

# Learning Together Why and How?

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## Abstract

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*With the changing global scenerio of education and demand of mass participation for the all round development of the country as well as of the world. It has become imperative to re-focus and ensure participation of all sections of people in the schooling system, so that all sorts of working and capable people are available at the right place for engaging them in the developmental process. This is also one of the focused areas of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. (vide para 1.4.9(d) Mission statement of SSA which reads as follows: " An equity based approach that focuses on the needs of ... children with special needs"). The concept of inclusion is not new but it will take time for our practicing teachers to adopt themselves to such situation and explore the merits of inclusive learning and Multigrade teaching. Although legal provisions are made (Article 21-A) so that education becomes one of the fundamental rights, but like many other behaviour laws, the right to education is yet to be percieved and enacted with full potential. International organisations and many NGOs are actively involved to look after the issue and address such neglected (gray) areas with proper training and study materials developed at the International levels. Still it is a question of attitudinal change and convinces us of the urgency of the situation and moulds ourselves accordingly.*

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Homogneity, uniformly and symmetry are beautiful concepts in miniscule scale but when such ideas are extended and projected in real life situations, it seems to be a big yawm; instead of pleasing our aesthetic sensitivities, it disturbs and ridicules our sense of harmony in variety. It looks like an artificial, mechanical world, heartless, senseless, monotonous and foolishly repetitive.

Fortunately, nature is never uniformly homogenous. No two things in nature are alike or a carbon copy of one another. Variety is indeed the spice of life. But why then, do crave and advocate for homogeneity in society? Why do we expect every child to be same or similar in every aspect, so that we can apply the same methodology mechanically and be cent per cent sure of the output, minimising

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our responsibilities? Do we really realise the consequences? Is not this an escapist approach?

The fact is that, novelty, ingenuity, creativity, talent are not the terms of mechanical world. Life is infinitely variable, myriad and more colourful beyond the limitations of VIBGYOR (violet-indigo-blue-green-yellow-orange and red; the colours of the rainbow). From ancient times this heterogenous aspect of nature is respected and we are taught to accept the variety, not as a freak but as the order of nature. The infinite variety and variability is both a challenge and beauty of nature. Only some 'crackpots' dare to overpower the order of nature and tries to do otherwise, in the name of racial, religious and ethnic harmony and homogeneity. They propagate a false sense of artificial peace. We can remind ourselves of the experiences of Spartans, who believed that nobody should be allowed to live in the society who are weak or otherwise 'unfit' in some way or other and therefore should be eliminated. Human history has repeatedly proved such blundering ideas intangible and untenable.

Two apparently opposing ideas are in vogue in the society. Individualistic approach and community/society-centric approach. In the first instance, welfare of the individual is the only objective at any cost. Unfortunately, this idea has allured the masses and flourished in the age of consumerism. Everybody is vying each other to defeat and overpower. The other approach takes the (w) holistic view of the society, 'greater' good for greater number'.

बहुजन हिताय, बहुजन सुखाय

Because, man is essentially a social animal and therefore he cannot live alone, neither he can be satisfied with bread alone. The nature is bountiful, beautiful, never tiring and monotonous. It is refreshingly novel every time. It is our physical and mental limitations that in many occasions, we cannot appreciate and cope with the variety, get confused and demand the same or similar thing to deal.

Take for example a classroom situation. Teachers, who are not 'well-tempered' with life experience, complain of difficulty for handling different types of children in the same class. Their idea is that, they have to 'deliver' the teaching to the 'uniform clients' like the children; so that just a single mode of delivery will do. Even in some educational institutions, the heads of the institution also divide the sections of a class according to the level of achievements of the children as if, they are commodities and the teachers are machines. Is it socially, psychologically and pedagogically a sound practice? Aren't they hiding their own incapability of facing the reality in real life situations? Aren't they discriminating against social and moral standards? If, unfortunately, their own children are not of similar or comparable merit, will they build separate houses for each of them and hire somebody for parenting? The answer is obviously no.

There was interesting news item in the papers in April 2006, which may be mentioned here, in stark contrast against such discrimination. A school in Ralegaon Siddhi Village in Maharashtra, named Sri Santha Nilobray Vidyalaya

initiated by social activist Anna Hazare. Among 900 students of the school 850 are repeaters and failures from conventional point of view. Hazare the founder said that the reason behind the unusual success story of this school lies in creating an environment to fully utilise children's talents. The children are bent upon to prove their mettle. Failure should not be a stigma for a child. The children who fail in other schools succeed here with good marks because we provide conducive environment to utilise their talents.

A few centuries ago, many children who were rejected by the society/ teachers as 'worthless' uneducable and therefore a liability and burden to the society, proved it to be otherwise. They were born with exceptional merit and had been instrumental for the advancement of the human society to greater heights.

Take for example the great artist/ engineer Leonardo de Vinci, painter/ artist Pablo Picasso, Auguste Rodin, scientist/ inventor Alexander Graham Bell, the greatest inventor of all times, Thomas Alva Edison, scientist/ mathematician/ philosopher Albert Einstein, Michael Faraday, entrepreneur Walt Disney, writer Hans Anderson and Agatha Christie dejected in their times as worthless drop outs but they rose to fame with their talent perseverance and indomitable spirit.

Their life history shows that it is the school/ society, which was responsible for their rejection because it failed to recognise their special talents and nourish it to achieve their cherished goals/ if you think that physical

disabilities is a barrier to achieve success and fame, take the example of the wheel chair-bound great mathematician/astronomer/astrophysicist professor Stephen W. Hawking. Mental abilities are not limited within physical barriers. But we often get biased with the latter and ignore or underestimate the former. Racial discrimination, social ostracism (like the Indian caste system, untouchability, etc.) are all products of our blind bias for people looking fair, beautiful and powerful. The truth is somewhere else. Even in nature, medicinal herbs are not selected for their looks and fragrance but for their inherent properties and curative powers. Man has learned these lessons throughout the ages, through ups and downs of human history, through trial and error, success and failure, keenly observing nature and the animals what do they do when they fall sick. The mightiest conquerors have seen their last days, the most powerful dynasty has passed into oblivion; the most beautiful faces have faded away; nothing lasts longer than the substantial contribution made by them to the society. So why repeat the similar blunder again and again?

Yes, believe it with all conviction and assert that we can live together, we can learn together; we can contribute to the society in a positive way. There is no need of discrimination or dejection. Similar lessons we are learning now in the context of maintaining ecological balance. Only beautiful flowers, beautiful birds, pet animals and beautiful people will not sustain the natural balance in nature. All the creatures in nature however horrible and grotesque they may

appear, have their own niche and a contributing role in nature to maintain ecological balance.

The following *sloka* of Upanishad is recited in many educational institutions as invocation and carries a deeper meaning in tune with the harmony in nature. It also tells us that it is not teaching and learning (as is generally presumed by many) but “co-learning” both are ‘learners’ at different planes. It is “learning together”, unfolding the mysteries of knowledge together and both moving in pursuit of the same goal or in the language of Rabindranath Tagore, lighting a lamp from the flame of one to the other’

औम् सह नावतु सह नौ भुनक्तु  
सह वीर्यकरवावहै।  
तेजस्विनावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै॥  
औम् शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः॥

*God may protect both of us (the preceptor and the disciple) by unfolding the worth of education, let us be successful in our endeavors, the acquired knowledge be fruitful in our lives, let us not be envious of each other, we may be blessed with peace bestowed by the Almighty.*

That is the foundation of the principle of inclusive learning.

When we agree to accept variety as an integral part of life, we have to start the process of ‘adaptation’ to our situation also. Adaptation is not simply adaptation of infrastructure, furniture and other equipment, it also involves emotional adaptation, inviting someone into our larger family, making ‘bridges’ of bipolar communication, etc. It may also signify some adjustment of the way

we behave, react cooperate and bring some output, a way of ‘befriending’ a new guest; the first step of which starts with building proper attitude, inclination and readiness. Here the family is the school family, family of the community, who is supposed to take the lead role. We have to learn that ignorance or infirmity is no impediment, some may learn slow some fast, it is ultimately the depth and quantum of ‘learning’ which matters. True learning will illuminate one’s perception of the world around us; it will not segregate, build walls or separation and divide our psyche.

The approach of inclusive education does not differentiate children with special needs (CWSN), children with disabilities and other children so called normal. There are nothing called problem children but ‘children with problems’ and everyone might have some problem sometimes. The chief objective therefore, is creating an inclusive Learning- friendly educational (ILFE) environment, where everybody is welcome and valued as a contributing member: not simply a consumer but also a valued producer at the same time.

The underlying philosophy of inclusive education is basically a human rights issue. In case of ‘integration’, the children with some problem are simply ‘accommodated’ in a normal learning environment while in case of inclusion they are ‘absorbed and assimilated in the big family’, keeping in mind their special needs of aids and appliances and rediscover their hidden talents. Generally, such children are introvert, somewhat withdrawn, shy, secluded and lonely. They accept their fate as

inevitable, uncomplaining and simply waiting for their turn of attention and affection, if it happens to drop before them. But mostly, their inner strength is much more than normal children. They learn to withstand, wait with patience and not mind for trifling matters.

Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all sorts of learners through increasing participation in the school community. It is not a matter of mercy of charity but deep understanding motherly love which comes from heart within.

यस्मिन् सर्वाणिभूतानि आत्मन्येवानु पश्यते।  
सर्वभूतेषुचात्मानां न ततो बिजुगुप्सते॥

'He who sees himself in all creations and perceives all within his own self, he does not hate or discriminate anything'.

Learning together also ensures value education in most natural way. Generally most of the children of affluent families are over-pampered by their busy parents who cannot afford time and parental care for their children and adopt an unnatural life-style of their own; they do never learn to care (for others) and share (their pleasures with others) and thus become obstinate, tempered, selfish, bully and unruly. It is not the fault of the children but of their parents who cut them off from themselves and other members of the family and the children of the neighbors. In inclusive learning friendly environment, such children may find the opportunity to re-learn (how to cope with others) socialise, become tolerant and considerate to downsize their inflated egos and to have a humane face.

When dealing with a large class with children of different learning levels, teachers get confused and baffled how to handle them and yet produce some tangible result. The reason behind such confusion and attrition is our poor knowledge about the benefits of addressing a mixed group of children (multi-grade/multilevel), which are as follows:

1. The range of experiences within a group is greater.
2. There is usually someone to help a young learner.
3. There is less stigma of being slow or fast amidst all the different levels of learning.
4. Self- learning generates more confidence and autonomy in the children.
5. It is possible for siblings and neighbourhood children to learn together in a multigrade class. This can lead to a greater sense of security, especially amongst the younger children beginning school. It can also remove social divides that graded schools may create.
6. Children enjoy the company of other children, provided no one is allowed to be bully and aggressive.
7. Learning can be interpreted as 'play' if the teacher creates such tension-free atmosphere.
8. The burden of the teacher to go to each child is less as active peer learning takes place.
9. Children actively participate in maintaining order and discipline in the class.
10. Children are kept occupied and can ask for next task when they finish an earlier one.

A novel experiment of this kind may be seen in the satellite schools of Rishi Vally, Madanapalle, Andhra Pradesh under Rishi Vally Educational Resources (RIVER) where in a village set up, children of mixed group are being actively helped to learn in Multigrade, multi-level (MGML) pattern. The only precondition of success

for inclusive approach is that the teachers have to be more attentive, imaginative, patient and dedicated and foresee the next step of action and be ready for that, as a weaning mother knows when and how to feed the baby. So, let us start pondering over the issue of 'learning together'. It is the clarion call of the day.