

Investing Children with Responsibility

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Most of our educational goals or curricular guidelines point towards developing rational thinking individuals through education. It is clear that the responsibility lies, to a large extent, with the schools and on the collective efforts of all stakeholders. The operationalisation of this idea is not very simple as has been experienced by many teachers. Most of us will agree that teachers have a prominent role in facilitating many of the practices that help in shaping children's thoughts. Although caregivers and peers also play a crucial role, they too are influenced by teachers through regular interactions. Schools usually have a holistic plan and run different processes and programmes for operationalising it.

At the Azim Premji School, Yadgir, we tried a practice that, in my view, supported many other practices in the school. When we started establishing a free and fearless environment for the children, there were some gains for us in the form of a good relationship with them; open and confident children who started expressing themselves freely and asking questions about things they did not understand in class. But gradually, we started facing challenges in managing children's behaviour – there were instances of some children not respecting their peers or their work; not responding properly to parents, not completing classwork, disturbing the class or morning assembly, not showing interest in participating in school events or not cooperating with the others.

After discussion on these challenges among ourselves and with expertise and observations from other schools, we started enhancing and improving the ongoing practice of holding dialogue. With the children individually, with their parents, peers and sometimes in groups in which a variety of modes were explored. To some extent, these were helpful. However, they took up a lot of time in classes, during assembly or events and when some children started taking these dialogues lightly, a few more actions, like establishing classroom rules by children and regular follow up on those were established. Feedback from the children and those

parents who were having trouble controlling the children's behaviour using punishment (which they mostly follow in their homes) and our experience of losing precious time during the class or other school practices, we started feeling that there must be something in addition to having dialogue that would help us in saving our time, making children more responsible, and would, above all, bring a sense of responsibility.

A few practices in other schools to overcome such challenges through democratic practices triggered some thoughts in us. One of the effective practices that I should mention here is conducting elections effectively with representatives elected from all the classes and then establishing legislations through meetings of the elected committee. The routines of the school, challenges and mostly behavioural aspects can be discussed by this committee. This method of bringing children to a responsible role of establishing practices and discipline in the school is good and many schools might have succeeded in establishing democratic values among children using this. This model of school governance has many advantages.

We started discussing all the practices that could be dealt effectively by adopting this model. The main focus was how to get each and every individual in the school to participate in the school routines. This was thought to be more effective compared to the electoral method in which after the responsibility of casting vote and electing representatives, the others become almost passive.

Democracy is a way of life and an experience built on faith in human nature, in human beings, and in working with others. It is a moral ideal requiring effort by people. It is not an institutional concept that exists outside of ourselves. The task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. (John Dewey, Creative Democracy).

To do this, we decided to form committees that would have representation of every member of the school, covering all the areas of school

operations. The good thing that we did during that time, about six years back, was that each committee had representatives from all the classes so that every child and teacher was part of one of the committees. The committees met every week to discuss and understand the role and responsibilities of members in the effective functioning of the school processes, setting up rules that have to be obeyed by all. The teachers were part of the committees and not in the driver's seat but guiding the discussions during meetings, delegating responsibilities among the members of a committee and communicating decisions and developments in the school assemblies.

In operationalising, initially, the idea seemed difficult because of the efforts that needed to be put in to convince or bring children to understand the democratic lines that need to be in place for the formation and functioning of the committees. To make the processes transparent and to ensure that each one was getting the experience of working in all areas, the lottery mode was adopted. Groups were formed according to ten functions and then a lottery system was used to choose a committee for the group. In a monthly school meeting, the functions were rotated among groups. Hence, at the end of the year, everyone got the opportunity of serving in all ten committees. It was very exciting for the children and teachers to sit together in small groups with a specific responsibility under the name of a committee and then, working on the smooth functioning of the same.

The committees were formed to focus on different areas in the school. The purpose of choosing these areas was to bring efficiency in these with new ideas, participation of all the children (from all the grades) and of them becoming more responsible as they design things. Following are the ten committees and their functions.

1. Assembly committee: responsible for the daily assemblies in school – morning assembly, classroom assembly, teachers' assembly, evening assembly.
2. Food committee: responsible for the midday meal (MDM) and milk/egg for children
3. Library committee: management of the school and classroom libraries
4. School garden committee: Planting of trees and maintenance of kitchen garden
5. Sports committee: responsible for sports and games

6. Cleanliness and hygiene committee: responsible for the cleanliness of classrooms, washrooms, other areas in the premises and personal hygiene
7. Events and celebration committee: management of national festivals, school events like *Bal Shodh melas*, subject week, etc.
8. Safety committee: responsible for the physical safety of children, for example, during movement in the corridor.
9. School rules committee: responsible for setting up and monitoring the execution of rules in the school and classrooms
10. School environment committee: responsible for aesthetics and neatness of classrooms and outside.

In the last year, a decision was taken to merge two committees – number 9 and 10 as their work was almost similar. Hence, currently, there are only nine functions or committees.

How we benefited

School operations became smoother. For example, for keeping the premises clean and well maintained, the committee members, who were from all classes, started telling the others in their class to maintain cleanliness, like using dustbins while sharpening pencils.

The MDM committee members started taking care of organizing sitting arrangements, monitoring, and discussing with children who used to waste food, motivating them to eat the vegetables etc. It was interesting to observe children from younger classes monitoring the upper primary children and even teachers to not waste vegetables. A practice of displaying the menu, ingredients used in terms of quantity, student and staff attendance and the food waste generated on that day, created awareness.

Discussions prior to events and celebrations on how meaningfully they can be celebrated, bringing variety in the activities in the daily assemblies, discussing and deciding practices related to safety were all very useful. Monthly meetings called *mahasabhas* coordinated by the school rules committee were organised to discuss all the current challenges in the school and solutions. In these meetings along with complaints about children's behaviour, a few interesting discussions and demands by children would also come up. For example, for striking off from the menu *Bisi bele baath* that was served on Thursdays and was not

liked by most of the children or to ask why shoes are not given instead of sandals, or why Hindi was only being taught to children from class VI onwards and not to early grades, and also a demand for more library or sports periods in a week.

We started observing positive changes with respect to cooperation, coordination, ownership, responsibility, participation and commitment all

the qualities that are expected of a responsible citizen. I was delighted when I heard a student's speech during the Republic Day celebration in our school recently, he was comparing the Indian Constitution with the practices of setting norms in our school and functioning of committees. That indicates our efforts are in the right direction.



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Citizenship education cannot be delivered in a short-term manner. It has to be done consistently and repeatedly for the long-term. In different groups different ideas/concepts will work. There is no pattern of what will work and what will not.

Umashankar Periodi, Citizenship Through Creative Workshops, p 105.