

Learning to Accept Differences

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Three decades ago, when the first two blind children from Arushi, a voluntary organisation working to empower people with disabilities, got admission into a (mainstream) school, the two of them stayed in class during the morning assembly and the games period. What will you do there? they were asked.

Beyond the definition of inclusive education that rightly focuses on access to school/education, which without a doubt is the greatest hurdle, there is a whole sociological ethos of how we perceive physical and mental disability. Popular films and literature romanticise the idea of sacrifice—the disabled hero intentionally plays villain to fall from the eyes of the love interest and make way for the ‘able-bodied’ other—when not using obesity, stammering, sleep-walking, over-eating, or slowness of speech or thinking as tropes for comedy. Therefore, getting children to school does not end their exclusion, rather, it may, in many ways, accentuate it for them.

When we talk of inclusion of children with disabilities we almost always see it from their perspective— how they feel and what they experience. But to effectively bridge this divide between them and the rest, we must consider what the children without disabilities believe and consider as the norm.

In these times of growing sensitivities acts that are rightly seen as discriminatory are actually just differentiators, if we did not consider our hidden biases. But while, ‘Who is that tall/attractive/longhaired/ fair girl in your class?’ seem like qualifiers, ‘Are you inviting that short/fat/dark boy for your birthday?’ are downright offensive. This may be how we identify people, but unfortunately, this is true also for how we seem to allude to caste, class, religion and the hundreds of ways in which our society is fragmented. Our hidden biases reveal in our language and expression and children around us are subconsciously receiving and internalising the signals we send out verbally and non-verbally. They smell our prejudices and can see through our pretensions. These lead to bullying and ridiculing anyone who does not conform to the societal idea of standard or its obsession with perfection of body and mind.

So, I spoke with a few children about what they think of children/people with disabilities. The first thing that I learned was that in the public schools that they attend, there are no children with disabilities; none at all. None of these children had ever come across any child with a disability and, while they were aware of Braille and sign language, they believed that by learning these, they would be able to ‘help’ others. They also thought that their schools did not have the facilities that should be there for children with disabilities. One 10-yearold said she would be awkward with a child with a disability, initially, but the awkwardness would go away once they become friends. One of them seemed worried that some children may ‘whisper rude things about them’. While they thought children with disabilities can do the same things that they do, perhaps a little differently, they, again and again, used the word help. There was no pity as such but compassion, nevertheless, in how they perceive disability.

I asked them if children with disabilities should go to a special school and a grade 5 girl did not take a minute before responding that they would ‘not learn a lot of things like us’ if they go to a special school. These kids do not lack awareness and acceptance. The little lack of understanding is due to their not having known any child or person with disability first-hand.

It is interesting how older people—school administrators, teachers, employers, government employees and people in general—however, seem to have more rigid opinions, evident from the difficulties people with disabilities face in public places and dealings. This ignorance comes from a deep-seated perception based on misinformation.

Going back to my example of the two blind boys in school, their inclusion happened in a very interesting way. They were both masters of chess and when their classmates began to play with them, it became clear to the non-disabled children that these two could do more than they had imagined they could. Gradually, they discovered that these two could read and write (using Braille); and that they were not just good in studies but had a great sense of humour too. They became friends and it was only natural that the two boys who did not see were soon out on the play field with the rest and were involved in all the other school activities too.

When we talk of inclusion of people with disabilities, we must talk not of what they cannot do, but what they can do, maybe (slightly or totally) differently. Secondly, this has to happen in a very natural, organic manner. Considering the fact that until just about a decade ago, children with disabilities did not go to the same schools as the rest but attended special schools or no schools, it is not inordinately late to embrace the change that has already been affected, albeit in small, scattered ways.

Arushi has adopted several innovative ways to promote inclusion, especially among children. They began with building the capacities of teachers in schools and taught them Braille and sign language along with the training in disability awareness and sensitisation so that these teachers would be able to include with facility, children with disabilities in their classrooms. To take this further, the organisation managed to have all school textbooks from grades 1 to 7 published by the Madhya Pradesh State Textbook Corporation include one page with information on various disabilities and ways in which students with disabilities can be a natural part of the school system.



Children from other schools learning sign language at Arushi

For several years now, Arushi has promoted a healthy mixing of children with and without disabilities outside the classroom, within the school system. So, while children from Arushi visit schools to meet their counterparts studying there, children from regular or mainstream schools are invited to interact with the children who come to Arushi for their various therapies, schoolreadiness programme and to learn the use of Braille, computers and sign language, among other occupational therapies and mobility training.

A typical visit begins with a tour of the Centre. Students visit the classrooms and interact with children with disabilities like autism, cerebral palsy, blindness, low vision or deafness, to name a few. These children from various schools from across the city mingle with the children at Arushi and watch them read, write, sing, draw, do crafts, physical exercises and have fun. The last is important because children without disabilities assume that those with disabilities live difficult, sad and unfulfilled lives. When they see them laugh and share jokes, they really are surprised. They learn. They also see them move about and do their tasks independently. All the children play games and sing songs together. They also compete in quizzes between mixed groups.



Visiting students trying their hand at Braille

The visiting children watch how children with disabilities use Braille and sign language to learn and communicate. They listen to audiobooks and to blind children reading out, say, a Harry Potter from their Braille version! They are also introduced to some basic Braille and sign language. Very young children, those in primary grades, show immense interest to learn the basics and are able to pick these up very quickly. After they spend a few hours at Arushi when the visitors are asked if the children at Arushi are different from them, they say, yes but in only that while they themselves carry notebooks and pencils, a blind child carries a Braille slate and stylus to school.

A visibly moved school girl after listening to a blind student read out a story from a Braille storybook, said, 'I was so awestruck. These children who cannot see are so cheerful and happy. And we who can see, complain about little things like the TV not working.'

Since children from Arushi are, without exception, prepared for and admitted to mainstream schools, it is imperative that the environment they get there is welcoming and accepting and not alienating. If their classmates appreciate that they can read, write and communicate just like them, even as they may use different means, children with disabilities have a better chance of integration.

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