

Creating Enabling Environment in Schools: An Interview with Usha Aswath Iyer

By | Sep 10, 2015

Nivedita (N) : What is your experience of creating enabling environments for special children? As a teacher and principal is there any awareness/ training/ policy you need for managing it in a better manner?

Usha (U) : There have been very few children with special needs in the schools I have worked in. In the early days of my career, my efforts were limited to using my common sense in trying to solve some of their problems related to the physical environment. No training has been put in place for the teachers or the administrative staff. Teachers and principals along with parents, need to be sensitive and counselled in supporting children with special needs so that they become happy children who are firmly set onto the path of discovery of life and learning.

N : I believe all of us as children need a lot of support with something or the other. In school I was so fearful of Mathematics that I didn't believe I could ever do a sum.

U : Me too, but do we think of it as a teacher or principal? I specially hate it when, during school inspections, the teacher will explain away a child's inability to answer with the remark that "he/she is a slow learner". Surprisingly, or may be not so surprisingly, even students of Class II and above know very well who is a slow learner! No teacher feels it is his duty to help the child answer. The teacher in the classroom is like a parent. Just as a parent protects and supports a child against any criticism, attack or abuse, the teacher should react instinctively giving the child every opportunity to solve a problem.

N: What role does infrastructure have to play in creating an enabling environment?

U: Yes, infrastructure does play a significant role in creating an enabling environment. Seating is a big problem in most schools as the furniture is heavy and uncomfortable. The feeble attempts to make the same kind of standardised furniture in all places for all classes, does not take into account the different needs of different age groups, subject requirements or climate. However infrastructure cannot replace emotional connect and common sense. I remember a teacher who placed a mat in the space near the blackboard, strung up some magazines and books as a makeshift class library and gave her students the freedom to use these resources whenever they had free time. This was a Class II I am talking about (about six or seven years old kids). During one of my rounds I was amazed to see this class all working on some task though there was no teacher present. And there were two students who were helping two other learners with the day's studies. As a teacher I remember Ashutosh- one of my very bright students in the Science stream. He used to wear calipers so it was very difficult for him to move about. But he was very enthusiastic and wanted to write on the board and participate in the class. Most of us, encouraged him. And one day, during inspection, he answered in class-without standing up. And the Inspector was very annoyed. He commented about it in class as well as reported it in my inspection report. I felt too embarrassed to explain to the inspector that Ashutosh was physically challenged and so could not easily stand up.

N : Which of these do you think are most important / most challenging in creating an enabling environment : respect and value each child, listen to children and learning and openness?

U : Respect and value each child- I strongly believe this is important. It is the most challenging too as people have to analyse why they treat children/people who are different from them differently, whether it is due to differences of social or economic strata or of abilities. There are deep cultural roots to our behavior. To replace the prejudices we cultivate as social beings with openness is definitely a challenge. Yet there have always been heart-warming moments when change seemed to happen. In one of my schools a teacher on her own devised a method to bring the slow learners of her class on par with the rest of the class. There were four or five students who had no clue about English but had managed to reach Class V. She was in despair as she just could not get through to them. She hit upon the idea of starting with Class I textbooks and guided them through Class II and III as well. The change was almost a miracle. After hearing

the words, "Why can't you?" they were surprised to hear the words, "You did it!" Listen to children and learn- This is the next most difficult attitude to change; as most adults feel they know everything and children need only to be ordered to do things. We rarely allow students to ask questions. I remember one class where I interacted with Class IX students. And the questions they asked about the political and social problems was amazing. There is a policy of free education for a single girl child in Kendriya Vidyalayas – where a single girl is the only child of the parents. I remember a boy telling me that the policy of giving free education to the single girl child was less necessary than a policy that would help to give the single girl child in a family of boys, preferential treatment. He said that in those rare cases where a single child, even a girl, is found, the child is usually given special treatment as there is no other child to compare her with.



N : In your long tenure of more than 10 years as a principal you have taken many steps to bring about attitudinal change in teachers and slowly turned prejudice into appreciation. Tell us about some of those experiences.

U : Remember Abhay of KV AFS 2 Pune? He was in Class V at that time and I had gone on my regular class inspection. An English class was in progress. The teacher asked questions and the usual set of students answered. Once Abhay raised his hand to answer. He answered correctly- but in Hindi. The question was: What do you do to cool yourself on a hot summer's day? And among the various answers of air conditioners, swimming, fans, coolers etc. came his response- "*dubkilagana*". Abhay came from a very poor background- almost a slum area. For him a pool of water- any pool of water was a good way of cooling off. And this is true of many of our students. How many actually use a swimming pool? But the teacher's response was a harsh- keep quiet. I had to intervene. And my praise seemed to help him to jump with more answers. Another question to which he answered "*ice ka golla*" was received enthusiastically by me. After that Abhay became one of our favourite students. It is only after I became a principal, I realised that the physically challenged students have special needs which we don't understand immediately. One of the students in Class X was deaf. She did not wear a hearing aid. The reason- the hearing aid amplified the noise the students in her class made, during the gaps between two periods and she could not bear it. I discussed with her teachers, and we decided to give her written notes which she would have to copy out as she could not always lip read the teachers' speech. We also made some worksheets for her. And then there was this girl in Calicut. She could not move on her own. It took me almost a year to realise that she could not use the normal Indian toilet marked for students. I managed to contact the CPWD and get toilets made for children with special needs and this was done fairly quickly thanks to the Vidyalaya Management Committee's support.

N :What difference do you see in your role in creating an enabling environment – as a teacher, as a principal, as a teacher educator?

U : As a teacher I could support all students and my friendly nature usually made them feel relaxed. I don't think I did anything different for them or anything special. As a principal I could easily take decisions where changes in the physical environment had to be made- whether it was changing a classroom, building special toilets or allowing books to be taken to a paraplegic student as he could not reach the library. As a teacher educator, I spread awareness through workshops and school visits. However I have no direct control or authority over policy making.

N : Have incidences of violence, abuse and neglect led you to wonder whether all children at all times can be provided with an enabling environment in the absence of community engagement?

U : Yes. I remember this boy in Class IX with the innocence of a Class VI child. He had cerebral palsy so his gait was erratic and his sitting posture also a little awkward. And his teacher, I found, had been pinching and punishing him- ostensibly to improve his posture! The teacher did not really understand my anger; he only understood that the parent was very angry and he could lose his job. What guarantee that the teacher would not continue his ill-treatment of other children? And what guarantee that this child would not have to face similar treatment from others?

N : If you had the power to improve one school policy to create a more enabling environment – what would it be?

U: Educational policies should clearly spell out the requirements, the methods and awareness measures for different stakeholders. There should be regular discussions on the problems faced by special students and steps taken to overcome them. B Ed programmes should have a component on special education. Every school should have the post of a special educator which will be of immense help in making teachers aware about the support needed by such students. Students' Council, Student representation in school boards like VMC or PTA would help students' voices to be heard. Value education, religion, examples of great leaders I hope will make an impact. Yes, awareness has to be created among parents, teachers and children themselves about respecting the uniqueness of each individual and the need for all kinds of skills and talents in this modern world. I would welcome a policy where report cards are purely verbal and only point out the plus points of each child, where there are no numerical marks awarded as this invariably leads to comparison and feelings of inferiority- whether it is in the home or school or society as a whole.

The interview first appeared in the Learning Curve, issue XXI

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