

Developing Sensitivity Towards Disability Through Classroom Instruction

Nidhi Seth

Abstract

Literature gives readers the opportunity to explore the lives of the Other, people different or distinct from oneself. An awareness of differences of the Other helps us to recognise exclusion and marginalisation, and we attempt to develop sensitivity and empathy for those deemed 'different'. Some of the major differences discussed in literature are based on race, class, caste, gender, sexual orientation and disability. This paper focuses on the Otherness of disability and makes a case for inclusive education in schools. While NEP 2020 advocates an inclusive education system, it is not easy to address these issues at the ground level. The portrayals of disability in school textbooks are limited in nature, and the students are too young to understand the discourse of disability studies. This paper uses the case of teaching a chapter on disability to Class VI students and suggests ways in which pedagogic spaces can develop sensitivity and promote inclusive education.

Keywords: Otherness, diversity, inclusion, disability, school textbooks

Introduction

In 2015, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations with inclusion embedded in all 17 goals. The promise to "Leave No One Behind" is a core universal value. Particularly, SDG 4 (Quality Education) emphasises an inclusive learning environment and equal access. In alignment with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016), which advocates for an inclusive education system enabling students with and without disabilities to learn together, NEP 2020 emphasises that education is a tool for social justice. The policy

emphasises adaptation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners, also echoed by Arora and Sahu (2015). According to Gray (2002), children with disabilities are at a greater risk of “bullying and teasing” in mainstream classrooms (as cited in Hodkinson et al., 2018, p. 27). Consequently, it is not just imperative to ensure that children with disabilities have their needs met in an inclusive environment, but also to ensure that children without disabilities learn to accept and accommodate children who are different from them.

Diversity is a social reality; we need to remind ourselves that selection, grouping, interpretation, prioritisation, celebration or discrimination based on these differences are social constructions. These constructions “are used to rationalise differential treatment or allocation of resources and to explain social reality in ways that make inequitable outcomes seem inevitable” (Bell, 2016, p. 31), thus marginalising the Other. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly affirms that “respect for diversity” (MHRD, 2020, p. 5) should serve as the foundational principle guiding the education system. In this context, examining the role of literature in the curriculum and its pedagogy in cultivating positive attitudes towards inclusion and respect for diversity becomes imperative.

Disability studies emerged as a field of critical enquiry in the 1980s. The field of disability studies employs various models to understand and address the complexities of disability like medical model, social model and rights-based model. The medical model of disability views disability as an individual problem wherein people with disabilities are defined by their disabilities and receive social and medical services. The social model of disability, on the other hand, considers differences among humans as a normal aspect of human diversity. It believes that society “is responsible for disabling these differences; therefore, social change, rather than individual perseverance, is required to address any challenges” (Rowe, 2026, p. 74). The social model of disability was used to foreground the pedagogy and discussion of the selected text with Class VI students.

This article suggests that literature can play an important role in developing awareness and sensitivity towards disability in young learners and thus contribute towards the creation of inclusive environments. The article draws upon my unpublished doctoral research, as part of which I taught the literary text “A Different Kind of School” to Class VI students

of Delhi University Social Centre Co-Ed Secondary School located in Maurice Nagar. I used discussion, activities, and situational analysis tasks to develop sensitivity towards diversity and inclusion. Apart from class VI, I also taught grades VIII and X as part of my fieldwork, focusing on different markers of diversity in each class. While the students were not proficient in English language, and often resorted to using Hindi while responding to a text, they were eager to learn and enthusiastically participated in classroom discussions and activities.

Literature as a Tool for Advocacy of Inclusion

Literature provides a lens through which the realities of a society can be examined, capturing the multiple complexities experienced by individuals and social groups within a given social context. Bishop (1990) states, "literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation and readers often seek their mirrors in books" (para 1). She further suggests that literature functions both as a window, allowing readers to glimpse new worlds, and as a door, inviting them to enter and become part of those worlds. Kurtts and Gavigan (2008) assert that children's and young adult literature should be used to promote empathy and acceptance towards diversity.

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part (Bishop, 1990). Hence, the trope of 'super crips' or 'overachievers' (Rubin & Watson, 1987, p. 61) is as detrimental to the cause of inclusion as bias and stereotyped portrayals of disability. According to Rosenblatt (1995), it is very likely that "the student's social adjustments may be more deeply influenced by what he absorbs through literature than by what he learns through the theoretical materials of the usual social science course" (p. 21). Hence, there is a need for sensitive and positive portrayals of disability in literature.

English textbooks, at times, "represent the only English literature that students are exposed to...For children from underprivileged backgrounds, the textbook may be one of their few possessions or even the only book in their homes" (Bhattacharya & Madan, 2012, p. 16). Hence, appropriate text selections and an inclusive pedagogy are

imperative to meet the goals of inclusive education. Significantly, Connor and Bejoian (2007) argue that teachers should “introduce the notion [that] differences are often perceived subjectively” (p. 4), emphasising that disability represents a form of difference that does not make an individual superior or inferior. According to Margolis and Shapiro (1987), “Those who teach literature have a wonderful opportunity to liberate young minds from almost imperceptible prejudices and pave the way for those with handicaps to enjoy full citizenship” (pp. 21-22).

Let us examine the case of teaching a chapter on disability from an NCERT textbook to Class VI students.

Selected Text: A Different Kind of School

This chapter features in the Class VI NCERT textbook, *Honeysuckle*. It is an abridged and simplified version of the essay, *The School of Sympathy*, by E.V. Lucas. While it is not clear whether the chapter recounts a true incident or describes a real place, it has the potential to develop a sense of social responsibility in students by letting them experience the problems of people with special needs. The chapter describes a school where the children must take turns to undergo some difficult days, such as blind day, deaf day and lame day and so on. On those days, it is the responsibility of other children to help them. The essay is written in the first person and has the author interact with the children and the principal of the school, who said, “The real aim of the school is not so much to teach thought as to teach *thoughtfulness*—kindness to others and being responsible citizens” (NCERT, 2014, p. 57).

The chapter is important from the perspective of inclusion, as it teaches young children about the problems faced by persons with disabilities. Most of the schools in our country are not inclusive and safeguard children from the challenges of life. In this case, the setting of the school is crucial since it makes the chapter relatable to the students. The principal of the school reiterates, “This is a very important part of our system. To make our children understand and appreciate misfortune, we make them share in misfortune too” (NCERT, 2014, p. 58).

The Pedagogic Process

I began the class by inviting two students to navigate an obstacle course while enacting the roles of a ‘person with visual disability’ and his/her ‘helper.’ Obstacles were created in the classroom by placing bags

and water bottles on the floor. The 'helper' was supposed to lead the blindfolded person (person with visual disability) across the course. The exercise was repeated with other students, and they were asked about the challenges they faced. While the 'helpers' reported that they had to give the right instructions to blindfolded classmates to safeguard them from bumping into objects or people, the latter said they were afraid of falling or hitting some furniture. Organising classroom role plays in which students assume the roles of persons with disabilities, or dramatising scenes from stories they have read, including reader's theatre or tableaux, can enable students to experience firsthand the challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Such activities also help learners understand the emotional states associated with adverse situations, such as discrimination, judgement, or patronising attitudes. While conducting such activities, the teachers need to provide a suitable context, and follow them with discussions to ensure that the students understand the purpose of the activity, rather than treating these activities as a game.

Once the obstacle-course activity was over, we proceeded to read the chapter. I asked the students to look at the picture accompanying the chapter, and to guess the events that would follow. In the picture, there was a boy, and next to him was a blindfolded girl. Most of the students said the two children were playing together. The students seemed unfamiliar with such pre-reading exercises. They were reluctant to guess the story from its title and picture, despite being told there were no right or wrong answers. We progressed through the chapter by reading and discussing vocabulary. I stopped at appropriate junctures, asking them questions to elicit responses, emphasising inclusion. An excerpt from the conversation between the researcher (R) and the students (S1, S2, S3...) highlights the attempt to develop an attitude of sensitivity amongst the readers towards persons with disabilities.

The Conversation

R: The principal says here that the school makes them share the misfortune of others. Why do you think the school is making them experience these problems?

S1: So that they can become kind towards them.

S2: Because when they experience the problems faced by others, they will realise how others feel when they face those problems.

S3: Ma'am, this will make us think that we should help them.

Relating the Chapter to Real Life

To help the students relate to the chapter, I spoke to them about the trainee teacher from the Department of Education who used to teach Social Science to their class. The intern was visually challenged, and the students observed, *"She has trouble reaching our class," "She can't move much in the class."* One student said with a smile, *"She can't see us talking."* The conversation made me think about the potential for sensitivity and empathy that young children have and how differently they might behave at times. Developing awareness and sensitivity towards the need for inclusive environments takes time, and young students need repeated exposure to such issues and situations both through literature and real life.

As we read the chapter, we came across a statement about the 'blind day', "They [the students] all learn so much this way — both the blind [the blindfolded student acting as a visually challenged person] and the helpers" (NCERT, 2014, p. 58). The students observed that the one playing the role of a person with visual disabilities will be forced to encounter the problems that persons with visual disabilities face in real life, and that will make them kinder and more considerate towards others. However, they became thoughtful but could not answer how it helped the 'helpers' learn anything. I called a girl in front of the class and demonstrated how a person with visual disability should be helped. As they watched attentively, one of the students remarked that the child playing the helper would learn how to help persons with visual disabilities.

I held a post-story discussion with them, attempting to relate the story to real life situations. I referred to the tactile paving in the university campus and the Delhi Metro, and asked the students if they knew their function. Only one boy in the class knew that the paths were meant to guide persons with visual disabilities. Subsequently I discussed the situation of crossing the road, since people with visual disabilities cannot see the traffic lights changing, it is difficult for them to know when it is safe to cross the roads. One student suggested using guide canes for navigation, which others considered this risky. Another student suggested that speakers could be installed at traffic lights to announce when the lights change. I informed the class that such speakers were already in use in some countries.

The chapter in syllabus discusses that each term "every child has

one blind day, one lame day, one deaf day, one injured day and one dumb day.” (NCERT, 2014, p. 58) I asked the students which one of the aforementioned days they would find the most difficult. Most of the students said that it had to be the ‘blind day’ since they would not be able to see anything. One boy said that ‘dumb day’ would be the most difficult because he would not be able to speak, and no one would understand him. Some students came up and tried to mime messages, the students said they felt irritated when they were unable to understand the message and suggested that writing messages would be better. I also informed them that the chapter was written long ago, and it is politically incorrect to use the word ‘dumb’.

Creating Inclusive Environments

Once the students showed interest in the discussion, I posed hypothetical situations regarding students with visual or locomotor disabilities joining the school. I questioned them about the changes that the school administration could make to accommodate the needs of such students and how the other students could help them. They were quite successful in drawing information from our previous discussion to suggest infrastructural changes the school could make to accommodate students with visual or locomotor disability. The school had an entrance with stairs. One of the students suggested making a ramp which could be used by persons with visual disabilities and users of wheelchairs. Another student suggested that tactile paving could be done within the school to help students with visual disabilities gain greater access. One student remarked that Braille books should be available to such students.

The students were quick to list the challenges, such as entering the classroom, taking things out of a bag and climbing stairs for which they could provide help to students with disabilities. The students suggested that they could help children with visual disabilities by doing tasks for them, such as escorting them safely through the crowded school areas during recess. One student pointed out that if a student with visual disability joined their class, they would have to think of games that the other student could also participate in. The students got quite involved, they suggested ways to create an inclusive environment for students with disabilities, their suggestions were not just about offering help but about making persons with disabilities independent through infrastructural and social support. I explained that while leading the

person with visual disabilities, the 'helper' should not pull their hand, I described the correct way to guide them which includes describing the surroundings and path to them. A week after this discussion, I saw a Class VI student leading the aforementioned trainee teacher towards the computer room. He was giving her verbal instructions and leading the way properly while the intern held his arm.

I planned a Situational Analysis Task (SAT) on disability, which I gave to the students about three weeks later. I planned the situation around a girl who could not hear or speak. Having discussed visible forms of disability, I chose these forms of disability since they are not visible to the people around, which can be socially challenging. The situation was as follows.

The Situational Analysis Task on Disability

Eleven-year-old Neha wants to join your class. She has visited the school and met the principal. The school principal has granted her admission. However, Neha's parents are worried about how she will manage in school, as Neha could not hear or speak since birth. They think that she may have trouble making friends. The teachers are also worried that other children may make fun of Neha. Her parents think that it would be better if she attends a school for children with special needs. Neha's relatives think that enrolling her in a school will mean a financial burden on her parents, and she should rather be taught at home. However, Neha is determined to attend a regular school like everyone else.

Questions for Discussion

- Do you think Neha should join your school? Why?
- Do you think that she would face any issues at your school? What do you think are some of the problems that Neha might face here?
- Can you think of some of the ways of helping Neha cope with these problems/issues?
- Do you think that the concerns expressed by Neha's parents and school teachers are justified?
- Is there any way in which you can assure Neha's parents about her well-being at school? How can you help make the class a welcoming space for her?

After recapitulating the main events of the chapter "A Different Kind of School" (NCERT, 2014) with the students, I presented the SAT to them.

I asked them whether Neha should join their school. While most of the students gave a resounding yes, one boy disagreed. He said that Neha would be teased by other children, face difficulties understanding what was being taught, and as a result lag behind in her studies. I accepted the boy's response and then asked the students whether Neha should enrol in a special school. A few students agreed with this idea, stating that she might feel comfortable attending a special school. The others said that Neha could join their school as well. At this point, I asked them whether any changes could be made in the school to make things easier for Neha. They suggested:

- S1: Ma'am, if she knows how to read, then we can write for her whatever we want to say. She can read and understand.
- S2: Ma'am, a special teacher should be appointed for her in the school who can talk to her and explain to her what we want to tell her.
- S3: We could learn sign language from that teacher and communicate with Neha

On being asked what they would do about teasing, they said, *"Ma'am, we will tell other children not to tease her. If they persist, we will inform our teacher or the principal."* One or two boys even wanted to beat the ones who would dare to tease Neha.

After this, I raised the point that Neha's relatives suggested that she should not be sent to school. The students said that while she could study at home, she would not be able to study properly. If she joined a school, Neha would get a proper education and have friends with whom she could study, eat and play. One of the students said they liked being with their friends, and Neha would like it as well, indicating a person-first approach to perceiving a person with disability as a person beyond their disability. Emphasising that her parents must send her to school, they said, *"Because if she doesn't go to school, she would not be able to study, and her dreams would remain unfulfilled."* Another student chipped in, *"I would tell her parents to send her to school. Whatever dream she has of achieving can only be fulfilled through education. She should also get a chance to study."*

The students strongly believed that education is essential to achieve one's goals and dreams. Their views indicated that a person with disabilities has an equal right to education, and they felt that Neha deserves to be educated at school to achieve her dreams. While the word 'inclusion' was not part of their vocabulary, but they felt that while Neha could

enrol in a special school, changes could be made to their own school to ensure her acceptance. They said that if Neha joined their school, they would reassure her parents that no one would tease her. Assisting Neha, defending her and suggesting that a teacher could be appointed for her instead of sending her to a special school, are all indicative of the fact that students were open to the idea of having a person with disability amongst them and getting education with them.

Conclusion

Rosenblatt (1995) writes that “prolonged contact with literature may result in increased social sensitivity” (p. 175). Though we read only one chapter on disability in class, the students showed signs of deep engagement with issues of disability. The pedagogy, as well as the students’ responses to the text and the situational analysis task (SAT), aligned with the social model of disability, which “sees the person as disabled by society” (Hiles, 2007, p. 5). In this case, the students were able to recognise the barriers to inclusion (infrastructural, attitudinal and pedagogical) and could suggest ways through which the school administration and the students could adapt, and help create an inclusive environment. Their response to the text and the situation creates the hope that they will be able to “develop a sense of agency and commitment” (Bell, 2016, p. 27) to work towards eradicating discrimination towards disability.

While the students were too young to be taught theories of disability studies, they were introduced to connotations associated with words related to disability. Students were told to avoid labels or euphemisms, people-first language is the most widely accepted language for referring to persons with disabilities. So ‘persons with disabilities’ or ‘people with disabilities’ are more neutral terms to use than ‘differently abled’. For language teachers, it may be a useful exercise to collect idioms and phrases related to different disabilities and examine them in class for their potential to hurt people with disabilities or perpetuate stereotypes through language. For instance, the use of phrases like blind as a bat, blind rage, blind spot, turn a blind eye, lame joke, and deaf to our pleas, etc., should be discouraged, and students should be made aware of the rationale for the same.

Through the chapter on disability, the students were made aware of the concept of the Other and the differences that can lead to exclusion. I believe that exposure to appropriate literary texts, when taught sensitively in class can help meet the goals of inclusive education.

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Nidhi Seth is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Shyama Prasad Mukherji College for Women, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest include English pedagogy, children's literature, critical literacy, technology in ELT and women's education.
nidhiseth2010@gmail.com