficult to attend every day, for a variety of reasons. Nor will there be adults in the family who can help a child with their studies. A large number may not know the school language well. In a slum school in Delhi, for instance, migration and urbanisation may easily lead a class to have more than ten languages. These may include, say, students speaking Punjabi and Odia sitting next to each other. How do you teach in a class like that?

'Designed to fail' situation

Given the diversity of our country, we have always had a degree of variation in our student population. However, as we successfully moved towards universalisation, this diversity morphed into 'super-diversity' – yet our approach to students' learning remained more or less as it used to be. We still expect our teachers to teach all the children the same thing at the same time with the same method and get the same results – an idea that is 'designed to fail', because what this does is to make sure that a great proportion of children, who are otherwise so bright and capable are left out of the learning process for one reason or the other. By creating a one-size-fits-all system we have created a 'leaves-out-most' situation where most children (and their families) cannot fulfil the basic expectations of the system. The consequences of the inherently excluding nature of the system are reflected in the great difficulties teachers face, the low levels of learning it generates and the low levels of motivation it creates.

Taking a responsive approach

What can we do to deal with this 'designed to fail' situation? To begin with, especially if you are a teacher, start with what is called the children's *fund of knowledge*. This is the knowledge that children bring with them from their world outside the classroom. Every child is an expert in something or the other. A child with an intellectual disability, for instance, might surprise you about how well she knows the moods of her caregiver.

How can we get that expertise and knowledge to come out, be shared, discussed and connected with what we are trying to teach? What this assumes is that, in your class, children speak. So, the first expectation really is to ensure that we run a lively classroom where children do not hesitate to participate actively. Here, our secret weapon is to smile a lot – it helps! Next, as mentioned earlier, ask questions about children's experiences and then find ways to connect them with what you are trying to teach. This will work many times (though not always). However, once the critical breakthrough is made – of getting the children engaged in the learning process – you can proceed much faster, often using the methods you usually do.

Teachers are, of course, always under pressure to 'complete the syllabus' or 'cover the textbook lessons' by certain given times. They may also have textbooks that are dull or do not appear to offer many possibilities for lively engagement or may not connect with children's lives at all. Even under these conditions, it is possible to have a highly active and engaged classroom that involves each child. For instance, with the old hare-and-the-tortoise-race story, how about asking children to make a consolation card for the hare, or to tell us of the dream the hare had as he slept or to conduct a press interview of the winner, Mr Tortoise? All teacher training programmes advocate some form or the other of *activity-based learning or constructivist pedagogy*, so any teacher trying to get children to participate in challenging tasks, reflecting on them, or applying what they have learnt into new situations, will essentially be doing what is expected of her.

In such a process, how can we address the different needs of our children? This is possible every time you create a task on which many children can work on their own. For example, make a drawing/role play based on the story we just did, or make a map of the classroom, or work out how much the mid-day meal costs per child. This leaves you free for 10-15 minutes, while the class is going on, to then work with children who for some reason or the other, are falling behind. It provides an opportunity for focused, even individual, inputs to those children who need more time and support. Equity in the classroom, thus, comes to mean 'to each child as per her need' – in terms of support, opportunities, and the teacher's time. This is far better than teaching in the usual, whole-class manner and then, doing 'remedial' teaching a little later.

But we do not have the freedom to do all this, you might say. This is an interesting point to think about – somehow, we are all free to teach poorly and attain poor results, but we are not free to try things to improve our processes! Do give this a try, see what happens and take a call based on that.

Being responsive

All this is not to say that the solutions only lie with teachers. On the contrary, we need to strengthen their efforts by carefully re-designing our core educational processes in light of our ground realities as well as contemporary, evidence-based thinking. This applies to re-examining our curriculum to effect a shift from content to core capabilities; our textbooks from sources of information to triggers of learning processes; our assessment from a fear-generating judgmental process to a pedagogical tool that also empowers children to take charge of their progress; our teacher professional development from hierarchical and instruction-based to an enabling partnership with teachers for whom we jointly set goals and then support them in achieving those.

These shifts are needed because it is not the children who have to adjust to school but the school that has to adapt to the children. Such a school is a 'responsive' school. I do not use the word 'inclusive' because it, somehow, implies that we have included you – a somewhat condescending approach when children are actually the rights-holders and we are only the duty-bearers. So perhaps the biggest shift needed in enabling each child to have a fulfilling learning experience where her potential is realised is the one in our own way of looking at education.

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