

What Constitutes School Culture?

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As an essential part of the process of educating children, the school has a role in the development of conceptual knowledge and cognitive abilities as well as the development of attitudes, dispositions and values that are articulated as valuable for society. In an ideal sense, education, including all the aspects listed above, is required for making informed choices and constructive contributions to life in society. These contributions are needed not only for the progress and success of the individual but also for the collective good. Schools, besides making children curious, confident and keen learners, must attempt to ensure that they develop in a manner that they can help strengthen the feeling of fraternity in society. Most schools have this, along with students' inclusion and excellence in cognitive domains as their stated mission. The degree of success in these aspects, however, varies from school to school.

I remember working with state government schools and noticing wide gaps in how they functioned. Such gaps continue to exist. Most surprising for me was the realisation that even within an area (adjoining villages) schools and teachers functioned very differently. Also, any teacher who came to a well-functioning school, irrespective of the reputation they held previously, started teaching and engaging purposefully with the children, the community and other teachers. Whereas, a teacher who was well-spoken of, when transferred to a not-so-well-performing school, would soon begin to function like the other teachers at that school. There was something about the schools themselves that made teachers function differently.

We know from our experience of walking through schools that we can perceive some aspects of the functioning of the school in the atmosphere. In some schools, we see people smiling, moving purposefully with a sense of easy energy, small huddles of people here and there engaged in conversations or just quietly doing their work or

something else together; there is laughter and chatter but no noise: there are arguments but no shouting. I remember schools where in the playground, the class teacher and children were present together and I particularly remember those where the teachers were not standing and overseeing or coaching but were actively engaged in play as an equal – chasing and being chased. One can sense the relationship that must exist between the teachers and the children, among the teachers and among children themselves to make this possible. In such schools, teachers talk about their work with passion and professionalism. And despite the sense of serious business at hand, both teachers and students seem happy and confident rather than stressed. Everyone seems to know why they are there. The students and staff treat each other with respect as full partners in an important enterprise. In brief, a school needs a safe and caring environment wherein all students feel welcomed and valued; a social climate where both students and their teachers have a sense of partnership and ownership of the school.

I have also seen teachers stretched to manage classes and paperwork resorting to using children from the higher classes to 'monitor' the junior classes. These children carry sticks and do not hesitate to use them to 'discipline' the younger children. Such schools achieve classroom silence but may sow seeds in the children of a belief that discipline is a product of subjugation and restriction. When a school restricts children in such a way – in conversations, interactions, and activities – it misses out on the opportunity to make them understand the difference between meaningful, useful engagement and quiet on one hand, and disorder and noise on the other.

While it is not easy to answer why a school is the way it is and what gives it its cultural overtones, we can identify some elements that constitute this – some broad features of how a positive culture may be developed; and what the challenges are to sustaining it.

Key elements of culture

One of the key elements of a positive culture is **the positive encouragement given to children in a manner that enables them to learn**. From the perspective of learning, the school must believe that all children are capable of learning and that they learn best when encouraged and enthused rather than when they are berated or punished.

Another element of culture is reflected in **what the school believes learning to be**. For example, the detailed Draft National Policy, 2019, the precursor to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, says, 'The key overall thrust of curriculum and pedagogy reform across all stages will be to move the education system towards real understanding and towards learning how to learn - and away from the culture of rote learning as is largely present today.' (p.76 4.2.). Therefore, the school must have a culture that supports children to learn and understand, rather than feeding them shortcuts. The intellectual climate should be such that children are expected to learn by making an effort and all of them are supported and challenged to do their very best. The learning should be such that it becomes a part of their lifelong process of learning rather than for show or short term. For this to happen, there must be a culture of curiosity, exploration and learning in schools of which the teachers must be a part.

The third key element of the school culture, therefore, is that the **teachers also exhibit a strong inclination towards learning**. Children will throng the library if they feel excited about the things they have been told in class and the books that are mentioned by the teachers. A school can set expectations for the students only when it is reflected in the behaviour of all its members. Therefore, for a nurturing environment with high expectations from students, the school must also offer such an environment to teachers.

School structures (such as staff/teacher/student councils) that give the staff and students a **voice and shared responsibility** in the school are another important element. Everyone in the school should feel a sense of ownership of the school. The onus of this is on the leadership and needs to be facilitated by forums that ensure clarity of roles in the functioning and an awareness of each one's responsibilities in a way that each one feels that they are participants in decision-making and problem-solving that impact the school environment. The

agency and autonomy that teachers are afforded, critically affect the way the school is perceived by its students and other stakeholders.

Another fundamental element of building a cohesive culture is to have the leadership, including all the teachers, function as **role models**. A principal has to be friendly and close to the teachers yet maintain the required distance between personal and professional relationships. This is the same balance that teachers must maintain with students – being friends but not forgetting that they are also their role models. Interactions in modes other than that of a teacher and the taught should be facilitated through participation in sports, arts and crafts. To have the feeling of equality with the students while providing them with a safe umbrella of care is critical to building students' self-confidence and the spirit of fair play, as in the playground. Similarly, when it comes to dancing or singing, if teachers restrain themselves, children pick up the notion that participation in these is only for those who are good at them. Overcoming such hesitation requires a culture where there is a general expectation and opportunities for everyone to participate without being self-conscious.

A **sense of mutual respect** gives children the confidence to speak to the teachers on issues that may concern them even if they are complex and difficult to speak about. The manner of address has a big effect on the nature of interaction and the way people perceive each other, Thus, there should be norms for relationships and behaviours that create a 'professional' culture of empathy, care, excellence and ethical practice. This is a huge challenge because teachers and students both come with cultural and social baggage of expectations of relationships and notions about the communities they belong to. The most critical factor here is the ability of the people in this melting pot to accept criticism and suggestions objectively. A process of this kind requires patience and understanding, particularly from those who are in authority and leadership positions.

A glance at policy statements

Communities and governments recognise that the most important function of education is instilling in children a set of ethics that promote the continuation and progress of society. Despite what is assessed and ranked, the expectation remains that education would make the person 'cultured'. The expectations are spelt out in curriculum

documents and reflected in guidelines and manuals for schools and teachers.

Policy documents have been concerned about the atmosphere in the school and how the students perceive it. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasises the need to have an inclusive ambience, and a caring culture, which encourages excellence, curiosity, empathy, and equity. It also emphasises the development of constitutional and positive Indian values in children, which must also be felt by the teachers in their work.

While the NEP 2020 (also NCF 2005) mention the conscious creation of a culture that has a long-term, developmental impact, it argues that ‘children cannot wake up one morning and know how to participate in, preserve and enhance a democracy, especially if they have had no prior personal or even second-hand experience of it, nor any role models to learn from.’ As per NCF 2005, NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023, schools have to ensure a culture that makes students experience values like democracy, fraternity, plurality and equity. It would also require having interactions with parents and the community to make these values a part of the home experience too.

Apart from this, the policy documents have recommended a culture of curiosity, questioning and seeking justification and proof besides developing the value and culture of open-mindedness, innovation and practical action. They also recommended preventing the development of fear of mathematics; allowing multi-lingual conversations; and respecting the language, culture and knowledge that children bring from the community and engaging with these.

The documents recommend a caring and nurturing environment. In the chapters on teachers, the NEP

2020 mentions that to help ensure that schools have positive learning environments, the role of principals and teachers will explicitly include developing a caring and inclusive culture at their schools for effective learning and the benefit of all stakeholders (NEP 2020 Final 5.13. p.12). The draft (NEP 2019) mentions that the schools must have a caring, collaborative, and inclusive school culture, which encourages excellence, curiosity, empathy and equity. A large part of this school culture must be set by school principals, school complex leaders, School Management Committees (SMCs) and School Complex Management Committees (SCMCs) (NEP Draft 2019, Chapter 5 Teachers, p.114) The draft NEP 2019 further adds that ‘to help ensure that schools have positive learning environments, the role expectations of principals and teachers will explicitly include developing a caring an inclusive culture at their school, for more effective learning for all, and for the benefit of all in their communities.’ (NEP Draft 2019, Chapter 5 Teachers, p.118)

The Right to Education Act 2009 (RtE) also spoke about developing a positive school culture and stated that ‘no child shall be subjected to physical punishment or mental harassment’. This calls for the school leader to focus on making the school a stress-free, child-friendly space with a learner-centred classroom environment, which requires redefining notions of discipline, punishment and student-teacher relationships.

Any transformation process in schools has to be led by a process of developing a positive and cohesive culture and tradition. The journey is not easy and, as has been said, is resisted by the beliefs of the stakeholders and the traditions in the communities and among the teachers.



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