



Social Inclusion and Exclusion – My Experiences

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I am sharing about my experiences of being a student in a school that largely catered to a middle class neighbourhood with most of the students' father or mother employed in the same industry but in different capacities, spanning from a floor cleaner to director of a department.

I remember, I was in grade 8 and it was Mathematics class, our teacher was teaching us. The office boy came and gave a sheet of paper to the teacher. The teacher said, "I will call out names of children, you have to collect your scholarship." She read out few names and then one more name, this was name of a bright girl student. She always got in first three ranks and was liked by the teacher. The teacher even commented on her dressing and if she wore a T-shirt the teacher would tell her "good girls" should not be wearing such clothes. She read out the girl's name from the list, the girl jumped from the bench but the teacher said "Oh! You are a schedule caste, chi chi".

I remember the "chi chi". This was my introduction to the caste system and I understood that something was not good about being Schedule Caste so the teacher made that remark. But then there was something about it because of which the students got scholarship. It must have been a painful experience for my friend who was humiliated by the teacher.

The other experience I remember is that when one of my friends had a quarrel with another classmate, he called him 'ABC'. I asked him what ABC was and he explained to me that it meant 'Aye, BC means you backward caste.' We were in grade 8 or 9 then.

The above experiences point towards issues of discrimination and more so stigmatisation of a particular group of students in school as well as the role of school in normalising and further

strengthening certain stereotypes as well as 'image' in this case image of a 'good girl'. The incidents also point out discriminatory interactions that happen on day to day basis in a school between students and teachers and between students and students. Though a middle class girl is able to access education and continue in school she has to face gender stereotypes as well as caste discrimination.

However, I also have memories of how a few teachers and a new principal tried to break the 'boundaries' that were created amongst students and the labels that were tagged on to different students. While I was in secondary school our class had two distinct groups - a group of students who looked physically stronger and did well in sports and another group who did not look physically very strong, but did well in studies. These were two distinct groups, there were many other kinds of groups that were formed but in this section I will share narratives about these two groups.

The boundaries were created because of achievements and teachers' preferences. While the physical education teacher preferred the physically stronger students to lead the teams and most of them also got many prizes for the school, the other group of students resented this as they were not made team leaders. But when it came to language, mathematics and science the teachers provided opportunities in classroom discussions to those who scored well in exams, were articulate in their thoughts, had certain fluency in English and who sometime also had answers to questions which were not necessarily from the textbooks that we all read. I remember our oral examination in grade 9 and the teacher asked me, "Why is the colour of milk white?" and I said, "Because of its protein content". The teacher laughed very loudly and I realised that

the answer was incorrect but she did not share the 'correct' answer with us. Definitely, it being a 'scientific knowledge', could have only one correct answer and there was no space for the teacher to even probe for any 'common sensical' understanding that a student wanted to apply, nor was the teacher interested in knowing the reason for such an answer. The teacher at the end of the exam praised one boy who always got first rank for his knowledge about science and how he was the only one who knew how a particular laboratory instrument was to be used, and many of us wondered that the teacher never made us use that instrument and expected us to know how the instrument was used in a particular way. I link the experience to the entire mechanism through which schools and evaluation system are geared to filter out students. That is what the teacher did by setting the questions in a particular manner ensuring that only a few could answer, knowing well that the school had just managed to get laboratory equipment and was setting up a library for secondary school and hence any understanding beyond textbooks could be only created if the parents had that knowledge and could engage with the child or if the child had access to reference material at home or extra support in form of tutorials.

This drives us towards the point of working class children and children from 'elite' groups and the way in which schools favour the 'elite groups'. There are other instances where an English teacher chose a student from the physically strong group and the other from academic group. She first asked the 'stronger' one, as the student answered the question she laughed and said "See this is what he knows". The teacher knew that this student would not be able to answer. As the teacher ridiculed this student some of us thought what the right answer could be and someone prompted to the other student who then gave the correct answer. In this case actually both the students did not know the answer but one has the opportunity to correct and take support from peers and had peers who knew the answer but the other did not. This incident raises several issues, not only about labelling, but also ridiculing and thereby harming a student's

self-esteem and self-confidence. The incidents also raise issues how students access resources 'capital' as the school favours a particular kind of knowledge and the way knowledge is used as an instrument to humiliate and create hierarchies and also how peers help each other. Incidents of this kind can definitely silence many students in classrooms for fear of humiliation. Hence, while the aim of education should be to give voice to those oppressed it actually makes them silent.

Some of our teachers did ensure participation of those who were labelled 'last benchers or unintelligent'. The teacher also ensured spending some time with them during class-work, checking their notebooks; these were classes when all of us participated. Our new Principal tried to break the existing labels; for the first time it was made mandatory for all to participate in all school events. He ensured that those who had never participated in a debate got support from teachers to prepare for it, he himself gave time for it and those who did not lead a team were made team captains, some of the groups did win. I remember that the perception that I had about some students did change, I don't know if the labelling that the teachers did got challenged (in their minds) or not.

The idea of cultural capital could also be invoked through these experiences since a particular class or students who had cultural advantage over others in terms of language, exposure, parental support, access to knowledge and mannerism that were appreciated in the school. The experience brings forth the role of teachers and principal in creating culture of inclusion.

In an another incident when our school Principal was teaching us commerce subject he asked, "What are shares". My father, since an early age, made me work with him not only to repair his scooter but also fill up application form of shares and I took the opportunity to read the tiny text on the application form. In response to the answer, I explained the entire process of how companies issue shares and applications are filled and money is given to the company and profit is shared later; one of my classmates, again from the 'brighter' lot, shouted that it was a wrong answer and he knew the correct

answer. The teacher (Principal) heard both the answers and said that one was from the textbook and the other was more practical. For the first time I felt that the work that I did with my father had some relevance with my school education. The incident, though is not one of physical labour, can be linked to the issue of connecting children's work with education, students' experiences and their labour with education. In this case both the answers were correct, the teacher accepted both the answers and explained the reason too, further the teacher did not rate one answer superior or inferior to the other.

The school had certain practices which could be termed 'being inclusive'; the school was a state board school but instead of 'saraswati vandana' to invoke goddess of knowledge, our school had different songs that we sang at the end of the day followed by national anthem. On every Saturday prayers of different religions such as Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity were said. We all folded hands and also opened our palms to do these prayers and tried to make a cross. I looked forward to this day and enjoyed reading these prayers from our school diary.

In the current scenario where issues about saffronization of curriculum are raised, government schools being public institutions have Saraswati idols and prayers though according to the Constitution of India schools should be secular and not promote any religion. This school where I studied in 90s either reflects the socio-political conditions of that time or is an aberration since being a private school it could have easily promoted 'majoritarian' culture but it decided to do otherwise.

Each one of us can recall experiences of exclusion and discrimination even if we may have studied in schools that catered to a particular class since discrimination and exclusion are based on identities of class, caste, religion, gender, rural-urban difference, or tribal-non tribal culture. In fact incidents that may seem to be a purely academic differentiation had deep linkages to the overall issue of the knowledge, pedagogy and evaluation that the curriculum and schools accept which are in favour of a particular group. But we also have experiences

that are 'positive' where we experienced teachers warmth and concern, where we felt that each one had the opportunity to participate, each one was supported to avail of the opportunity, diversity was being not only tolerated but celebrated in myriad ways and hierarchies were challenged, voices were raised against discrimination.

The same school where I experienced being humiliated at times, discriminated at times, sometimes being included, sometimes proud and sometimes got a sense of achievement; prepared me to pursue doctoral studies from an institute like the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Did the school perform its role of reproducing the class, caste, gender hierarchies and religious difference or did it help me to challenge some of those hierarchies? Or should I consider myself one of those who belonged to the rising urban middle class section of society that benefited from expansion of education? It did filter those who joined industrial training and those who could continue higher education by ranking us and thus social hierarchies were converted to academic hierarchies (Velaskar, 2005).

We can raise many such questions and the intersection of family aspiration, school dynamics and larger socio-political conditions that influence education of various social groups. I would like to end from where I began—the girl who was humiliated by teacher for her caste identity studied up to post-graduation, and joined a 'white collar job'. For her and for many others like me, the system did create opportunities and scope to enter higher education and the labour market even if some of us were first in our families to have studied beyond matriculation. I cannot ignore the role of education and my school even if it was for the emerging urban middle class girl, it did create an opportunity and space to challenge patriarchy, caste and class structures.

I thank Professor Nandini Manjrekar, supervisor of my Ph.D. dissertation, titled 'Social Inclusion in Schools: Experiences of Students, Teachers and Parents'. It was due to her suggestion that I reflected and penned my school experiences.

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