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D. S. Kothari Centre For Science, Ethics and Education

Celebrating Diversities: Inclusive Learning in an Alternative School

Disha Pandey

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Introduction

Mathematics Lesson, Ila Classroom

I observe this lesson as it unfolds in front of me, almost magically, as it is every teacher's dream come true to observe that children are at work out of their own free will and not because they merely have been told so. The teacher finishes her lesson on the board and waits as the second, third and fourth graders of this mixed-age classroom arrange themselves on separate low-floor desks. On the remaining table in the classroom, the co-teacher, also known as the 'special educator' who provides extra-support to the group teacher of the mixed-age group in Ila sits on the floor with Sooraj¹. Sooraj is wonderfully sensitive and extremely curious, like a lot of other children. However, unlike a lot of other children, Sooraj is afflicted with a condition known as Down's syndrome which makes it significantly harder for him to do some tasks like pronounce certain alphabets, solve Mathematics on a sheet of paper and so on. The special educator sits with Sooraj during a Math lesson on skip-counting. This lesson is being taught to him while he sits on the floor in front of his designated table just like the other children do. He attentively listens, occasionally losing focus and concentration. When this happens, the special educator or the group teacher or one of his classmates gently taps him on the shoulder. When the instruction of the lesson finishes, students sit according to their respective grade levels and Sooraj uses the same wooden table as his classmates use although, for a slightly different activity to gain academic mastery in the same lesson that they intend to understand as well. He is given a hands-on task with a long wooden log-like piece that has little circular scoops carved into it. On one side of the classroom the group teacher works with the other children demonstrating the lesson she taught earlier using beans grouped in twos, fives etc. On the other side, the special educator provides extra support to Sooraj using clear directions to urge him to put two or three beans specifically into those carved wooden scoops. He does this activity independently while receiving intricately planned instructions instead of moving on to the Math workbook simply after a demonstration by the teacher like the rest of his classmates. Occasionally he loses count, but the special educator gently insists that he count again and again, until he finally gets it right. Once that happens, she smiles and exclaims, "Now run and go give these seeds to Aunty!" pointing to the group teacher. Sooraj then runs and hands over the seeds in her hands proudly declaring that he just finished counting five seeds. None of the other students stare at Sooraj while he is engaged in this kinaesthetic activity, possibly because the children have been told quite often that everyone is unique and thus, everyone has a different way of learning and doing. More importantly, in the one year that they have spent with him, they have looked past his 'problems' to find a friend in Sooraj. For them, he is a friend who needs a little extra help every now and then just like the rest of them.

¹Names of the students have been changed to preserve anonymity.

This is an instance that fits best as I begin describing a journey of ethnographic exploration I embarked on in The Valley School, Bangalore². My research intends to unravel the workings inside an inclusive classroom and gauge the beginnings of inclusion in an educational setting. From the very outset, I must establish, that I will not be arguing that the classroom or the school are truly inclusive in all possible senses. What I will be developing as I go on, is the notion of inclusion of children with special needs and how that may be reworked inside a mixed-age group classroom when he is taught *along* with the other children, yet given some differentiated activities to learn a similar concept, not unlike some other children who may face difficulty with the concept as well. Moreover, I argue, that these beginnings of an inclusive education are evident and possible because The Valley School is an alternative school, visibly different in its culture and workings from any mainstream school. Thus, through my study, I intend to show that this inclusiveness is a potential possible future for the school precisely *because* it is an alternative school.

The notion of an 'alternative school' is a complex one and I feel it will be quite redundant to list a definition or specify characteristics that such a school is supposed to have. Instead, I choose to talk about the school itself in order to spell out a kind of alternative school, which I believe, cannot be explained in its full essence by definitions.

Disability has had a long global history, the beginnings of which confined it to the realm of a medical category. The biomedical or the 'individual' model of disability remained predominant in the shared representations of most of the societies of the world that viewed the person with disability as lacking in something that all 'normal' people have. Taking a departure from a view like that, Winance and Devlieger (2009) argue that “impairment cannot be reduced to a biological reality; it is also a social and cultural reality” (p. 4). The social model sees the community of the disabled as any other minority in the world, not arising as a result of a disease or a bodily malfunction but a malfunction of relationships instead. Thus, for the proponents of the social model, disability must be critically analysed as a result of relationships of oppression. What is truly needed then is not really an improvement in the field of medicine to combat this disability. Instead, what is required is a transformation of the society itself. In the continuum of these dichotomous views on disability, there lie a lot of intermediary ones as well.

“I have difficulties too (with something else). I am sure; my schooling did not require that part of it. For example, space. I have major difficulties with space, so I cannot drive anything bigger than a Rewa and that too I struggle with. When I make *saambhar*, I do not know which vessel will be big enough to pour it in. But, my schooling did not require any of those skills from me ... A child with reading and writing difficulties may excel in so many other things (but) our schooling system is not based in that way (so they can be supported). Because our schooling system happens to be like this,

²This study was conducted at The Valley School, Bangalore under the Shiv Lal Sawhney Scholarship that I received from the Department of Sociology (University of Delhi) in 2013. The field work for this qualitative study took place in June-July 2014 over the six weeks during which I stayed at the premises of the school.

these children are called different. So finally, do they have learning difficulties, or do we have teaching difficulties? We have a majority that can do a certain thing, so we go with the majority and tell the others that they do not fit in! Where is the inclusiveness in society, then? Each child is good at something and I tell parents, even if your children are average in reading and writing – find something else that they are good at. Sometimes, parents say to me – my child is good in swimming but I have put him off swimming until he becomes better in reading and writing and I tell them, but what if he does not? Are you going to take away swimming from him even though it is something he loves (and is good at)?”

(Source: Interview with Special Educator at The Valley School)

This dialogue, an exemplar of many similar discussions I had with group teachers and special educators at the school reinforced for me the view of disability that the teachers themselves had. For them, disability was not a lack of something. It was a societal view of the minority who deviate from the norm. The educators at The Valley School did not intend to 'fix' any child with or without special needs in order to churn out an ideal-type of a 'best student'. Thus, the attempt was not really to assimilate differences; instead, to celebrate these differences or diversities in *all* children while providing the much-needed life skills to the child and in process, discovering what she truly loves doing. This important fact of daily life at The Valley School is one of the reasons why I truly believe that this marks the beginning of inclusion in the school. In this paper, I will lay out some other themes that are critical to the development of a potential future in inclusiveness that is already visible in the junior school to some extent. To confirm my assertion of this potential future, I would have to go back to the field in some years to extend my current study, so for now, I would just maintain that what I observed in the classrooms as well as in the school was a beginning to inclusion that I present through various aspects of the school as they unfolded.

Methodology

This study was conducted over six weeks spent at the premises of The Valley School. During this time, I spent the first four weeks actively observing four classrooms (*Ila, Bhuvi, Prithvi, Mahi*)³ and the last two weeks shadowing two separate special educators both to the junior school and the middle school. Although the main focus of my study remains the junior school classrooms, I also ventured into the middle school mixed-age classrooms to understand the similarities and differences between the process(es) of learning taking place in a mixed-age group in general. I spent over sixty hours purely in classroom observations, apart from which I also conducted at least sixteen semi-structured interviews with junior school teachers and special educators who assisted and were co-teachers to both the junior and middle school group teachers in select classrooms. Apart from all this, I believe, what helped me get a true sense of the field

³Spaces in the school have been denoted meaningful Indian names. This is exemplified through the names of these five junior-school classrooms, or 'groups', which have been named after the various synonyms of the word 'Earth' in Sanskrit, signifying the importance of this natural element in our day-to-day functioning.

were my informal conversations with teachers (some of whom were simultaneously parents of children studying in the school) and students who had chosen to reside on campus. Partaking meals as well as impromptu walks around the school with an alumnus who had returned as a teacher to the school as well as with an ex-teacher who was now working on a project in the Art Village taught me a lot about the school, its socio-cultural environment and the belief system that complemented my classroom observations.

A fieldworker does not just become a tabula rasa upon entering the field waiting to be inscribed with the new culture she encounters. Similarly, I brought in my own previous experiences both as a student from my own schooling days in a strict all-girls Catholic school as well as a teacher in a lower-income private school in a slum in Delhi. This study thus, stems from the interest I developed in the field of inclusive education while I was a teacher at a time when I found myself ill-equipped to handle a child with learning difficulties in my classroom. Through this qualitative account of life in an alternative school, I intend to provide a detailed and hopefully heartfelt description of the power of passion, positivity and hope, especially for those parents and teachers who have given up on their children far too easily because their child does not fit sufficiently well in the mould provided by our society.

The reader will find that I have supplemented this study with some key observations extracted from my field notes. Some of these extracts are moderately edited to provide for a better reading experience, and some were simply included as they are inscribed in the original version. My intention is to make this study richer by bringing the field quite literally in to the paper through the use of some select parts of my field notes which include not just my own observations, but the teacher's actions and dialogue from the classrooms.

The Field

The Valley School in Bangalore is an alternative school based on Jiddu Krishnamurti's philosophy. This private, co-educational and semi-residential school boasts of a 120-acre campus that is lush green and is home to deer, snakes, wild boars and even certain rare species of birds. Occasionally, you can hear the trumpets of elephants while exploring the campus. The nature and environment are central to Krishnamurti's philosophy and form the theme around which the entire workings of the school unfold. Ranging from taking nature walks, to incorporating land care into the curriculum, to separating biodegradable waste for compost on a daily basis, the teachers and students are sensitive towards their surroundings. During some of our walks around the campus, I would often see students picking up snails lying in the middle of the path and moving them to a corner so they wouldn't get crushed by an oncoming vehicle. I saw a sense of normalcy in their act, as if it was the most obvious thing to do. Other instances like, students choosing to pick up fallen flowers rather than plucking fresh ones, led me to believe that true sensitivity comes not from just 'knowing' about issues, but in 'acting' on them – in physically removing the snail from the path. Such reinforcement of nature into the lives of children awakens and sensitises them to the environment around them that they may not have the opportunity to do during their lives spent amidst the hustle bustle of the city. At the Valley, although wastage is neither encouraged nor accepted, the

teachers often lament that the students take what is given to them for granted – be it their personalized Art kits, the teacher-student relationship or the environment itself. Whereas, some teachers confidently told me that “the terrain of the school is a great leveller”, others are convinced that the low-tables in the dining hall and meals eaten with bare hands sitting on the floor together would genuinely bring out for the children the egalitarian way that they should live their lives in. Either way, it is interesting to see my pre-conceived notions of this 'elite school' falling short in many places once I began to delve deep into the daily workings of the school and saw just how hard the educators try to break out of this 'unfair' tag by making sure the kids are always grounded and in touch with the roots of their being – quite literally. For this to take place, nature and the surrounding environment play an important role in reminding the children and the teachers alike of the very rawness that a human being is made of. Through this, they hope that the children will imbibe at some point in their lives, if not immediately, the many metaphysical learnings that go beyond the classroom.

Entering what would be my field for the next six weeks, the first thing I noticed is that the campus is shrouded in greenery. Infact, as my coordinator would later tell me, the Valley School stands on land donated to the Krishnamurti Foundation of India and is connected with the Karnataka State Forest which explains the frequent encounters with wildlife that the staff and students living on campus might have. Hailing from a metropolis of concrete, I found the school amidst nature quite surprising. It resembled a space for retreat, rather than a space where I intended to study the power relations between teachers and students. The buildings are constructed in a simplistic manner and spaces around the school have been allotted meaningful names. Quite a few walls around the campus have been painted with figures or murals, perhaps left by students or teachers; so spaces have been personalized to represent the various personalities that walked these paths once. The space that the school occupies can be best described as located right in the heart of lushness of nature around it. The silence that surrounds the school is so visibly different from the city sounds, that even a whisper seems adequate in order to communicate with a person sitting right next to you. The silence makes you reflect, and the beautiful green landscape engulfing it urges you to think deeper than you normally would, had you been surrounded by the chaos of the city.

Educators as Learners: The Process of Learning and the Student-Teacher Relationship

In his talks and books, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1974) talks of the concept of the teacher as a facilitator of learning or simply put the educator as the learner herself. Staying true to his philosophy, the school's teachers attempt to be learners themselves while they are teaching in the classroom. Although, the method of instruction is intervention by the teacher during practice time (individual and group) coupled with mainstream blackboard teaching, the strategies used are highly progressive. For instance, during many of my observations, I saw that the class teacher would often accept explanations from students that might be different from the manner in which they had been taught by her earlier, as long as they made sense and the students could explain why it was relevant and appropriate to the question being asked. The children were not reprimanded for

choosing to implement their own way of reaching a solution as long as they could explain *how* and *why*. Such instances led me to conclude that the teachers do not think of themselves as 'higher' than the students. Infact, many of them confessed that they did not really know much about their current Environmental Sciences topic (insects) until they had actually started teaching it.

The common acceptance of the view of teacher-as-learner in turn, I argue decreases the power dynamic that would usually operate in a classroom between the teachers who sits on the desk, as against children who sit on the floor. Although, efforts are made to completely eradicate that power dynamic, one can see that it is significantly lesser than would be in a school where teachers' words are seen as gospel. This is evident by the placement of the teachers' desk in the classroom as well. It is not right at the forefront of the classroom. Instead, as one might observe, the teacher's desk is often right at the back of the classroom while the blackboard is the main focus. The library corner, the children's group tables, bulletin boards, etc. form a secondary focus of the location of paraphernalia inside the classroom. The classroom is wide and spacious enough for the average sixteen to eighteen children in every class to move around freely. The roof slants and there's a tiny glass sunroof on top which brings in fresh sunlight every morning, assuming the weather is not overcast.

The teachers would often facilitate peer-learning as well because that forms a large part of how the school functions and the larger ideology. The older children would help out the younger ones in these mixed-age group classrooms, and having imbibed the way the learning process takes place, they would ask 'leading questions', instead of simply giving away the answer to the younger ones. I saw the teachers constantly reinforcing this strategy by modelling it themselves and when the children are helping each other they were reminded that they must not simply provide an easy, spoon-fed solution to someone on their table – they must lead them to find their own answer. Such strategies are used to pass on the message to the students that they can also garner equally legitimate support from their peers without looking at the teacher as the sole source of knowledge. This significantly reduces the power embodied in the teacher-figure, who now becomes a facilitator of knowledge, not the sole provider.

Furthermore, since the students were not reprimanded for getting something wrong, they were more likely to take risks and answer in the class as a result of which, the class participation in every single classroom I observed was very high, even from children who were observable introverts or just plain shy.

Perhaps the most important part of the teacher-student equation is the terminology that the students use to address the teachers. Whereas most of the high school students address their teachers by first names or by nicknames that have been bestowed upon them like, *Jazz* for Jairam or *Lalli* for Lalitha ; the junior and middle school students usually address their teachers by the kinship terms of 'Uncle' or 'Aunty'. I believe this practice also brings down the power dynamics that seem to function in any school between the teacher and the student. The student now sees the teacher as someone related to him/her, not as an invincible and undefeatable entity who knows everything all the time.

The classroom environment is calm and the teacher would often choose to wait patiently rather than yell at a student to redirect his/her attention. Infact, I often heard firm conversations between students and teachers but I rarely heard yelling. Krishnamurti's philosophy speaks of how fear is detrimental to the learning process. For him, "learning only comes into being when there is no fear and there is no authority," (1974: 45) and following from this, it is ensured that none of the children live in a 'fear' of the teachers.

An interesting phenomenon occurring in school is that out of all the educators in the school, a vast subset belongs to the 'parent' category, meaning most of the teachers in the Valley school are parents to the children enrolled in the school. Add to that the fact that almost all of them are passionate about education and see it as the sole way to change the destruction and violence that contemporary society has become synonymous with. Their passion is visible by the fact that one would find a teacher taking great pains and going the extra mile for even one child since, she inevitably knows each and every child she teaches personally. The teacher does not just reach out to the 'average audience' inside her classroom, but to the outliers as well, whichever end of the spectrum they may lie on. Thus, my view is that the combination of parental sensitivity and care combined with a teacher's demand for academic excellence depending on individual capabilities makes up an educator's role at the Valley school.

Although, many parents are also wary of the 'no examination' principle that the school follows until the end of the 8th grade, I was corrected when I asked a teacher if the 'no assessment' policy makes her uncomfortable. She argued that there are no examinations, but the teachers are constantly assessing the students in one way or the other. The fact that there are no examinations puts the child's mind at ease and gets rid of the fear that he must "prove his membership to a class and jump through a hoop to enter a higher grade," as told to me by an educator. Every teacher informally monitors each child and knows exactly what each child is capable of doing and where he/she needs to work harder on. It would put parents' minds at peace to get a finite number that their children have achieved by the end of the year, yet the school chooses to hand out a qualitative assessment of each child during the Parent-Teacher Conference. The teacher also manages to communicate to the individual child his progress via the frequent one-on-one 'feedback sessions' in the classroom.

Special Education within a Mixed-Age Group

The conscious effort made by The Valley School almost a decade ago, to introduce and implement their mixed-age group system in the junior school (2nd, 3rd and 4th) and middle school (5th, 6th and 7th) is partially the evidence of a strategy of inclusion. Adding to that, although children with different interests and abilities have always co-existed in the school, around two years ago a conscious decision was made to enrol children who may have diagnosed disabilities and to adopt the 'inclusive learning' model in order to ensure that the learning of the 'special' children takes place inside the same classroom as all the other children. Out of the six junior school classrooms, four have one child each in them with a diagnosed difficulty. There is a child with Down's syndrome in *Ila*, a child who falls on the autistic spectrum in *Bhuvi*, a child with a form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in *Prithvi* and a child with dyslexia in *Mahi*. During Math, English and E.V.S.

these classrooms have a 'special educator' who comes in for intervention with a specific focus on the child with special needs.

The significance of the mixed-age group, as was reiterated to me by the class teachers and the special educators alike is that the special child does not stand out. A mixed-age group is empathetic to all needs – the younger children are slower and require more time to grasp concepts, so the older ones learn patience. Similarly, the older ones are challenged through more complicated workbooks and by reading books of a higher grade-level. Thus, it has been constantly reinforced throughout their time in school that all of them are unique, and they must not compare themselves with another. Moreover, because there are no set examinations this early, the teachers exercise flexibility with the curriculum and the special child can take longer to learn the same thing that his peers are learning. Furthermore, even the goals and method of instruction may be completely different for the special child; and not just for him, but for other children too who may struggle with a subject. For instance, the use of kinaesthetic tools i.e. beads or abacus to teach Mathematics may not just be specific to the child with learning difficulties and may be used to teach another child who simply struggles with Math as well. In a single classroom with same-aged peers, it is harder for a special child to fit in because there is a linear standard of what the children should be able to achieve by the end of the year, whereas in these mixed-age groups the children have mixed-abilities on top of which they also have three years with the same teacher to explore a subject thoroughly. Thus, a mixed-age group dilutes differences between all children and “diffuses the tension of the presence of a special child” in the classroom.

I observed often that a special educator, instead of simply focusing all her attention only on the special child all the time during a particular lesson, would often play a complementary role in the classroom. She would become a 'second' class teacher rather than a special educator. In fact, I was informed that this was indeed a very conscious effort on both the part of the class teacher as well as the special educator to ensure that the special child does not recognize with just one teacher or feel alienated and ostracized from the rest of the classroom because of the tagged 'special' educator teaching him. Although, the class teacher and the special educator played complementary roles during instruction time and even during individual and group intervention time, due to intensive planning together they also knew which kids they had to separately focus on without making it too evident to the children themselves. For instance, although a special educator would attend to eight or ten children during individual practice, ultimately she would know her focus is specifically working with a set of particular five children without making it too visible to them or the rest of the class. Needless to say, this can only happen when there is ceaseless communication and mutual understanding between the class teacher and the special educator.

While enquiring about the relationship between a group teacher and a special educator, I am told by a special educator that, “We try not to isolate the special child in the classroom so that he is identified with only one teacher. The special educator works as almost a second teacher.” She narrates an incident that took place while she was observing the Oorja classroom where the group teacher and the special educator were also present. During this instance, one of the students, confused about a particular

concept raised her hand and simply said, “There are three of you; can one of you help me in English?”

When asked for their personal vision for the special children, teachers often cite independence and visibility as two virtues they want their students with learning difficulties to achieve. Inevitably, these goals differ with the level of difficulties that the child might have. For a child with lesser difficulties, the teachers may set ambitious goals, but for a child who has a massive trouble in coping, the teachers may settle for more simplistic and basic goals of financial independence. However, there are different views of the educators at school. For instance,

“Income generation is a very limited vision of education. Its vision is to help us see our place in the world and that is not dependent upon how much money one earns – even for the special children. A lot of special educators say that goal of 'independence' is important but for me, it is participation that should be the goal, even if it is partial participation. My wish is that they (people with 'special' needs) are someday visible everywhere. In society, I want to see people in wheelchairs outside or a person with hearing aid. I want this to be such a normal sight that people do not think of this as extraordinary. I want to see children with different kinds of disabilities even in all the normal schools (so that) they are seen as valued members and they have a place to belong. This is my wishlist for the future because it is not happening yet. The ultimate aim is to know that even if you're using a wheelchair, you have intrinsic value as a human being.”

(Source: Interview with Special Educator at The Valley School)

I definitely saw the special educator as a second teacher inside the classroom whom the children would approach just as much as they would their class teacher. The relationship of comfort between the student and teacher and not of intimidation significantly enables the child with learning difficulties to ask for help more openly. In the category of learning difficulties as well, the children fall across a wide spectrum and the planning that is done jointly by the special educator and the class teacher tries to meet the child at his level and identify where exactly he needs help. Although, the peers in the classroom are aware in some cases of the special child being 'different', that difference is not starkly visible and is diluted because of the presence of the mixed age group. Moreover, even if the children know about this difference, they are empathetic towards the child and have taken positively to his presence in the classroom, instead of ostracizing him for being different. This stems from the constant reminder to them of each other's uniqueness, no matter what the root of that uniqueness may be.

During an English lesson in Bhuvi, Om walks around in circles around the classroom. The teacher is teaching a grammatical concept and he makes faint noises as he sporadically breaks the pattern of his circles to walk diagonally across the classroom. In

the process, he encounters the rest of the children who are sitting cross-legged listening to the lesson the teacher is attempting to teach. Though, it has only been a month that he has been with them, it is clear that they understand his need to walk while he listens. Instead of raising complaints and agonizing over his habit of walking around and breaking their concentration in the process, they simply lift their feet without a word as he crosses over to another space in the classroom.

Inclusion and Diversity

The term 'inclusion' can only be understood when juxtaposed with the term 'exclusion' and even then, there are many competing views on the term inclusion itself. The normalisation process in societies dictates that there is a societal 'mean' of how a member of the society should be and there is a need to assimilate deviations from this mean or differences in individuals in order to fashion them into the established norm of the majority. The “appeal of the universal” (Ravaud and Stiker 2001: 16) drives modern contemporary societies and this model sustains on its constant fulfillment through 'forceful integration'. Each societal element must have a clearly defined space that it must fit in for instance, persons with disabilities must be tagged as 'handicapped' in order to benefit from their status. It has been argued, quite optimistically, that “the exclusion of today, as it is historically situated, not a fixed destiny” (*ibid.*: 20). As against integration which implies conformity to a given norm and a result of oppression of the minority by the majority, the notion of inclusion may mean that one is organically made a part of a given setting without forced adherence to a given norm. Another view however, states that inclusion could also mean simply being tolerated but not truly accepted (*ibid.*). My main thrust in this paper is viewing inclusion as not merely a condition of 'tolerating' a person different from oneself, but accepting them and rejoicing that acceptance by continually making efforts to make the inclusion stronger, more permanent and durable.

In my view, as presented through my own observations and in the educators' words, children with special needs are not merely tolerated in the school. There is constant dialogue on how to combat their problems better, how to make them independent and how to teach them more effectively. What is notable is that such dialogue takes place for *each and every child* who goes to the school, not just for children with special needs. This is evident of the kind of inclusion that I have been attempting to look at – at least, the beginnings of it through dialogue, followed up by action of strategies implemented concretely in the classroom by intensive planning through Individualized Education Plans by both group teachers and special educators.

What supports the notion of inclusion as 'complete acceptance' is an often layered and sometimes visible diversity in the school. Considering Krishnamurti's philosophy actively argues against and the school refrains from setting a norm of the *best* student, the teachers have diverse goals for all children including children who have special needs. This puts considerably less pressure on the students themselves as they do not have to meet a set criteria established for them by adults. Moreover, the group teachers of classrooms that have children with special needs have ensured that they spend time on sensitizing the other children with respect to the needs of the special child as against trying to fit him in the mould of the classroom. Thus, the child with 'special' needs is not

taught how to conform to the existing classroom structure. Instead, the elements of the entire classroom open up and create a space to allow him to settle in and provide him his own definition of comfort and acceptance.

Diversity is also visible through the morning rituals where songs that are sung are of linguistic (Kannada, Bengali, Hindi, Marathi) as well as religious variety. Moreover, the teachers themselves are from diverse backgrounds, most of whom have joined as a result of their intense passion. During the time of my field work, the campus was a mix of these teachers – a Cancer surgeon, an Accountant, a Civil Engineer, a Social Worker, Montessori-trained teachers as well as a Psychology Major. Moreover, socio-economic diversity is layered, yet has been present in the school.

“There have always been kids (from own batch experience) from varying socio-economic backgrounds. This is the first time there is a stamp on such kids (who enter the school as a result of the RTE Act).”

(Source: Interview with an Alumnus who is also a teacher at The Valley School)

The inclusion of children under the RTE Act to the school has been accepted fully by the school ever since it came into force in Karnataka. One of the teachers discreetly told me of an informal scholarship-like arrangement that the school has, as a part of which some parents provide funds for children whose parents cannot afford it do so. Along with that, the school itself makes provisions for parents of children who cannot afford a certain fee structure as long as their ideology matches with the school's workings – so, the fee structure in the school is flexible to some extent.

Four Case-Specific Accounts from the Classrooms

Case No. 1: A child with Down's Syndrome –

“He wants one-on-one interaction often; he is stubborn and knows when he is doing something wrong. His hold may be firm and the younger children might feel it must be a little harsh. He is very attached to some of his peers and so, he listens to them. I ask them to get through to him and tell him not to do certain things. He is slowly beginning to incorporate 'excuse me' and 'sorry' in his vocabulary. His memory is very short, so he needs reinforcements often. He lost touch with enunciating sentences during the summer break because the practice was not continued at home. So, now we have to work again with him on words. He really connects with people who speak in his mother tongue (Kannada). He is also going for speech therapy to improve his limited speech. We try to push him to use sentences now. He has come a long way from when he had just joined and he would just hit everyone, so much so that his mother had to come for a few days. But, we did not want him to be pulled out of the class every time. We wanted him to have that sense of belongingness to the class. We could see he wanted to be a part of it, he listened and picked up a book

and tried to read it while sitting in a corner. His social skills are very existent. His peers have supported him very well – (though he would fight with them sometimes), they would still support him.”

(Source: Interview with the group teacher of *Ila* at The Valley School)

Case No. 2: A child with Autism Spectrum Disorder –

“Working with him is new for me as well. What I take back from it is my strategy-sharing with the other teachers. We discuss and then we try out something and I follow it to see if it is working or not. He is not very communicative. It is very tiring – not so much emotionally, but sometimes physically it is very tiring for me. I do not know if I have that much energy by the end of the day anymore – but that is something that I need to work on for myself. For him, I would say, that children on the (autistic) spectrum - each one is different. He is academically very bright, so there is no challenge there. We are looking at his social, interpersonal skills like listening and communication. We want to focus on building his communication so he can explicitly say what exactly he needs. Right now, he gets cranky and cries. It's not so much an emotional problem, but one has to be pragmatic about it and see what we can do with this ... Maybe, I finished off my emotional burdening when I worked in the field in Spastic Society of Karnataka. I worked across disabilities there – those days were more emotionally tiring. I used to come home emotionally drained. In a child like him, I see that he is nowhere near those scenarios. He is actually a very able child with a lot of potential and it is very easy to work with him. Although, he needs a lot of movement around the class in order to stay, if you notice, he listens. If you ask him a question, he knows what the teacher has been talking about. It's a joy to know that even though he does not really respond in Hindi classes, he has been singing the songs the Hindi teacher teaches them at home.”

(Source: Interview with Special Educator of *Bhuvi* and *Mahi* at The Valley School)

Case No. 3: A child with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Since the group teacher of *Prithvi* chooses to work without the aid of a special educator, she was my only point of contact with respect to this student. I use my field notes instead of a quote by the teacher to describe his case. These are edited and include some knowledge I gained from my conversations with her, so I intermingle the teacher's point of view and mine in the following excerpt hopefully spelling out a more holistic description of the student's abilities and his presence.

He is not a conventional special child; his exact diagnosis eludes me, but it is certain that he has a certain degree of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. However, if one were to observe him in the classroom, one wouldn't find any issue with him. He solves the workbooks like any other child does and responds to questions like the other children.

In fact, he is very eager and often speaks out of turn but does not really misbehave with the teacher. His spoken English and social skills seem like any other child's. He does not really need additional support in writing either and mostly works on his own. His worksheet is pretty much at par with some others and one cannot tell from his worksheet that he may be a special child at all. His group teacher speculates he has an OCD of some kind, but she is yet to look at his diagnosis sheet for the exact information.

Case No. 4: A child with Dyslexia

“Actually, we took a lot of time to understand what are some of his areas of development. He is not able to take group instruction at all, so we thought that we have to give him individual instruction – but we also planned to simultaneously make him aware of what is happening in the class and that he must try to listen, atleast. I feel, maybe there is a gap between what he is listening and what is being comprehended. So, one of us needs to sit next to him to ask him what he has understood by retelling it in his own words so that we understand that he has understood. We give him time to process all the information – so, with every topic he takes a little more time than the others. We have also made a very limited curriculum for him and he does not have to go through everything. His parents are also very open and we're getting a lot of support from them although, they also took their time to understand his needs. This vertical group is helping him as well – every child knows that they are all different. Our target is very different for him with respect to everything.”

(Source: Interview with the group teacher of *Mahi* at The Valley School)

In the first case, the group teacher recognizes that the child has strong social skills however, his motor skills, speech ability, basic Mathematics and behaviour are a few key areas she intends to plan for in order to provide him extra support. In the second, the special educator admits that he is an academically bright child as he is able to read, write and solve basic Math. She aims to work at improving his listening and communication skills along with seating stamina and interpersonal abilities. In the third case, my diary entry conveys to the reader that this child is an exceptional 'special' child as he does not seem to have a visibly evident learning difficulty. In fact, he is more or less at par with the rest of the students in the classroom. There are instances when he has acted up behaviourally but his academic skills as well as his social skills are extremely sharp. And in this instance, the teacher sets high academic goals for him to achieve because he is capable of them. She chooses to focus on his ability, in place of his 'diagnosed' disability. In the fourth case, the group teacher mentions in an informal conversation with me that this child is quick-witted and sharp but also adds that there are some gaps evident in his listening, comprehending and spelling that need to be worked upon.

Thus, each child is unique for the teachers and there is no 'one size fits all' philosophy being followed with respect to children in general, and students with special needs in particular. The teacher recognizes that even children with learning disabilities have their

strengths, just like other children. She sets the academic rigour for each child (as she does for the four children above) according to their individual strengths and areas of development and truly treats each of them as a unique case.

Conclusion

While concluding, it is necessary to recognize some stresses and dilemmas I found the educators in the school grappling with on a daily basis. Firstly, the term 'special' itself has received much criticism by some educators in the school. They believe that the term should be abolished because it sends out the wrong signals to the children. It is argued that as a child reaches middle and high school and recognizes himself with the tag of 'special', he/she becomes self-conscious about own identity and even, in the words of an educator, “psychologically gives up”. It has been proposed that unless a child has definite diagnosed disabilities, he should not be called a 'special' child. Moreover, teaching a child with severe learning difficulties is emotionally challenging for the group teacher who is not trained in special education. The pressures on the teacher make it not just a physically-draining, but an emotionally taxing job as well. In such cases, the special educators and other fellow teachers come to the rescue and offer strength and support along with strategies that have previously worked with children facing similar difficulties.

My focus has been on the experimental nature of The Valley School. I have attempted to show that the educators are not afraid to try out new strategies of teaching and inclusion inside the classroom. This model of flexibility supports inclusion that is visible through the themes I have explored in this paper. I would reiterate that in the junior school, there is no 'mainstream' that the children are faced with which is why their diversity can be celebrated. I argue that such inclusion and celebration of diversity is made possible *because* it is an alternative school. The specific themes emerging from the workings of the school would have specified to the reader that the school is an inherently different socio-cultural setting from a typical mainstream school in India.

Singal (2006) has attempted to understand the idea of inclusion in some select mainstream schools in Delhi; she has argued that inclusion is not wholly successful in implementation majorly because the socio-cultural ecosystem surrounding the learning in a typical Indian classroom is aided by the fact that 'ability' is given a rather narrow and fixed definition. As against the “included child and excluded teacher” (p. 248) model that she observes where the special child is visibly standing out and is the sole responsibility of the special educator, I believe that The Valley School's model stands as a sharp contrast to her experience in the mainstream Delhi schools. I found that many factors such as the fixed dichotomy of ability/disability, the aim of 'assimilation' of the special child etc. that have been hindering the incorporation of 'inclusion' in the mainstream schools have been consciously reworked inside the Valley School using the tools of values, culture and a larger ideology in order to construct a holistic atmosphere of inclusion. This has been possible through the interpretation of Krishnamurti's ideas on education and life in a way that facilitate and enable inclusion in this alternative school that attempts to celebrate, not assimilate.

For a better educational future for our children, it is essential to destroy the idea of the mainstream or the standardized norm. While it may take a considerable amount of effort and many decades for this destruction to take place, if at all, my contention is that even the tagged 'mainstream' schools should be open to experimentation at least for their junior-school students. I am not proposing a blind experimentation, but simply pointing out how essential it is to consider the effects of the socio-cultural environment on a differently-abled child and his future while planning his 'inclusion'. While the Indian education system requires a student to conform to standardized testing tenth grade onwards, a mainstream school with average to high resources can negotiate with this reality by choosing to implement The Valley School model in the formative learning years of their students. It will definitely be a hard task to translate the workings of The Valley School to transpose them onto the realities of a mainstream school amidst the hustle bustle of cities with a severe lack of space and resources. Thus, what needs to crop up in place of the branded singularly-defined mainstream schools, is different clusters of untaged schools that work with the aim of shattering the stereotypes of a 'normal' or ideal student through various practices adopted from anywhere in the world altered to suit their own surroundings.

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