



Building a Better School Culture in India

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Grants given to schools are typically measured by indicators such as number of classrooms constructed, textbooks printed, and teachers recruited. These are essential inputs.

Yet, walk into two schools with identical grants, infrastructure, and staffing ratios, and you will often find two entirely different institutions. Despite comparable resources, their outcomes diverge because the culture of each school shapes how those resources are utilised.

The culture within a school profoundly influences how teaching and learning are organised, experienced, and valued by teachers, students and parents. It encompasses leadership practices, professional collaboration among the staff and the community, shared norms, and the quality of classroom instruction and interactions. Consequently, identical resources can yield markedly different educational outcomes depending on the culture in which they are embedded.

Recognising this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly emphasises the creation of positive, inclusive, collaborative, and learner-centred school environments as a foundation for improving learning outcomes, teacher professional development, and overall school

quality. In doing so, the Policy affirms that educational transformation depends not only on investments in tangible resources but also on cultivating a strong and enabling school culture.

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Why is this a policy issue?

While school culture is not often thought of as a policy issue, it underlies some of the issues that have been discussed. These problems are frequently seen as separate issues, but in reality, the same causes often lead to them.

High dropout rates

The decision to withdraw a child from school is rarely determined by the child's capability. It is often shaped by the belief that schooling is not worth the time when meeting basic needs and ensuring survival takes priority. The child's experience at school also matters. When teachers

support struggling learners and make them feel valued and believed in, they are more likely to remain in school despite pressures to drop out.

Teacher motivation

Teachers are more likely to remain motivated and effective when they feel respected, supported, and empowered in their pedagogical practice. Supportive leadership, mentoring, access to and availability of resources along with opportunities for professional collaboration enable them to navigate the complexities of the classroom. In their absence, the cumulative challenges of teaching can quickly erode motivation and professional commitment.

Learning outcomes

Even the most well designed pedagogy cannot improve learning unless teachers have the tools, processes, and professional support to continuously understand what students know, where they struggle, and how instruction should adapt in response. These problems therefore require a policy response that addresses school culture, not just individual issues. School culture shapes how people behave and think, and influences students' experiences and everyday practices.



Each of these challenges warrants a policy response. However, policies that address

only dropout, teacher motivation, or learning outcomes without considering school culture are unlikely to have a lasting impact. School culture shapes how policies are understood and put into practice, and therefore plays an important role in improving educational outcomes.

How to diagnose the issue?

When we define a good school, we often look at indicators such as learning outcomes or infrastructure. Both are important, but they do not tell us enough about what is happening inside the school. To understand the issue better, we need to ask three simple questions.

What does the school promise?

What does a parent walking into the school or a child entering the classroom expect from it? Are they greeted respectfully and given time to speak? Are parents informed about their child's progress and given guidance on how they can support their learning? Do students know what they are expected to learn and achieve during the year? Do they feel that their views are heard and acted upon?

These everyday experiences are part of what a school promises its students and parents. They are aspects of the school process that should be present regardless of its capacity or willingness to deliver. They are also areas that a District Education Officer can observe and track, but they can easily be overlooked when attention is focused mainly on inputs. NEP 2020 itself places a caring school culture at the centre of the school experience and makes it a responsibility of the head teacher, with the School Management Committee expected to be regularly sensitised to it. Yet there is no clear mechanism to track whether this promise is being fulfilled.

What does the school deliver?

Does the teacher who walks into the classroom know how to engage her students? Does she know how to teach the concept, or does she rely mainly on reading from the textbook? When students begin to disengage, does she know how to bring their attention back, or does she resort to the cane? Does she use different activities to help students understand a concept, or does she

use the same approach to introduce, explain, and assess it?

These questions are about pedagogy, which is central to learning but often receives less attention than other aspects of schooling.

What does the student need?

Do schools recognise that students come with different levels of exposure, background knowledge, and readiness to learn? Do they make an effort to bridge these gaps and help students catch up? Do schools have ways to motivate students and respond to their individual needs, or is it simply business as usual?

These questions are about student preparedness and the school's ability to recognise and respond to where each student is starting from.

What does this mean for policy?

Every school is different, and its culture develops through the processes and practices that become part of everyday school life. Building a strong school culture depends on having both autonomy and capacity.

Autonomy comes from trusting teachers, students, and the community. Schools need the space to develop practices that work for their context. This requires school leaders who look beyond examination results and pay attention to whether the school is a safe, respectful, and supportive place for everyone. They also need to share responsibility rather than hold all the power themselves, so that good practices continue even when they leave. Therefore, the focus must be on preparing and supporting school leaders and giving them the confidence to use their autonomy.

Schools also need the basic resources to function well. It is difficult to expect good outcomes without safe buildings, clean drinking water, toilets, textbooks, and other essential materials.

The shortage of qualified teachers is another concern. In many schools, teachers with different employment conditions work alongside each other, with some on contract and others in regular positions. This can make it difficult to build a stable school culture. Teachers need security

and continuity if we expect them to invest in their schools and students. Where possible, recruiting teachers from the local area and those who speak the local language can also improve communication with students and parents and support longer term retention.



Teacher preparation also needs attention. More qualified young people are entering teaching, but training often focuses on teaching methods rather than on understanding how children learn. Teachers need support to develop this deeper understanding.

Time is another major constraint. Government school teachers lose a significant share of instructional time to non teaching duties such as election work, census surveys, and so on. This leaves little time to support individual students, work with colleagues, or build relationships with the community. Reducing these duties is therefore as important as improving teacher capacity.

Finally, schools need to work closely with their communities. Teachers and school leaders may change, but the community remains. School Management Committees can play a stronger role in areas such as attendance, learning, and the school environment. Schools should also have a simple way to involve community members and alumni who want to contribute. This can

make school improvement less dependent on individual leaders and help good practices continue over time.



Some final thoughts

School culture is shaped by the many small decisions that school leaders and teachers make every day. These decisions can be about ordinary things, such as how to respond when a student comes late to class, how to deal with a concern raised in a staff meeting, how to respond to critical feedback, or how teachers interact with students, parents, and colleagues.

Policy cannot decide these things for schools, but it can create the conditions in which these decisions are made. The suggestions above are an attempt to get those conditions right. More broadly, every policy that affects how a school functions, whether or not it is called a culture policy, influences the behaviour and relationships within the school.

For policymakers, the task is therefore to consider the effect of every policy and initiative on school culture. Does it help create the kind of school environment we want, or does it make it harder to build one? Every policy shapes, in some way, how people behave, what they value, and how they experience school.

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