Responsibility Comes from a Sense of Belonging

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The reason we insist on children taking part in deciding, organising and implementing a school's day-to-day processes is that we believe that children do not come to school to be taught or be 'worked upon' by adults – the teachers. A child's place in the school is not that of an observer or a receptor, but of an active participant. This participation can only go smoothly if they have a voice and a platform to present their needs. This platform and the amount of agency granted to children has always varied across schools. For example, in the school attended by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi (or Totto-chan)[i] , we know that the Headmaster was responsible for setting up the rules but did so in a way that it assured complete freedom for children to be themselves within the school space.

More formal and significant energy is dedicated to this idea of children being involved in coming up with their own democratic setup in Summerhill School, run by A.S Neill[ii]. Neill stresses that although the meaning of 'Children's Government' may vary across ages, it is important that they know that it concerns them and that they can present arguments about matters important to them. The examples he gives of children asserting their ideas range from discussions on the suitable punishment for theft or of 8-9-year-old pupils arguing for the lifting of the ban on smoking on children aged below 12-years.

In a school like Summerhill, children have the final say even on things that the rest of the world may consider negative or extreme. What we also gain from the description of these events is that in this school, children have been given a space to express themselves, they choose the matters that need to be discussed, there is no hierarchy among them or among headmaster-teachers-students and rules are based on the best argument. This process is successful because the school has already made children understand (through experience) the core ideas of the school. Children have been allowed to be free and have been taught that anything that hinders their freedom is against the school's principles and can be contested.

Election day at school

I was at the Government Higher Primary School, Kanchagarahalli (Yadgir) as part of my Associate Programme. The school has students from the village and as well as a *tanda* (a tribe hamlet). In Yadgir, almost every village has a *tanda* with Lambani-speaking people. The *tandas* are usually more secluded and remote, away from the main roads.

Children had gathered for prayer in the school on a Saturday morning. They were to vote for leadership positions for the new academic year and do a thorough cleaning of the school. Voting for positions included those for different clubs, like cleanliness, gardening, library, sports, English, Hindi; and tasks such as overseeing midday meals and uniform checking etc. While speaking to students and teachers, I learnt that there was a pattern to the students who were absent on that day:

- Many girls from classes VII and VIII were absent.
- Several students from the *tanda* were absent.

The headmistress informed me that the absence of students from the said *tanda* was not unusual; they always skipped school on the cleaning day. I also found out that the girl students' absence was linked to the fact that the same set of students were voted into leadership positions. The shyness and feelings of anxiety, especially around the kind of popularity that comes with these leadership positions may be common among adolescents but to clearly see that girls are more prone to feeling inferior or ignored, also depended on factors, such as:

- Several positions required the appointment of both – a boy and a girl, but this was only in name. Depending on the position, the responsibilities either fell upon either the boy or the girl. For example, boys would 'lead or organize' events related to sports and gardening, and girls would oversee everyday tasks, such as midday meals and cleanliness.
- The remaining positions, like leaders of various clubs, tended to be about academics, so only a select number of students were picked for these.
- Boys who were industrious, for example, brought

plants to the school or were interested in sports could become leaders. When it came to the girls, the same set of four to six girls from classes VII and VIII were chosen for all the positions, as teachers believed that those who did well in studies were responsible enough to oversee everyday tasks.

Migrant children

The absence of the Lambani-speaking, *tanda* students was disconcerting. Their academic performance is a challenge across this region since they struggle with Kannada as the medium of instruction. But there are areas in which they can lead, like the Hindi Club (they are more comfortable with speaking in Hindi), or cultural activities (they show interest in singing and dancing). While academic performance affected their overall chances of being elected, their being absent, brought these chances to nil.

When I attempted to understand why they were absent and known to always skip cleaning duties, I realised that I had to look at their presence at the overall school level. Starting from the early grades, children from the *tanda* struggle to blend in with Kannada-speaking students in the classroom. Due to the difference in their parents' occupation, it is common for these children to be 'seasonally absent' (around harvests, festivals, etc.). They are also more likely to be absent for long periods when they migrate with their families to big cities for work. In these big cities, they lose their Kannada environment along with the learning. When they return to school, the language barrier intensifies their challenge in getting along with their classmates and teachers. This makes it routine for these students to feel out-of-place among peers and consistently anxious about being reprimanded.

Sense of belonging

Responsibility is closely related to a sense of belonging. In the case of young children, they first develop this sense of belonging to which responsibility can be introduced at a later stage. An example of this is seen in a description by A.S Neill in Summerhill where a child who has been breaking windows refuses to see it as a mistake or as bad behaviour but offers to pay for the damage he has caused, saying, 'They're *my windows*!' (Neill 1960). In this case, the child's sense of belonging has come first and because of his age, it is of a possessive nature. He is not of an age in which he can be made to feel guilty for his actions or to understand that what he has done is wrong. But his sense of belonging makes him take responsibility for the action in a most natural manner.

It is this incident mentioned above that I thought of while reflecting upon the reason why the *tanda* students tried to escape school-cleaning. It is common knowledge that no child enjoys these tasks that border on labour. Children need some other motive to do such work, whether they are at home or school. Children can be made to do these by introducing a rule, making threats, or forcing them to believe that it needs to be done. But the example of the *tanda* students shows how children respond when they feel no personal motive to do something. If students have not felt like they really belong to their school for six to seven years, they will not feel responsible for cleaning the school when such responsibility is assigned to them. And if the girl students have not experienced a sense of belonging over six years, adolescence may only intensify the feeling.

Teachers' biases

Coming to the elections, the bias among teachers, while it needs to be discouraged, is quite commonplace. Any adult who ever went to a government school and excelled in studies will corroborate this. They will tell you that they were their teachers' favourite and admit that the best teachers from their school were the ones who only focused on a few, select students. Teachers too admit to it; they do form favourites as they recognise those willing to learn and would rather direct their efforts towards their development.

We must remember that a school government is formed by the children for the everyday functioning of the school. That leadership is more about taking responsibility and providing support to others in carrying out their assigned duties. This process cannot possibly occur unless all children are involved in making decisions. Decisions should be made based on collective consent, rather than on mutually agreed upon exclusion. And most importantly, a children's government is made of, for and by children to ensure that it is not about monitoring other students in place of teachers, but to bring about an environment of students carrying out their tasks and responsibilities 'for themselves'.

It is this feeling of doing it for their own sake that I found missing when the *tanda* students did not show up in school on that day.

Rules by children

Although I could not do much at the school level, I did want to know how children would react to a system of governance they themselves came up with. When my students of class V began shouting

and saw me close the storybook I was reading from, they shushed themselves at first, but then launched into a louder din as they began to harangue one another. When I asked them to figure out their own way of making sure that we can complete one story each week (which could only happen without disruptions from their side), they came up with the most comprehensive set of rules (one detailing who should not sit with whom to avoid fights!). I tried the same with class VI and VII too, and they worked.

The rules did not guarantee a perfect classroom atmosphere. But what made the process successful was that when an issues came up, children knew what had gone wrong and how we could address it. Of course, there were times when issues had to be dealt with in other ways. There were also moments when students did not bring a particular issue to me because they felt that my way of handling it would not work. But for the brief period that I was with them, I could tell that a government formed by children does work. I think that the attempt I could make (at a very small level) only had a chance at working because one, I could make it a priority to include all the children, and two, I could manage to include all children because the rules they prepared were directly related to their behaviour. It was about their fidgeting, fighting and shouting at a time when a story of their choice was being read out to them. The act of possession followed by responsibility was simple (if not easy) to establish. I could only do this with grades V- VIII. In the case of *Nali-Kali*, children could not be expected to remember the rules, regardless of who made them. Even if they had agreed to it the previous day, they tended to get carried away in their play and forget it the next day. But we had smaller setups maintained in every class (like sitting in a semicircle only while listening to a story) that gave them structure and consistency.

In my understanding, Citizenship Education in our government schools revolves around four major points: first, children need to have an environment that makes them feel like citizens of the school; second, children need to understand that their environment exists on the basis of each member in the school having a fixed set of rights; third, children need to be involved in maintaining, asserting and implementing processes in which these rights can come into play; and fourth, children's awareness of how democracy has been structured for them should be drawn into a formal learning process (like when they learn about Indian democracy in their civics textbooks).

The idea of creating responsible citizens, or even responsible students may seem complex and daunting, but that of making each child feel a sense of belonging towards the school is a responsibility that falls upon us. Playing a part in creating citizens who belong is a good place to start. And, in my brief experience, wonderful to see.

i Totto-chan, the Little Girl at the Window (1981) is an autobiographical memoir written by a Japanese television personality and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, Tetsuko Kuroyanagi.

ii Summerhill School is an independent, boarding school in Leiston, Suffolk, England. It was founded in 1921 by Alexander Sutherland Neill with the belief that the school should be made to fit the child, not the other way around.

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