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Otherness: A Levinasian Framework for Educational Institutions' Wellbeing

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Abstract

Policymakers, educators, and teachers make numerous efforts to provide an adequate school environment for teaching and learning. Despite these continuous efforts, there are instances of marginalisation of certain identities, experiences and ways of being, causing dropouts, absenteeism, and burnout amongst students and teachers. This affliction of individuals in the school system indicates the deleterious results of poor institutional well-being. This paper discusses the foundational flaws in understanding inclusion and further argues that the central cause of poor institutional well-being is the negation of the Other, an idea advanced by Levinas. This repudiation of the Other leads to a lack of belonging, even within the school system, which Young terms "internal exclusion." Furthermore, this article explores ways to address these problems through ethical responsibility toward the Other.

Keywords: *Internal Exclusion; Marginalisation; Other(ness); Health and Wellbeing; Responsibility*

Introduction

The landscape of schooling has shifted from segregation to integration and then to inclusion. The state has taken multiple measures to universalise education, including Operation Blackboard (1987), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001), District Primary Education Programme (1994), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (2009), and various other schemes and policies. One such landmark step was the arrival of the RTE Act 2009, which made education free and compulsory for children aged 6-14 (RTE Act, 2009). Studies have shown that many significant and successful efforts have been made to improve the enrollment rate in schools through various affirmative action, such as seat reservation for students from Economic Weaker Section (EWS) in private institutions (Romero & Singh, 2022), mid-day meal scheme (Jayaraman & Simroth, 2011), scholarships & financial assistance (Farooqui et al., 2018), Ladli yojna (Singhal & Anand, 2017), commutation assistance (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017) etc.

On the contrary, over the years, reports have shown that the dropout rate across schools in India remains high, despite a significant increase in enrollment. As per the UDISE+ report, the Primary Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is above 100%; however, the national dropout rate at the secondary school level is approximately 12.6%-14% and is significantly higher in particular rural and marginalised sections of India (MoE, 2022). The recently developed educational policy, NEP 2020, also highlights that a large number of students from socially disadvantaged groups leave school early (MHRD, 2020, Section 3).

Student retention in schools remains a critical challenge for policymakers, curriculum designers, and other education stakeholders. Most of the factors identified by Vishishtha & Jain (2020) behind this phenomenon are social, such as discrimination, violence, bullying, and illness, and political and legal, such as the absence of legal safeguards in the RTE and its ineffective implementation. Apart from them, the limited success of education-related schemes and programmes, operational gaps in the Mid Day Meal Scheme, and household factors such as family and individual issues, gender-based discrimination, and financial instability, along with the quality of curriculum and scarcity of resources, are some of the other crucial causes (Vishishtha & Jain, 2020). Similarly, it is also observed that the discriminatory practices pursued by teachers and classmates, such as caste-based discrimination during mid-day meal distribution and sitting arrangements in the class, create an environment of alienation for the

students coming from marginalised communities (Thorat & Lee, 2005; Thorat & Sabharwal, 2010; Bajoria, 2014). This further causes isolation, disengagement, and exclusion within the institution, leading to high absenteeism and dropout rates.

Most of the above-mentioned factors concern institutional and physical access to schools and can be mitigated through external support and administrative effectiveness. However, some of the factors at the individual level are often subtle and attitudinal, and require immediate attention, such as biased and discriminatory behaviours by teachers and fellow students, and the neglect of the experiences of students from diverse/ marginalised backgrounds. To address these concerns, this study aims to understand the most fundamental attitude that leads to the feelings of exclusion and identity-based discrimination linked with the negation of the Other (Levinas, 1961/1969, 1974/1998) that directly or indirectly pushes students out of the school system, especially those coming from the marginalised sections with diverse and unique experiences. It further proposes implications for teachers, administrators, and school management to eliminate discrimination and marginalisation by looking for solutions in the spirit of Otherness.

Furthermore, this study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary data, to explore and understand the phenomenon of internal exclusion, discrimination, and marginalisation. Researchers conduct library-based work to gather information and develop conceptual and analytical understanding by examining existing literature and implementation gaps. The current scenario of marginalisation is then analysed through Levinas's conceptual framework, utilising the concept of the Other. Later, recommendations are given to bridge the gaps existing at ground level, rooted in the acknowledgement and acceptance of the Other(ness).

Since this study is theoretical, it relies on secondary data, engages with the ideas of educational thinkers and philosophers such as Levinas, and reframes the traditional norms of validity and reliability typically followed in empirical research. For instance, validity takes the form of credibility and is ensured by utilising well-researched, reliable sources of information and literature, such as official government reports and peer-reviewed articles. Further, reliability is maintained through a coherent, structured, and logical analysis and argument in understanding the causes of existing phenomena of internal exclusion and marginalisation through the lens of philosopher Levinas' concept of Other(ness). Rigour is achieved through conceptual clarity, logical soundness, and precision in argumentation.

Institutional Marginalisation and Negation of the Other

Indian society represents an ideal site of diversity. It encompasses diverse classes, castes, cultures, ethnicities, genders, languages, religions, and abilities. Within this diverse space, every individual rejoices in having multiple identities. These identities do not persist in isolation but interact with one another to shape lived experiences, resulting in instances of privilege and disadvantage. When multiple identities intersect, they give rise to complex forms of exclusion within educational institutions. Thus, it becomes important to understand institutional marginalisation through this intersectional perspective. This understanding provides a lens through which marginalisation is viewed not only as the absence of access or representation but also as a prerogative of certain kinds of experiences, identities, and ways of being, thereby rendering others invisible.

Public and policy discourse often views inclusion as the key solution to the injustices faced by the marginalised (Enslin & Hedge, 2010). Contemporary discourses presuppose that educational institutions incorporate identities perceived as 'different', defined by caste, class, gender, religion, language, and so on. The implicit understanding of these discourses is that there are dominant or normative identities, against which the 'different' is identified and subsequently accommodated—such an understanding risks reducing inclusion to a process of assimilation rather than transformation. Thus, the underlying assumption of inclusion needs a critical evaluation. To eliminate the exclusion of certain 'different' identities, physical access and representation may help address the issue; however, experiences of exclusion within the educational institution often persist due to practices that sideline them, resulting in what Young (2000) calls internal exclusion.

Many research conducted states the reasons for school dropout or lack of retention to be poor quality of learning at school, bullying/harassing school environment (Prakash et al., 2017), schools not having usable or gender specific toilets for tribal girls (Nayak & Kumar, 2022), lack of menstrual hygiene management (Sinha & Paul, 2018), teacher absenteeism (Chatterjee et al., 2018), teacher competence (Nayak & Kumar, 2022), use of corporal punishment (Dehadray, 2019), lack of support for students falling behind with their studies, peer pressure influencing the dropout behaviour (Paraman & Mohd Hussain, 2022), use of standardised language and standardized textbooks and syllabus (Nayak & Kumar, 2022), institutional assumptions and teachers' beliefs and attitude towards EWS students (Geetha, 2014). Such instances reflect the exclusion of individuals within the educational institution, leaving them feeling invisible and pressured to suppress aspects of their identity in order to belong.

Such issues raise fundamental questions concerning fairness and inclusion in educational institutions. If 'to be included' is to homogenise the institution by conforming to its pre-existing institutional norms and practices. This approach to inclusion can inadvertently reproduce the inequalities it initially seeks to address. To address these concerns, a critical view of the universalistic conception of the individual is needed. The pursuit of universal ideals often represents the normative or dominant understanding, against which all differences are measured. Such universalisation negates the Other by understanding the difference as a deviation. Thus, inclusion may be better understood and practised by recognising the Others as irreducible, unique individuals, as discussed more elaborately in the next section.

Considering the 'Other'

The moment children are sent to a formal setting The problem of marginalisation is not merely external or a systemic failure, but rather the kind of exclusion that occurs at the most individual and rudimentary level, whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally. Some questions may arise in one's mind when looking at the site of this marginalisation: why are standardised provisions and institutional norms not enough to include everyone in the institution (schools, in this case)? What could be the possible cause behind that? Is the entry into the institution not enough to ensure justice, equality, and inclusion?

Some may argue that rules should be strict enough to ensure inclusion, but would it be inclusion in essence if it is enforced from the outside or caused by external factors? Where does the actual exclusion begin - outside or inside? These questions draw our attention to the interactions one has with the Other. If one has not accepted the Other in their mental space, then all attempts to change formal setups by introducing procedural changes and institutional norms seem in vain.

Levinas would see the site of discrimination and internal exclusion as the result of totality. Totality is the tendency in which the subject, which can be an individual, a group or a whole institution, sees everyone and everything as a closed category that can be grasped easily (Levinas, 1961/1969). In an attempt to do so, they reduce the infinite Other to finite boundaries. For instance, as discussed in the previous section, when a teacher sees all of their students and colleagues as the same, they negate their unique and diverse experiences to fit into their own pre-assumed stereotypical categories. This is what happens in mainstreaming as well, where, in order to include everyone, one tries to fit the marginalised with different experiences and diverse backgrounds (say, some tribal communities, religious minority groups) into existing rigid categories. However, this is not inclusion in the proper sense, in which one seeks to include the Other in a fragmented and reduced form. True inclusion can only happen when a person is included in their whole being, including their experiences, choices, individual culture, and characteristics. For one has to know the Other completely.

Now, the question arises: is it possible to know the Other completely? Can we know someone with their whole being? Levinas would say, "No". As per Levinas' concept of 'alterity' (1961/1969, p. 33- 40), it is not possible to reach the Other, since it is infinite or endless. When someone claims to have known the Other, they reduce the Other's existence to a mere object. This is where both ontological and ethical violence happen; one's individuality, uniqueness, and core existence come into danger of systemic dehumanisation.

The only way to include the Other is through one's infinite ethical obligation towards the Other. However, the question is: When does one's ethical obligation begin/arise? Levinas would say one's ethical responsibility begins when the vulnerable face of the Other emerges. This face of the other being is not some physical appearance that can be captured by looking. Instead, it is infinite, which overflows or escapes the category one may attempt to reduce it to. This vulnerable face that is defenceless, naked, or capable of being hurt possesses a power that makes you ethically responsible for it. It says, "thou shalt not kill" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p.199) or do not reduce me to an object.

However, through the process of effacement, an attempt is made to make the face and the ethical command it gives invisible (Levinas, 1961/1969, p.194-219). For instance, structural layers within the educational institution reduce the Other, their lived experiences, and vulnerability to statistical data based on the principles of measurement and productivity. This way, the faces of students, teachers, and other stakeholders, often working at the grassroots level, are masked by institutional checklists. Through this, even after gaining entry to the institutional space, systemic or subtle forms of discrimination persist, simultaneously eradicating alterity by reducing it to fixed, known categories.

Reconceptualising inclusion through the lens of the ethics of the Other helps acknowledge and consider the Other's existence as absolutely other, separate from the self. Rather than attempting to assimilate the Other into the pre-existing normative institutional structure, inclusion, with the spirit of Otherness, seeks to ethically consider the Other with openness, recognition, and responsibility. Further, in Levinas's understanding of the Other, the encounter with the Other, whether at the individual or group level, precedes all forms of categorisation or institutional classification. He encapsulates the essence of this understanding in "Thou shalt not kill", extending it beyond the literal sense of physical harm or violence (Levinas, 1961/1969, p.199). It signifies that the Other should not be negated, dominated or bounded in our own categories of understanding. In practice, within educational institutions, where every learner is an Other, they should not be compelled to conform to dominant ideals or homogenised standards to be considered or recognised.

For Levinas, ethics precedes ontology, showcasing that responsibility for the Other comes before identity, rationality or any self-interest. The self is constituted not by any reasoning or self-directed interests, but rather by the infinite responsibility for the Other. In an educational context, institutions shall not ask individuals to fit or fix themselves to be part of the institution. However, they shall hold absolute responsibility for responding ethically to Others' diverse identities and experiences.

Therefore, inclusive educational institutions are responsive to alterity by recognising and considering the agency, dignity, and uniqueness of the Others/learners. Such a lens offers to transform the policy of inclusion from merely a practice of assimilation into an ethical commitment that considers the Other with mutual recognition and reverence for diversity.

Institutional Health and Wellbeing: Ways to eliminate marginalisation

Institutional health and well-being extend beyond a school's physical infrastructure and administrative efficiency. This implies that the health and well-being of any institution is determined by the well-being of all its members, who constitute the whole system. Here, the meaning of health is not restricted to an individual's physical and mental health; rather, it also encompasses ethical relationships with other stakeholders, including the institutional ethos, spirit, commitment to one another, and the institution's overall harmony. Thus, health and well-being reside fundamentally in the space the school creates for its learners and other stakeholders within the school system.

When one denies responsibility for creating such spaces, exclusionary and/or discriminatory practices emerge. The manifestation of the institutional marginalisation, as discussed in the previous section, including poor quality of learning, bullying and harassment, inadequate sanitation facilities for girls, lack of menstrual hygiene management, teacher absenteeism, corporal punishment, peer induced dropouts, standardised language and/or curricula, teachers' attitude and assumptions, should not be understood as isolated administrative failure but is case in point the institutional inability to recognize and respond to the Other.

Rooted in Levinas's understanding of the Other, the institution's well-being can be reimagined as a responsibility of every teacher, student, and administrator. Here, each member of the school system is the Other, possessing distinct identities and being infinitely responsible for every Other. Such innate responsibility manifests beyond prescribed directives. Thus, this responsibility is primary and inevitable. When students tease one another for their appearance, performance or for any other reason, they fail to recognise the Other. In a similar vein, when female students are denied the opportunity of having adequate sanitation facilities or even the feeling of being safe in school, it is a prime example of negating the Other by the teachers, peers, administration and the entire school system. Similarly, when teachers fail to attend school or arrive on time, practise corporal punishment, and hold deficit-oriented assumptions about EWS students, it demonstrates a breakdown of their ethical responsibility. They fail to see their responsibilities as individuals for the Other. In addition, when school systems burden teachers with excessive administrative duties, it causes professional burnout, compromising their individual well-being and, in turn, institutional health.

One may suppose a stricter adherence to rules and policies to address these instances of discrimination or neglect. These rules may ensure systemic equality and fair treatment to a certain extent, but they risk marginalising individuals' responsibility. Such an approach jeopardises individuals' sense of responsibility, reducing it to mere adherence to externally imposed rules. Assuming that members of the institution are unaware of their ethical responsibilities or hold no ethical position implies that ethics must be imposed on them. By doing so, the essence of responsible action is reduced to mere formalities. Such mechanisation of ethics reduces the uniqueness of the Other to external and objective reality. From Levinas's lens, the existence of the Other is in itself enough to make one realise their ethical responsibility towards them and further preserves the dignity of the Other. For him, ethics precedes ontology since ethics is the first philosophy (Levinas, 1989, p. 75); the responsibility towards the Other arises long before any institutional assumption, classification, rule, or rational thought. Therefore, institutions' well-being rests on openness to alterity and responsiveness to the Other, without reducing them to the institution's own existing categories or standardised norms. Efforts should be made to raise every individual's awareness of the presence of the Others and, eventually, to recognise their ethical responsibility. Hence, it becomes imperative to reimagine institutional health as an individual's responsibility rooted in ethics rather than an edict.

For instance, the conventional education system treats students and teachers as mere statistics on paper. Even the health of the institution as a whole is reduced to mere attendance, marks, and physical well-being. However, from Levinas's perspective, the face of the Other ensures one's ethical position towards them. It suggests a gradual shift from numbers to being. The presence of students, teachers, and other members is sufficient to support claims of just and fair actions. For this, a shift from objective, standardised norms to an understanding of the Other is required. For instance, instead of viewing a student as an object, like a blank slate to be shaped, or as part of a homogeneous group, it is important for a teacher and the educational institution to consider each student as a unique presence with distinct experiences. Here, the site of the Other becomes the teaching moment, as the Other possesses an infinite perspective. One way to realise this aim is through dialogue. As Levinas proposed:

> To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression…It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. However, this also means: to be taught.(Levinas, 1961, p.51)

Dialogue can help a teacher engage with students' experiences and acknowledge the emerging, vulnerable Other. Nevertheless, this practice does not suggest that one can reach the whole of Other, as Other is infinite. It simply encapsulates the idea that, despite infinite differences, schools should continually work to fulfil students' most fundamental needs, given their diverse socio-economic backgrounds and prior experiences. Similarly, higher officials and administrators should recognise the teachers' vulnerable Otherness. This will help bring out teachers' infinite creative potential for new experiences, practices, and pedagogical approaches within the school system. Schools

ought to adapt to the needs of students and teachers rather than fitting them into a fixed, normative school system. Thus, such an adaptive approach by the educational system shall establish harmony.

Another major barrier that restricts the true inclusion of Others is the top-down bureaucratic structure. The Bottom-up or participatory approach can help in considering the Other by incorporating the immediate needs of students, teachers, and parents, who are often marginalised or rendered invisible. The Face of the Other makes one responsive, and this can only be realised when one comes into proximity to the other. Through encountering the vulnerability of the Face, one emerges as a responsible being. Such measures need to be implemented to bring students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other education stakeholders closer together. For instance, such platforms and opportunities shall be provided to students where they share their experiences with teachers and other officials.

Similarly, administrators should actively participate in school activities, engage with students and teachers, and discuss the problems being faced. Higher authorities, given their proximity to students' experiences, such as a lack of sanitation facilities, should more firmly affirm their ethical responsibility. Bringing them closer to one another can prevent the loss of the Other and unethical practices.

Further, it is observed that the contemporary system of education is working on the approach of students' becoming rather than being, and even that becoming is too fixated on or rigid in a certain ideal scenario. Apart from that, the whole institution is working within an instrumentalist approach, in which people treat others, relationships, or duties as means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. For instance, teachers facilitate students' learning with the expectation of good exam performance, which in turn leads to teachers' promotions or other incentives.

Similarly, schools expect teachers to teach in ways that significantly improve the school's overall results compared to other schools. In a larger circle, this competitive and productive zeal has seized the spirit of infinite innate responsibility towards the Other. For instance, the functionalist and capitalist structures of society have influenced the functioning of educational institutions, with an emphasis on reproducing existing social structures, emphasising class distinctions and the allocation of resources. Nevertheless, through Levinas's lens, the education system has an asymmetric responsibility towards its members, in which it should help realise the full potential of teachers and students, not because of external validation and incentives, but because of their unconditioned responsibility towards each other.

Moreover, conventional classroom assessment practices often reduce students' knowledge and learning to paper-based assessments. It is often assumed that students' response sheets can capture their holistic understanding. However, language cannot be the medium to reach or understand the infinite Other, as these are mere symbols that replicate what one has in their mind, but they cannot fully realise or explicate their thoughts. Hence, its true essence may remain partially unaddressed. In such a case, Levinas would say that objective standardised tests operate on the principle of totality and lack the capacity to assess students' learning fully. Assessment of students should capture not only their learning in terms of a final product but also their learning as a process. This could be achieved by continuously assessing students' learning. This continuous assessment involves teachers creating a dialogic classroom space where students explore and engage with one another meaningfully. Further, students' assessment should represent their own progress over time, rather than being based on a standardised norm or any external reference.

The classroom is a significant part of any school and determines the institution's overall health. Hence, the teaching-learning process is crucial to ensuring the well-being of both students and teachers. Teaching-learning practices are often based on teacher-centred, student-centred, or content-centred pedagogy. However, in these particular frameworks, one component is neglected. For instance, in a teacher-centric classroom, the Otherness that students bring from their unique experiences does not get enough space. Similarly, in a content-centric classroom, the positionality of both teachers and students often gets ignored.

Therefore, to ensure that every individual finds their space in the entire teaching-learning process, an Other-centred approach could be

practised. The fundamental essence of the approach is to recognise the unique Other and to have infinite ethical responsibility for them. This enables the creation of a classroom conducive to learning and inclusive for everyone, since everyone is considered the revered Other. Such an approach encourages students and teachers to be ethical individuals and offers a harmonious learning experience. Teachers have the ethical responsibility to make the Other visible to their students through their practice and actions.

Further, teacher education, both preservice and in-service, should engage teachers in understanding the Other and the ethical significance of difference. This encourages them to engage with students with irreducible identities or experiences, rather than reducing them to categories such as caste, class, gender, disability, religion, language, or academic performance. Such an understanding enables teachers to practice hospitality, pedagogical responsiveness, recognition, empathy and respect for difference.

Last but not least, the Other-centred approach can be adopted by policymakers when designing and implementing educational policies. This will enable them to be receptive to the diverse needs, experiences, and voices of those affected by institutional ill-being or marginalisation. They should consider critical engagement with students, teachers, parents, and other education experts as their ethical responsibility. These perspectives and experiences can reveal forms of exclusion, institutional neglect or inequity that may remain invisible at the policy level.

Conclusion

Educational institutions are widely recognised as spaces for knowledge transmission. To make the environment conducive to meaningful learning, it should also be viewed as a social and ethical space where students experience crucial years of their lives. The instances discussed throughout the paper showcase institutional marginalisation that is embedded in the space through everyday practices and structures. These practices put individuals' well-being at risk and largely damage institutional health. The disharmony that follows is not restricted to schools but extends to society.

This paper presents a Levinasian lens showing that the fundamental cause of exclusion within and beyond the system is the negation of the Other(ness), which results in the institution's state of ill-being. Such exclusion cannot be addressed and eliminated through strict rules and regulations, but by realising one's infinite responsibility towards the Other. This perspective provides a deeper ethical foundation by placing responsibility towards the Other before the autonomous self. This pictured inclusion is not simply about incorporating the marginalised into existing structures, but about transforming these structures to be responsive to those who encounter them.

The spirit of Otherness thus offers a way to rethink institutional health and wellbeing. Inclusion in the truest sense is achieved in the spirit of Otherness when one recognises, acknowledges and accepts the infinite presence behind attendance sheets, checklists, marksheets, etc. A presence that comes with unique identities, experiences, needs, and ways of being and that commands unconditional respect, dignity, care, and responsibility. This understanding places ethical responsibility on all members of the educational institution for every Other. Therefore, institutional health and well-being are inseparable from the well-being of the Other. In this sense, recognising the Other is not only a philosophical stance but a necessary condition for building institutions that are just, inclusive and conducive to the health and well-being of all.

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