


A school's culture matters more for its success than we think

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He was a short man, but his thug-like demeanour outdid his stalker's build. His up-twirled moustache danced to his raspy voice. "Kyaa muayanaa karne aayen hain aap? (What have you come to inspect)," he asked. The cordiality of his tone sounded like a struggle to keep the menace of his presence in check.

"Muayanaa nahin, dekhne aayen hain, suna hai yahaan ke shikshak bahut badhiyaa kaam kar rahen hain (We aren't here to inspect but to observe, having heard that teachers do very good work here)." My reply puzzled him. "Yahaan shikshak badhiyaa kaam karten hain? (Teachers do good work here?)" It was unclear who he was asking. Then he said, "Achcha, hoga (alright, must be so)."

Then he introduced himself as a teacher in the school, and also vice-president of the town's wing of a regionally-dominant political party. He scanned his colleagues sitting around and introduced each one of them, including the principal.

We were harmless if a bit woolly-headed—this seemed to be his conclusion. Perhaps only that could explain our belief in good work by teachers. He instructed the principal to feed us some local pedaa, then announced that he was very busy and left.

The principal led us on a tour of the school, which wasn't in good condition. Dusty lab equipment, a few dismantled computers, smelly toilets, and so on. It wasn't clear what he wanted to show us. We settled down in the classroom of the teacher we had actually come to meet.

He did a fantastic job teaching the Harappan Civilization to grade six. The class was abuzz with questions and observations. We chatted after the class ended. "Mahaul hee theek nahin hai, sir" (the school culture is bad), he said. "Bas koshish kartaa rehtaa hoon (I just keep trying)."

Earlier that morning in another school, two women hugged each other and sobbed while I watched in wonder. One of them was the principal of that primary school and the other a teacher. When we had sat down to talk, they started describing the hard-scrabble lives of their students—mostly children of brick kiln workers or landless agricultural labourers.

Then the teacher said she had learnt everything about empathy for such children and how to handle them from the principal. In turn, the principal started narrating how everything in the school turned after this teacher joined the school 10 years earlier. That is when the emotional dam burst. The teacher had been transferred to another school and was to leave soon.

After they got a hold of themselves, they explained what was already clear, that they had worked so closely together in the most trying circumstances that it was hard to imagine what the future would be like without support from the other. The teacher would be in a distant school, and this one would be left without her.

From the moment we entered the school, we could tell it was a happy and clean school. Two students who met us at the gate wished us "good morning" with gusto and then wanted to know who we had come to meet. One of them ran to the principal to tell her we had arrived and the other led us to where she was.

After introductions, she got us to sit in a math class for grade three. Animated students were rushing past each other to solve problems on the black board. Then they had to explain how they solved them. Any mistake would be corrected by the students themselves, gently guided by the teacher. Then they would take five minutes to develop new problems, from which the teacher would select five to solve.

In a combined class of grades four and five, the principal was teaching Hindi. These students were writing funny stories, taking off from one of the "not funny" stories in their textbook. We sat there for a while, then she took us to her office where stacks of notebooks and student projects were neatly arranged.

These notebooks were of stories that her students had written over many years. Many were like a record of their lives, their joys and aspirations, but to us, they revealed hardship.

She got a call on her mobile. An alumna was getting married. She had called the principal because her father wanted to know what the principal would advise. The student had graduated from the school eight years earlier. It was important to her father to get the teacher's approval because the school continued to be an anchor for these families long after its students had left. She consulted the teacher and then responded to the father.

It was a clean and happy school that gave its students the gift of education, but it also gave them more. Beyond subject knowledge, the school served as an anchor for the lives of students and the larger community, which otherwise had little else to hold on to. It was the school's mahaul—its culture.

Stark differences between the two schools I visited emphasize the biggest but most underrated determinant of school culture—its teachers and the relationships between them. The thuggish teacher's school seemed to have no relationships at all, while the second one had a deep camaraderie forged in the crucible of hardship. The effects were all too visible.

We cannot leave such an important matter to chance. This is why the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 places a special emphasis on school culture and the criticality of relationships and teamwork among teachers for that. Bringing this to life on the ground is hard, but there are enough examples to learn from.