

A CLASS DIVIDED: A SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

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A Class Divided: A Social Experiment in Elphinstone School (in collaboration with Dhanashree and English teachers)

Background

In the outset of peer discrimination being reported by 9th grade students who have come to Elphinstone from Sayani and NM Joshi schools, the Socio-Emotional department collaborated with Dhanashree and the English teachers to conduct a social experiment aimed at building empathy by putting the students in the shoes of those who are discriminated against.

Method

The experiment spanned two weeks in duration and was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the English teachers were instructed to give preferential treatment to one group of students (Sayani/NM)- they were given positive reinforcement, and made to feel superior while not being receptive to the others. The reverse was carried out in the second week. The second phase of the experiment involved having Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with the students, with the aim of capturing their behaviour, attitudes and feelings that they experienced in this process. Four FGDs were carried out (one for each division- A,B,C &D). The discussions were moderated by Dhanashree (B and D divisions) and Nihal (A and C divisions).

Process & Outcomes

Through the analysis of the FGD transcripts, 5 categories of themes were explored.

1. **Experience**- A process of reflection was elicited through the experiment and FGD. The experience was largely one of de-motivation, a reduction in confidence, feeling isolated, feeling bad, sad, frustrated and lonely. They felt they were receiving a bad deal. Along with it, helplessness increased which led them to wonder: “why are we here?” The culmination of these experiences was perceived as discrimination by some of the students. Through these experiences, they began to become more conscious and aware of rules that authority figures should ideally follow.
2. **Rules**: Teachers should not discriminate students based on where they come from. Treat everyone equally. Welcome new students. If there are specific children who are being problematic, that shouldn't be attributed or generalized to other students from similar backgrounds. Similarly, appreciation should be given to students solely based on their merit and not their background.

3. **Consequence:** The consequences of these rules being broken and their experience of being discriminated against, led to some consequences, such as: they harboured negativity and changed their attitude towards the teachers. Some students began questioning their opinion about Muktangang- “Is Muktangang really inclusive?”; “First, they put us into different groups (differential learning), now they treat us differently.” As their attitudes changed, their relationship with the school, teachers, and peers was affected. Over a period of time, their negative experiences also resulted in dislike for not only the teacher but also the subject which she taught. In some cases, there were indications that the dislike could have been extended to Muktangang. In summary, the negative impact of discrimination was also observed in the students’ affect, motivation, confidence, interest, participation and interpersonal relationships.

4. **Understanding:** The Confusion of Membership, Lack of Agency and Powerlessness was important for empathy building at an affective and cognitive level. Seeing preferential treatment as discrimination and voicing it facilitated them to be sensitive to such happenings and identify them as a problem by both groups of students.

5. **Action:** Insisting that teachers do not blame and treat students preferentially based on their background is borne out of a change in rules they had previously externalized. After the debrief, the students were quite overwhelmed with emotion and relief and approached the teachers with affection. Their attitudes regarding the teachers and school which were influenced by the experiment had shifted after the debrief, with narratives like: “We are not from Elphinstone, Sayani or N.M, we are from Muktangang.” This not only indicates that they reascertained their membership with Muktangang but also is evidence to the effectiveness of the experiment in rekindling the sense of community and belongingness that is core to Muktangang practices.



FGD moderated by Dhanashree

Concept map describing the findings of the experiment and FGD

