

# The Nature and Purpose of School Culture

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## Schooling as initiation into society

It is common for us to associate schools primarily with the curriculum and consider the curriculum alone as a means of education. But schools are much more than that. For the first few years, children grow up in a limited geography predominantly around family, relatives, and neighbours, getting accustomed to its traditions and practices. From this space, they move into schools that are initially alien both in terms of the people they meet, and the culture and practices followed there. Schools are the first social spaces that children are primary inhabitants of and mark the initiation of children into social institutions, which they inhabit as autonomous persons.

Children form relationships, understand norms, and familiarise themselves with new practices and traditions, such as following classroom rules, paying attention in class, doing classwork and activities, taking up responsibilities, making friends and sharing, and gradually, by secondary school, they begin to figure out what being an autonomous person means. In this process, they become aware of and form unique social and personal identities. In a sense, schools are a gateway into adult life and the process of self-determination.

Three aspects of the schooling experience need to be noted. Firstly, schools are the beginning of independent lives with responsibilities for children – they have to not only learn the curriculum but also demonstrate that they have learnt. Secondly, they form their individual identities and personality by deciding how to behave with others and making significant life choices about what they like and what they do not. Thirdly, from this experience, they develop a perspective of how society functions, and what it is to be an adult.

Children are not passive learners who unquestioningly accept all that is taught to them. Humans are *naturally* autonomous and after a certain age, they start comprehending formal

pedagogical actions and *know* they are being taught and that they are expected to *learn*. This autonomy manifests itself in the way they deal with the cultural practices of the school – through selective obedience, different ways of subverting norms they are not entirely convinced about, and sometimes through protests and rebellion. For instance, after a few years of schooling, students develop biases towards some teachers and some subjects and pay more attention in some classes than others. Subversion of school norms often manifests in subtle ways, like avoiding homework, intentionally coming late to class or even just doodling or reading comics in some classes rather than paying attention. Protests and rebellions happen in silent ways, like refusing to study some subjects and not caring to learn them at all.

## Formal curriculum and school culture

Teaching and learning in schools do not happen through the formal curriculum alone. Schools also create processes, protocols, and norms which make it possible for the curriculum to be transacted. All these additional processes and norms contribute to the formation of the school's identity. For instance, uniforms or dress codes, seating arrangement in the class, teacher-student relationships, level of autonomy given to teachers, rules related to student behaviours, format of the morning assembly, frequency and nature of teacher meetings and parent-teacher meetings etc. All these are part of the ecosystem of practices that children experience and learn from.

Any practice invariably stems from some foundational values. For example, when a school decides to include a secular prayer in the morning assembly, it is demonstrating that it values secularism and inclusion. If some schools replace prayers in the morning assembly with a pledge for the nation, they are demonstrating that they value patriotism over any religious affiliation. The importance of practice is in the values they demonstrate, and the choices schools make are in the values they wish to inculcate in children.

Secondly, we can call behaviours practices only when they are consistently practised, and there is a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of these practices. For instance, the norms in an assembly that are mentioned above would not be norms unless all members of the school have a common understanding of these norms and reasons why they exist. New teachers and members of the school are usually initiated into these existing norms, which ensures there is continuity and stability in the school culture.

### **School culture and the aims of education**

The culture of a school and its curriculum coexist in the same institution and, therefore, are never independent of each other. School culture represents some additional aims of education that are particular to the school, for example, developing leaders of tomorrow, conscientious democratic citizenry, or individuals who value environment and sustainability. The schools often develop norms and practices, which cater to these declared aims. These are usually achieved in two ways:

- Differential emphasis on elements of the curriculum or subjects, which is usually very evident from the timetables
- Additional processes and activities that schools implement as part of the way the school is run, in other words, the school culture

One can view school culture in the form of two concentric circles. The core curriculum is in the inner circle, and a larger circle – the school culture which becomes a meta layer around the curriculum that makes it possible to transact it. The outer circle is not merely processes and protocols meant to transact the curriculum; they represent the aims and purposes of education as much as the formal curriculum does.

We need to understand that there are intended aims of a culture and there is a culture that is experienced. There are often marked differences between the two. Children are seen to be learning to behave in a certain manner, which is usually limited to the time they are in school. They design their behaviours to be in sync with the school's expectations. However, they choose to interpret the behaviours and the values embedded in those behaviours as they wish. In informal spaces, like home, family or in the absence of teachers or staff, students discuss, critique and claim to negate the intended learnings. But then, even this act of debating cultural practices, and claiming to discard

the learnings, does amount to an engagement with the fundamental ideas of learning.

Schools would have to accept this inevitability of learning from the extant culture and respond to the situation accordingly. This brings to the fore two critical aspects of education that can only be engaged with through cultures developed in schools – Moral and Political Education.

### **Moral education**

It is common for moral education to be perceived as understanding a set of fundamental principles, and then developing the ability to apply these principles to real-life situations. This approach has been the basis of moral education, and moral science subjects. Children are taught aphorisms, like 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness', or read out stories from the *Hitopadesha* or *Jataka Tales* that conclude with, 'The moral of the story is...'.

This approach has two serious limitations. Firstly, moral education is reduced to memorising or understanding some principles, but how they could be applied in real-life situations is left to the imagination of learners. All of us do not go through the same life experiences, so the creativity and cognitive abilities required to apply principles are difficult if not impossible to teach. Secondly, stories are helpful, but since the stories occur in completely different spaces and times, a lot of creativity and imagination is needed to derive the principles from them and apply them to contemporary times and situations. Moreover, we do not go through experiences that are similar to the ones people went through centuries ago, as in the *Jataka Tales*, nor are the life experiences of princes for whom *Hitopadesha* was written even remotely similar to ours. The same applies when we narrate stories of exemplary individuals, like Gandhi or Abdul Kalam. Our life experiences will never map to theirs, nor will our capacities.

In this approach, morality is reduced to using appropriate verbiage and only broad simplistic values of politeness, truth, honesty etc. In reality, morality is embedded in social practices. Our moralities are determined by how we behave in real situations when our emotions and cognitions are in conflict with each other. Moral situations also usually evoke conflict between two or more important values. It is rather difficult to decide what to do when we face the classic conundrum – is it alright to lie if we believe that telling the truth is going to harm someone? Or how justified is it to

steal something from a person who has plenty of it? These are the kinds of problems students are bound to experience, and education ought to help them deal with.

This is where the extant culture in schools helps. As we saw in the first section, cultures are practices with values embedded in them. Expecting students to follow practices and nudging them to question the logic behind those established practices would be a very direct and valuable approach to moral education. Allowing a significant level of freedom and autonomy to students when they bring into question established norms in a school and attempt to try breaking the norms and perceive the effect, would be invaluable for developing their moral autonomy.

### **Political education**

The same argument could be made for introducing students to democracy and for their political education. It has been seen that educating students about our Constitution through the subject of civics is woefully inadequate. It does not give students even a reasonable understanding of the fundamental concepts of democracy, like freedom and equality, nor does it give them any familiarity with constitutional values.

The best approach towards this would be for schools to execute a prototype of the parliament with students and teachers as members, to help develop a sound practical education of democracy. Schools ought to develop a culture where students take

responsibility for some key activities, like managing teaching-learning material (TLM) in the classroom and books in the library from primary school onwards. Such activities necessarily involve dealing with rules and norms and therefore developing formal relationships with others. The complexity of these responsibilities could gradually increase from primary to secondary school when they could engage with formal democratic structures like student parliaments.

Rational choice (whether moral or political) is not a matter of applying the results of detached, neutral, theoretical judgement but of following or appropriately modifying existing generally successful practices, according to our particular circumstances.

### **Student autonomy and school culture**

Lastly, for this to be made possible, school cultures would have to accept students' autonomy of rational choice as an empirical fact. The culture of a school must ensure that students are not encouraged to receive ways of thinking passively – either from the curriculum or from the adults in schools. Rather a fundamental aspect of a school culture must be the freedom to question and, even occasionally, challenge values and norms enforced in the curriculum or via the school culture. This questioning must bear the scaffolding of reason and rationality so that it is educative, and not critical for the sake of being critical, or rebellious for the sake of rebellion.



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