

Students spend a substantial amount of time at school and their school experience impacts their lives. On the face of it, schools are in a unique position to influence a sense of wellbeing and promote social-emotional learning. Herein lies the responsibility of schools as institutions that build a culture that nurtures children and ensures their wellbeing from a very young age. As mentioned by Schein,¹ culture is something that gets established over a period where people learn to bond, earn each other's trust, learn to solve problems, and resolve conflict. Schools may thus be seen as spaces where all stakeholders work together to establish this culture, and this has become a need that has been particularly felt during the pandemic.

Wellbeing, in simple terms, may be seen as a combination of feeling good and functioning well; experiencing positive emotions and relationships; developing one's potential with a sense of purpose. It is about the coming together of the 'mind' and the 'heart'. We feel from the way we think, and how the mind imagines a situation to be. The phrase *Cogito, ergo sum*, (Latin) coined by the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650), translates as 'I think, therefore, I am'. Much of Descartes' philosophical thinking led him to speculate about the connection between the mind and the body. Is wellbeing, then, merely a state of mind? Should one examine it rationally or with empathy? Are rationality and emotionality two sides of the same coin or do they function irrespective of each other? However, if what we think and imagine has an impact on the physical body, feelings, and behaviour, then wellbeing may be seen as the coming together of our physical, mental, and emotional selves.

The experiences shared in this article are meant to facilitate substantive thinking about specific questions. For instance, can one show that along with family support (for decent living conditions, housing, and nutritious food), school support constitutes necessary basics for 'feeling well' among children? Or how demonstrably does a sense of wellbeing come from how one is treated

by near and dear ones, by friends, and at school?

The article focuses on the experience of building a culture that promotes wellbeing while setting up the Azim Premji Schools. Given that the Foundation schools do not tolerate corporal punishment, do not depend on external factors to bring about discipline, and do not promote rote learning and other such factors commonly associated with school life, Descartes' dictum – reflecting on the complex relationship between mind and body – provides us with an appropriate starting point for this narrative.

School culture

'Culture is deeply ingrained in a school, and therefore may only be altered over a longer period through systematic change in a school's climate'². '...School culture is defined as the shared values, rules, belief patterns, teaching and learning approaches, behaviours, and relationships among or across the individuals in a school.'³ It often operates beneath the surface and encompasses a school's norms, unwritten rules, traditions, and implied expectations.

Among the many things that were required in setting up the Azim Premji Schools, creating a space where children felt safe and happy was a priority. A pleasant environment, it was thought, would serve as the foundation for rich teaching and learning experiences, teacher accountability, lively parent-teacher conferences, and healthy relationships among all. This is because expectations affect almost everything. For example, being happy means looking forward to coming to school. This served the overall purpose and intent and necessitated the fostering of a sense of belonging and ownership among all the stakeholders - teachers, students, and parents alike.

A school's culture was seen as a living, evolving process that depended more on needs and circumstances than on any one individual or a set of written regulations. It was also believed that every process and event in the course would undoubtedly serve as the cornerstone for beliefs and values,

which would then be used to build perceptions for a school environment that would guide actions and behaviour.

As mentioned by Kent Peterson and Terrence Deal, 'Beneath the surface of everyday life in schools is an underground river of feelings, folkways, norms, and values that influence how people go about their daily work. This taken-for-granted set of expectations affects how people think, feel, and act'.⁴ Since the schools had just started, none of these aspects was a given. To foster a supportive, enabling environment and develop a 'feel' for their school, everyone had to work collectively.

Creating a school culture

'Schools are seen as places where teaching and learning take place, where knowledge is transmitted, where children can learn about other people, history, and diverse social issues.'⁵ Education must encourage social sensibility as well as self-awareness. Schools are therefore more than just a physical space. The creation of a *school community* that learns and collaborates in an environment characterised by the ideals of equality, social justice, and respect for everyone has been a key objective of the Azim Premji Schools. Thus, it was believed that all stakeholders should participate in the management of the schools through a process of communication and collaboration to promote a sense of community and ownership.

Role of dialogue

Dialogue is an introspective and sharing process that allows differing viewpoints to be held side-by-side. Dialogues among all stakeholders, relationship building, conflict resolution at all levels – within groups or between individuals – and having a forum to sort things out were viewed as critical to establishing an enabling culture and a way with education, that is, a means of educating and equipping individuals to be able to value and engage in dialogues. Spaces such as morning assemblies, meetings, classrooms and playgrounds were used for dialogue and to share views. For instance, assemblies were not just meant for prayers, sharing news, and other regular school-related rituals. Morning assembly was viewed more as a forum for fostering conversations. Both adults and children were encouraged to share their opinions and talk about topics that interested them. Children's performances were an outcome of classroom learning, not specifically planned items for the assembly. They were a means of letting

children know that their opinions were heard and that they could contribute. On the playground, winning and losing were considered part of the game and discussions revolved not just around the game, but around what children felt and how they behaved (particularly in the case of any aggression witnessed during the game).

Over time, children developed confidence in speaking during discussions, engaging in conversations with teachers or people less familiar, and sharing their issues. This was also a way of ensuring that children were equipped with making informed choices. Teachers at one of the schools believed it was critical to build students' awareness of social issues. So, they included conversations during assemblies and in the classroom on various topics including the persistent problem of child marriage in the area. Eventually, one of the students was able to resist the social pressure of marriage, demonstrating that dialogue is an effective method to ensure everyone's wellbeing—both individually and collectively.

Working with stakeholders

Engaging with parents

Given the kind of clientele the schools cater to, Parent Teacher Meetings (PTMs) had to be thoughtfully planned. Teachers were encouraged to understand the parents' and community's perspectives while communicating the school's perspectives. To make sure parents looked forward to coming to the PTMs, the focus was not to make it a complaint forum. Instead, it was a space to exchange ideas, celebrate the child's success and ensure that teachers and parents work together towards the wellbeing and performance of the child.

Teachers were also required to maintain a record of each child's work and make it available to parents. The bottom line – parents have a right to know about their child and it is the teacher's duty to provide all facts with evidence. Parents were expected to engage and be interested in their child's learning, set a work routine for children to study but not necessarily teach them. Respect and trust were thus mutual.

Parents' concerns were addressed in an amicable way. If teachers felt certain concerns to be beyond their capacity to deal with, they could share these with their colleagues and the management. Perspective-building was part of the meeting agenda, with discussions on matters like why rote

learning is discouraged, the school's vision, and other broader, general aims of education. One remembers at one of the first PTMs, in one of the schools a parent saying, 'You do what you have come here to do, and you have all our support, madam.'

Working with children

Children who enrolled at the school were from the local community; they were accustomed to the regular ways in which the local schools operated; where hierarchy, incentives, punishments, and tests are the norm. Children, for instance, were accustomed to continual teacher supervision and reprimands for mistakes. They were unsure of how to behave when given the chance to engage in 'free play' or autonomous learning in the classroom (such as reading independently or selecting captivating picture books). With their new school being a 'no punishment' space, children often went 'berserk' and got aggressive when left to themselves. What really helped here was a continuous dialogue with the children.

Teachers engaged in conversations with children by listening to both sides of an argument. A teacher had to be an active listener and observer; non-interfering, fair and non-judgmental. Without a doubt, this was challenging for the teachers and against their usual line of thinking. There was thus, a need to examine routine ways of working with children. Slowly, teachers started encouraging children to solve their problems and not prescribe solutions. They showed them alternative ways of engaging with friends and discussed ways of dealing with anger or being upset about losing a game on the playground, feeling frustrated with schoolwork, with a classmate or, at times, with a situation at home.

The changes were pleasantly surprising; within a month, children began to settle down, make their own board games, play with things that were readily available, and gradually discovered ways to be useful and productive when left alone during free time/unsupervised time, that is, in the absence of any formal instruction or organised activities by teachers.

Reflecting with teachers

While teachers were new to the organisation, they were not new to the profession. They came in with their own set of beliefs and values, be it about education, children, or themselves as teachers, the idea of discipline or aspects like examinations.

Teacher wellbeing and values are critical for any student wellbeing effort. There was a need for teachers to feel valued, to have a voice and be involved in the decision-making that impacted their work. Teachers were respected and acknowledged for their experience and expertise. For their part, teachers had to understand the value of having a good rapport with their pupils and the need to take time to get to know them. They had to comprehend how crucial a role they played in creating a culture of trust.

Processes and systems were put in place to ensure that quality time was spent with teachers to develop a sense of ownership for the school. Dialogues and conversations were considered 'the way forward' to understand each other and to iron out differences. Staff meetings, being one such forum, were held almost daily during the initial days of setting up the schools. It was a time for everyone to come together, exchange notes on the day's work, share concerns, celebrate achievements, and discuss challenges related to administration, Mid-Day-Meals (MDM) or the classroom.

Meetings were also a forum to build perspectives, discuss practices related to classroom teaching, school processes and resolve conflicts. It became a space that was used to understand the meaning of going beyond textbooks for teaching, why children's pace of learning need not be the same, whether uniformity mattered, understand that classroom management was about managing one's own emotions and behaviour and so on.

Larger aspects, like aims of education, curriculum or aligning practice with the vision of the organisation, were taken up during formal teacher professional development sessions, although not restricted to that. Agendas for staff meetings were not rigid - people could bring up their points. Essentially, staff meetings were a space where everyone was required to examine their own expectations as teachers if they were to bring about a new school culture. The idea was to have a shared understanding of all matters.

Teacher professional development

Professional development programmes were designed based on the vision of the Foundation and teachers' needs. Teacher professional development was planned with the belief that it had to be a process which calls for continuous and consistent engagement. An annual event was held in different school locations each year, where teachers from all the schools came together. This provided an

opportunity for teachers to travel to different locations and see how the other schools of the Foundation functioned. Teachers came together to share their views and practices, collaborate and learn from one another – the central idea was to promote comradeship among the teachers at the Foundation schools.

School committees

Various committees, like Admission, MDM, Library, Safety and Security, Activities and Celebrations and Assembly were formed. Teachers were appointed to these committees on a rotational basis to ensure that everyone was involved in all the school processes; to get a positive feel of the school and to collectively build the institutional culture.

Students too were part of some committees, for instance, as part of the Library Committee, they helped with the maintenance of books, the process of borrowing and lending of books; or as part of the MDM committee, they helped in serving, clearing up and ensuring that food was not wasted. Participation in school processes gave students the opportunity to understand how their school was run, encouraged them to accept responsibilities, learn about the expectations from them about responsible behaviour and how they can help

maintain healthy relationships.

Conclusion

The above account represents the experiences of the initial years of the Foundation schools. As with most organisations in their nascent stage, there were challenges while setting up the schools, with resources and facilities (most schools at the time functioned from rented spaces), establishing processes and working with teachers who came from diverse backgrounds. The experiences of the early years of these schools emphasise the importance of focusing on creating a motivating and supportive school culture that promotes the wellbeing of all, resulting in improved overall performance. It is also apparent that everyone involved in schools needs to come together to have a shared vision of creating a culture of wellbeing. For children to learn, achieve and thrive, they must be in a state of readiness, with their basic needs met. They must feel safe, valued, and believe in themselves. They require positive role models around them, from which stems the need to ensure the wellbeing and dignity of the teachers, resulting in the formation of the core elements of a culture that can contribute to a shared vision, values, and beliefs.

Endnotes

- i Edgar Schein's Model of Organisational Culture
- ii Gruenert, (2008) in School Climate and Culture, Strategy Brief, February 2016, Elisabeth Kane, Natalie Hoff, Ana Cathcart, Allie Heifner, Shir Palmon, Reece L. Peterson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. p 1
- iii Çakiroğlu, Ü., Akkan, Y., & Güven, B. (2012) in School climate and Culture - Elisabeth Kane *et al. ibid.* p 1
- iv Kent Petersen and Terence Deal (2002)- The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook, The Jossey-Bass Education Series, Wiley Company. p 9
- v Why School Is Important. <https://www.waterburybridgetosuccess.org/why-is-school-important/>



Aruna Jyothi is faculty with the School of Education at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She comes with decades of experience as a teacher. She worked as Head of the Department of Counselling and Special Needs and has also been a volunteer at the VHS Hospital, Chennai and SNEHA (Centre for Slow Learners). She was part of the Azim Premji Foundation's Schools' Central Team which set up the first six Azim Premji Schools across the country. She has worked extensively in establishing certain systems and processes in the schools, such as teacher professional development, curriculum development, CCE, ECE, special education, and aspects related to adolescence. She may be reached at aruna.v@apu.edu.in



Shobha Lokanathan Kavoori is a member of the Bengaluru District Institute, Azim Premji Foundation. She has been a teacher and has been involved in educational and development initiatives in Rajasthan. She was part of the Azim Premji Foundation Schools' Team that set up the first six Azim Premji Schools. She has worked extensively in the areas of curriculum development, teacher professional development and language development in these schools. She may be reached at shobha.kavoori@azimpremjifoundation.org