

Developing a school culture can do much to mould students well

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The curriculum in a school includes everything that directly shapes the learning of students. Not only learning goals, subject content, textbooks, pedagogy and assessment, but also the school's culture and processes. Narrow views of a curriculum often determine the design and even more so its practice, ignoring or paying lip service to the central role that school culture and processes play in education.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 (NCF) gives culture and process their due importance by not limiting itself merely to well-intentioned statements. It converts statements of intent and principle to behaviour and practices, which is how culture is experienced by students. Instead of merely stating that respect for all is important to develop values like pluralism, empathy and inclusion, it distills the statement to its manifestation in everyday school life, such as the treatment of parents when they come to meet the principal or teachers, the behaviour of teachers with students struggling academically, the celebration of students' acts of support to others, and a lot more.

School culture plays two kinds of roles in student learning—in creating an effective learning environment with motivated and engaged students, and in developing values. My last column detailed the approach of the NCF to development values, including the role of school culture.

Culture can foster different learning environments—characterized by constraint, compliance and control, or enabling individuals with trust and self-discipline, motivating them to try harder and take charge of themselves. The former is much easier to do; the latter requires concerted effort by teachers and the whole school. Lack of structure and direction can be as problematic for learning as fear and mistrust. A fear-free, motivating and supportive environment, with appropriate direction and clarity for students, is most effective for learning.

To understand how schools can shape the learning environment and development of values appropriately, let us consider what school culture is. It has two interrelated aspects, the first being values, norms and beliefs. The second comprises behaviours, relationships and practices. For the school to shape these experiences, three kinds of manifestation of culture can be worked on.

First, relationships among the people in and involved with the school: That is, students, teachers, principal, support-staff, parents and others. For example, teachers being collaborative and collegial versus competitive, the principal being consultative versus always directive, and students resolving differences through dialogue. Functional relationships in the educational context are characterized by mutual trust and respect, openness, communication and collaboration, as also by the care taken and responsible behaviour.

Second, symbols of what are considered worth displaying and celebrating in the school: Most schools have a range of symbols—both explicit and implicit. Display boards emphasize what they feel is valuable, for example, featuring pictures of students who secured top ranks in Board examinations or awards that the school has won, or pictures of visitors to the school. The kind of work done by students that appears on display boards speaks directly to what is valued. Often, there are 'sayings' or 'quotes' written on school walls—these are also direct descriptors of what is valued. There are pictures of important and famous people, even idols, in the principal's rooms, staff room, classrooms or school corridors. The choices and arrangements of physical objects often have large symbolic value. For example, the principal's chair is often much better than that of teachers. The arrangement of furniture in classrooms can communicate the school's beliefs about teaching-learning processes: Do students mostly listen to the teacher lecturing, or is it arranged as a space for collaborative work? Any celebration or commendation at the school assembly or its public functions has deep symbolic value. All these symbols need to be thoughtfully and carefully aligned with curricular objectives.

Third, arrangements and practices related to classroom and school processes. Key classroom practices include seating arrangements; it could be gender mixed, or with no preference for academically sharp students. It also includes availability and accessibility of teaching-learning-material, ensuring that enough is available, and how what is available is shared. Also, giving ownership and responsibility to students in the learning process and responsibility for tidiness of the class. Some other key school processes include the school

assembly, the management of and arrangements during meal-time, the distribution of work for sports, assembly and functions, the upkeep of the school, practices in sports and their handling, and the school's engagement with parents and the local community.

Most of us have personal experience of the deep impact of organizational culture on performance of every sort. Schools are no different. The NCF gives its due to school culture in achieving educational goals, and that too in a practical and relatable manner for the educator.