School Culture | Differences Across Time and Contexts

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School culture would essentially mean establishing a purpose of education among its stakeholders – school administration, management, teachers, children, parents, and community – that transcends narrow instrumental aims of education, such as credentialism, skill building, employability, and even continuity of knowledge generation. This is not to say that these cannot or should not be aims that a school seeks to achieve. However, if these become the substantive reasons determining the existence of the school, then we have reasons to worry. If schools do not teach us basic human values, such as respect for diversity, a sense of justice, responsibility and honesty, ways of discerning between right and wrong in terms of their legal, moral, social, and environmental implications, and understanding ourselves in relationship to others in ways that are empowering, caring, and critically reflective, then we probably lose the very purpose of education.

It is important to note that culture is not a 'given' set of identifiers, whether we call them rituals, everyday practices, or belief systems of a school. Culture is made and remade by the constituents of a school and is temporally fluid, which means that schools that might have a culture over a certain period of time with certain constituents (such as its management, headteacher, teachers or student profile), could well have a distinctively different culture over another time period with a different set of constituents. Another mistake we tend to make in the Indian context is to draw an equivalence between cultures of schools that belong to very different institutional settings. Let us take two hypothetical examples to illustrate this. Though hypothetical, these draw upon contemporary social, cultural and economic realities of the school education system in India.

School A

This government primary school was established in the early 1970s in a prosperous rural area, not far from the district headquarters yet lacking regular public transport facilities, with agriculture and related activities as the main occupation of the households. The school served around six villages in the panchayat, and in the first two decades catered mostly to the dominant caste in the panchayat who had benefitted from the Green Revolution and were eager to educate their children. The Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) households in the area were not in a position to send their children to school as the opportunity costs[i] for them were very high, and sending children even to government school had direct financial implications that were beyond their financial capacity.

The number of teachers in the schools was adequate, and with a dynamic headteacher, they were able to engage meaningfully with the dominant caste children who had some amount of exposure to education at home, with parents having completed basic levels of schooling and having an interest in supporting their children's education with the required time, opportunities and facilities beyond school hours. The few children who came from the lower strata of society were neglected in school, and teachers, in their practices, maintained social boundaries that existed in the surrounding villages. In terms of performance, from the dominant castes, the school had very high transition rates into further levels of schooling, and a significant level of dropouts from among the disadvantaged groups in the early years of primary or as the children completed the primary level.

Over the decades, there were changes in the head teacher and teachers in the school, administrative transfers and promotions, and a few small private schools also came up to cater to the growing aspirations of parents for English-medium schooling and an overall perception that government schools did not do justice to the education they wanted for their children. Many children from the dominant castes moved into these private schools while children from SC, ST and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and more girls from these groups came to access the government school because government

schemes at the central and state levels made the opportunity costs and direct financial costs of government schools much less than it used to be. Teachers struggled with these transitions of educating first-generation school-goers, and children with very little support for education at home. However, the presence of either an able head teacher or a couple of teachers who were dedicated to their work and thought of the school and its past performance as a legacy that was handed over to them to uphold, made sure that the new education programmes were implemented with integrity in the school. While beliefs about caste divisions persisted among the teachers, and these were often seen in different aspects of the school environment, teachers also realised the importance of reaching out to the community to make them aware of the benefits of schooling, regularity of attendance, and basic forms of home support for the education of children. The school managed to achieve an almost complete transition to the next levels of schooling of current enrolments – those that come predominantly from the underprivileged groups.

In terms of school practices, what has sustained over the years is a school assembly in which children stood in lines class-wise and gender-wise but which has always included equal opportunities for female and male students in various activities that constitute the assembly – singing of the state and national anthem, presentation and sharing of students' work from their classroom sessions, sharing of important state- and national-level issues by the children under the guidance of a teacher. Other practices that have sustained is the professional camaraderie among the teachers where they have found it useful to dedicate half a day every week to discussing the challenges they face in class, sharing their approaches to addressing these issues and seeking suggestions from each other. This has been sustained irrespective of the involvement of the head teacher, though the first head teacher was instrumental in starting this process.

School B

This private unaided school was established around the same time as *School A* – in the late 1960s. The school started as a trust under a well-known corporate entity, which had multiple business interests but was also known to have made philanthropic investments in education and healthcare in various locations. The school was established in the heart of a tier-1 city with a considerable size of the middle and upper-class population from whom came the initial enrolments, and which gradually increased through word-of-mouth recommendations among the same population group.

With sufficient resources at its disposal, the school, from its initial stages, could build state-of-the-art infrastructure and facilities and recruit well-qualified teachers from urban middle-class backgrounds. Over the years, these standards have been maintained and updated as required. A self-selection process sustained the school in terms of the families/children who accessed the school and teachers who came to teach there. A low pupil-teacher ratio, a holistic approach to the curriculum (including co-curricular activities), autonomy for teachers to experiment with new pedagogical thoughts, and freedom provided to children to develop outside both regular disciplinary modes of mainstream schools and demarcated boundaries of subject domains, ensured that students became more self-confident and capable as they transitioned from the school.

In alignment with its overall teaching-learning environment, other school practices also developed in unique ways. Assembly was conducted in the form of songs sung voluntarily by students receiving training in classical music in the school. It was held in a concentric circular arrangement, non-segregated by class or gender, with students and teachers using the allotted time after the songs to engage in discussions around various issues that they submitted in a suggestions box. Student voices were given space and contentious topics were debated in keeping with the norms that had been collaboratively developed for such discussions by the teachers with the senior students. Some of these contentious issues were taken up in student-led clubs to be pursued as projects, under the guidance of teachers.

However, this situation sustained only till the early 1990s. With a changing economic scenario, and the growth of more private schools of equal or more repute in the same city, the school had to contend with questions about the preparedness of its students for a competitive world. A strategic revisioning was initiated by the trustees, leading to a change in management and a total overhaul of the processes and practices of the school. Results in public examinations, the performance of the

students in curricular and co-curricular events across the city, and the pathways of students after they transitioned into their higher education and professional lives became the main driving factors.

The earlier low pupil-teacher ratio was replaced by large-size classes to justify the financial viability of changes in infrastructure and facilities to make them equivalent to purported global standards. Likewise, teacher autonomy gave place to a system of managerial accountability with a rigid hierarchical school administration system keeping a close watch on teacher performance, which in turn, was linked to teachers' professional continuity and growth in the school.

School culture: Different institutional contexts

The first thing to note about these two examples is that both schools have undergone changes in their school culture over the four decades. *School A* has oriented itself to a more inclusive culture, even though the belief systems of the teachers in the school are still strongly embedded in the immediate social and cultural environment of the school. Similarly, *School B* had to align itself to external pressures of a changed economic scenario that has had repercussions on the aspirations and demands of the middle and upper classes from the education system. As compared to *School A*, *School B* has moved from a normative school culture (based more on values and purposes of education) to an instrumental school culture (based more on aims of education focused only on economic readiness). So, school cultures do change over time.

The second point is that we often make the mistake of comparing the cultures of schools that exist in very different institutional contexts, such as government schools with private schools (more so with private schools that are accessed by the middle classes and upper classes). Government schools are still quite strongly embedded in the micro-contexts (social, cultural, political) and have porous boundaries with these contexts, where the schools often reproduce the micro-contexts or need to be attentive to them, explicitly and implicitly. This characteristic is tied up with the very nature of government schools, which seek to cater to the idea of education as a 'public good' and have made themselves available increasingly to marginal population groups hitherto excluded from school education. The school cultures of government schools too cannot be seen without the context of the institutional system within which they are embedded – the school administration system at large, but also the culture of governance in the particular state.

Private schools, on the other hand, never had such an onus, though there have been private schools (in a minority today) that have followed the same principles. To an extent, private schools of various types have the characteristic of a 'gated community' where they can choose to distance themselves from their micro-context and instil processes that can orient children to a distinctive school culture. [ii] At one end of this spectrum, we are likely to see elite boarding schools and several alternative schools that cater to the upper middle classes and upper classes. At the other end of the spectrum, we see small private schools across both urban and rural geographies that cater to the relatively poorer sections of the population with some ability to pay. Across this spectrum, private schools have, in general, tighter administrative systems that lay down corporate-like processes for school practices to align with. The macro-institutional ambit of these schools does not extend beyond their management bodies, just as their aims do not cater to a population group that is far less privileged than the relatively homogeneous extended middle- and upper-class they usually cater to.

School culture: What matters?

The examples in the previous section, from both *School A* and *School B*, contain factors that educationists have considered important for vibrant, positively oriented school cultures. However, it is not easy to offer simple unambiguous answers to the question 'what matters' in terms of school culture. For example, though autonomy at the school level in terms of decision-making for curriculum, textbooks, teaching-learning materials, pedagogy, and assessments has been widely emphasised as being a sign of a positive school culture, it might be difficult for a private school to instil this in its early years as teachers need more hand-holding and mentoring to understand the basic ideology, principles, and processes that have been envisioned to guide the school. This again is difficult for a government school in the absence of a supportive head teacher and a supportive administrative system that endorses such autonomy as a value to be nurtured.

Given this ambiguity, a more pragmatic approach would be to go back to where we started – the purpose of a school. If we see a normative idea

of education as a public good manifest in the rituals, belief systems, and everyday practices of a school, it is more likely that the school has been trying to develop a school culture that would be characterised by factors that educationists have deemed important in their studies of school culture; that is, a respect for and critically reflective practices related to basic human values, such as diversity, integrity, perseverance, resilience, autonomy, responsibility, and self-esteem, all of which permeate the environment of the school and its linkages to its various stakeholders.

Endnotes

i The loss of other alternatives when one alternative is chosen.

ii The ability of private schools to attract families from a spatially dispersed population group, as compared to a government school, also acts as a natural dis-embedding process from their micro-contexts for the private schools.

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I did not find a single student who was not taking part in the class proceedings, and every child in his class was happy and confident. They responded and asked questions when they did not understand something without hesitation. If they wanted to say something during the discussion, they raised their hands, waited for their turn, and engaged in their work. Class decorum was maintained by the students even though there was more than one grade sitting together.

Creating a Supportive and Empowering Environment | Learnings from a Single-Teacher Rural School, Swati Bhandari, p. 36