

Diversity of classrooms

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BONDAGE OF LANGUAGE

It is a common experience that languages of children in the school are ignored. It is assumed that all education can/ should take place through the dominant regional or official languages of the state. The vernacular voices of children are silenced and more often than not they do not understand what is going on in the classroom. The consequences of such a scenario should be obvious and are there for everybody to see.

The dropout rate from class 1 to 5 and from class 6 to 8 continues to remain very high and the general levels of school achievement are miserably low. Even today, of the total number of children who enrol in schools in class 1, very few manage to complete the middle school or the high school. In fact, accordingly to the government's own estimates, about 11 per cent children drop out after class 1 itself and about 16 per cent children drop out after class 5. The State-specific transition rate from primary to upper primary - class 6 - is 83 per cent for the whole country. In some of the large states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it is between 60 and 70 per cent.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the country has lost about 40 per cent of its child population in education by the time children reach class 8. For several additional social, economic and cultural reasons, this dropout rate (now called the push out rate) is invariably high in the case of girls (and in other marginalised groups such as the dalits and the disabled), which may be close to 50 per cent before they can complete class 8.

Is it possible to conceptualise a pedagogical paradigm that would regard the multilingualism and linguistic variation available in the classroom as an asset rather than as a hurdle in the classroom processes? This alone will not ensure retention rate and quality but may certainly be an important step in that direction. The classical pedagogical paradigm is constructed around 'a teacher', 'a textbook' and 'a language'. Such a paradigm throws out of the classroom a whole mine of linguistic and cultural resources that children bring to the classroom and that could constitute a solid basis for careful reflection and cognitive growth.

These resources do not have to be printed books or newspapers or digitised material. They could be arts and crafts, farming practices and various other linguistic practices and cultural activities of the community. In the case of languages, it is possible to seek liberation from the bondage of 'a language' and use languages children bring to the school for enhancing cognitive growth and language proficiency.

The moment a child realises that her language is finding a voice in the classroom processes, her self-esteem rises immensely and her levels of participation in the classroom processes becomes reflective and meaningful.

Shifting paradigm

This radical shift in the pedagogical paradigm would immediately empower children and give space to their voices encouraging peer group learning and construction of knowledge in which all children, their community and their teachers become equal partners. To some extent, before we gave in completely to the misconceived compromise formula arrived at the meeting of the chief ministers in 1961, there was an effortless use of the languages of children in the classroom and peer group interaction.

The Three Language Formula evolved in 1961 was fossilised in the 1964-66 report of the famous Kothari Commission; given the scholarship and sanctity of this report, even such policy documents as the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Curriculum Framework 2005 have found it difficult to transcend the boundaries of the Three Language Formula. This formula was trying to achieve the impossible targets of local, regional, state and national harmony and unity with a single stroke of misconceptualised and misdirected language policy.

It was assumed that every person in the South would agree to learn Hindi and every person in the North would be happy to learn a South Indian language irrespective of whether it is of any use to him/her. It also showed complete insensitivity to the people of the East, North East and the West. A larger number of states in the North (where there were hardly any teachers of South Indian languages) made a mockery of the Three Language Formula while introducing inadequately taught Sanskrit as the third language in addition to Hindi and English.

In the South, in general, people preferred their regional language, English and giving Hindi in general a step-motherly treatment. In some parts of the Northeast, people were quite happy with just their own languages and English. In fact, the craze for English has intensified so much that now almost all states have introduced it from Class 1 without having any teachers or materials. Jammu and Kashmir declared it the medium of instruction from Class 1 a decade ago. English does need to have a place in our education system but it must be located in the multilingual ethos of India.

It is time that we recognise the diversity of classrooms in our country and start working on pedagogical paradigms that may become profitable models for the rest of the world. It is important to recognise that India is not an object of wonder in terms of having linguistic and cultural diversity. Once we look carefully around we find that whether it is Australia or America, England or Europe, China or Russia, Africa or Latin America, they are all overwhelmingly multilingual and multi-cultural.