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How city government schools work

Chandrika Muralidhar

The functioning of government primary schools through the eyes of a keen observer – the schools being those from an urban setup. Functioning of Government Schools in Urban Areas – A Narrative based on Three Schools endeavours to present a holistic view of the functioning of government schools. It sincerely attempts to stay true to the observations made, the interactions carried out with the stakeholders and succinctly captures the minute aspects of the various working arms of the school. At the outset it can be considered as a handy book that appraises the reader, who could be of three types – one, a teacher who already knows the way the system functions, two, a novice teacher who is entering this field or a teacher who is not familiar with this system. To the first kind it could support them in their already existing practices. The novice teacher can draw from the narratives and the third kind of teacher can draw insights into the role of a teacher within the system. Various aspects that comprise the working of a school have been included, all primarily based on observations made. The contents of the book are organized starting with the assembly in school and ending with teachers' perspectives and concerns. The author takes the reader through classroom dynamics, mid-day meal (MDM), school as part of the community, special events and interactions.

For the purpose of the study, the author chose three schools in an urban Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) where the stakeholders are the teacher, head teacher, students, MDM functionaries and some other educational functionaries. Based on this, the tools for the study were observations and informal interactions with the stakeholders. There was initial resistance from the schools towards this study until official permission from the CRC was obtained. The author was the sole observer and would visit each of these schools according to the schedule created by reaching the school well before it started and would leave after everyone left.

On reading the book, one notices that extensive observations have been made in the area of classroom dynamics, school as a part of the community and of the special events. One of the observations made across the schools was about the intensity of the classroom processes before MDM and after it. The classes before were oriented to serious learning of subjects and the focus after was on non-academic activities. One very pertinent reflection from the author is about the inclusion of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) – there is an understanding and sensitive approach to inclusion in the traditional sense (children who were mentally challenged, hearing impaired, Down's syndrome) – she feels that inclusion needs to also be about age, personality and religion.

The community plays a significant role in moulding and influencing the kind of school that is present in a certain area. The interplay between the community and the school teachers/students is comprehensively articulated in school as part of the community. The SMC (School Management Committee) meetings are highlighted too. A comparison is drawn between the attendance of parents at these meetings – parents in urban schools rarely attend them as opposed to parents in rural government schools. Celebrations like the Republic Day, Bal Mela and Bal Ganana are events for parents to visit the school and see their children participate and showcase their learning in different ways. Another important aspect for successful school oriented processes are the interactions of the stakeholders with each other – teacher-student; teacher-teacher; teacher-head teacher-bhojan mata; educational functionaries with teachers – the author brings out all these relationships with relevant examples based on her interactions with them. The book ends with Notes which include the contextual terms used in the government school system which helps, especially, the reader who is unfamiliar with them.

A prevalent vein that is seen through the book is the reflections and opinions that the author includes with subtlety so as to not interrupt the narrative. The language used is simple making it accessible to readers with a primary level knowledge of the English language. It's a book which can be used extensively by teachers for an overall comprehension of the government school system.

The author is an Assistant Professor at the School of Continuing Education – University Resource Centre at the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She works in the field of science education, teacher preparation and curricular material development. She can be reached at chandrika@azimpremji.org.

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