

*Inspiration from abroad*

# INDIAN INSPIRATION

## Dr Cyril Mooney and the application of her model of inclusive education

### Inclusive schooling in mainstream education

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Over the past decades inclusive education has proved to be a successful model in many schools inside and outside Europe. Students can excel in this model, while learning to build relationships, understanding their viewpoints and value systems and developing important social skills and a positive attitude towards life and society. Yet mainstream education often distances itself from this type of education. Teachers, school management and parents sometimes find this method challenging, impossible or even destructive. They often feel simply overloaded by the many aspects of their work in education. Inclusive schooling requires long-term preparation involving constant self-reflection, courage, a conscious presence and common vision shared by all employees of the school. In this sense we often seem to be standing on the edge of an ice-cold lake dipping just our toes into the water.

Along with the legislative support of inclusive trends at Czech schools, teachers suddenly found themselves asked to deal with the issue of how exactly should inclusive education be carried out in practice. How to work with the children who suddenly appeared in their classes, when the schools, teachers and classroom collectives were mostly unprepared for this? How to coordinate the expectations of the authorities, principals, teachers, assistants, parents and the children themselves?

Dr Mooney's experience offers solutions – principles that need to be articulated, understood, and accepted by all parties entering the educational process in a school, which decides to be inclusive, and practical methods to cope with situations arising in the classroom. Her inclusive model is based on a holistic and deeply reflective approach, where students are not supposed to achieve on just the academic level, but also through their interactions and relationships with others, through their characters and personalities, their participation in non-academic activities and their commitment to serving the community. Dr Mooney established her inclusive model through constant work with teachers and other staff, students and parents, and by establishing the child's needs, relationships and values as the focus of the school's interests. In her approach the child's personal development is as important as his or her academic achievement. Special attention is given to the values of everyday life within the school. Despite the fact that Dr Mooney's experience comes from India and arose from the needs she sensed within her own environment, her model also offers many solutions to our situation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This text was generated on the basis of the author's personal experience with Dr Cyril Mooney (Sister Cyril) at the Loreto Sealdah School, during work on the [Sit Beside Me film](#) and during teacher training courses organised in the Czech Republic (2012–2017). Much of the text is derived from the book titled [Transforming schools for social justice & inclusive education](#), written by Dr Mooney (2019) as an aid to principals and teachers interested in the topic. More about Dr Mooney, including the summary of the school's outreach, can be found [here](#).

### Values as a key for creating an inclusive environment

*"The atmosphere of the school is a subtle entity, which reflects the way in which the philosophy of the school is lived out. It is a compound of physical surroundings, people's faces, words spoken, and attitudes shown in the treatment people receive and in the decisions made by the school."*

*SM Cyril Mooney*



Values and attitudes influence our everyday decisions, which direct our thinking and our focus in life. They are the basis for our decision-making and actions; one of the most important activators, apart from our basic needs, family archetypes and group paradigms. Values are also the basis for forming healthy relationships, trust within the community and for fulfilment of our goals. They help us to connect to ourselves and to others. Values become a type of guideline, an anchoring point for our orientation in the ethical and relational world, which it is crucial to experience at a young age. Despite this fact, minimal time is spent in schools in open peer-to-peer and class communication regarding value systems, relationships and feelings.

The opportunity we receive at a young age to reflect on our values, attitudes and feelings, without being corrected, evaluated or even criticized, is crucial to the way we act and solve problems as adults. Freedom is an utterly important component of this process. When the opportunity created for children to reflect on their life experience and attitudes is not safe, and also if they know what answer they are expected to give in order to be rewarded (or not to give in order to avoid being disparaged), children quickly learn to either comply with the system and give the "right answers" or to revolt. They learn that to be dishonest is acceptable and convenient, or they lose interest, are marginalised and eventually disconnect. In an excessively controlling and unsafe environment children learn to survive through intensification or withdrawal, instead of developing their potential. This also applies on the macro level of the school. When rules become more important than people and too much control is applied, and when there is not enough opportunity for safe and constructive

sharing by each participant, processes become more exhausting, inner motivation is suppressed and inclusive education is virtually impossible.

However, classroom discussion is not sufficient to conscientize our own value system. Activities that matter to us need to be practiced through real life experience and by nurturing the understanding of ourselves in relation to the world. Hands-on experience is the most valuable lesson, providing children with the opportunity to learn how to handle crises, organise thoughts, draw boundaries, be open, be emphatic, to mature and to communicate. This can only happen as part of social interaction, for which school is the ideal place. Therefore it is necessary to take the topics discussed in classes outside school, for example through community service, a project or in the way the school is organised. The validity of such practice is also confirmed by the theories of cognitive and social constructivism. One of the rules most intensively promoted by Dr Mooney was to provide education where 90% of the work was practical and only 10 % theoretical. This is especially true in relation to value education.

### Genesis of Dr Mooney's approach

*"I don't see problems as problems, I see them as puzzles to be solved."*

SM Cyril Mooney



In India overly ambitious parents place tremendous pressure on the principals of good private schools to maintain the high standards and prestige of these schools and its students at all costs. This leads to a very competitive school environment where disadvantaged children, mostly with very little intellectual stimulation from their home environment, poor nutrition etc., have no place and quickly get marginalized or even pushed out completely. This was also the situation Dr Mooney faced in Kolkata. She describes two profiles of children with very different starting conditions - those from the poorest families and those who had all the advantages. As the principal of a competition-based private school for affluent Anglo-Indian girls, her goal became to transform this school into a community-based model and include children who were on the margins of society, while maintaining

the school's high academic standards. The Loreto Sealdah School became the canvas available for her to work with.

Dr Mooney became the principal of her school in 1979. Yet even today her experience can offer a lot of inspiration that has an impact not only in India, but in Canada, England, Australia, the Czech Republic and other corners of the World. In India her concept and some of her programmes were adapted by the government with the plan to initially implement them in 600 schools. Dr Mooney was an advisor to this process in the years following her retirement from the school in 2012. Other Loreto schools have also adapted her programs after observing the effect of her methods. Many of the projects originated from the ideas and activities of Loreto Sealdah students.

Dr Mooney's ideas and practices are still alive today and are being researched to find out how much the model has spread, how it is being used and developed and what its future is. Dr Mooney has shared her experience via seminars held in India and internationally, developed a complex programme for teacher training and created a series of value education textbooks titled *We Are The World*. She has also summarised her findings in a book titled *Transforming Schools for Social Justice and Inclusive Education*. Educators all over the world find inspiration in her school in Kolkata because of the universality of a method based on sharing values common across all cultures and mirroring everyday practice.

The book titled *Transforming Schools for Social Justice and Inclusive Education* was originally dedicated to principals and teachers who were facing the Right to Education (RTE) Act in India in 2009. As a result of this new law they were required to admit up to 25 % children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, children who did not previously visit a school. They were suddenly faced with many problems on how to handle this situation. Many voices were heard saying "This type of school cannot be for this type of child" (Mooney, 2019, p. 3).

Despite very different settings and problems (e.g. the numbers of children, coordinating children of different castes and religions, older illiterate children with illiterate parents etc.), these arguments and discussions also resemble some of the discussions on inclusive education we have experienced in the Czech Republic. Let's have a closer look at this material, which can be useful in transforming our schools into more inclusive institutions.

## **In the classroom**

When transitioning to inclusive education the first question everyone asks is how to handle everyday classroom situations. One of the first steps that can be taken is to gradually involve much more group work, leaving decisions and responsibilities to the children as much as possible.

### **1 Group work**

In our experience, this kind of group work is a very good place to start with in schools, as many of them already work with groups on some level. Working in groups is one of the cornerstones of the methodology Dr Mooney used, not only for VE classes, but in academic subjects as well. This is how children develop social skills and academic abilities, which can only be acquired by working together. This goal is often not fully achieved in schools claiming to use group work, because it is simply not enough to divide children into groups and give them work. In order to utilise the full potential of the group effectively, and to nurture the atmosphere within the groups, we need to cover objectives, group management and reflection. When the work is assigned it should be challenging enough to be interesting for each member of the group and to encourage cooperation. It should be clear that every member is needed to complete the task. Specific rules are set to help internalize certain behaviour, such as that everybody gets the chance to express themselves (i.e. even if the child does not speak for the first few months, he or she is always given the opportunity to do so and is made to feel welcome to join in). Children should be aware of what strategies or techniques they are going to



use (i.e. summarizing their opinions, seeking compromise, or dividing roles while working on the project). Opportunity should also always be given for the children to reflect on their work together. Dr Mooney uses group work as part of her class dynamics method, which she named The Basic Plan. This seven-phase process is a complex and effective way to work with even a large number of children or adults.

Some of the phases from the Basic Plan are also used in teacher training and during parent meetings. Dr Mooney held training courses for her teachers and school staff twice a year or any time the situation required. For this purpose she created a set of worksheets addressing topics that were currently applicable within the school and the team (e.g. on fear, freedom, competition etc.). This also gave the staff the chance to safely discuss the very basic issues of the goals and mission of their school, but also issues that needed special attention. In today's practice, when working with teachers this is still often the first time that the teachers of a single school have the opportunity to discuss such issues and express their opinions and have the chance to hear and compare the opinions and viewpoints of their colleagues.

## 2 Competition

Dr Mooney says: "If you want a really inclusive environment the competition must go." This is often a very thorny issue and one of the major topics teachers often disagree upon, even within a single school. Needless to say, by competition Dr Mooney does not mean sports or various academic competitions for which children sign up voluntarily on the basis of their talents and interests, but the process of comparing children, ranking them, pitting them against each other and bribing them with good marks in order to motivate them to work. According to Dr Mooney such competition is harmful to intellectual and personal development and strongly affects a child's character.

Unfortunately, in many schools competition is promoted from a very young age and the fear of evaluation is part of the experience. Natural curiosity is lost when students focus completely on marks, tests, promotions etc. The stress continues in relation to pressure from parents, while marks can become the very centre of the child's education and even family life. In some cases stress related to academic performance, test results and assessments, can have extreme consequences such as suicide, which is a global trend according to various studies and the statistics of the World Health Organization. Despite the many destructive factors, schools involve in competitive education as in the best practice to motivate students to learn.

One of the important conditions for encouraging children to stop comparing themselves to others and accept themselves as they are is development of a sense of self worth. Dr Mooney says: "For an inclusive school, the participation of all students should be taken for granted. You cannot run an inclusive school without a participative atmosphere that expects every individual to make their own contribution to the community and that, in turn, values each individual's contribution no matter how small or insignificant" (Mooney, 2019, p. 57).

One of the most challenging points in relation to removing competition from our schools is the idea that competition (external motivation) is the only way to motivate children. The question of how to bring the inner motivation mentioned above into practice arises. At Loreto Sealdah this was done by shifting the emphasis to competing against oneself. This corresponds very well with various methods of formative assessment. Comparing with others doesn't provide an accurate representation of the acquired knowledge. It also limits the ability of children to estimate their own knowledge and skills. Focusing on one's own results and growth is therefore much more effective.

During her seminars Dr Mooney mentioned that her students regularly participated in regional or national competitions such as Debate Clubs and were tested using standardised tests compulsory in India. Competitions were an element of schoolwork and she did not consider this a problem. It was important not to give the results more attention than needed, or to compare the children. This

proves that a school based on values can succeed in a competitive world and its students acquire the required knowledge and stamina.

At Loreto Sealdah, parents often argued that the community aspect is wonderful but impractical and that the children would not be able to survive in life if they do not learn to compete. We often hear exactly the same concerns from Czech teachers and parents. In fact this argument can be heard all over the world where community-based education is promoted. For her work with parents and teachers Dr Mooney created a worksheet on the topic of competition. It was given to teachers and parents during meetings and teacher training courses, using the group work method in the same way to working with students. Parents were questioned on what values they want their children to acquire during their school years. The answers were then linked to the programmes designed to strengthen these values. Parents also received a checklist comparing what was emphasised in the system of competitive education versus the community-based system, what the results were and what the final product is and what risks would be taken in their child's education. This was all discussed in small groups and analysed by the entire group and reflected in the school's vision. Everyone had the opportunity to contribute and discuss. Conclusions were then made.

### **3 Evaluation and Assessment**

Feedback for students is closely connected to the success of an inclusive school. In the case of Dr Mooney, evaluation and assessment using marks and grades was required by the Indian educational system. In order to offer more accurate feedback to students at Loreto Sealdah, evaluation consisted of a combination of grades, marks and written feedback, given for academic and also non-academic work. The grade indicated effort, while a mark was given for academic achievements. "If a child receives a low mark for achievement accompanied by a high grade for effort, she has done her best within her capabilities. For this, she should receive praise and encouragement, not belittling comparisons to other students' (Mooney, 2019, p. 19)." Children were evaluated on the basis of individual improvement, not by comparison on a scale. Evaluation was based on the level of hard work, rather than talent since hard work is something everyone can achieve, but talent is given. Students also received progress prizes for improving their performance during the year. This allowed academically weak children who achieved the basic minimum through hard work to be awarded. Children were also given appreciation cards to point out their exceptional behaviour during everyday school life. The school had 1,400 students, where the older students also worked in larger groups ("houses") led by captains, who also participated in assessment of their peers at the end of year.

Today, many of these goals can be achieved by using formative assessment. It offers tools that enable students to follow their own progress continually and it suggests ways to continue their learning in future. This encourages inner motivation and establishes the habit of self-improvement and understanding of the meaning of the work. The options for teacher assessment of students are very flexible today. Teachers can decide *which* areas of the students' development they will focus and provide feedback on. This allows the teacher to reflect on the social skills, behaviour or individual progress of a student. Self-evaluation and peer assessment is also practiced as this reinforces the student's inner responsibility and self worth.

### **4 Give me a moment of silence**

So far we have talked about group work and the move towards community values. All this is part of Dr Mooney's approach, which offers a complex structure for value education lessons as well as academic subjects. We have mentioned that she divides the time dedicated to a particular topic into seven phases in the Basic Plan method, where children work alone, in small groups and everyone together. We would like to direct your attention to the phases that work with silence.

In general we encounter a lot of silence in our schools. There are different kinds of silence. There is silence as a result of concentrated work, but also silence that is enforced because "a silent class is a

good class". Dr Mooney's opinion of this issue is: "If you want silence, go to the cemetery. This is a school." Yet she works with silence a lot.

The first phase gives everybody space to think on their own about the topic that is being introduced. It provides certain guidelines and uses various topics to draw students into the work. This phase enables students to enter into a discussion in groups and to prepare. Group work, discussion and feedback given in front of the entire class is followed by individual work, which provides each student with the time to process what has been said, analyse and decide what kind of action should be taken in order to use newly acquired knowledge and skills. This phase fluently moves into the spiritual phase, which is represented by prayer, meditation, breathing exercise or a singing at Dr Mooney's school. In the Czech environment, where the spiritual background of the children varies, we use all sorts of techniques, but the goal is to give children a quiet moment to reflect on what they have just experienced and to integrate it. Every value education teacher should choose what is appropriate for the kind of children he or she teaches. A simple breathing exercise and focusing attention inside the body can be a powerful tool to begin with.

## 5 Value education classes

Dr Mooney incorporated Value education classes into the curriculum in order to discuss values, attitudes and feelings and to bring values to everyday school life. This subject gave students the opportunity to reflect on certain topics and develop their own value system. Dr Mooney and her team wrote 10 textbooks titled *We Are The World* on this subject and the subject became an important part of the school's programme. This series covers the basic values connected to topics relevant to different age groups of students, starting with students in the first grade. Each book has 16 to 17 lessons and the topics intensify in a spiral depending on the children's age. Basic Plan phases are used for the lessons. Value education classes can precede community service and projects to discuss and plan the project together, and later can help to reflect on the work which was done using the Basic plan again, interconnecting the hands-on experience on an intellectual and personal level.

## 6 Community service

*"Go out, look around to see what needs to change, make a plan, and go and do it while the need is there."*

*SM Cyril Mooney*

When working with values the school provides opportunity for this work via VE classes, through everyday interaction within the school and through community service. During the class the children can decide what kind of area they would like to work in and, after they acquire hands-on experience, they reflect on it during the next VE class, understanding better why they do something, what the impact is and finding motivation to continue their work. When starting community work, students, teachers and leaders collaborated to survey the area, the needs within the community, the school's resources and then decided on a project. This form of education was tangible and the school was ready to simply change the rules in order to help a person. Community service gradually became an inseparable part of the school's curriculum, benefiting both the students and the recipients of their help. It had rigid and practical rules that were followed.

Implementing community service in a school takes preparation, time and the understanding of its benefits. Empowering and trusting children to carry out projects is extremely beneficial to their intellectual and personal development, as well as to the school's atmosphere and the community. In the Czech Republic, the *We Are The World* curriculum created by Dr Mooney and her team for the VE classes was adapted in 2017, when the first schools started to apply it. Three years later the focus remains on the class work and the school's atmosphere, but is slowly moving towards taking the work outside as well. Dr Mooney mentions some of the benefits of community work in her book: "At



Sealdah, every child at school, from class V onwards, participates in some form of community service, whether helping to teach poor children in villages, aiding children in hidden domestic labour, tutoring street children, or providing care for the abandoned elderly. Confronted with this poverty and deprivation, they develop a new, more compassionate and understanding vision of the world” (Mooney, 2019, p. 65).

During teacher training courses Dr Mooney had teachers analyse their attitudes and thought processes and to reflect on them, because the teachers were the children’s primary models. In this example, she is asking teachers to reflect on their approach to community service comparing two approaches:

Cosmetic approach:

- An additional activity that can be dropped at will.
- Something done at the school’s convenience.
- Involves small numbers of older children.
- Children get material recognition for service (marks, certificates, etc.).
- Children see those they serve as less than themselves.
- Children see themselves as doing something great (Mooney, training materials).

Integral approach:

An integral part of the school curriculum just as important as Maths or Science or English.

- Done at the convenience of those who are served.
- Involving all children from the age of ten upwards.
- Children work with the awareness of another’s needs, paid in joy, not marks.
- Children form relationships and see the clients as equals.
- Children see themselves as doing something essential (Mooney, training materials).

### Experience from the Loreto Sealdah School

*Example 1:* ‘When we began the programme on the Eastern Bypass (slum area in Kolkata), I asked the children to give up one day of their holidays. Each day, 20 students clambered onto a bus holding a pack of 12 dice and a set of letter cards. By the end of the holidays, all the children in the program could add, subtract, multiply, divide, and read their alphabet. The students were so proud!’ (Mooney, 2019, p. 65).

*Example 2:* ‘Shagufta Parveen, daughter of a conservative Muslim family and student at Loreto Sealdah Day School, found a young Hindu domestic servant burnt from the waist down after having dropped a cauldron of boiling oil over himself. Shagufta brought him to the school by taxi, sought out her class teacher to give the necessary information, and took him to the hospital herself where she had him treated and given the appropriate medication. Afterwards, she took him home and saw that he received his medicines regularly. At the time, Shagufta was only 13 years old. Yet she had been empowered through their work and lessons at school to successfully handle a real-life situation of poverty and need’ (Mooney, 2019, p. 65).

### The school as an organism

For the successful transformation of a school into an inclusive institution, the change must go beyond classroom pedagogy. As well as applying the specific methodology, the vision, structures, policies and practice within the whole school must be reflected upon and revised. Only when relationships and values are in place, can an organisation such as a school transform into an organism, where people help each other to reach a common goal.

The foreword by the authors in Dr Mooney's value education curriculum *We are the world* says: “We hope that schools that use these books will see value education as a vital component of their

curriculum...” (Mooney, 2017, p. 4). It not only means that value education, with its content and forms of work, becomes part of the school educational plan and legal documents, but also that the school is willing to make changes in its practices in order to incorporate these into the school’s whole system of operation. The principal, the teachers and the school staff need to ask whether everyday situations and the school’s atmosphere truly mirror the values they agreed on as the school’s core values. This will allow the school to experiment with the time and space for VE lessons and community work until a suitable scenario is found. Another step the school has to take is to create a team of value education teachers who enjoy this work and find it important and meaningful.

Dr Mooney's educational model can be studied and adapted thanks to the materials she wrote for teachers and principals and the many seminars she gave internationally. Current research also involves interviews with former pupils and teachers, as well as mapping of the international impact of her work. Her curriculum, tools and approach are being adapted in schools in the Czech Republic. This is taking place through teacher training courses and through a growing community of value education teachers who use this method and the We Are The World curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Dr Mooney’s inspiration and her influence demonstrate the great potential of each school as a crucial player in the educational and social reform.

## References

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<sup>2</sup> You can learn more at [www.cmeducation.org](http://www.cmeducation.org), or [www.skolacyril.org](http://www.skolacyril.org).