

I have had the opportunity to observe and understand several schools and have realised that the reason a school is good, and the children are happy and are learning well is that the atmosphere or the culture of that school is 'different'. The most important aspect of this culture is the feeling of ownership and responsibility that the students, teachers, and parents have for the school. This article discusses some special features that are generally found in such schools.

Knowing their students

The first and most important aspect is that the teachers in these schools have a good understanding of the social and economic situation of their students. They address the students by their names and create a fear-free environment in which students interact naturally with them. The teachers make sure that the social status of the students does not affect their personality development in the school, nor hinder their learning.

In such schools, the teachers also know when and why their students remain absent from their classes. They interact directly with the parents and these interactions are spontaneous and natural. The teachers are aware and sensitive to the problems faced by the parents. In the rural context, it has been observed that children lend a helping hand at home during harvest and sowing seasons. When the children remain absent from their classes, teachers spend extra time to help them.

Such teachers have a good understanding and sensitivity regarding the students' language/dialect, food habits, living conditions and circumstances. They make efforts to understand the local language and how students refer to local items, conditions, expressions or feelings.

Active learning

The second aspect that can be seen is that in these schools, the children accept responsibility for their

learning. They can be seen helping each other earnestly during the teaching-learning process. The teachers create an atmosphere in the classroom where students learn from each other.

I have also realised that teachers in such schools have a solid understanding of the interests of the students and what is unique about each one. They make lesson plans for their classes based on this understanding. They also know exactly what the learning levels of their students are, and based on this, students are grouped and regrouped frequently.

Such teachers work actively to ensure that the children learn to take responsibility for themselves, become responsible individuals, develop leadership qualities, and become strong physically and mentally. It can also be seen that in such schools, the students have an easy relationship with their teachers and like to be in the company of their teacher. They can often be seen holding their notebooks/workbooks and asking the teacher to give them more work to do.

Meeting parents' expectations

The third aspect that I have understood is that teachers have a good grasp of parents' expectations and to meet these expectations, they put in hard work and effort in the teaching-learning processes of their students. They conduct regular monthly and quarterly meetings with the parents/guardians and consider it their responsibility to inform them of what their children are learning at school. Often, they also convey where the children require special attention. The current needs and issues that concern parents are discussed, such as their wish for their children to learn English. The cooperation of the parents is visible in different ways in the school, for example, in the construction of the school building and its maintenance (beautifying the surroundings).

Adherence to constitutional values

The fourth aspect that I have understood is that there are also many social problems in our village

societies, such as caste and gender discrimination, or prejudices against other religions or economically weaker sections. In such schools, the teachers seem to realise that educational institutions are bound by our constitutional values and the purpose of the school is to develop sensible and good (better) citizens and to create a milieu that is free from discrimination. A good understanding of this can be seen in the thoughts and behaviour of the teachers. Hence, they make all the practices in the school free of discrimination. They discuss this with the parents too. The effect of these efforts by the teachers can be seen in the form of positive changes among the parents, and consequently, society.

Focus on foundational skills

The fifth important aspect that can be discerned is that teachers in such schools focus on their students' foundational skills and understanding of concepts instead of rote learning. Notably, I have found that these teachers unequivocally understand that reading and writing, thinking and contemplation, imagination and logic, etc., are skills which form the foundation on which education rests. Hence, proper attention is given to building such skills in these schools.

I have also found that children in these schools are enthusiastic about learning and have an interest in reading and writing. Children put across their views without fear or hesitation. The teachers emphasise that the responsibility for their learning lies with each student; and that the teacher is there merely to aid this process. In their classes, the children can often be heard saying, 'Sir/Madam, what shall we read next? What shall we write? Shall we read the next lesson? etc.' I have never heard these teachers say that they get tired of teaching. I have also seen that when school gets over, students do not seem to be in a hurry to go back home.

Students' sense of ownership

This brings me to the sixth aspect, which is that children have a major role to play in the running of these schools. The participation of the students in the organisation of the school, in conducting the daily prayer session, games, various programmes organised in the school, and national festivals/celebrations is important. The children have a sense of belonging because of which the buildings look neat, tidy and safe in such schools. I often get to hear from many teachers that some anti-social elements from the village misuse the school premises after

school hours. But in such schools, the students and their parents keep a sharp eye on this and consider it their responsibility to keep the school buildings safe and secure. The students and their guardians feel that the school is a property that belongs to them as part of their village community, and it is their responsibility to ensure that it is safe.

School head's leadership

The seventh aspect is the role of the school heads in such schools and their able leadership. The school heads have clarity regarding the aims and objectives of education. They believe that their responsibility is not just to teach children various subjects, but to also work towards developing good citizens and a better society. Their interactions with the children are natural and spontaneous and they regard children with love, giving them advice from time to time.

They set themselves up as models for the school and have friendly, yet professional relationships with the teachers. They keep in mind that they have to provide the necessary facilities to ensure that the teachers enjoy their teaching tasks. They are alert to the problems related to teaching being faced by teachers and if needed, they also take the help of the concerned departments or institutions to resolve these.

These school heads also conduct timely inspections in the school to stay abreast of the learning status of the children. They provide opportunities for the students to participate, as well as perform well in various sports and cultural competitions at the school, block and district levels. It is evident that when schools perform well, then the guardians also feel a natural sense of belonging with the schools and come forward eagerly to help the school in ways that they can.

In these schools, proper attention is paid to the functioning of spaces like the school assembly, children's library, children's food and seating arrangements, and equipment for sports, as well as to beautifying and keeping the premises clean.

Team spirit among teachers

One last thing that I understand is that teachers work together as a team in these schools. A single teacher can make individual efforts in the teaching of a subject, but when the whole school works together as a responsible organisation, then the situation is far better. When the teachers are seen to have a sense of belonging and responsibility

towards the school, then they work towards the all-round development of the students; and they work keeping the overarching goals of education in mind. Because of this, students can be seen to be learning in these schools. They also eagerly take part in all

the activities of the school. The students do well in various competitive exams and have a deep sense of belonging with their school. The cooperation of the education department officials is also evident in these schools.



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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 Nature and Purpose of School Culture, Prakash Iyer, p. 6