Children's Literature and Child-Centric Practices

Vartul Dhaundiyal

'Ma'am may I also do things which *bhaiya* and *didis* do?' asked Diksha. Her teacher asked her with a gesture of pleasant surprise. 'What things?' '*Chamiksha*', said Diksha. 'Oh, why not! Go ahead,' her teacher said joyfully. Diksha, then, very shyly asked, 'Then my video will also be sent?'. The teacher laughed at the charming expression of the child. She promised her that if she did the *sameeksha* (review) of a story, then, she would share her video in the teachers' group.

Diksha is a student of class I in a primary school Danda Jungle, in the Vikas Nagar block of Dehradun district. She belongs to the *Jaunsari* tribe and her father is a daily wage labourer. Most students in this government school have a humble socio-economic background and are first-generation learners who do not have anyone to support their study at home. So, it is their teacher who can be given the sole credit for their learning and achievements in school.

Role of teachers

Working with government school teachers, I observed *that there are teachers who believe that all students can learn*. These teachers are found to be progressive in their methods of teaching and they try new methods to keep their students interested in studies. They also keep in mind the varied needs of their students while designing classroom activities or assessment tools. Unfortunately, the number of such teachers is limited.

On the other hand, there are teachers who stick to the belief that only a few students can learn well. These teachers often back this perception with their personal experiences of teaching. The observations of the classroom practices of such teachers reveal that they follow a traditional approach while dealing with various subjects. They follow the textbook and give common, one-size-fits-all instructions to the class, despite the varied learning needs of the students.

Unimaginative teaching

In such classrooms, one can observe a complete disregard of the fact that every individual has a different learning style. Students who are able to learn through such traditional practices are mainly the ones who already come with some sort of social and educational capital; at least they have someone educated in their family and their socio-economic status is better. Often, these students already converse in a language that is considered 'civilised' (urban) and follow a form of social etiquette which is considered 'suitable' by the teachers.

The traditional approach also lays emphasis on memorisation of facts and content, with not enough attention on understanding and assimilation. Assessments based on such an approach only test for the content that has been memorised by the students. These answers or the methods for problem-solving do not offer space for individual thinking, creativity and innovation or for trying new things. The whole approach seems to be very textbook oriented and teacher-centric, in which the student is often treated as a passive learner who has to acquire knowledge and reproduce it when asked or assessed. This is a boring, tiresome and redundant method in which not all children can find interest. Many children also find the classroom situation alien, where their previous knowledge about the world, their language, their context have no relevance and they have to learn the expected discipline, ways of articulation and memorisation. As most students are unable to cope with these methods, they are soon branded *buddhu*, seen as lagging behind and even considered 'slow learners'. This works to further distance them from education and they are ready to drop out of the school and education system.

Teaching the individual

On the other hand, teachers who believe that all students can learn despite the difference in ability levels pay a lot of attention to identify their individual talents, likes and dislikes, learning styles, challenges, socio-economic contexts and the learning need of each student in their class. These teachers are found to have a good and friendly relationship with students and are open to the different views and opinions of individual students.

For these teachers the meaning of learning is not limited to the memorising of concepts and content; they are aware of the optimum learning objectives for a given class and emphasise on the competencies of the students rather than the content of the textbook.

These teachers usually use different instructions, varied examples, activities for individual students or groups of students. They do not teach the whole class in the same way. They even know that one-time summative assessment does not tell much about all the competencies a student might have acquired in an academic year. Rather, they see assessment as learning for the teachers[1] when the assessment focuses on identifying the learning gaps of the students and helps in planning future teaching. In turn, for the students, it is an aid to self-assessment because it helps them understand what more they need to learn. Such assessment is a kind of formative assessment that has inbuilt scope for identifying the strengths and learning needs of the students.

Many such practices were observed to be taking place in the government schools of Vikasnagar Block, Dehradun during the *Potali* Library Programme in 2018-19 in which teachers from twenty-eight schools volunteered to participate. There are many anecdotal accounts that give us enough evidence that during the programme, the learning levels of the students improved, and the most observable changes were among the students who could not read or write – they were found to have developed an interest in books. Although initially, they could only enjoy looking at the illustrations, later, it became apparent that these children showed interest in learning to read and write and picked up these competencies.

The programme was based on the assumption that if adequate and good children's literature and support to teachers in terms of pedagogical inputs demonstrations on child-centric practices are provided in a school, it might bring the desired change in the students' learning levels. The focus of the programme was to promote differentiated instruction[2] to ensure that all students within a classroom, regardless of the diversity of learning ability, can learn effectively. The design of the programme was such that it provided an opportunity for the teachers to examine and reflect upon their practices.

Analysing results

When the teacher's reflections, teaching accounts and views recorded during the meetings were analysed, we got a clear idea of what the focus in the language teaching programmes should be.

Some underlying principles that emerged during the programmes provide insights that might help all children learn, though at their own pace and in their own way. These principles can be summarised as:

1. The programmes should guide teachers on the elements of what to teach and why to teach it. Teachers should be provided support and guidance to evolve their own pedagogy that best suits the need of their students.

2. It was very clear that every child can learn, but one common instruction programme will not cater to the varied learning needs of all students, nor would it suit the different learning styles and processes of the students of the same class.

3. The differentiated instruction method is best suited to the present multi-grade, multi-level teaching situation in rural government schools.

4. Graded and adequate reading material, which includes various genres of text, such as stories, poems, plays, help children to develop an interest in reading and writing. However, this interest must follow individualised instruction and support from the teacher since interest alone cannot enable a student to learn to read and write.

5. Teachers are willing to learn new perspectives and methods, but theoretical lectures do not help them much in negotiating the day-to-day challenges and situations that emerge in classroom teaching. It is imperative that resource persons visit and spend time in classes to be able to help the teacher develop customised solutions for real classroom situations.

A month after the brief interaction in PS Danda Jungle, Diksha's teacher shared a video in the teacher's group. I was thrilled to see that Diksha had reviewed a story from her textbook. She discussed the storyline, characters and what she liked and disliked in the story. She also said that unlike the protagonist in the story, she would not hurt her friends. Though this was not the kind of review that we often get to read in the general scheme of things, it represented the reflections

of a student who thought about the story and expressed her own (read as 'original, unpolluted by external pressures') views about it.

Such examples and experiences boost the conviction of teachers and teacher educators that every child can learn, all it needs is for the teacher to regard each child as an individual and provide personalized inputs that suit the need of the learner.

References

1   *The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Guide*, Chapter 3, http://www.ltag.education.tas.gov.au

2   *The Differentiated Classroom*: Carol Ann Tomlinson

Vartul Dhaundiyal works as a Resource Person of Hindi Language at the Azim Premji Foundation, Dehradun. He has done his Master's in Journalism and Mass Communication. He has also worked in organizations like Pratham and Room to read. He has worked as Content Editor for the History channel and is interested in philosophy and research. He may be contacted at vartul.dhaundiyal@azimpremjifoundation.org