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Quality public education is crucial for India's development, particularly at this juncture as the country navigates rapid economic, technological, and social changes. Public education is essential, especially when children from vulnerable and underprivileged families are primarily enrolled in government schools. Providing quality education to every child is a constitutional mandate of the government. Developing and sustaining a culture of certain school practices can provide quality education in the long term, irrespective of changes in teaching faculty and administration.

Creating a sustainable school culture is paramount for fostering an environment where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. This article explores essential practices that contribute to a sustainable school culture, focusing on a learning-enabling environment, fear-free and child-centric learning processes, strong school-community relationships, and support for higher education for students. There were attempts to develop constructive practices in schools under the Azim Premji Foundation's Child-Friendly School Initiative.

Table 1. The five domains of Child-Friendly School Initiative.

Sl no	Domains of school practices	Purpose	Indicators of development
1	Safe school environment	To attract children to enrol in school	Classrooms with sufficient air and light, a functional library, play space, student cabinet, greenery, meaningful school assembly, functional toilets, safe access road to school etc.
2	Classroom environment	To retain children in school and ensure regular attendance.	Provide students with free access to learning resources; utilise appropriate educational displays, exhibition of children's work, learning pandaal ¹ in lower grades, running blackboard for children, no corporal punishment in the classroom, etc.
3	Teaching-learning process	To strengthen learning and cater to diverse needs based on diagnostic assessments of students	Encourage peer learning, use of the library and laboratory; activity-based, project-based and hands-on learning; connect lessons to real-life situations using concrete objects and students' experiences, etc.
4	Teacher development	To engage students according to their learning needs and employ diverse pedagogies	Teachers regularly prepare lesson plans and learning resources, attend cluster-sharing meetings and contribute to the discussion; attend annual workshops conducted by SSA; function as Master Resource Persons, and organise school-level/cluster-level capacity-building based on needs; discuss classroom challenges with other teachers etc.
5	Community and parent participation	To sustain the school culture and evolving practices	Organise regular parent-teacher meetings, ensure that the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) includes parents from all social groups with 33% women; create platforms for the community, panchayat, and alumni to contribute and take on responsibilities during special events, like learning exhibitions, school annual days, enrolment drives, and school development plan and its execution, etc.

Child-Friendly School Initiative

The Child-Friendly School Initiative by the Azim Premji Foundation was implemented in Surapura (a subdivision in Yadgir district of Karnataka) between 2005 and 2012. The intervention primarily focused on developing school practices in five domains: school environment, classroom environment, teaching-learning process, teachers' professional development, and community participation. Initially, it used 214 indicators of development spread across these domains, this was later revised to 60 indicators, which are provided at the end of this article.

As a result of these interventions over 6 to 7 years, the schools in Surapura experienced significant positive changes, such as increased enrolment, reduced dropout rates, improved student attendance and learning, and continued education beyond the school level. Many students successfully cleared entrance exams and enrolled in institutions like Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Morarji Desai Residential School in large numbers.

Though the Child-Friendly School Initiative ended in 2012-13, practices in the five domains developed by schools remain an integral part of the school culture even today, more than 10 years later. This article explores some of the practices developed and sustained in different schools and their effects in the long run.

Learning-enabling environment in school

A learning-enabling environment is fundamental for the academic success and personal growth of students. This environment goes beyond physical space, providing opportunities for students to learn in a fear-free, participatory, and needs-based engagement. Schools must foster a supportive environment where students feel valued. They must also provide a rich array of learning materials and experiences that cater to diverse learning needs and interests, encouraging curiosity and critical thinking.

Case Study: Tackling migration

Jumalapura Dodda Tanda is a remote village known for the migration of its people for work. Children used to migrate to Pune, Goa, and Bengaluru with their parents, leading to irregular school attendance and eventually, dropping out. The Head Teacher, Achchappa Gouda and his team made

arrangements for students' stay in the school with dinner and breakfast, supported by the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme, and the personal investment of parents and teachers. Teachers resided in the school along with students to look after them.

This initiative ensured regular attendance, which improved student learning outcomes and 50 percent of class V students cleared the qualifying tests for Morarji Desai School, continuing their education until class XII. These positive results convinced parents of the importance of education, leading to a current enrolment of nearly 590 students, with almost 470 attending regularly though there is no boarding facility in the school now.

Case Study: Overcoming the language barrier

Gaddada Narayana Tanda, a hamlet with a high migration rate, faced a language barrier as the children's home language is Lambani but the medium of instruction in school is Kannada. Kashibai, a dedicated teacher, convinced parents to send their children to school regularly by visiting their homes and many times even their agricultural fields. She overcame the language barrier by learning the students' language and having the older students help the younger ones.

The school developed a culture of self-learning and peer learning, which empowered the students to manage the classes themselves in the teacher's absence. The mechanisms of group work and peer learning enhanced social skills and deepened understanding through collaboration. They started learning in groups with peer support.

Completing homework on the playground after school closing, using concrete materials and activity-based learning, maintaining a student-run bank for financial literacy, and access to and use of library and Learning Corner; dynamic art, paint and origami displays in the classrooms have all contributed to meeting learning outcomes and sustaining the culture even after a decade. Bagyashri, who has come in place of Kashibai, has ensured that all the practices initiated previously are continued, especially community relationships.

These practices helped students meet learning outcomes at all stages, and almost 80-85 percent of class V students get through Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya or Morarji Desai Schools every year. Visualising these practices, regularising them with support, developing a shared understanding among all stakeholders, and being able to demonstrate the outcome of these practices in terms of students'

learning and promoting the continuation of education beyond school culturised these practices and sustained them even after a decade. All of the alumni of this school completed class XII, and most of them are in universities.

Fear-free/non-threatening teaching-learning process

Creating a fear-free, non-threatening learning environment is essential for students to feel safe and confident in expressing themselves. This involves establishing a classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities and all students feel supported. A child-centric pedagogy tailors the teaching-learning process to individual needs, interests, and abilities, recognising that each child is unique and learns differently. Encouraging students to ask questions, explore, and engage in hands-on activities sparks their curiosity.

Gaddada Narayana Tanda school, which is described above, has most of these features of a non-threatening environment and a child-friendly pedagogy. The school was able to culturise the practices of being sensitive to language and learning difficulties; respecting each child for their unique abilities; giving freedom to children to express their thoughts and ask questions; and exploring through guided projects. There are other schools that have developed many practices, which lead to a child-friendly environment and a child-centric approach to the teaching-learning process.

Case Study: Student leadership

At the Lower Primary School, Huvinahalli, a teacher, Navani, developed an innovative initiative to enhance student leadership and responsibility through the formation of a school cabinet. Students elected to key ministerial positions – Prime Minister, Education Minister, Health Minister, Environment Minister, and Sports and Culture Minister – reflect a microcosm of governmental structure. The Prime Minister oversees overall coordination; the Education Minister focuses on the academic processes and regular classes, helping in the library, managing classes during teacher absences, and helping students with homework; the Health Minister is responsible for maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in the school campus, during MDM, as well as for promoting health awareness among students; the Environment Minister works on developing gardening, sustaining greenery during holidays, and promoting environmental education; the Sports and Culture Minister is responsible for

organising sports events, cultural activities and fostering talent in various extracurricular activities.

Each minister works with a group of students to carry out their respective activities. Weekly cabinet meetings and monthly reports build students' presentation and articulation skills and confidence. The school has managed to maintain greenery on the campus, develop learning materials, and promote health awareness through these initiatives, that are sustained by regular activities and teacher support. To ensure the sustainability of this cabinet practice, the Huvinahalli school has regularised activities and integrated them into the school routine. Each minister has a well-defined role with specific responsibilities that are monitored and supported by teachers. Regular meetings are held to discuss progress, plan future activities, and address issues that arise. This process has been followed for the last 10 years.

Teaching plans and academic meetings

At the Government Model Primary School, Hunasagi Camp, two key initiatives have significantly transformed the educational experience: teacher planning for classroom engagement based on students' needs and conducting regular academic meetings. Initiated by the Head Teacher, Basavanagouda, these practices have improved the quality of teaching and learning notably, contributing to increased student enrolment and overall school development.

One of the cornerstones of this transformation is the systematic approach to teacher planning for classroom engagement. All teachers prepare detailed lesson plans and get them reviewed by the Head Teacher regularly. These plans are designed to meet the specific needs of their students, ensuring that each lesson is relevant, engaging, and aligned with the curriculum. These are revised based on reflection on the implementation of the plan.

Complementing the individualised lesson planning, the school also holds fortnightly academic meetings led by the Head Teacher. These meetings provide a platform for teachers to share best practices, innovative teaching methods and effective use of learning resources.

This collaborative environment fosters professional growth and the continuous improvement of teaching strategies. Teachers discuss various difficulties they face, whether related to concepts, student engagement, or classroom management. The meetings also focus on student-related issues,

such as absenteeism, dropouts, and academic performance. This allows the school to develop targeted interventions to resolve academic and other issues.

Conclusion

Creating a sustainable school culture requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the physical environment, resource availability, emotional safety, personalised learning, teacher development, and community engagement. By implementing these practices, schools can create an enriching and

supportive environment that enables students to reach their full potential. In the examples discussed, head teachers have played a crucial role, teachers have worked as a team, and the school-community relationship has been consciously built. In all these schools, certain practices are contextually visualised, shared understanding is built among all stakeholders, processes are set, mechanisms for implementation and reviewing are in place, and finally, the community, teachers and students value the outcomes of these practices motivating them to sustain these practices.



Figure 1. A child-friendly school environment fosters learning and all-round development of all children.

The complete list of development indicators used in the CFSI programme.

Child-Friendly School Initiative Shorapur

School Improvement Plan Baseline Sept-Nov, 2009

Cluster Name:

School Name:

SI no	Fortnightly Indicators
F1	SDMC and community supervise the quality of food served in mid-day meals
F2	Classrooms are clean and hygienic
F3	Different work done by children, like project work, painting, and crafts are attractively displayed and written material is displayed on notice boards or walls
F4	Resource corner -- books, TLMs, equipments easily accessible to children is provided
F5	No cane is seen in the classroom
F6	All areas of the school are maintained clean and hygienic (no cobwebs, paper pieces, plastic tea cups outside the windows, waste thrown around etc).
F7	Simple basic greenery in the school campus -- garden, plant and trees
F8	Clean drinking water is made available for all children
F9	Functioning, usable toilets (there is a water facility, mug, a cover for rain, a door that can be latched and used) separately for boys and girls
F10	Records are neatly organised and kept in an identified space
F11	Sports items are neatly organised and kept in an identified space
F12	There is a clean and hygienic kitchen/cooking space
F13	There is enough and separate space identified for storing groceries for mid-day meals (the space should not take up the teaching-learning area)
F14	All teachers including HT come on time (any time before the school commences)
F15	All teachers including HT leave on time (any time after the school hours)
F16	During the games period, children play under the guidance of teacher
F17	Record the total number of students enrolled in school and headcount by the Margadarshi (guide)
F18	Record the total number of teachers on roll and the number of teachers present
F19	A library is maintained and is actively used by the children
F20	First-aid kit is available and usable
	Monthly
M1	SDMC meetings have been held regularly with the required quorum
M2	The minutes of the SDMC meetings indicate discussions related to school (enrolment, retention, learning of children, strategies for dropout children etc)
M3	There is an attractive learning pandaal in the classrooms
M4	Proceedings of weekly teacher meetings are recorded and followed up
M5	Each teacher has a clear/well-prepared lesson plan for each topic/unit
M6	Each teacher maintains a diary to make notes of the day's activities/proceedings
	Quarterly
Q1	Community has made contributions, such as assistance in teaching/creating TLMs/other support in classroom
Q2	Academic and management issues of school are discussed with Gram Panchayat members at regular intervals and records of discussion maintained
Q3	There is question box available in each classroom for the students
Q4	There is an equipped laboratory for children of higher classes
Q5	Children with special needs are identified and the list is available in the school
Q6	Student cabinet exists and is active
Q7	Progress on the School Improvement Plan (SIP) is recorded
Q8	There are no dropouts in the quarter

	Annual
A1	SDMC has been constituted as per government norms (critical indicators: 9 elected members, all of them parents)
A2	The community has made donations over the last year (monetary/material/labour)
A3	Parents meetings are conducted as per norms (twice in a year)
A4	There is adequate protection from sun and rain for the children inside the classroom (it has proper roof, doors, windows etc)
A5	There is enough light and proper ventilation inside the classrooms
A6	There is enough space to sit and move freely in the classroom
A7	Classrooms have proper and clear blackboard which is visible to both children and teachers
A8	Classrooms of class I and II have running blackboards accessible to all children
A9	Classrooms has different wall writings and displays covering all subjects
A10	There is a compound with a gate all around the school (the compound can even be a bio-fence, but should be without any breaks)
A11	Walls are painted and maintained clean
A12	There is at least one classroom for every 40 children
A13	There is an adequately sized playground for children to play
A14	Annual Sports Meet is conducted
A15	Children's special talents are identified and recorded
A16	Cultural events (quiz/drama/storytelling etc) take place regularly (ann/quarter)
A17	School has a list of roles and responsibilities for HT, Teachers and SDMC readily available
A18	School Improvement Plan has been made and is available
A19	A complete list of competencies for all classes and subjects is available with the HT and with respective teachers
A20	The timetable for all classes is prepared and readily available with the HT
A21	Books and uniforms are distributed to all children on time
A22	Annual School Day event has taken place
A23	Annual group events, like Metric Mela has taken place
A24	All achievements (KSQAO* and other such) records of the school are displayed prominently
A25	All teachers have attended their allotted SSA training in the previous year
A26	Teachers have carried out research/action research in the previous year

*Karnataka School Quality Assessment Organisation

Endnotes

- i A Learning Pandal displays children's work hanging from the roof (chappara) in the classroom, as in a Nali Kali classroom.



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