

An emotionally safe classroom – An act of co-creation

Anecdotes from a substitution period

It was a humid August afternoon when I had gone for substitution in one of the classes. I was met with the rambunctious laughter of the students as the delight and glee of having a free period came to colour their faces. As usual, I began with a script I've perfected over the last few months. Three options were given to them vis-à-vis how we can bide our time together. One involved me coming to each table individually to view their designs for the exhibition, another focused on both the parties – me and them, doing our own work with some silence and finally, the option of a conversation on topics that came to affect them the most psychologically. The options shared with them included bullying, peer pressure, academic pressures, social media and so on. Most of the time, even the 'coolest' and the most put together child struggles with these concerns. Often, these conversations happen behind closed doors and are viewed as individual struggles. A classroom isn't just an academic/intellectual space which is nourishing or geared towards the acquisition of literacy. Friendships, relationships, heartache, social difficulties and the potential of recovery all palpitate in the background. Yet, academic work is placed at the forefront.

I was surprised and yet not to see the students choose the last option. It felt as though the lonely bits of them that are often aching to find voice, expression and recognition in the other as well as the collective space of the class emerged. What ensued was a free associative discussion that documented their struggles. I began with a simple question that centred on their difficulties as school students. I was hoping to hear a raging sermon on academics, tuitions and teachers but they spoke about isolation, alienation and feeling that they cannot always speak to one another. It was surreal to hear these ninth graders use this terminology known as 'trust issues', a term that is commonly used by young adults in the context of heartache, relationships as well as intimacy. Yet people as young as them were highlighting themes of disappointment, betrayal, miscommunication and a lack of safety. This highlighted to me that while the focus is consolidated primarily on studies at this developmental stage, the role of one's peers and how they come to view a specific child can be so potent as to completely take away their attention span. Behind closed doors, I've seen eighth graders break down in tears when one of their friends refuses to play with them or make other friends.

As adults who have come forward in time and as figures who've now overcome these experiences which are a part of growing up, it is easy to see this as but a minor thing but for children/adolescents this can spell catastrophe and unfurl all kinds of self-questioning around one's worth.

Without violating the child's confidentiality, I would like to highlight a vignette from my work with a youngster from the school itself. Prior to the break, this young life would only speak to me from behind a mask. I wondered if it was because of a lingering fear of contamination, a legacy of fear left by COVID or if she had somehow shut her voice. As the sessions evolved, themes of being shamed by her peers found our way into the

sessions as well. The more I got to know her the more I became certain about the mask masking one's whole being. Hiding something shameful. We worked together for a few months before the summer break set in. The narcissistic part (which is there in all of us to some extent, not to be confused with pathological narcissism) in me would like to believe the sessions were impactful, but nothing could substitute what a healthy loving friend group within the school did for her. Right after the break, the mask came off and I saw her body language transform from a perpetual stoop to an upright posture. I saw her smile for the first time.

I'd wondered what had happened and found out that she'd made new friends who were supportive in the same school. Voila! Returning to the classroom space, it was heartening to hear that while most of us lose our sanity as facilitators during a noisy substitution, the conversations between them are often the only time that the students can find to connect with one another. If the connection is healthy, it impacts the other areas of their life positively but a lack of it can make one feel very secluded.

In this particular class, the students mentioned that some of the obstacles to feeling safe within the class include a difficulty around vulnerability. *"It's not cool to be too emotionally expressive otherwise you're marked as weak. Weak, is not cool."* To be an adolescent and not be perceived as cool isn't the easiest. The other areas that we were able to narrow down on also focused on *ego* and *arrogance*. Attitude, as one child put it. It builds a barrier between any two people, student or not. As we reflected on these more deeply a path had to be carved.

If we seek safety in social spaces in order to articulate better and feel better, it's also imperative for us to create the same. Can we invite or create the same energy with which we wish to be surrounded? As the students reflected on it the core answer that emerged focused on kindness. The other theme which emerged spontaneously in the session also centered on how while it's not necessary that one may always be liked by the other or always like other people, can we find a way to respect our differences? Deep down, we all struggle with the same vulnerabilities and difficulties. Knowing that we all wish to be liked, cherished, appreciated and feel safe in itself can be so grounding regardless of the fact that it may often be concealed behind a wall of attitude, arrogance and defensiveness.

A student asked as the period came to a close about how can we prevent ourselves from getting hurt in friendships and relationships? Is there a way to avoid that? The question in itself reveals so much. Can we? They also realised that one may truly never know but we can still choose. Choosing healthier connections, the choice of staying in certain friendships versus choosing to end them can be equally complex for school going students. While one might intuitively know that a certain classmate/group isn't healthy for them, walking out could mean losing benefits like whom to call when one is absent? Whom to collect the pending work for? Whom to pair with on a group project? As students and adults within the schooling system, reading the classroom beyond an academic space by looking at it as also an emotional one can allow us to better enter the subjectivities of children. While it might seem connected, what happens inside the class besides teaching holds the clue to improved academic/overall functioning in a child's life. It begins with safety. Creating it and experiencing it.

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