**Inclusion in class**

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| RECENTLY, I had the privilege of working with teachers to implement inclusion strategies in a secondary classroom. We started with what inclusion means to teachers and most of them focused on the task of taking students with disabilities on board.  Whilst a large part of inclusion does involve catering to students with differing abilities, it doesn`t end there. Recognising that students engage in the classroom in different ways might help nurture the way they process learning.  Doodlers and day dreamers are often frowned upon; a closer look of ten reveals that these are strategies to process information by creating a silo. Not all students are group learners some need to distance their cognitive selves to think deeply. Teachers are inclusive when they understand the multiple ways in which student engagement occurs in the classroom. It is mostly a symbiotic relationship where listening to the students is perhaps more important than the instruction itself. Gauging cognitive, behavioural and affective engagement is a process that requires inclusion strategies.  Cognitive learning refers to the deep thinking taking place as students process the learning; behavioural engagement refers to actively paying attention, answering questions and so forth. Affective engagement is the idea of helping out peers, sharing the learning experience and participating in group work. Most students are selective about how they want to engage; not all of them manage to do so. Differentiating between their abilities and accepting or respecting their choice of engagement is reflective of inclusion. If there is any trouble-shooting needed, a quick verbal or written formative assessment will reveal the lack of engagement.  When teachers find it hard to engage students, some flexibility is essential to enable identification of barriers. Sometimes it`s a simple lack of energy due to tiredness, hunger or some other basic need that has not been fulfilled. Of ten, it is much deeper than that. Social dif ficulties at school may end up not just excluding a student from the learning process but causing self-worth issues that seep into learner engagement. Again, inclusion strategies that identify such roadblocks at play might give teachers an insight into the needs of the individual learner. This is especially important at the primary level when children are less adept at identifying and vocalising their feelings and rely heavily on teachers for pastoral care in and outside of the classroom.  Hidden biases surface when these children are followed closely. A hesitation to reach out to a teacher for support may be borne out of a perceived bias that af fects the student-teacher rapport. Similar biases orthe perception of them operates among peers, skewing the learning relationships and affecting the capacity of students to engage well with each other. Inclusion strategies may then require integration activities or class discussion geared towards minimising discord. Inclusion cannot occur in a vacuum, where engagement, interaction and student autonomy are compromised.  Learning is a process of negotiation where the needs are identified and both the teacher and student evolve continuously.  Inclusion in the classroom does not necessarily require any specific techniques a basic degree of awareness can yield fantastic results. It is often just the opposite of a feeling of alienation in which case a student may feel ignored, neglected, misunderstood or targeted. Teachers who focus on maintaining a connection or a rapport with their students recognise the signs of alienation very quickly. From barriers to learning for differently abled children to those who feel discriminated against in class, the pattern isfairly similar.  Disconnection with the teacher naturally results in disengagement in class, unless there is another adult at home who is filling that vacuum and managing to keep the child motivated. Why do somany of our students require other adults to fill in? Many rely on support from not just parents, but tuition teachers too who have mushroomed in the last decade. We blame the high-pressure environment that demands excellent results.  However, it is not just the pressure that is spurring the high demand for tuitions, but teachers who fail at inclusion and lose the rapport with their students who then run amok looking for another equally competent adult that they can establish a rapport with someone to become their gateway to the inclusiveness that students so deeply crave at every level.  Most schools fail to incorporate inclusion in classroom strategy sometimes what is required is just a conversation about what alienation feels like. The concept of empathy is repeated so often that it has almost become a cliché but can most teachers identify specific ways to show empathy in the classroom?  The writer is senior manager; professional development at OUP, Pakistan.  neda.mulji@gmail.com Twitter: @nmulji |  |