

Inclusion in Early Childhood Education – Fostering Culture of Belonging

Harit Bagga

Research Scholar, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

Each child enters the learning environment with diverse educational needs which must be catered and fulfilled to ensure that each student becomes an important and integrated member of the society. The NEP 2020 has been envisioned with keeping in focus, the future needs and beliefs of India. It emphasizes on inclusive and equitable education which is also critical for achieving an inclusive and equitable society in which every citizen has the opportunity to dream, thrive, and contribute to the nation.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is the need of the hour for our education system as we are a nation of enriching diversities in terms of culture, language, religion and customs to name a few. To achieve the goal of universal brotherhood and fulfil the dream of universal education we need to inculcate positive sense of belonging in our young students so that they can contribute to a compassionate and tolerant society in their later years.

Keywords: *Inclusion, Culture, Equitable*

Introduction

Inclusive education for all is an essential goal which is decisive for envisioning an equitable and just society. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 states that the Indian education system must aim that no child loses any opportunity to learn and excel because of circumstances of birth and background. This vision of Government of India encompasses the need of fostering culture of belonging in our classrooms.

Culture of Belonging

Culture of belonging is the development of sense of belongingness as a valued member of community. Belonging is also defined as the need to form at least a minimum quantity of affectively positive connections within one's context (Baumeister and Leary 1995, Fairclough, 2009). Maslow's (1999) hierarchy of psychological needs also stressed that the need for belonging must be met before motivated engagement can be attained. As pointed by Osborne (1997) and Voelkl (1997) children who do not enjoy a positive sense of belonging are distinctly more likely to be disaffected or disengaged at school. Further, Baumeister and Leary (1995) stressed that the need for belonging is so prevalent and far reaching especially in younger kids that it dominates an individual's emotions, cognition, behaviour and health.

Dewey's philosophy of education also comprehends an intimate relation between child's life and his experiences as a continuous process. Vygotsky (1978) put forwarded - "The law of Cultural Development" which states that "every function in the child's cultural development appears at two levels: Social and Individual". These inter-psychological and intra-psychological relations led to formation of actual relations among humans. These aforementioned theories form the basic concept of "culture of belonging". Culture of belonging is a pragmatic dimension of culturally responsive pedagogy.

The ancient Indian education system was based on values of compassion, love and tolerance. Gupta (2000) summarises that the ancient Indian education system aimed for a) formation of high character b) the development of personality c) Inclusion of social and cultural values, to name few. Similarly, the "educultural wheel" presents a model based on a dynamic relationship across a set of core values and knowledge. It reinforces the integrity of cultural knowledge the students and teachers bring along with them to the learning environment. Though set up on core values of Maori culture (indigenous to New Zealand), it has universal appeal in instilling culturally responsive pedagogy.

The Educultural wheel as suggested by Macfarlane et al (2004) comprises of few basic values.

- whanaungatanga (building relationships)
- rangatiratanga (teacher effectiveness)
- manaakitanga (ethic of caring).
- kotahitanga (ethic of bonding)

All these values lead to development of culturally responsive environment which inculcates a meaningful culture of belonging. A positive culture of belonging showcases teacher's effectiveness and willingness in building and maintaining relationships among her and students.

As teachers, educators and facilitators we need to follow certain practices which would ensure my classroom becomes more inclusive, culturally responsive and exhibit culture of belonging. I, hereby share few such classroom management tips and recommended practices

- By planning “me time” in the class weekly. For a class of forty students, every Friday eight students will be allotted five minutes for their “ME TIME”. They will be encouraged to share their experiences of last weeks, something special that took place or even share some thoughts which may have disturbed them. This will help in building relationships and also the bond of caring.
- By putting students in small groups for classroom interactions. By making groups of students with varied interests and soft skills will help them to know each other and feel bonded with each other.
- By leading oneself as an example in showing compassion, respect and care to all students irrespective of their diverse cultural and or intellectual pursuits.
- By planning adequate participation of “special children” in class assembly, so that they are also encouraged to showcase their talents to the wider audience. This will help in fulfilling a teacher's role in culturally responsive pedagogy.
- By holding regular discussions, and interactions with parents, so that they are also engaged in their child's academic journey.
- Allocating projects in small groups so that collaborative work can be done. The same can be done for online projects also.

- ‘Show and Tell’ is also an effective way wherein children can show anything from their house, garden or can even show any article or a book cover.

Suggested Resources

A few meaningful resources which can guide teachers further in this right direction.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1M6whw9k8N4>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ylsG5zx6Mo>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdYJr03eJjE>
- Videos for teachers <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfWhQUz2J70> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGPdqzhjtj0&t=109s>
- Usage of various e-assessment models for formative and summative assessments (especially for students who find difficult to write or speak). One can use quizzes, kahoot, pro quiz and quizlet.

All these are suggestive aids. However, readers are encouraged to scout for such resources and use them to make their classroom more culturally responsive and to exhibit positive culture of belonging.

Conclusion

Fostering, culture of belonging in early childhood classroom is a prerogative on teachers, as facilitators of education, we need to think and critically reflect upon our teaching. Thinkers like Dewey, Skidmore and many other writers along with the Educultural framework can shape and guide our thoughts. One can hope strategies devised and discussed above will hold worth and will be able to inculcate respect for diversity existing in our classrooms and do justice to inculcate inclusiveness. I know it is deemed challenging but small steps towards building culture of belonging, respect for diversity will surely help to complete the arduous path.

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