

In a well-cited and acknowledged study on how young urban Indian 15-year-old school-goers fare on democratic citizenship (*CMCA<sup>i</sup> Yuva Nagarik Meter, 2015<sup>ii</sup>*), we learned that what positively influences the score, or marks, for democratic citizenship are these three enabling conditions:

- Not being physically beaten in school or at home
- Being able to ask questions freely and share ideas without fear in classrooms
- Reading the papers, watching TV (news and current affairs)

The only other factors that positively influenced the score were: children from smaller towns fared slightly better than those from big cities and yes, overall, girls scored slightly higher than boys. Nothing else really influenced the score – not the board of education, nor the communities or castes of respondents, nor their class/economic background nor educational qualifications of parents or which part of the country they came from.

There are several studies that show that education for citizenship must start early and schools and classrooms are important foundations of the democratic way of life and thinking. There are clear linkages between Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), child rights and children's own awareness of their rights and their ability to secure them.

I will focus on some key building blocks of citizenship education. While this article is for primary school teachers, it hopefully holds useful insights for teachers of all grades.

### The building blocks of citizenship

Citizen participation and engagement with the State, with each other in society and with ideas of justice, equality, liberty, etc, are complex and multi-dimensional and so it stands to logic that education for democracy is also challenging and complex. Here I share five simple and practical, but powerful, pathways to effective citizenship education for teachers to explore and apply, with the teacher and the classroom as the epicentre.

### *Self-love and resilience in the classroom*

Many children are unhappy, but teachers, are you asking, are you listening?

Here is a story from a primary classroom. *Magic Box* is a teacher-led programme involving hundreds of 10-minute citizenship and life-skill daily-do cards. During a pilot session of the *Magic Box* children had to hug themselves long and hard and say, 'Mmmm, I love me!'. As we moved from 6-9-year-olds to 10-11-year-olds, the enthusiasm and comfort with which kids hugged themselves reduced noticeably. In a class of 10-year olds, we heard a child say softly, 'I don't love me.'

Poverty poses unique, personal challenges for the child, the family, community and country. Children are often going through various kinds of trauma – financial issues, family infighting, acrimonious separations and mental, emotional, sexual abuse including bullying and substance abuse etc.

One in four Indian children in the age group of 13-15 years (adolescents) is depressed; one in ten is anxious; 11 percent reported being *distracted* and had a hard time concentrating on their work while another 10 percent said that they have no close friends.<sup>iii</sup>

When I asked 6 to 8 year-olds in a *Nali Kali* class what made them scared or sad, they said, 'When my father beats me' or, 'When my father beats my mother,' and so on. Few seemed scared of snakes or ghosts or sad about not having enough toys or any other responses one expects from young children.

In another school, another classroom, two fifth graders - 10-year-old brothers - were beating each other and fighting. In the ensuing discussions, they laughed and brashly shared that their father beats their mother and even their grandmother sometimes. Too many children are already facing violence at home.

In the same CMCA study, 61 percent of the children reported that they are beaten in school. There is no hope that we can encourage kindness and empathy in children when we, adults, ourselves shout, beat, pinch or label, shame and insult. As J Krishnamurti

wrote, ‘... it is violence when we use a sharp word, when we make a gesture to brush away a person, when we obey because there is fear...’<sup>iv</sup>

#### *Teachers who love children*

In a workshop organised by the NCERT for teachers of tribal schools, teachers shared challenges they faced with children from extremely low-income backgrounds, neglected children and children who are under tremendous stress in their daily lives. I could empathise with the teachers’ difficulties. Facing such challenges daily can make cynics of us all! It was no surprise that some teachers defended beating children and felt it was unavoidable.

On the other hand, over the course of the day, it was inspiring to see some teachers, deeply committed to non-violence, share their experiences and gently and empathetically bring the others around to their position. Teachers, you can break the cycle of violence and must do so.

#### *Positive psychology in the classroom*

Aristotle acknowledges that happiness can be affected by such factors as our material circumstances, our place in society and even our

looks. Yet he maintains that happiness is more a question of behaviour and of habit – of virtue – rather than of luck: a person who cultivates such behaviours and habits is able to bear his misfortunes with balance and perspective, and, thus, can never be said to be truly unhappy.<sup>v</sup>

Research shows us that when children’s minds are occupied by the stress of everyday living, education suffers. Just as we have recognised and responded to the reality that no child can learn on an empty stomach and that nutrition affects learning, so too must our system and our teachers recognise and respond to the reality that no unhappy or stressed child can learn and develop to his or her full potential.

Teachers can and must help their students build resilience, cope with their hardships, acknowledge and appreciate their strengths and opportunities, remain positive and hopeful and aspire and strive for a better and happier life for themselves. This self-love (self-confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-regulation, etc.) is a vital building block to becoming good citizens, those who are empathetic and alive to the needs of others.

Use these simple, regular tasks and daily interactions to help your students to:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find joy in the little things</li> <li>• Start each day/period with a smile</li> <li>• Be thankful and grateful</li> <li>• Choose to be positive and see the best in every situation</li> <li>• Live in the moment</li> <li>• Be good to themselves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask for help when they need it</li> <li>• Let go of sadness and disappointment</li> <li>• Practice mindfulness</li> <li>• Walk in nature</li> <li>• Laugh and make time to play</li> </ul>

#### **Gender and the classroom**

In CMCA sessions on gender, we have seen children moved to tears as girls share heart-breaking stories of how when they fall sick, their parents wait to take them to the doctor but not when their brothers fall ill, or how girls get fewer eggs or milk, or how the boys get the juiciest parts of meat and boys share the stress they feel about starting to earn quickly and the expectation to ‘man-up’. We can use stories and even personal experiences to share and challenge ideas of gender. We do not need expensive material to have such conversations – something as small and simple as an egg only for a brother can be the starting point

We need to be careful in assigning chores and tasks so that girls and boys feel able and willing to do anything. For example, boys can learn and draw *rangolis* on school functions and girls can handle the sound system and manage the technical aspects of a school programme. Yes, there will be some resistance and there will be mistakes, but the mistakes and imperfections hold greater and deeper learnings. We need to be careful not to perpetuate gender behavioural stereotypes – for example, do not force boys not to cry when they are hurt and do not stop girls from somersaulting or spinning tops.

Awareness of gender identities start early, so we

must be mindful that gender is not binary but a spectrum. Do not set gendered role-and-behaviour expectations from children in your classrooms. Rather, challenge gender roles in stories and help your students examine their own assumptions and ideas.

### **Diversity in the classroom**

Living together in harmony and embracing change and differences in a diverse country are not only important skills for democracy but are highly valued 21st-century workplace skills. Educators, at all levels, play an essential role in facilitating the development of intercultural competence among learners. (Barrett et al., 2014)<sup>vi</sup>

Teachers, you can spare 15 minutes each day to bring the world into the classroom! Education must address the mistrust or fear of the unknown, of what we assume of others and what we can learn about each other. For young children, food, music, inventions, travel etc are great pathways to breaking barriers and celebrating differences.

For example, spin the globe/travel on the world map to 'visit' different places or see different landscapes. Use magazines and videos to see different ways of life and different kinds of people – their looks, foods, clothes, accents, languages. The unfamiliar becomes familiar and ideas of *us and them* begins to melt! From this building block, we can move onto more challenging conversations on equality, discrimination, etc, in later years in school.

### **Harmony with nature and the classroom**

Who teaches a child to kill insects, tease and throw stones at animals, ignore injured, scared, or hungry animals? These behaviours are learned and it is only meaningful education that can help children *unlearn* and *relearn*.

Common house spiders, house lizards, ants, bees, birds, community animals, trees and plants can nurture this fundamental duty of compassion towards all life.

Include in regular school days powerful activities like keeping bird-feeders, feeding community animals, caring for plants and trees and even naming lizards on classroom walls and ant colonies in the playground! This teaches children that caring for our environment is not just a science subject but a human responsibility.

Children who notice and care for birds, ants and dogs will see the deep connection between keystone species in the jungle and their own well-

being. From this building block, we can enable our students to engage more critically and actively with coexistence and sustainability as they grow older.

### **Child rights, duties and the classroom**

Classroom experiences are among a child's first experiences of democracy. Where and how does a child learn to throw waste on the street or deface public property or heritage sites? Why does a child think it is okay to ride a motorbike at age twelve? Why do young adults feel rules are meant to be broken? Where and how is poor civic behaviour learned and how can it be unlearned?

Democracy is best learned when it is *experienced*. Often adults mistake assertiveness for arrogance, disagreement for insubordination and view discipline as unquestioning obedience and conformity.

Common sense tells us that we cannot expect students who lack adequate opportunities in school to engage with authority or have a fair say in the rules that govern them, to emerge as active citizens who can discharge their duties or secure their rights! Children who are beaten or punched may not be able to engage positively with power or authority as adults. Boys and girls who are segregated in classrooms cannot be expected to forge healthy personal and work relationships of mutual respect or make responsible life choices.

Teachers can involve children at all levels in rule-making. For example, involve children in solving challenges like keeping toilets clean, ensuring food is not wasted in school, addressing too much noise in the classroom etc. When children *co-create*, *co-frame* and *share* the burden of finding solutions, they experience democracy and learn that freedoms come with responsibilities. From this building block, we can build an understanding of a citizen's rights and duties in later school years.

### **Conclusion**

Nothing can substitute for the transformative power of teacher-student interaction. Human relationships are vital in the teaching-learning process. I have seen such gentleness in classrooms - teachers who exude love and patience, who so obviously enjoy the company of children. There is laughter and amusement in their voices and a twinkle in their eyes! We do not need expensive material or elaborate training programmes,

enormous amounts of time or deviations from the syllabus to foster well-being in children and create democratic classrooms and schools.

We need teachers who provide positive and empowering classroom and school experiences - teachers who can elevate daily-life tasks and challenges into opportunities to transform the

young into concerned, thinking and active citizens. We need teachers who can manage the many demands placed on them with optimism, hope and a positive attitude. We need teachers who are passionate about what they do and who love children! And fortunately for us, we have many, many such teachers.



- i Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA) is a nonprofit organization, head-quartered in Bengaluru. They work towards transforming children and young people into active citizens for an inclusive and sustainable India. Our research-backed pro-gram is run in schools, colleges and rural youth clubs. (cmcaindia.org)
- ii Yuva Nagarik Meter – Young Citizen National Survey. (2015). (pp. 1-60, Publication). Bengaluru, KA: Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA).
- iii Mental health status of adolescents in South-East Asia: Evidence for action. (2017). World Health Organization, New Delhi: Regional Office for South-East Asia; 2017. Li-cence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
- iv Krishnamurti, J. (1969). Chapter 6. In Freedom from the known. Harper & Row. Re-trieved from <http://jiddu-krishnamurti.net/en/freedom-from-the-known/1968-00-00-jiddu-krishnamurti-freedom-from-the-known-chapter-6>
- v Aristotle on happiness – Happiness is not a state but an activity. (2013). Psychology Today. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-seek/201301/aristotle-happiness>
- vi Barrett, M., Byram, M., Lázár, I., Mompoin-Gaillard, P. and Philippou, S. (2014). De-veloping Intercultural Competence through Education. Pestalozzi Series No. 3. Stras-bourg, Council of Europe Publishing.



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