

INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM AND SOCIAL DIVERSITY IN INDIA: MYTHS AND CHALLENGES

Sanjay Kumar*

ABSTRACT

The paper is based on an ongoing programme conducted by Deshkal Society, Delhi on "Enhancing School Effectiveness through Inclusive Teaching and Learning: An Innovative Action Research in Two Rural Government Primary Schools in Gaya District of Bihar". The paper discusses prevalent myths among the educators about the children's individual and collective identities and their abilities. These are often deeply rooted and shaped by varied socio-cultural contexts which have remained largely unspoken but understood by those who believe in diverse societal norms. Therefore, inclusive education has variety of challenges in the contemporary set up. As the school system becomes increasingly diverse, relationships inherent in its structure (student-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, administrator-to-teacher, school boards-to-administrators, parent-to-teacher, etc.) also become more complex. By bringing together myriad social affiliations, gender orientations, economic levels, belief systems, and cultural norms, the institution of schooling poses a plethora of challenges which are not limited only to classrooms but also include the space outside the formal classroom. The paper provides new insight into teacher education reform in connection with the increased intake of diverse learners in elementary classrooms.

Keywords: Children with special needs (CWSN), Dalit, Diversity, Education Volunteers (EVs), Inclusive education, Learning Support Centres (LSCs), Musahar, *sanskara*, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).

INTRODUCTION

"The desire for our children's well-being has always been the most universally cherished aspiration of mankind."

**-Kofi Annan in *We the Children*,
UNICEF, June 2001.**

Today the increasing number of learners from diverse backgrounds entering elementary classrooms has reinforced the importance of making schools more inclusive. With a greater variation in the talents, and social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds of the learners, the elementary class-room in India faces a challenge to use this diversity constructively in order to democratize the teaching-learning processes and practices, and achieve the larger goals of social justice.

In this context the agenda of "inclusive education" has gained importance. There has been a further impetus with the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The implementation of this Act

***Sanjay Kumar** is a Delhi-based researcher, social activist and Secretary of Deshkal Society. He has co-edited *Asserting Voices: Changing Culture, Identity and Livelihood of the Musahars in the Gangetic Plains*(2002), *School Education, Pluralism and Marginality*(Orient BlackSwan,2012) and *Interrogating Development: Insights from the Margins*(OUP,2010).

will be considered successful only if it addresses the issue of making the children of marginalized communities “visible” within the four walls of the classroom.

Many of these children, across the country come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities; ethnic and religious minorities, economically weaker sections (EWS), migrant labourers, nomadic and de-notified tribes, urban poor, Children with special need (CWSN) and so on. Although children of these communities are enrolled in school, they face the danger of dropping out. Many of them live in extremely vulnerable socio-economic conditions and face a serious threat to their universal rights, such as a school education. From a learner’s point of view, RTE, 2009 provides a legal framework to make school admission, attendance and completion compulsory.

With physical access taken care of to a greater extent, it is no longer enough to talk merely about provision of universal access. Rather, the growing importance is to make school education free of anxiety, fear and stress for the diverse learners. In this context, the quality of teaching-learning practices and processes has attracted the attention of all the stakeholders of elementary education. It is now a widely recognized fact that glaring achievement gaps exist between the children of marginalized and non-marginalized communities. At the very heart of the issue that has occupied recent debates and discussion about making school education “stress free” and “child friendly” is the teacher and teaching practices (GOI, 2009, p. 9).

In fact, in recent decades, various studies, reports and documents have revealed that in the classroom, curriculum delivery and pedagogy in contemporary mainstream government schools in India, children—especially those belonging to the marginalized communities—are subjected to various forms of discrimination and humiliation which severely affects their self-respect and self-confidence. Children have narrated painful stories of their experiences in the classroom and shown their resentment to this, as well as towards the teachers (*Probe Report*, 1999; *Nambissan*, 2001; *Govinda*, 2002). Some children have undergone violent experiences inflicted by teachers as well as their classmates from dominant castes. A study of schools in Uttar Pradesh by *Dreze and Gazdar* (1996) reported that teachers refused to touch SC children. They were subjected to verbal abuse and physical punishment by teachers, and were frequently beaten by their upper-caste classmates.

Recognizing the complexity of issues regarding teacher-based practices the RTE Act, 2009 makes it obligatory to change the general perception of children as passive receivers of knowledge, and to move beyond the convention of using textbooks as the basis of examinations. Going beyond the issue of making elementary education legally compulsory, it talks about the pedagogic factors that prevent learners, especially those belonging to disadvantaged social backgrounds, from a comprehensive and continuous elementary education, in the context of ensuring quality education for all. The Act states that the curriculum should provide for learning through activities, exploration and discovery. It intends to address the pressing issue of teacher-based reforms in the classroom to hold teachers accountable for the violation of a child-friendly environment in the classroom. Further, it emphasizes an examination of the assessment system to redesign it to suit the needs of all learners.

Similarly, several years earlier, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 also attempted to address the issue of “child-friendly” teaching-learning. NCF, 2005 also notes the fact that learning has become a burden, causing immense stress to children and their parents, which are evidenced by the deep distortion in educational aims and quality. NCF 2005 makes a series of observations and suggestions about pedagogy, curriculum, teaching-learning material, and class-room and school environments. It notes that:

Children’s voices and experiences do not find expression in the classroom ... [T]he curriculum must enable children to find their voices, nurture their curiosity to do things, to ask questions and to pursue investigations, sharing and integrating their experiences with school knowledge—rather than their ability to reproduce textual knowledge.

NCF, 2005 thus recommends a child-centred pedagogy giving primacy to children’s experiences, their voices and their active participation. However, the curriculum frame-work also observes that:

This perspective on the learner may sound “obvious” but, in fact, many teachers, evaluators and textbook writers still lack the conviction that this can become a reality.

It also observes that many schools now have large numbers of first-generation learners whose parents cannot provide them direct support in their schooling, and therefore, the pedagogy must be reoriented to meet their schooling needs.

In fact, the necessity to address teacher-based practices in the changed circumstances of elementary education in

India has been even more strongly emphasized in the recently released National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009):

One finds the situation on the ground ridden with difficulties. Regional, social and gender disparities continue to pose new challenges. This reality increases the challenge of implementing the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act and, in particular, the role and place of the school teacher ... (ibid., p. 2)

NCFTE, 2009 takes serious note of teacher education reform in connection with the increased intake of diverse learners in elementary classrooms. It envisions a teacher education framework that satisfies the needs of the time:

There is increasing recognition of the worth and potential of social context as a source for rejuvenating teaching and learning. Multi-cultural education and teaching for diversity are the needs of contemporary times. (Ibid.,(p. 19)

Along with recognizing the issues to be addressed in the context of teacher education reform, the document stresses an urgency to provide due emphasis on developing reflective teachers with positive attitudes, values and perspective; developing teacher education curricula on the basis of the changing requirements of time; and develop skills in the art of teaching. Despite such serious concerns it is still a fact that children belonging to marginalized communities and girl children have persistently “under-achieved” in school. In fact, not only in India but also at the global level, current strategies of educating children of marginalized communities have been severely questioned (UNESCO, 2003).

A significant aspect worth mentioning here is that much of the current debate on the underachievement of children of marginalized communities takes place at a level that treats the problem as a “technical issue”. That is to say, the current debate treats the historical underachievement of children of marginalized communities as being caused by faulty and inadequate teaching-learning practices and processes. However, posing the problem in such a manner means that the only possible solution considered is the “right teaching methods” or finding the “best practices”. This is a gross misrecognition of the issue and has compounded the problem further. As a result, considerable time has already been wasted in crying out for a bagful of pedagogic tricks. Perhaps we have only scratched the surface of a far more complex and deep-rooted problem.

PERSISTING MYTHS

The persistence of discriminatory practices by teachers, educators, school authorities and all of us in general about underachieving learners’ socio-cultural identities and abilities are based on a number of problematic assumptions. Some of these pertain to pervading beliefs and common perceptions about the children’s individual and collective identities and their abilities. These are often deeply rooted and shaped by varied socio-cultural contexts which have remained largely unspoken but understood by those who believe in diverse societal norms.

MYTH I: Children Are Children After All ... They Are the Same

No. Children have multiple and diverse identities. But why do children look similar? Imagine children at school with their school uniforms! Don’t they look similar? In fact they do; not only in their physical appearances, but also with respect to certain perceptions about them. Generally, attributes like playfulness, innocence, purity, goodness, naiveté, etc. are used while talking about a child. A child is a child after all! And thus all children are tucked into a common blanket identity. Take the case of Mohit for instance. Mohit Bhalla is in Class IX and is 14 years old. He was born in Delhi and lives in a middle class housing colony.¹ The children with whom he plays are from different schools, and he is quite comfortable with them. But he considers them only playmates and does not discuss his problems with them.

Mohit wants to become a “pilot” when he grows up: *“By becoming a pilot I will finish the enemies of the country and there won’t be any infiltration.”* Infiltration by Pakistani nationals worries Mohit a great deal and he constantly reiterates his desire to “protect” the nation from disloyal and vile enemies from across the border. Becoming a cricketer is another favourite: *“By playing well I can make India win the game ... I will change the whole structure/map (nakshaa) of the country.”*

Communication with his family members is somewhat restricted and it is only when they have dinner together that they talk about his school, his friends and teachers. Contrary to the school practice of “havan” and its attendant religious discourse, Mohit does not believe in outward religiosity and says, “Mind is temple itself. My mother asks me to go to the Hanuman temple every Tuesday but I personally feel that if we don’t go to the temple and just remember God silently (“maun”) then also he will listen.” Mohit has participated in the *havan* twice, “I used to sit just because I am asked to sit.”

Mohit's reference to the bomb blasts in cinema halls in Delhi is fraught with the circumstances of Hindus and Muslims in the context of India and Pakistan. Interestingly, the newspapers later reported that the terrorists arrested for this act were in fact from the Punjab but this does not deter Mohit from expressing his strong views: "Yes I came to know about the incident from the TV news. Now these things will happen if we allow the bus service to Pakistan. And now they are saying that they will start a train from India to Pakistan. This will make the process of infiltration much easier for the terrorists. It very often comes in the daily newspaper about the infiltrators who come from Pakistan and are caught over here. There should be a strict vigil on the boundaries of our country, otherwise again there will be Muslim rule."

Mohit's narratives reflects the fact that while it is true that diverse learners in classrooms look similar in the eyes of a teacher, behind their common identity lies a "child", and each learner has a different interpersonal and collective identity. It is similar to a piece of ice floating on the water, wherein the major part is hidden below the water. The personal or collective identity of a learner is considered to be formed and moulded by the socio-economic and cultural milieu in which he or she grows up. For instance, the very socio-economic and cultural milieu under which a Dalit child grows up in India is significantly different from a non-marginalized child studying in an elite school in urban India.

Contemporary thinking in child development also points out that a child's identity is a complex one. Children begin to learn complex social realities around them at a very early stage which influences to a large extent, the way they perceive themselves and others. From this perspective, rather than children being empty vessels as generally perceived, their "social" identity and consciousness about their personal and collective identities are in fact to a large extent formed before they enter school.

However, it is observed that the mainstream perception of learners dominates those involved in educating children. Such a perception is widespread among people around whom these diverse learners grow up—teachers, parents, school authorities, community members, etc. The way these learners are perceived by other people around them informs to a large extent how they are expected to appear, behave and respond to others, more specifically in the context of the classroom.

The gap between the common perception about learners' identities and their actual reflection of their "social selves" is so wide that sometimes it becomes almost difficult to hold a discussion in the classroom. For instance, a female teacher who taught at the Gyansthal Public School in Jhansi, faced stiff challenges in teaching from the history textbook in the classroom after 9/11 (*Chitalkar, 2007*).² The students in the school were predominantly from the disadvantaged sections of society—Scheduled Castes and the OBCs. The Muslims in the school were present in the ratio of 1:10 with roughly four Muslims in a class of 40 children.

Lessons progressed smoothly and she enjoyed teaching, till she started teaching the chapter on India's struggle for independence, especially the portion on the Muslim League and communalism from the prescribed history book by NCERT for Class X. Media images of the hijacked planes crashing into the twin towers, fresh in the memory of the learners, became the central point of discussion in the classroom. The words, "communalism" and "partition" were used to bait the Muslim students in the class. "See they are killers" said the non-Muslim learners. The teacher's response to the Gujarat riots was: "They deserve it."

Every history class degenerated into a verbal duel with possibilities of physical duels on the issue outside the class appearing very real. Attempts to mediate by the teacher were countered by scathing remarks by non-Muslim learners "Madam, are you Muslim?" The teacher finally decided to discontinue teaching that particular lesson, since neither severity on her part or attempts at resolving the issue had any effect on the learners. The prejudices ran too deep and the school authorities were not interested, and nor were they equipped to deal with the situation. Peace was finally restored when the teacher resorted to the safer geography portion of the syllabus.

This example illustrates that the myth that children are all the same is false, and that children come to school not only with their own individual identities and experiences, but also with a consciousness and identity formed while growing up as members of collectives.

MYTH II: Learning Achievements of Children are determined by Heredity

No. Learning achievements of children are not linked to heredity in any way. Stigmas and prejudices have influenced notions among teachers and school administrations about the learning potential of children from different backgrounds. Social experiences of children in elementary schools across India point towards the fact that such notions are often based on prejudices and stigmas regarding caste, class, religion, ethnicity and language.

The underachievement of marginalized children and the gap between their learning abilities and non-marginalized children are seen in the light of heredity-based factors such as caste. For instance, a study by a Delhi-based civil society organization in selected elementary schools in Gaya district, Bihar unearthed the fact that belief in the notion of "*sanskara*" and inherent "non-educability" of children from marginalized communities adversely affects the nature of teacher-student and teacher-community relationships as well as the overall school ethos and environment. Surveys carried out in the course of the study revealed that teachers generally do not indulge in any overt acts of discrimination against children from marginalized communities. Rather, social exclusion has taken on a "silent" nature which is characterized by the indifferent attitudes of teachers and school administrations towards the learning achievements of children of marginalized communities such as the Musahars.

Teachers in the elementary school in Gaya where Musahar children are being educated attribute their underachievement to their "impure" culture in which parents indulge in practices like rearing pigs and eating pork. They are considered to lack "*sanskara*" – the sociability to be eligible to learn. Although caste is not directly referred to by teachers during their interactions with the students, it is the apparent lack of "*sanskara*" which dominates their perception and attitudes towards the Musahar children. As stated by a teacher of Majhauri Primary School in Gaya: "*Pigs eat filth. Wherever they go they make the place filthy. Due to pig rearing, the children and parents of the Musahar community can never develop good 'sanskara'*" (Singh and Kumar, p. 38).

A teacher in a primary school in Dhareya, Gaya even went on to explicitly state that "*one cannot even dream of the mental development of those who are engaged in 'pig-rearing'*" (Ibid.). Caste has been substituted by the notion of "*sanskara*" to explain the educational failure of marginalized children and to their inherent or heredity-based non-educability. The teachers however are reluctant to discuss the caste factor directly. They assert that the caste identity of children does not matter in school and every child is treated equally.

Further, teachers' belief in the hereditary educability of children and their attitude of attributing the children's educational failure on their "*sanskara*" has also resulted in antagonistic relationships between teachers and parents, especially parents from marginalized communities. The latter openly blame the teachers for the failure of their children. They claim that the teachers show minimal interest in their children's learning and, therefore, do not make any effort to "discipline" them during school hours and keep them within the school premises. Ironically, these parents even go to the extent of saying that teachers should physically beat the children in order to inculcate discipline. On the other hand, teachers say that if they do this, these same parents will oppose it violently.

Within the classroom, the beliefs about hereditary educability of children are further reinforced by the teaching-learning methods which are dominated by the centrality and supremacy of the teacher and the textbook. Instead of encouraging students from different backgrounds to participate in co-constructing knowledge and building on what they already know from their life experiences, their knowledge is de-legitimized as something not worth knowing, and their initiative and enthusiasm for learning through co-construction of knowledge is cut short. Often, attempts by students at interactive engagements during the teaching transaction are rejected by teachers as violation of the moral order, standard behaviour and discipline in the classroom.

The dominating attitude and opinion among teachers in this regard is represented by what a female teacher said during an interview: "*These children are all of low learning capability, and we (the teachers) have to make them learn the right things*" (Sushila Prasad, teacher, Majhauri school, quoted in Singh and Kumar, 2009, p. 48). Implicit in this attitude is the view that what children already know from their everyday experiences is not the right knowledge to learn in the context of formal education, and that, in any case, children's ability to learn is determined by heredity rather than by what happens in the classroom.

MYTH III: 'School Kids' Are Different from 'Street Kids'

No. Children are not born with any prescribed identities. Rather they are given these or they gradually acquire them. It is often observed that among different learners "school identity" and "social identity" do not match in the perception of teachers and educators. For instance, the salience of school kids is often found in perceiving them as "homely", "good" and "obedient". They are "silent", "serious" and do their homework properly, and generally listen to the teachers. They dress smartly, are neat and clean, maintain good hygiene and their parents take a keen interest in their education.

On the contrary, the identity of street kids is relegated to "non-serious" learners in the classroom. Street children often suffer from poor motor control. Their restlessness, the "adult-like" orientation in their behaviour is stigmatized in a diverse classroom as having "deviant" characters. They are frequently identified as not having the traits of a "child".

Teachers and school authorities tend to develop a poor opinion about them. Ultimately, these children feel like “fish out of water” in a diverse classroom. Their alienation from the classroom and its teaching-learning practices and processes finally leads them to drop out from school.

Teachers in particular and school authorities in general perceive that street children come to school to “pass time” by playing with their friends rather than to study. Those who are unruly and play pranks, are the “bad ones” and those who are “silent” and “serious” who generally abide by what the teachers say, are the “good ones”. Such labelling in fact makes the difference as to who can “make it” in the eyes of the teachers and who cannot. This prejudice emerges from the fact that “school children” have a different identity from those who come only to pass time – the “trouble makers”, the street children. Their parents are perceived to lack any interest in whether their children learn or not as they will shortly follow what their parents do. Their parents send them to school to get rid of them during their working hours.

Street children are often engaged in daily survival. They develop resourcefulness, self-reliance and independence and other survival skills in a hostile environment. Alienated from mainstream life, they have no social status in the larger society where their existence is tolerated, but not trusted, as their background is unknown. Because their contacts in society are mainly casual, street children rarely develop any “protective relationship” with non-street people. They live in their own world, seeking the support and protection of the local gangs for companionship or to learn the ways of street life. They sometimes develop a group identity, and occasionally a spirit of camaraderie, which meets, however imperfectly, their emotional and psychosocial needs (Bose, 1992, p. 52).

The failure to understand the emotional and psychosocial needs of street children within the classroom is a major factor in their dropping out. For instance, the teachers and administrators of schools managed by Brihan-Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) were quite enthusiastic when large numbers of street children participated in the introduction of *balsakhis* in school. However, as the days passed several of them had dropped out of the schools. Under the scheme, the initial attractions for the street children were the free clothes and study material provided by the schools.

Raju (11 years) used the free distribution policy to take care of his wardrobe for the next six months. He first enrolled in a school at Mahalakshmi. Within a week, he changed his “address” and landed on the streets at Dadar, where he was enrolled in a civic school. His final stop was Borivili (E), where he was registered for the third time in 35 days. In all, Raju collected three sets of uniforms. “He even got free books from the second school, sold them and earned a neat Rs. 100”, says his friend Chotu (11 years), his tone tinged with awe and envy. Attendance dwindled and finally petered out. “Didi (the balsakhi) ne bola ke agar mei school jau toh mujhe pehne ko kapde milenge, esiliye mei school mei bharti hua (Didi told me that if I go to school, I’ll get free clothes and that is why I enrolled),” says Rasik (10 years), who lives on the streets near Haji Ali (Express News Service, September 8, 2000).

Principals in civic schools concede that the plan has its inherent difficulties. Says Ram Sharma, principal of a Hindi-medium school at Mahalakshmi: “Street children don’t even inform the school that they are moving out of the area and are going some place else. And it is very easy for them to register in another school in a different ward with the balsakhis and teachers so enthusiastic about enrolling yet another child in their school.” Other principals agree. Says Meena Phondge, Principal of a Marathi-medium school: “The children who continue schooling have a permanent home and a more or less stable home background. It is the street child who will not take the school curriculum for more than five days straight. Take any attendance register and it is as clear as day that a majority of students who play truant live on the streets,” she confirms.

The children, on the other hand, blame the teachers for their disinterest. Most of them complain that they are either rude or ignore them completely, because of which they don’t feel as though they “belong”. Some of them are also beaten, they claim. Parroting alien rhymes like “Twinkle, twinkle little star” and “A for apple” is the clincher. So, they simply leave; free uniforms notwithstanding. Says Imran (7 years), “I might as well continue begging at traffic signals. That way, I earn at least Rs. 40 and don’t have to take orders from a teacher” (*Ibid.*).

Such instances clearly indicate that teachers and school administrations lack a proper social understanding of street children. While the identity of those marked as school children poses no conflict with their corresponding social backgrounds; it is not so in the case of street children. Their family backgrounds and social associations are not perceived to fit in with the school children’s social backgrounds. Street children’s peer associations are viewed with suspicion. Their “street” identity acts as an impediment in developing meaningful relationships with their teachers, co-learners and the school in general. In fact, inside the classroom their “street” identity is reinforced by their poor academic achievements, and is further legitimized in the perception of teachers and educators.

MYTH IV: Boys Are for Schools, Girls Are for Marriage

No. It is a traditionally created male viewpoint. So far, schools have also represented and reproduced such a conservative perception about the girl child. For instance, take the case of the Meo Muslim girl children of Rajasthan who are first-generation learners. A comparative study between two villages, one in which a school intervention was conducted and the other where it was not, revealed minimal school participation and integration by the Meo Muslim girl child. Her daily routine remained almost similar to what it was before the school intervention programme.

A typical day for the Meo girl child starts at dawn and ends late in the evening. She prepares breakfast, milks the cattle, fetches water from the pond, cooks the lunch food, washes clothes, collects dry wood and leaves, feeds the cattle, takes care of her younger siblings and helps members of the house with other chores "*Savere se shaam tak kaam hoe hai, ladke to na karen* (we work from early morning to evening but boys don't work)" says Afsana (14 years), a first-generation Meo Muslim learner. In between she manages to go to school. She wishes she could be a boy! "*Ladka ho to itna kaam na karna paro... ladke ko baat sunna pado jab koi kam no baro, yo saver mein uthe to bhi baat sunna pado* (if I were a boy I would not have to work so much...boys are scolded when they do not complete their assigned jobs, but girls are scolded from the moment they leave the bed" (*Ahmad*, 2005, p. 78).

Within the classroom, the Meo Muslim girl faces stiff challenges. Owing to the traditional values held by the community which bars girls from coming into contact with males, they hesitate to interact with the teachers. The regular absenteeism of teachers from the classroom is perceived as a risk factor by the community members where girls are left un-chaperoned in the presence of their male co-learners. The girls are unable to participate in the reading and writing exercises within the classroom. In fact, community members see their participation in school in a poor light.

The community members maintain school education almost as a waste of time as they find Madarasa education more suitable for them compared to boys who are regarded as the future wage earners of the family. This is well reflected while interacting with the male and female parents and grandparents of Meo girl children. "School education" is given low emphasis as a criterion for a "good girl". In their views, other socio-religious criteria such as observing religious rituals, early marriage and lending a helping hand in household chores are given more emphasis. For girls, more than school education, Madarsa education is considered suitable for their proper upbringing within the mores of the Meo community.

The social values held by the community are also reflected in the Meo girls' self-perception. They too differentiate between "good" and "bad". This is reflected in Afsana's view when asked why she preferred a Madarsa to a regular school: "*Ladke wale puche hai ladki dini talim aur Urdu jane ya na* (the groom's side mostly inquires if the bride is properly educated in religious education and Urdu)" (*Ibid.*, p. 78). A similar opinion is held by young Meo co-learners like Asim who maintains: "*Ladke kamao hain. School mein padhai ke baad, ladki to shaadi ho jai hai. Padhai zaroori na ho utni* (Boys earn! What is the point of girls going to school since they will get married soon? School is not so important for them)" (*Ibid.*, p. 77).

Like Afsana, Champa (12 years) is a bright Dalit learner studying in her village school in Class VI. Both her parents are landless farm workers. Their income was so meagre that they decided to ask Champa to drop out of school. She protested vehemently as she wanted to continue. To console and please Champa her parents told her, "We will make you happy my child by getting you married.." Champa responded, "You do not want to make me happy by letting me attend school." The grandmother tried, "Don't feel bad, my child, we will find you a good boy." Champa asked, "How am I to get a good boy when I am not going to be educated?" (*Macwan*, p. 17).

Even if girls do happen to go to school they are discriminated against in the choice of school. An interesting phenomenon of social discrimination was noticed in a family of the Berwa tribes in Ujjain, which preferred to send their boys to private schools but their girls to low quality government schools.

The voices of girls such as Afsana and Champa amply reflect the social experiences of girls growing up in disadvantaged backgrounds where their education is widely perceived as having less value than that of boys. Their involvement in sharing the burden of household chores starts from childhood and continues throughout their school years, and this is never acknowledged. In a Hindu-dominated social upbringing, the arrival of a son is greeted with happiness, whereas the birth of a daughter brings forth uninhibited expressions of melancholy or indifference (*Kakar*, 1978).

A similar moment arrives when a girl reaches puberty. She loses her role in festive rituals on account of having become "impure" due to the onset of menstruation. The development of the "negative self" is built up in successive years of social experiences eroding the very autonomy of the "self". Traditional practices such as early marriage add another layer of disadvantage to this. In fact, the customs and rituals under which girls are brought up and gendered into

womanhood constitute a regime which is incompatible with the normative view of a childhood which is implicit in child-centred policies of education. In this regard, child-friendly and special strategies to educate the girl child in the future will only gain in reality and value when such approaches to education take into account the larger cultural context of girlhood (Kumar, 2010).

Myth V: Children Learn Only from Textbook Transaction by Teachers in the Classroom!

No. Children learn more outside the four wall of the classroom by interacting within the socio-cultural milieu in which they are born and brought up. There is a widespread belief that children learn more from school textbooks and teachers. Intelligent learners are held to be those who can better remember what is in the textbook and reproduce it in examinations. They receive accolades not only from their teachers, but also from their parents and community. It is frequently seen that instead of encouraging students' participation in the co-construction of knowledge and building on what students already know from their life experiences, their knowledge is de-legitimized as not worth knowing, and their initiative and enthusiasm to learn through co-construction of knowledge is eliminated.

Let us examine a day's teaching transaction in a school in Gaya, Bihar where a large number of Dalit children, especially Musahar children, are being educated in rural elementary schools. A teacher asked students in Class IV to write an essay on a village, in accordance to the exercise given at the end of the lesson 'Halwaha Rajkumar'. Some of the students, particularly those from the marginalized communities, wrote about the common features of their own villages from their everyday experiences, describing the crops grown in their village; how their parents work for landowners; how if the paddy crops are not good, they are bound to starve; if a chamar (SC) touches utensils belonging to other castes, the utensils have to be washed. These are everyday realities experienced by children in their social world (Singh and Kumar, 2009).

However, although the teacher himself was aware of these realities, since he is part of the same social world, he not only rejected these essays, but also passed derogatory comments on the low mental abilities and worth of these students. The teacher then gave instructions to the students to strictly follow the content and language of the lesson in the textbook while describing the village, which is as follows:

Second person (telling the first person): 'This is really a wonderful place. The son of the king holds the plough, no one is a servant of anyone, all are brothers.'

First person: 'Well Prince! What is the difference between you and the other citizens?'

Balram (Prince): 'The only difference is that we have some more land and a few more cows.' (*Ibid.*, p. 48).

This image of the village presented in the lesson contradicts the reality of everyday life faced by children from marginalized as well as non-marginalized communities. It is difficult for children to relate to the imagined description in the lesson, where the son of a king tills the land with his own hands, and where all the people live like brothers. Every day, Dalit children see their landless parents working on other people's land. They also see that people are divided into low and high castes and that low-caste people work for the higher castes. Rejecting this knowledge that these children have gained from their everyday experience, as irrelevant, and passing derogatory remarks about their inability to understand and learn the "standard" knowledge contained in textbooks, adversely affects their perception of self-worth and alienates them from the learning process.

On the other hand, when the children can relate their life to the contents of a lesson, they are mentally and emotionally involved in the learning process. This was observed very clearly by the researchers during a reading session in Class IV in Badka Bandh school in Gaya, Bihar. The lesson concerned a story about a peasant, Jhuri, and his two bullocks Heera and Moti. As the children related to the content, they listened to the story with rapt attention, their facial expression changing with every turn in the story. However, due to the teacher and text-centred transaction method, the students had no opportunity to engage in interactive discussion and develop critical thinking.

Teachers' devaluing learners' knowledge, especially of children of marginalized communities; do not communicate respect and dignity for the learners' socio-cultural milieu. Teachers and school authorities tend to put more value on caste, class, religion, ethnicity, language to recognize learners' knowledge in the classroom. Such biases and prejudices often damage children's educational opportunities, leading to alienation of learners from the teaching-learning environment of the elementary classrooms.

Children often put forward difficult questions directly related to the complex realities that they encounter in everyday life. Rather than encouraging a dialogue, their voices are muted in the classroom. A common perception held by teachers,

school administrations and parents is that teachers need to keep a safe “distance” from the learners in day-to-day classroom transactions. The learners are required to respond only to what teachers teach in the classroom. Any other kind of engagement in a dialogue with the teacher is considered as a threat to the integrity and knowledge of the teacher. It is perceived that if teachers become too friendly with learners, they could take undue advantage, and the teachers would “lose” control over the learners leading to gross indiscipline in the classroom.

The non-recognition of the learners’ knowledge leads to confrontation between the teachers and learners in the classroom. Such a confrontation results in violence by the teacher since it appears to them that the learners are questioning the authority of the teacher. Learners are caned in the guise of disciplining them and make them more attentive to their studies. Moreover, parents also complain when teachers are friendly with learners and do not beat them. A classroom with pin-drop silence is what teachers and principals of most elementary schools expect. The dilemma between the emphasis on “learning through activity” and a “disciplined classroom” is shared by a teacher of an MCD school in Delhi:

Agar hum sochte hai ki bacche group work karein ... pairs mein team karein ... toh bahar walon ko lagta hai class humse sambhal nahi rahi..ab agar headmaster/headmistress bhi isi soch ki aur usse thodi bahut awaz theek na lage ... toh problem ho jatein hai

(If we think that children should learn in groups and pairs and the teacher does so, people tend to think that the teacher is unable to control the class. If the principal also thinks so, then the teacher is in a real mess!)” (Quoted in *Jain, 2006*, p. 137).

MYTH VI: Inclusive Education Means Enrolment of All Children in School

In the dominant discourse on elementary education in India, the meaning of inclusive education appears to be limited to merely school enrolment of children from all sections of society. However, several studies indicate that children from diverse socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious backgrounds have different learning experiences and outcomes when they come to school. Inclusive education, therefore, needs to move beyond just enrolment to denote a feeling among all learners of “belonging equally” to the school, irrespective of their backgrounds. Inclusive classrooms and schools in this sense would mean a place where diversity among learners is appreciated and considered a learning resource rather than a problem; where children from diverse background are valued for what they are, and can feel safe enough to express whatever they know, without fear or discrimination; and where the curriculum, teaching-learning methods and materials are culturally responsive to meet the different learning needs and interests of children from diverse backgrounds.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

The myths discussed in the previous section provide a glimpse of how formidable the challenge to educate diverse learners has become. In fact, as the school system becomes increasingly diverse, relationships inherent in its structure (student-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, administrator-to-teacher, school boards-to-administrators, parent-to-teacher, etc.) also become more complex. By bringing together myriad social affiliations, gender orientations, economic levels, belief systems, and cultural norms, the institution of schooling poses a plethora of challenges which are not limited only to classrooms but also include the space outside the formal classroom. Some of the specific challenges in this regard are:

CHALLENGE I: Recognizing the Increasing Diversity of Classrooms

There is a need to recognize the changing social composition of learners in the classroom resulting from the increased flow of children from varied backgrounds in terms of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, etc. This diversity also presents new issues and challenges to change curriculum design, teaching-learning practices and processes, learning materials, teacher education, etc. so that they meet the different learning needs of children from diverse backgrounds. In order to address these issues and challenges, policymakers and practitioners need to first recognize the different learning needs and interests of the diverse learners.

CHALLENGE II: Developing and Maintaining Disaggregated Databases on Diverse Learners

The increasing participation of diverse learners in the classroom has radically altered the social composition of elementary schools in India. Data on learning achievement, however, reveals a significant gap between children from different backgrounds. But, without a clear understanding of the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of these diverse learners, it is difficult to evolve strategies and develop plans at the classroom, school and system levels to teach these children. It is therefore necessary to collect relevant disaggregated data on diverse learners, and examine and analyse it in order to inform and shape policies and practices to make classrooms and schools inclusive and responsive to

the learning needs of children from diverse backgrounds.

CHALLENGE III: Developing Ethnographic Research Focused on Teacher Beliefs and Practices

A contextualized understanding of teacher beliefs and behaviour as well as the teaching-learning practices and processes, and their impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of children from diverse backgrounds is a crucial prerequisite to develop inclusive classrooms that are responsive to these children's learning needs and interests. Without this, it will be difficult to assess the professional development needs of teachers, and evolve appropriate training curriculum, practices and processes for them. Therefore, there is a critical need for school-based ethnographic research which can better inform policy and practice. As teaching and learning takes place in particular contexts, such research will also provide inputs to orient teacher training towards an understanding of the importance of contextual specificity and an ability to critically reflect on their own specific classroom contexts and practice. This will equip teachers with abilities to apply general principles of teaching for diversity in ways that work for their specific classroom situations.

CHALLENGE IV: Need For a Greater Focus on Diversity Issues in Teacher Training and Teacher Education Programmes

An effective and meaningful framework for teacher training and teacher education programmes would identify several professional development needs of teachers. To be effective, the framework should be linked to the changing social landscape of the contemporary elementary classroom in India. Teaching children from diverse backgrounds requires a tremendous amount of flexibility in teaching practices and processes as well as in curriculum design and learning materials. It also crucially involves reflecting on and examining teachers' personal and professional beliefs about diversity based on caste, class, gender, ethnicity language, religion etc., and analyzing how these influence their behaviour and relationships with children from diverse backgrounds. However, as evidence suggests, the ongoing programmes on teacher training and teacher education are yet to recognize and focus attention on the need to adequately address teachers' professional developmental needs to prepare them to teach diverse learners.

CHALLENGE V: Maintaining Teacher Diversity in the Elementary Teaching Workforce

Maintaining diversity in the teacher workforce is considered crucial for creating inclusive schools. A teaching force that more closely mirrors the student population can benefit both students and teachers. Diverse teachers can serve as powerful role models for diverse students, potentially motivating them to strive further in their achievements. They also bring to the classroom their unique experiences and perspectives, which can help them to better relate to their diverse students. They may also be more inclined to view student diversity in the classroom as a resource.

However, data in this regard suggests that while there has been an increasing flow of diverse learners in the classroom, the social profile of teachers has almost remained the same. The participation of the excluded groups in the teaching force, such as women, SC/STs, and religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities have remained lopsided within the recruitment processes. Moreover, a majority of the teachers recruited from these social categories in recent years are para-teachers who have remained out of the formal teacher training structure (*Govinda, 2005*), and their lower educational qualification and lack of professional training debars them from developing their professional careers.

CHALLENGE VI: Developing Organic School-Community Relationships

Involving parents and communities in school functioning can be an effective strategy to address diversity in the classroom. It also needs to be recognized that in the changing context of the increasing inflow of children from diverse backgrounds, it is important for schools to understand and articulate parent and community involvement in terms of socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. The current official mechanisms and structures (VECs and PTAs, etc.) prescribed to ensure community involvement do not appear to achieve the desired outcomes, particularly with regard to participation of the marginalized and excluded communities. In several villages, the local people are not even aware of the existence of VECs and their roles and responsibilities. In many cases, VECs become platforms for the powerful sections of the local society, and the marginalized and excluded communities feel powerless to assert their voices and participate in the functioning of the schools.

SILVER LINING TO THE CLOUDS

The challenges of inclusive classrooms and diversity discussed above appear formidable, especially because the mainstream policy and practice in the elementary education sector have yet to adequately recognize and focus attention on them. On the other hand, it is fortunate that during the recent decades, these issues and concerns have started getting the attention of a section of policymakers and practitioners. Various innovative experiments in school reforms have also

been taken up by civil society organizations as well as in the government sector in different parts of the country. These experiments have attempted curriculum design, development of teaching-learning methods and materials, and teacher development with child-centred inclusive perspectives. These have shown encouraging results in terms of the learning achievement of children from diverse backgrounds. For instance, the Loreto Day School in Sealdah, West Bengal uses a variety of teaching and learning methods to ensure that all children can learn intelligently in the classroom. Activity-based learning methods and the uses of local resources are emphasized. The school is sensitive to the children's different cultures and promotes appreciation and pride for each one. It recognizes the injustices poor children are subjected to and is flexible enough to give them first priority. The school is deeply concerned about the dignity of every child and carefully monitors all existing structures, eliminating or re-orienting those which could make a child feel inferior. The curriculum encourages the affluent children to mingle with children from the weaker sections of society and develop relationships. This exposes them to a variety of life experiences that children from diverse backgrounds bring from their homes or from the streets.

Care India has taken initiatives to promote inclusive and equitable classrooms in a few schools in Uttar Pradesh. The programme, implemented by civil society organizations, is based on the identification and analysis of the practices and processes of marginalization in actual classroom situations. A specifically designed tool of classroom observation from an equity perspective is used to capture the quality of teaching-learning and children's experiences; teacher behaviour in the classroom; peer behaviour among children; use of teaching-learning materials; and the varied learning needs of children. Based on the feedback of classroom observations, teachers are given onsite support through class demonstrations to ensure that they understand how to facilitate inclusive classroom practices and processes. Regular feedback from classroom observations and demonstrations are discussed and analysed in monthly meetings with teachers in order to keep improvising these practices and another innovative school reform programme was initiated by Deshkal Society in two government rural primary schools in the Gaya district of Bihar. A major focus of the programme is on improving classroom practices and processes of teaching and learning. The programme works with teachers, children, parents and community members to evolve context specific teaching-learning practices and processes which are child-centred, inclusive and relate to the diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the children. Issues and methods of intervention are discussed and identified through classroom observations, workshops and meetings with various stakeholders such as teachers, parents, children and community members.

Teachers are helped to first develop an understanding of the children's life experiences and knowledge of their socio-economic and cultural environment. In this process, instead of testing their knowledge and competencies through textbooks, children are asked by the teachers to write about their knowledge and experience on various issues related to their daily life and surroundings. Children's experiences and knowledge from these exercises are documented, discussed and analysed by the teachers and the project team to identify issues to evolve context specific teaching-learning methods in different subjects, such as mathematics and language, to further build their knowledge and enhance their competencies.

In the area of teacher training, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has developed and implemented an innovative four-day training model, "Rupantar", for primary school teachers in the tribal areas of Orissa. The model focuses on attitudinal training of teachers and their sensitization to tribal language, culture and knowledge systems. In the government sector, the Activity Based Learning (ABL) programme introduced by SSA in the primary schools of Tamil Nadu has received considerable acclaim in recent times for its comprehensive and holistic approach in enhancing the quality of education at the school level. The ABL methodology was introduced in response to the poor learning levels amongst children and uninteresting classroom processes. The most notable feature of the reform is its focus on changing classrooms, in terms of methodology, the role of teachers, classroom organization and classroom environment as a whole.

The innovative experiments initiated in different parts of the country present a silver lining to the clouds. The positive and critical awareness from these initiatives need to be documented, shared and widely disseminated, and a perspective and strategy needs to be developed to address the challenges of inclusive classrooms and diversity.

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NOTES

1. This narrative is adopted from a research study by Meenakshi Thapan (2006).
2. This experience was shared by the author in her paper presentation at an international conference entitled *School Education, Pluralism and Marginality: Comparative Perspectives*, 2007, New Delhi.

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BOX 1: My Right to Learn

MY RIGHT TO LEARN

Robert Prouty

I do not have to earn The right to learn. It's mine.
And if because of faulty laws
And errors of design,
And far too many places where
Still far too many people do not care – If because of all these things, and more,
For me, the classroom door,
With someone who can teach, Is still beyond my reach,
Still out of sight,
Those wrongs do not remove my right. So here I am. I too
Am one of you And by God's grace,
And yours, I'll find my place.
We haven't met.
You do not know me yet And so
You don't yet know
That there is much that I can give you in return.
The future is my name And all I claim
Is this: my right to learn
Quoted in *UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007.*

BOX 2: Inclusive School

THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school.

Salamanca Framework for Action, 1994

BOX 3: How Inclusion Ought to Work**LORETO DAY SCHOOL, SEALDAH****A school that believes passionately in inclusion**

Loreto Day School at Sealdah in Kolkata, West Bengal is an example of an innovative experiment whereby a privately managed school has gone beyond the norm to successfully integrate the schooling of middle class and poor children through a creative and flexible use of pedagogy, curriculum and resources. The school has 1,400 regular students, of which 700 pay fees to provide stability to teachers' salaries, and 700 come from impoverished slums. Children are admitted through a lottery system at the age of four. They learn together, wear the same uniform, and play, work, study and eat together as equals.

Besides the regular school, three other programmes for street children, domestic child labourers and rural children are also run by the school. The Rainbows is a programme for street children. They are allowed to drop into school whenever they are free, from early morning till late afternoon. When they come, they always find a regular student free and prepared to teach them. This is made possible by a creative structure of the curriculum. Regular children have Work Education for two periods a week which ensures that throughout the day there is a reservoir of 50 potential "teachers" free and prepared to teach whoever comes. The street children are brought to a level for a class appropriate to their age and then slotted into school according to her age level.

Loreto children are also encouraged to make contact with domestic child labourers, to play and talk to them, listen to their stories and even interact with their employers to persuade them to get the children to school. Loreto has admitted 239 such children in this way. The regular Loreto children also interact with and teach 3,500 primary school children in rural areas every Thursday (school holiday) in an ongoing child-to-child programme.

The school uses a variety of teaching and learning methods to ensure that all children can learn intelligently in the classroom. Activity-based learning methods and use of local resources are emphasized. The school ensures that all activities are creative rather than money-based so that poor children do not feel excluded because they cannot afford to take part in them. It also provides head start / remedial / alternative programmes to meet the needs of academically weaker children. There is no academic ranking or competition, no pitting children against each other for marks. Children are trained to compete with their own best performances and all prizes are effort-based; talent per se is not rewarded, as it is considered a gift.

Child-to-child tutoring and peer learning in Rainbow, domestic child labour and rural schools programme encourage reflection and enrichment of teaching methods. Children are challenged to reflect on what they do and why they do it, to analyse what they have experienced and become aware of some of the burning socio- economic issues facing Indian society today.

The school is sensitive to the various cultures of the children coming from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and promotes appreciation of and pride in each one. It recognizes the injustices poor children are subjected to and is flexible enough to give them first priority. The school is deeply concerned for the dignity of every child and monitors carefully all existing structures. It removes or re-orientates those which might make a child feel inferior. The curriculum encourages children to mix and have relationships with the poor, and exposes them to a variety of life experiences that children from diverse backgrounds bring from their homes or the streets. Even middle class parents understand the educational value of mixing children of several different backgrounds, and parent-teacher meetings are geared towards reflection on various aspects of education rather than reporting on individual children's shortcomings. The school thus exposes teachers, children and parents alike to a variety of socio-economic experiences and issues, and practically makes it possible for everyone to make their contribution in the successful implementation of its vision and purpose.

(Based on a presentation by Sister Cyrril, Principal, Loreto Day School, in an International Conference organized by Deshkal Society in partnership with DFID, UNICEF, NUEPA and ADRI in 2007 in Delhi.)

BOX 4: Toolkit for Teachers**Development of a Toolkit for Teacher Education**

Development of a toolkit for teacher education on diversity and marginality will be one of the major outcomes at the end of the programme. Thematic issues related to various aspects of diversity and marginality in the classroom, how these are manifested in the teaching-learning and other school-based practices and processes, the relationship and entrenchment of these issues with the larger society are discussed, documented and analysed through fortnightly workshops with various stakeholders such as teachers, parents, children, community representatives, VECs, and Panchayat representatives. The toolkit will focus not only on developing a perspective and explanation which enhances the awareness and understanding of teachers on these issues, but also on developing context-specific practical inputs which help teachers to implement this understanding in actual classroom situations and make classrooms and schools inclusive.

What Inclusion IS About**What Inclusion is NOT About**

Welcoming diversity

Reforms of special education alone, but reform of both the formal and non-formal education system

Benefiting all learners, not only targeting the excluded

Responding only to diversity, but also improving the quality of education for all learners

Children in school who may feel excluded

Special schools but perhaps additional support to students within the regular school system

Providing equal access to education or making certain provisions for certain categories of children without excluding them meeting the needs of children with disabilities only meeting one child's needs at the expense of another child

Courtesy: UNESCO(2005), *Guidelines for Inclusion*, Paris