

Linguistic Sensitivity in an Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract

The general perception of inclusive education being imparted in an educational institution implies is limited to provision of disabled friendly infrastructure to enable differently abled children to move around the premises on their own without any hindrance. However, this approach involves very little focus on the attitude and language of the teachers or the management staff and neither does any systematic orientation exist in this regard.

This study is based on an observation undertaken in schools of Delhi as sample where the teachers were observed while teaching in classes sixth, seventh and eight. Their body language and speech were observed in the context to inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

There are many courses being run in India that relate to the preparation of teachers, such as B.El.Ed., J.B.T., E.T.E., D.El.Ed., B.T.T., B.Ed., etc. In each of these courses, there is one specific topic on which there is an educational discourse and that relates to out of school children (OoS) for whom it is not possible to go to school and children who drop out of school without completing their elementary education. In such

teacher training institutions where the scope of a 'discussion' is non-existent, efforts are made to make the prospective teachers understand through guidebooks about the reasons for school drop-outs.

If one makes efforts to find out the reasons either through discussion or books, some specific aspects come to the fore, such as—Poverty, child labour, lack of awareness among parents, lack of basic facilities in schools, uninviting school environment, etc.

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Surprisingly, the linguistic behavior of teachers has never been included in the list of 'reasons', neither before nor after the concept of inclusive school environment. India is constitutionally committed to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of 6 to 14 years. However, many children are not able to take advantage of this facility, as they opt to drop out. A major reason for this is the linguistic behaviour of the teachers and other staff members of the school.

LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOR

Linguistic behavior in the context of this article, refers to the way and style of talking with students in different situations in school, such as—

1. How children from different socio-cultural economic background are addressed by the teachers.
 - Language of instructions and commands—Whether it is a morning assembly or a physical exercise class in the sports complex, teachers given various types of instructions to the children orally throughout the school hours. It is worth noting that the vocabulary and expressions of these instructions and commands change their form for different students.
 - Teaching-learning in the Classroom—Whether it is a language class or a science, maths, arts class, it is generally

the practice to nurture a culture of silence in the classrooms. The scope of listening to narrated experiences of the students is not created. Often teachers, considering 'evaluation' as a synonym for classroom teaching, write readymade answers to the questions on the blackboard for students to copy and to 'learn' occasionally some teachers are seen speaking and explaining something. The sentences spoken, vocabulary used and examples quoted by them are such that are seen as excessively ridiculing the inclusive environment of the classroom. The language 'fixes' a particular student socially or makes a heartless attack on the identity of others. The distress arising from such attacks forcibly pushes the student outside the school periphery and harbours in them a feeling of resentment towards the whole society or compels them to live with a sense of humiliation.

- Oral or Written comments given as encouragement—Whether students need it or not, teachers consider it their responsibility to keep students informed with their comments about their conduct, behavior and reading progress. Here too the language used by them disturbs the inclusive atmosphere of the classroom.

2. Language being used in parent-teacher meetings: During an academic session, there are many opportunities for parents to meet their children's teachers, both formally and informally. Access to such opportunities has been seen less in rural environment, but in urban environment, daily wage earners also come to school eager to know and hear a lot about their children. The volatile language used by teachers in such meetings compromises the intent of the inclusive policy.

3. At the time of delivery of welfare services: Along with many opportunities to communicate with their students, teachers also get another opportunity to talk to them outside the classroom, that is when they have to distribute cash, uniforms, books, mid-day meal, etc., under various welfare schemes. The 'linguistic behavior', that is the remarks made by teachers on such occasions is so full of scorn and hate that the students tend to cringe with hesitation and embarrassment or even wipe off tears from the corner of their eyes.

In essence, 'Linguistic Behavior' implies oral or written comments, reactions and interactions that the teachers employ towards their students during their day-to-day interactions in school. This includes their tone, vocabulary, idioms, proverbs and body language. They seem to be least concerned that an

inclusive classroom demands from them awareness and sensitivity in terms of their linguistic behaviour.

Global Awareness

The Salamanca Statement, 1994 states, 'Regular school with an inclusive ethos are the most effective way to combat..... education for all' approved a policy of inclusion, which also influenced education policy, and recommended that a flexible, comprehensive and balanced curriculum for the entire country be prepared that meets the needs of each child. That is the provision of inclusive curriculum for all students without any discrimination on the basis of gender, race, socio-economic group, disability or ability.

Generally, when it comes to an 'inclusive' policy, environment or curriculum, the focus or understanding shifts towards physically challenged children (visually challenged, hearing and speech impaired, etc) and this value is achieved by mobilizing provisions like building ramps in school premises and classrooms. It is assumed that with this, an inclusive environment has been created. It may be noted that the policy of inclusive education is not limited to including the 'disabled' only.

IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSION

The second important point is that the implementation of inclusive education policy requires not only a change in the physical environment, but also a change

in teaching practices, curriculum content, evaluation process, usage of technology, and specifically positive change is required on a much wider scale in the attitudes and linguistic behaviors of the teachers.

Inclusive school environment includes—

- i. Girl, boy and
- ii. Children of any geographic background,
- iii. Children of any socio-cultural, economic background,
- iv. Children of any race, ethnicity, class or colour,
- v. Children from different linguistic backgrounds
- vi. Working and non-working Children
- vii. Physically challenged children (children with any type of disability),
- viii. Children learning in different ways

An inclusive school environment is expected to address the physical, emotional and learning needs of all children. It should acknowledge the diversity of the learners and instill a sense of human dignity.

It must identify the limitations and shortcomings of all children, but instead of describing them, create an environment related to developing their characteristics and abilities.

It should identify the characteristics of children and make appropriate changes in their behaviour, teaching-learning materials and methods according to their specific needs. In

short, the inclusive policy does not only demand changes in the physical environment of the school but also demands harmony and fairness in the approach of the teachers.

The Study

From 10 October to 24 December, 2014, during the classroom teaching and other activities going on in three schools under the Directorate of Education, Government of Delhi, the linguistic behavior of the teachers was observed and it was found that their speaking style and words were not in consonance with the inclusive education policy.

The names of the schools are as follows—

- Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya, Rajnagar No.1, New Delhi
- Government Co-educational Higher Secondary School, Sector 1, Dwarka, New Delhi
- Shaheed Captain Sumit Rai Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya, Palam Enclave, New Delhi

(Teacher—The names and subjects of the teachers are being kept confidential as stated in writing before the observation.)

COMMENTS BY TEACHERS

1. Some utterances of the teachers and staff, as noted by the observer, in various school situations are given below, while addressing the visually impaired student in the class—

- “O you descendant of Surdas, did you understand or not. Whether the rest of the students understand or not, it is important for you to understand. Or else your father will report directly to the commission. Then we will be running around answering their queries. Have you understood? Will you be able to solve these questions?”
 - “Hey you! Make your parents understand that instead of reading and writing, they should teach you to play some song. Now let me arrange a tactile globe for you. I have not seen such a globe till today, where do I get one for you?”
 - “As it is, you are blind and on top of that you are also a midget. But look at your tongue, keeps wagging all day! You will somehow manage to get a job under the special category irrespective of whether you study or not. But then why are you bent on ruining the rest by your chatter?”
 - Hey!..... Yes. Don’t tell them anything. Put them on your head, on a pedestal. There is a very strong union of these broken-eyed people. Anything less than suspension will not work.”
 - Are you actually blind for real or pretending to be blind in preparation for a job in the future? Tell me! How did you know that I have come to the class? I did not open my mouth. Nor did anyone else uttered a word. Go and sit down on your seat. Part of a drama company!”
2. When upper caste students are unable to give the correct answer in the class—
- “Serves you right for befriending this outcaste. If you stay with them, you will only destroy yourself. She will talk only about films and fashion. Show me your hand? What have you painted on your nails? It appears as if you have scratched someone. That’s all you will learn from these outcastes.”
 - “Hey you son of a Baman (priest)! The days of priesthood are over. Gone are the days when your forefathers earned a lot by reciting incorrect verses. Now your bullying will not work, son. Now concentrate on reading. Those who do not answer this question, then just wait and watch...”
 - “Aha! Trivedi (person who has mastered three Vedas) in front of your name...! and result? Zero! Why *bae!* If you do not feel like reading then go and cut grass in the field. *Chikna kahi ka.*”
 - “O, *Albelion* (cuties)! Just keep laughing. Oh, the time ahead is very dangerous. With whom you are making merry now, one day they will swallow your jobs. Come on read it, read it. Yes,

- you (to another girl) come tell me the answer. *Batayegi ya yoon hi tujhko inki chaat lagi hai?*"
3. When the students of disadvantaged families do not submit their homework—
 - “*Kyon ri Chappanchhuri*. Why did you not solve this question? Did you also go to do business with your mother at night?”
 - “I knew you would not deposit your copy today. Same story as always. Father beats mother. The lantern will break and all of you brothers and sisters will hide under the cot. I don’t care about your stories. I am concerned about your work. I have also given you the guidebook, have not I?”
 - “Hey you, son of a drug addict! Did you also have one with your father? Which subject’s copy have you submitted to me? You are making a fool out of me. It is quite unlikely that you did the work. You may have thought, ‘I will submit any copy, and no one would know’.”
 - “Hu huh..., so madamji celebrated her birthday yesterday, it was her birthday, so could not work. *Ghar mein daane nahi amma chakki peesne chali*. You have become very big now, have you... However, many birthdays you may celebrate, after all you will stay the same...”
 - “*Idhar aa kasai ki aulaad!* I will tell you how not to do the work.”
 4. While addressing children of dark complexion—
 - “O, *Aabnoosi* (blackey)! Did your mother eat a bag of brinjals before giving birth to you? Go and keep all the sticks in the physical room. Do not lose even a single one. All of them have been registered in my name.”
 - “Look at the *Kaluvi* (black skinned). How she skips and runs. She is too *Phisaddi* (of no use in studies.) And how she runs here like lightning? Anyway, however she is, atleast she always bags a shield for the school.”
 5. The comment of a sports teacher on a student wearing expensive shoes was—

“*Akkhen...*, wow what a great shoe. *Kahan haath saafkar ke beta aaya tu?* The father died in the dark and the son is a power house.”
 6. While checking the uniforms of all the children during the morning assembly—
 - “Why are you wearing this red colored salwar? Why, is the school salwar white or red in colour? *Bandariya kahin ki!*”
 - “What kind of glitters are hanging in your hair? Has *Kalimai* seen her own face? Have you become a beauty now? I warn you if anyone ever comes to school donning such fashion. This school is not a gathering of dancers. Got it?”
 - “O son of Mussalte! Is there no

water in the house to wash? You come along to school with such stink.”

7. In the event of a scuffle between two students, and trying to mediate between them—

“O you Talibani! Did you not get your fill after gulping all those Murgmusallam. Get aside. Is this a school or your father’s shop? I will give you such a slap that both your ears will go numb.”

8. When a student rejoined school after a week’s holiday—

- “*Kyonji itne dino baad kahan se aaye?* Today, the flag should be hoisted for you, is it? After all you have decided to come to class. *Kahaan mar gaye the* by the way?”

On the attempt of a student to speak completely in English in the English class—

- “Come on... what’s the matter Duncan sir? Running an express (train) in English. You have made up your hair very stylish. Just sit down. Do not try to speak too much in English. It is evident that your father has engaged a tuition teacher for you.”

CONCLUSION

Many such conversations of teachers were recorded in different situations at the school, which amounted to not only ridiculing the inclusive policy, but also hurting the human dignity and the identity of the students. It is clear that the teachers do not treat all students

equally through their language. In such a situation, it is not logical to expect an inclusive environment.

Further, it was found that the teachers (who were observed in this study) were also teaching in the primary classes, as well as being involved in sports activities, mid-day meal scheme, etc. Their linguistic behaviour was no different in the primary classes. The devastating impact on young impressionable minds can only be imagined. To curb this evil, institutional support as well as internal motivation is needed.

First of all, teachers should become aware of their language style and choice of words with respect to inclusion. As an initial step, an intervention was held in the form of a dialogue with all the teachers (seventeen in total). They were asked for their reflection to the following questions—

- Have you ever noticed how you address your students?
- Is it possible for you to keep a tape recorder in your pocket or wallet, etc. and record your dialogues or use some other technique or method?
- Have you ever noticed that your linguistic behavior hurts the identity of the students?
- Do you think that students expect polite language from you?

A few teachers showed some resentment, while others asked the purpose of the above questions.

The basic premise of the activity was explained to the teachers—If identity pedagogy are constructed through a self-narrative of lived experience within a social and cultural context, it follows that such experiences offer insight and illumination in teaching-learning situations.

On the basis of the observations, it was recommended to the Deputy

Director of Education that, the teachers should be made aware of their language. Teachers need to be oriented on inclusive education, gender, sensitivity, and above all, on the impact of linguistic behaviour. A concerted effort would facilitate in maintaining the inclusive environment of the schools.

REFERENCE

UNESCO. 1994. 'Salamanca Statement and Framework for Special Needs Education'.

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