

Azim Premji University

Learnin*g* 
CURVe

RNI No: KARENG/2018/76591

An Azim Premji University Publication

ISSN No: 2582-1644



Practices for a Sustainable School Culture

Editorial Committee

Shefali Tripathi Mehta, Associate Editor
Azim Premji University
Survey No. 66, Burugunte Village
Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura
Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka
shefali.mehta@azimpremjifoundation.org

Chandrika Muralidhar
Azim Premji University
Survey No. 66, Burugunte Village
Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura
Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka
chandrika@azimpremjifoundation.org

Nimrat Khandpur
Azim Premji University
Survey No. 66, Burugunte Village
Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura
Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka
nimrat.kaur@azimpremjifoundation.org

Shobha Lokanathan Kavoori
Azim Premji University
Survey No. 66, Burugunte Village
Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura
Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka
shobha.kavoori@azimpremjifoundation.org

Advisors
Hriday Kant Dewan
Sachin Mulay
Sudheesh Venkatesh
Umashanker Periodi

Publications Team
Lokram V G
Meera Prabhu
Sambit Mahapatra
Shahanaz Begum

Translations Editors
Madhukara S Putty (Kannada)
Rajesh Utsahi (Hindi)

Publications Office
Azim Premji University
Survey No. 66, Burugunte Village
Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura
Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka
Email: publications@apu.edu.in
Website: www.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in

Cover Photo
Azim Premji Foundation Archives

Design
Banyan Tree
+91 98458 64765

Printing
Lakshmi Mudranalaya, Bengaluru
+ 91 80 26613123 / 26618752
lakshmimudra@gmail.com

Learning Curve is a publication on education from the Azim Premji University for teachers, teacher educators, school heads, educational functionaries, parents and NGOs on contextual and thematic issues that have enduring relevance and value for them. It provides a platform for the expression of varied opinions, perspectives and stories of innovation; and encourages new, informed positions and thought-provoking points of view. The approach is a balance between an academic and a practitioner-oriented magazine.

All opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Azim Premji University.

FROM THE EDITOR



A student of class IV lost her father. She came back to school a month later and quietly went to sit on the last bench not speaking with anyone, nor making any eye contact. Every day, she would come to class and sit at the back, never again speaking to anyone, nor participating in the class activities or games. She never laughed, smiled or played again. All her classmates, as is natural for 9-year-olds, were awkward around her, they did not know what they should do – if they should talk to her or ask her to play with them. Some felt sad for her, some indifferent and it suited them all that she had herself withdrawn; they did not need to do anything that seemed ‘difficult’.

Decades later, I, one of her classmates, cannot get the incident out of my mind. It is too late, but I ask myself if it wasn’t the collective responsibility of everyone in the school – the principal, teachers and all of us to reach out and comfort her in the small ways that we could. Did we as children not need guidance from teachers, and they from the school head? Sadly, the culture of the school did not support such a practice of compassion. If it were important for them, the principal would have known when the child would be back, and all the teachers would have been alerted to take extra care of her. Would it not have been wonderful if a teacher had talked with the class beforehand about how their friend might be feeling and what they could do when she came back? Was it not in order for the teacher to show some sympathy through word or gesture when the bereaved child returned? To ask her where she wanted to sit and with whom or when the children stepped out to play, called someone to take her with them, and told the children to hold hands – something that helped the child to feel she was in a safe, comforting space with

others who were cognisant of and with her in her grief? It would have helped the whole class in many ways. They would have internalised compassion and ways of reaching out to grieving people.

When we arrived at the theme of this issue, we knew exactly what we wanted the focus to be. We were looking at practices that build a school culture that lasts – practices that become so ingrained in the school's ethos that they come naturally to everyone and not change if those who helped develop these move out of the school.

We’ve put together this issue with a lot of passion, and hope for teachers all over the country to create in their schools a culture that can help students feel safe, engaged, and supported, promoting their overall academic and personal growth. There are many aspects of building a ‘positive’ school culture and we have detailed some, touched upon some others and have had to leave out many. We look forward to your thoughts on this – what are your experiences as parents, teachers or teacher-educators?

Lastly, the journey of the Learning Curve magazine which started as the first periodical of the Foundation in 2003, will soon undergo some changes and though this 48th issue is the last issue of the Learning Curve in its current form, we are not going away; just changing into a new avatar. With immense gratitude, the Editorial Team thanks all readers and contributors for their support through these years.

Shefali Tripathi Mehta

Associate Editor

shefali.mehta@azimpremjifoundation.org

01

02

03

04

05

CONTENTS

What Constitutes School Culture? Hriday Kant Dewan	03
The Nature and Purpose of School Culture Prakash Iyer	06
Diversity at the Heart of School and Classroom Culture Madhusudhan Ramesh	09
Questioning Gender Boundaries in School Nidhi Gulati	12

VOICES

Nurturing Curiosity in the Classroom: A Personal Reflection Anagh Purandare	15
Fostering a Culture of Inclusion: An Account from a Classroom Ananya Banerjee	17
Establishing a Non-Threatening School Environment: An Experience Anil S Angadiki	19
Creating a Culture of Strong School, Parents and Community Ties Arddhendu Shekhar Dash	23

01

02

03

04

05

CONTENTS

Building a Culture of Reading: Success Story from a Rural School Melody Xalxo	27
A School Where all Students Feel Safe, Valued, and Seen Priyanka D	30
Sense of Ownership and Responsibility: A Critical Aspect of School Culture Shobhan Singh Negi	33
Creating a Supportive and Empowering Environment: Learnings from a Single-Teacher Rural School Swati Bhandari	36
How Children Imbibe Social and Behavioural Practices Umashanker Periodi	39
Doing Away with the Fear of Maths Rajni Dwivedi	41
School Culture: Differences Across Time and Contexts Rahul Mukhopadhyay	44
Child-Friendly School Initiative: A Lasting Impact on School Culture Rudresh S	48

What Constitutes School Culture?

Hriday Kant Dewan

As an essential part of the process of educating children, the school has a role in the development of conceptual knowledge and cognitive abilities as well as the development of attitudes, dispositions and values that are articulated as valuable for society. In an ideal sense, education, including all the aspects listed above, is required for making informed choices and constructive contributions to life in society. These contributions are needed not only for the progress and success of the individual but also for the collective good. Schools, besides making children curious, confident and keen learners, must attempt to ensure that they develop in a manner that they can help strengthen the feeling of fraternity in society. Most schools have this, along with students' inclusion and excellence in cognitive domains as their stated mission. The degree of success in these aspects, however, varies from school to school.

I remember working with state government schools and noticing wide gaps in how they functioned. Such gaps continue to exist. Most surprising for me was the realisation that even within an area (adjoining villages) schools and teachers functioned very differently. Also, any teacher who came to a well-functioning school, irrespective of the reputation they held previously, started teaching and engaging purposefully with the children, the community and other teachers. Whereas, a teacher who was well-spoken of, when transferred to a not-so-well-performing school, would soon begin to function like the other teachers at that school. There was something about the schools themselves that made teachers function differently.

We know from our experience of walking through schools that we can perceive some aspects of the functioning of the school in the atmosphere. In some schools, we see people smiling, moving purposefully with a sense of easy energy, small huddles of people here and there engaged in conversations or just quietly doing their work or

something else together; there is laughter and chatter but no noise: there are arguments but no shouting. I remember schools where in the playground, the class teacher and children were present together and I particularly remember those where the teachers were not standing and overseeing or coaching but were actively engaged in play as an equal – chasing and being chased. One can sense the relationship that must exist between the teachers and the children, among the teachers and among children themselves to make this possible. In such schools, teachers talk about their work with passion and professionalism. And despite the sense of serious business at hand, both teachers and students seem happy and confident rather than stressed. Everyone seems to know why they are there. The students and staff treat each other with respect as full partners in an important enterprise. In brief, a school needs a safe and caring environment wherein all students feel welcomed and valued; a social climate where both students and their teachers have a sense of partnership and ownership of the school.

I have also seen teachers stretched to manage classes and paperwork resorting to using children from the higher classes to 'monitor' the junior classes. These children carry sticks and do not hesitate to use them to 'discipline' the younger children. Such schools achieve classroom silence but may sow seeds in the children of a belief that discipline is a product of subjugation and restriction. When a school restricts children in such a way – in conversations, interactions, and activities – it misses out on the opportunity to make them understand the difference between meaningful, useful engagement and quiet on one hand, and disorder and noise on the other.

While it is not easy to answer why a school is the way it is and what gives it its cultural overtones, we can identify some elements that constitute this – some broad features of how a positive culture may be developed; and what the challenges are to sustaining it.

Key elements of culture

One of the key elements of a positive culture is **the positive encouragement given to children in a manner that enables them to learn**. From the perspective of learning, the school must believe that all children are capable of learning and that they learn best when encouraged and enthused rather than when they are berated or punished.

Another element of culture is reflected in **what the school believes learning to be**. For example, the detailed Draft National Policy, 2019, the precursor to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, says, 'The key overall thrust of curriculum and pedagogy reform across all stages will be to move the education system towards real understanding and towards learning how to learn - and away from the culture of rote learning as is largely present today.' (p.76 4.2.). Therefore, the school must have a culture that supports children to learn and understand, rather than feeding them shortcuts. The intellectual climate should be such that children are expected to learn by making an effort and all of them are supported and challenged to do their very best. The learning should be such that it becomes a part of their lifelong process of learning rather than for show or short term. For this to happen, there must be a culture of curiosity, exploration and learning in schools of which the teachers must be a part.

The third key element of the school culture, therefore, is that the **teachers also exhibit a strong inclination towards learning**. Children will throng the library if they feel excited about the things they have been told in class and the books that are mentioned by the teachers. A school can set expectations for the students only when it is reflected in the behaviour of all its members. Therefore, for a nurturing environment with high expectations from students, the school must also offer such an environment to teachers.

School structures (such as staff/teacher/student councils) that give the staff and students a **voice and shared responsibility** in the school are another important element. Everyone in the school should feel a sense of ownership of the school. The onus of this is on the leadership and needs to be facilitated by forums that ensure clarity of roles in the functioning and an awareness of each one's responsibilities in a way that each one feels that they are participants in decision-making and problem-solving that impact the school environment. The

agency and autonomy that teachers are afforded, critically affect the way the school is perceived by its students and other stakeholders.

Another fundamental element of building a cohesive culture is to have the leadership, including all the teachers, function as **role models**. A principal has to be friendly and close to the teachers yet maintain the required distance between personal and professional relationships. This is the same balance that teachers must maintain with students – being friends but not forgetting that they are also their role models. Interactions in modes other than that of a teacher and the taught should be facilitated through participation in sports, arts and crafts. To have the feeling of equality with the students while providing them with a safe umbrella of care is critical to building students' self-confidence and the spirit of fair play, as in the playground. Similarly, when it comes to dancing or singing, if teachers restrain themselves, children pick up the notion that participation in these is only for those who are good at them. Overcoming such hesitation requires a culture where there is a general expectation and opportunities for everyone to participate without being self-conscious.

A **sense of mutual respect** gives children the confidence to speak to the teachers on issues that may concern them even if they are complex and difficult to speak about. The manner of address has a big effect on the nature of interaction and the way people perceive each other, Thus, there should be norms for relationships and behaviours that create a 'professional' culture of empathy, care, excellence and ethical practice. This is a huge challenge because teachers and students both come with cultural and social baggage of expectations of relationships and notions about the communities they belong to. The most critical factor here is the ability of the people in this melting pot to accept criticism and suggestions objectively. A process of this kind requires patience and understanding, particularly from those who are in authority and leadership positions.

A glance at policy statements

Communities and governments recognise that the most important function of education is instilling in children a set of ethics that promote the continuation and progress of society. Despite what is assessed and ranked, the expectation remains that education would make the person 'cultured'. The expectations are spelt out in curriculum

documents and reflected in guidelines and manuals for schools and teachers.

Policy documents have been concerned about the atmosphere in the school and how the students perceive it. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasises the need to have an inclusive ambience, and a caring culture, which encourages excellence, curiosity, empathy, and equity. It also emphasises the development of constitutional and positive Indian values in children, which must also be felt by the teachers in their work.

While the NEP 2020 (also NCF 2005) mention the conscious creation of a culture that has a long-term, developmental impact, it argues that ‘children cannot wake up one morning and know how to participate in, preserve and enhance a democracy, especially if they have had no prior personal or even second-hand experience of it, nor any role models to learn from.’ As per NCF 2005, NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023, schools have to ensure a culture that makes students experience values like democracy, fraternity, plurality and equity. It would also require having interactions with parents and the community to make these values a part of the home experience too.

Apart from this, the policy documents have recommended a culture of curiosity, questioning and seeking justification and proof besides developing the value and culture of open-mindedness, innovation and practical action. They also recommended preventing the development of fear of mathematics; allowing multi-lingual conversations; and respecting the language, culture and knowledge that children bring from the community and engaging with these.

The documents recommend a caring and nurturing environment. In the chapters on teachers, the NEP

2020 mentions that to help ensure that schools have positive learning environments, the role of principals and teachers will explicitly include developing a caring and inclusive culture at their schools for effective learning and the benefit of all stakeholders (NEP 2020 Final 5.13. p.12). The draft (NEP 2019) mentions that the schools must have a caring, collaborative, and inclusive school culture, which encourages excellence, curiosity, empathy and equity. A large part of this school culture must be set by school principals, school complex leaders, School Management Committees (SMCs) and School Complex Management Committees (SCMCs) (NEP Draft 2019, Chapter 5 Teachers, p.114) The draft NEP 2019 further adds that ‘to help ensure that schools have positive learning environments, the role expectations of principals and teachers will explicitly include developing a caring an inclusive culture at their school, for more effective learning for all, and for the benefit of all in their communities.’ (NEP Draft 2019, Chapter 5 Teachers, p.118)

The Right to Education Act 2009 (RtE) also spoke about developing a positive school culture and stated that ‘no child shall be subjected to physical punishment or mental harassment’. This calls for the school leader to focus on making the school a stress-free, child-friendly space with a learner-centred classroom environment, which requires redefining notions of discipline, punishment and student-teacher relationships.

Any transformation process in schools has to be led by a process of developing a positive and cohesive culture and tradition. The journey is not easy and, as has been said, is resisted by the beliefs of the stakeholders and the traditions in the communities and among the teachers.



Hriday Kant Dewan has been working in the field of education for over 40 years in different capacities and currently works with the Azim Premji University. He is a founder-member of Eklavya, Bhopal and is the Educational Advisor of the Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur. He has been associated with efforts in educational innovation and modification of state educational structures and materials. He can be contacted at hardy@azimpremijifoundation.org

The Nature and Purpose of School Culture

Prakash Iyer

Schooling as initiation into society

It is common for us to associate schools primarily with the curriculum and consider the curriculum alone as a means of education. But schools are much more than that. For the first few years, children grow up in a limited geography predominantly around family, relatives, and neighbours, getting accustomed to its traditions and practices. From this space, they move into schools that are initially alien both in terms of the people they meet, and the culture and practices followed there. Schools are the first social spaces that children are primary inhabitants of and mark the initiation of children into social institutions, which they inhabit as autonomous persons.

Children form relationships, understand norms, and familiarise themselves with new practices and traditions, such as following classroom rules, paying attention in class, doing classwork and activities, taking up responsibilities, making friends and sharing, and gradually, by secondary school, they begin to figure out what being an autonomous person means. In this process, they become aware of and form unique social and personal identities. In a sense, schools are a gateway into adult life and the process of self-determination.

Three aspects of the schooling experience need to be noted. Firstly, schools are the beginning of independent lives with responsibilities for children – they have to not only learn the curriculum but also demonstrate that they have learnt. Secondly, they form their individual identities and personality by deciding how to behave with others and making significant life choices about what they like and what they do not. Thirdly, from this experience, they develop a perspective of how society functions, and what it is to be an adult.

Children are not passive learners who unquestioningly accept all that is taught to them. Humans are *naturally* autonomous and after a certain age, they start comprehending formal

pedagogical actions and *know* they are being taught and that they are expected to *learn*. This autonomy manifests itself in the way they deal with the cultural practices of the school – through selective obedience, different ways of subverting norms they are not entirely convinced about, and sometimes through protests and rebellion. For instance, after a few years of schooling, students develop biases towards some teachers and some subjects and pay more attention in some classes than others. Subversion of school norms often manifests in subtle ways, like avoiding homework, intentionally coming late to class or even just doodling or reading comics in some classes rather than paying attention. Protests and rebellions happen in silent ways, like refusing to study some subjects and not caring to learn them at all.

Formal curriculum and school culture

Teaching and learning in schools do not happen through the formal curriculum alone. Schools also create processes, protocols, and norms which make it possible for the curriculum to be transacted. All these additional processes and norms contribute to the formation of the school's identity. For instance, uniforms or dress codes, seating arrangement in the class, teacher-student relationships, level of autonomy given to teachers, rules related to student behaviours, format of the morning assembly, frequency and nature of teacher meetings and parent-teacher meetings etc. All these are part of the ecosystem of practices that children experience and learn from.

Any practice invariably stems from some foundational values. For example, when a school decides to include a secular prayer in the morning assembly, it is demonstrating that it values secularism and inclusion. If some schools replace prayers in the morning assembly with a pledge for the nation, they are demonstrating that they value patriotism over any religious affiliation. The importance of practice is in the values they demonstrate, and the choices schools make are in the values they wish to inculcate in children.

Secondly, we can call behaviours practices only when they are consistently practised, and there is a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of these practices. For instance, the norms in an assembly that are mentioned above would not be norms unless all members of the school have a common understanding of these norms and reasons why they exist. New teachers and members of the school are usually initiated into these existing norms, which ensures there is continuity and stability in the school culture.

School culture and the aims of education

The culture of a school and its curriculum coexist in the same institution and, therefore, are never independent of each other. School culture represents some additional aims of education that are particular to the school, for example, developing leaders of tomorrow, conscientious democratic citizenry, or individuals who value environment and sustainability. The schools often develop norms and practices, which cater to these declared aims. These are usually achieved in two ways:

- Differential emphasis on elements of the curriculum or subjects, which is usually very evident from the timetables
- Additional processes and activities that schools implement as part of the way the school is run, in other words, the school culture

One can view school culture in the form of two concentric circles. The core curriculum is in the inner circle, and a larger circle – the school culture which becomes a meta layer around the curriculum that makes it possible to transact it. The outer circle is not merely processes and protocols meant to transact the curriculum; they represent the aims and purposes of education as much as the formal curriculum does.

We need to understand that there are intended aims of a culture and there is a culture that is experienced. There are often marked differences between the two. Children are seen to be learning to behave in a certain manner, which is usually limited to the time they are in school. They design their behaviours to be in sync with the school's expectations. However, they choose to interpret the behaviours and the values embedded in those behaviours as they wish. In informal spaces, like home, family or in the absence of teachers or staff, students discuss, critique and claim to negate the intended learnings. But then, even this act of debating cultural practices, and claiming to discard

the learnings, does amount to an engagement with the fundamental ideas of learning.

Schools would have to accept this inevitability of learning from the extant culture and respond to the situation accordingly. This brings to the fore two critical aspects of education that can only be engaged with through cultures developed in schools – Moral and Political Education.

Moral education

It is common for moral education to be perceived as understanding a set of fundamental principles, and then developing the ability to apply these principles to real-life situations. This approach has been the basis of moral education, and moral science subjects. Children are taught aphorisms, like 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness', or read out stories from the *Hitopadesha* or *Jataka Tales* that conclude with, 'The moral of the story is...'.

This approach has two serious limitations. Firstly, moral education is reduced to memorising or understanding some principles, but how they could be applied in real-life situations is left to the imagination of learners. All of us do not go through the same life experiences, so the creativity and cognitive abilities required to apply principles are difficult if not impossible to teach. Secondly, stories are helpful, but since the stories occur in completely different spaces and times, a lot of creativity and imagination is needed to derive the principles from them and apply them to contemporary times and situations. Moreover, we do not go through experiences that are similar to the ones people went through centuries ago, as in the *Jataka Tales*, nor are the life experiences of princes for whom *Hitopadesha* was written even remotely similar to ours. The same applies when we narrate stories of exemplary individuals, like Gandhi or Abdul Kalam. Our life experiences will never map to theirs, nor will our capacities.

In this approach, morality is reduced to using appropriate verbiage and only broad simplistic values of politeness, truth, honesty etc. In reality, morality is embedded in social practices. Our moralities are determined by how we behave in real situations when our emotions and cognitions are in conflict with each other. Moral situations also usually evoke conflict between two or more important values. It is rather difficult to decide what to do when we face the classic conundrum – is it alright to lie if we believe that telling the truth is going to harm someone? Or how justified is it to

steal something from a person who has plenty of it? These are the kinds of problems students are bound to experience, and education ought to help them deal with.

This is where the extant culture in schools helps. As we saw in the first section, cultures are practices with values embedded in them. Expecting students to follow practices and nudging them to question the logic behind those established practices would be a very direct and valuable approach to moral education. Allowing a significant level of freedom and autonomy to students when they bring into question established norms in a school and attempt to try breaking the norms and perceive the effect, would be invaluable for developing their moral autonomy.

Political education

The same argument could be made for introducing students to democracy and for their political education. It has been seen that educating students about our Constitution through the subject of civics is woefully inadequate. It does not give students even a reasonable understanding of the fundamental concepts of democracy, like freedom and equality, nor does it give them any familiarity with constitutional values.

The best approach towards this would be for schools to execute a prototype of the parliament with students and teachers as members, to help develop a sound practical education of democracy. Schools ought to develop a culture where students take

responsibility for some key activities, like managing teaching-learning material (TLM) in the classroom and books in the library from primary school onwards. Such activities necessarily involve dealing with rules and norms and therefore developing formal relationships with others. The complexity of these responsibilities could gradually increase from primary to secondary school when they could engage with formal democratic structures like student parliaments.

Rational choice (whether moral or political) is not a matter of applying the results of detached, neutral, theoretical judgement but of following or appropriately modifying existing generally successful practices, according to our particular circumstances.

Student autonomy and school culture

Lastly, for this to be made possible, school cultures would have to accept students' autonomy of rational choice as an empirical fact. The culture of a school must ensure that students are not encouraged to receive ways of thinking passively – either from the curriculum or from the adults in schools. Rather a fundamental aspect of a school culture must be the freedom to question and, even occasionally, challenge values and norms enforced in the curriculum or via the school culture. This questioning must bear the scaffolding of reason and rationality so that it is educative, and not critical for the sake of being critical, or rebellious for the sake of rebellion.



Prakash Iyer is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Azim Premji University. He teaches philosophy of education and curriculum theory, and his research interests are in moral and political education. He can be reached at prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in

Diversity at the Heart of School and Classroom Culture

Madhusudhan Ramesh

In this essay, I hope to build an understanding of diversity, narrate practices of working with diversity and suggest a broader approach of education and educators towards diversity.

Recognising diversity

Schools in India are becoming more diverse thanks to the Education for All (EFA) movement and the importance placed on this global commitment nationally through *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA, 2001) and more importantly, by teachers and parents who have persevered to educate children (against all odds). Classrooms today have greater diversity linguistically, socio-culturally, in abilities, disabilities, and gender, to name a few. A simple framework to recognise diversity is to think of it in terms of 'direct' and 'indirect' influences with the caveat that there will be overlaps between the two. Migration is one form of direct influence, though the nature of migration is equally important – a family might move to a metropolitan city for better job prospects while another might move to a neighbouring state due to unrest in their state.

Examples of indirect influence on classroom diversity are macro factors, such as aspirations of families leading to changes in school choices or progressive thinking, such as the assertion by a family/parent for their child with a disability to study in a 'regular' neighbourhood school (which is endorsed by the National Education Policy 2020). It is harder to spot indirect influences, which arise from the rapidly changing markets and their impact on the nature of jobs, popular culture informed by social media, an array of new student interests, and the evolving identities of young people born into the third millennium.

While the pace, and manner in which classroom diversity is taking shape needs a critical look, as educators, we must welcome and prepare for greater diversity. This raises the practical question of how we can build a school and classroom culture for this new diversity.

The practice of working with diversity

As educators, engaging with diversity involves not just developing empathy towards the different circumstances that children come from, but also engaging with it in a pedagogical sense. In other words, it is asking key questions, such as how I can include the lived experiences of all my students in my teaching and learning; and what can children learn from each other, not just conceptually, but also to build a social understanding of the world they inhabit. A diverse classroom means more opportunities for children to learn about each other and to appreciate the social fabric of society. To engage in this form of diversity is to also show acceptance towards all different types of backgrounds.

In a recent webinar,¹ on inclusive practices, Murari Jha, a mentor teacher from a government school in Delhi spoke of the gap between how education is structured and taught and who the children are. One of the cultural gaps he referred to was celebrating a hundred percent attendance of students to motivate them to come to school, in a community where there are children who work to support their families and often miss school. He went on to talk about the practice of a reflective diary-writing exercise that his class does, which helps him construct his teaching and provides space for children to feel heard and understood by the teacher and their peers. Such a practice can be classified as a practice of co-agency, which argues for learning to be a shared endeavour between the teacher and student.

When a classroom culture is built on the idea of co-agency, it creates room for students to take on a sense of responsibility for their own learning, leading to a greater possibility of children discovering how they learn. For instance, if we consider a student having a reading difficulty and

the lesson requires students to read a short story and answer questions. A classroom with co-agency will incorporate *open-endedness* and *choice* for all students. The possible choices can include the choice of story, choice in how much time one would take to read and answer a question, choice in the process of reading – having the option to do it alone or in pairs or listen to it using text-to-speech technology, choice in the questions or the number of questions, choice in answering through an audio note and so on. It is important for this choice to be extended to all students because making choices available only to those with a difference will inextricably make students feel othered. A student with reading difficulty in such a classroom is less anxious and free to develop their skill of reading and learning at a pace that works for them. This type of choice and open-endedness help all other students since they find room to understand how they learn as well as develop their own unique ways of learning. Co-agency is not the same as giving free choices to students, it includes teachers raising questions for the students to reflect on their process and how they can improve the same – making learning a shared responsibility.

Other than principles and practices, understanding diversity is also about the day-to-day ‘small’ efforts (and reflections) in getting to know students. Kavya, a middle-income high school teacher, is an avid listener of world music. She makes an effort to listen to the music that her students are listening to and has brief discussions about it at different intervals throughout the year. This is her way of connecting with children based on her interests, which inextricably facilitates a kind of unique connection that she has with students that no one else in the staff room seems to have.

Underlying principle of enacting inclusion in diversity

In exploring the idea of diversity and difference in the classroom, it is important to understand the vulnerability of that difference in relation to the dominant feature of a given space. If we take a common example, such as left-handedness (10% of people are left-handed) we might find that a left-handed student sits in a different way to be able to write effectively; may struggle with handwriting due to a lack of proper training (and the fact that most writing systems taught in India follow a left-to-right format); and may be perceived as clumsy due to how spaces and objects (desks, scissors, measuring instruments, etc) are designed for right-

handed people. In rarer situations, the child may be labelled negatively for being left-handed. As an educator, one might respond to this by taking necessary steps, such as offering flexible seating so that it helps left-handers, training for handwriting (and/or concessions in handwriting standards) and building awareness towards normalising left-handedness.

Most of these approaches may be common today for left-handedness but when we extend the same to other forms of difference, such as disabilities, learning difficulties or gender identities, where do we stand? At a fundamental level, dealing with such differences is no different from the approach we would take in the case of left-handedness. With disability and other intersectional issues, there are more variables to consider but the starting point should be the same.

From my experience as a teacher-educator, I have found that teachers do not always see this as the starting point. This is because the work of teaching children with disabilities or difficulties is yet to be embraced as the work of regular school teachers and not of the special educator alone. The idea that children with disabilities can only learn from a specialised set of instructions or techniques is a deeply entrenched one. To reiterate, the starting point for the practice of inclusive education is not a set of special strategies or so-called best practices, it is building and making your current practices more inclusive than they are and abandoning those that are exclusionary.

I conclude this essay with the following (interrelated) points:

- As many scholars of inclusive education have highlighted, the mindset of an inclusive educator considers difference or being different as a fundamental part of a person. When we consider this, we will find that the ability-based categories that we might place children in, such as the *good*, *average* or *dull*, will fade away and we will be able to see them as individuals with differences.
- Inclusive practice is less about ‘best practices’ and more about building on what we know (our strengths and interests, as Kavya does through music and Murari through his inquisitiveness about students’ life experiences). Inclusive practice is the development of a kind of pedagogy that enables the participation of all students and is compounded by ideas, such as the ‘growth

mindset' (a belief that one can learn through effort and improve the process of learning and that learning is not an innate ability).

- For inclusion to come into practice, educators need agency (and autonomy) to structure and

practise education in a space where there is liberty and a commitment to ensuring rights for all children to learn, to belong, to grow, and to a life of self-fulfilment.

Endnotes

- i *Supporting Teachers to Develop Inclusive Classrooms* – to watch this webinar, use the link or scan the QR code.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hucxfxN_cA4&t=3063s



References

- Dweck, C., 2017. *Mindset- updated edition: Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential*. Hachette UK.
- Florian, L., 2014. *What counts as evidence of inclusive education?* European Journal of Special Needs Education, 29(3), pp.286–294.
- Florian, L., 2014. *The Sage Handbook of Special Education: Two-volume set, second edition*, SAGE Publications Inc.
- Florian, L., 2015. *Conceptualising inclusive pedagogy: The inclusive pedagogical approach in action*. In *Inclusive Pedagogy Across the Curriculum* (Vol. 7, pp. 11-24). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Hart, S., Drummond, M.J. & McIntyre, D., 2004. *Learning Without Limits*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kar, B. and Sinha, S., 2021. *Disadvantages and Segregation through School Choice*. Economic & Political Weekly, 56(12), p.33.



Madhusudhan Ramesh is a faculty member, School of Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. He teaches Inclusive Education in the postgraduate diploma and master's in education programmes. Prior to this, he was a design researcher in the healthcare sector. Drawing from his experience of being dyslexic, he worked on research projects on disability and inclusive education with NGOs and in 2019, secured a Chevening Scholarship to pursue a master's in inclusive education at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland and has since been committed to developing inclusive practices and teacher professional development and advocate for the rights of children with disabilities. He may be contacted at madhusudhan.ramesh@apu.edu.in

Questioning Gender Boundaries in School

Nidhi Gulati

At school, children line up by gender for various activities, including assembly, physical education classes, and meals. A glance at any classroom reveals clear, sharp gender boundaries. Boys sit in columns of desks placed near the door or at the back of the classroom, and girls occupy the inner spaces of the rooms, far away from the door, but closer to the teachers. These are 'gender territories'- physical or social spaces that are restricted or designated based on gender. There appears to be a persistence of these 'bound' spaces marked by clear divisions where certain areas or activities are dominated by one gender. Interactions across the territories are limited. These territories exist even where there is no practical need, for instance, while entering the library. All children can join in a queue of ones or twos. This article delves into some such questions and possibilities.

How can gender divisions, norms, and practices be interrupted? Once we recognise these practices, we can plan to change them. How can gender-inclusive spaces and practices be fostered? What must schools do? Schools that reflect societal biases when they separate children and assign roles that echo traditional gender norms are also promoting, supporting, and reproducing the stereotypes. This rigid structure keeps girls from being able to lead and instead puts them in roles of care, while boys are pushed to be aggressively competitive, which impacts their mental growth and capacity for empathy.

The impact of gender differentiation is profound: girls internalise the message that their worth is tied to obedience and diligence, which makes them constantly underestimate their capabilities. Boys, conversely, are told that potential is inherent, fostering a culture of entitlement and unchecked ambition. This dynamic hurts individual self-esteem and motivation and primes the next generation to replicate these biases in their personal and work lives. The cycle of structural inequity that stifles both boys and girls from reaching their

potential, is vicious and inescapable. As families change slowly, schools must break the cycle. Only then can each child be enabled to explore a range of abilities without fear, restraint, or ridicule. If schools do not change, where would we find diverse leaders who think critically and empathetically, innovate without prejudice, and contribute to a society that values equity and diversity in every sphere?

Schools can chalk out a plan to interrupt practices and routines that deploy gender. Each actor in the school, including sports and music teachers can draw out their plans. Some of the students in my gender class, training to be teachers, plan changes after observations of classroom routines. Sometimes, they chart out a unit plan with themes, such as challenging gender stereotypes, fostering inclusion, and imagining a gender-equitable school. The strategies used include inviting women from the community to the classroom; discussions around media analysis (what message does an advertisement carry?); focus on women poets; role-play activities (who really is the head of the household?); and biography projects.

Gender territories

In schools, the category of gender is highlighted because of the sheer number of children present. This accentuates a collective form of femininity or masculinity. School structures, training systems, and reward hierarchies amplify aggressive masculinity and docile femininity. Schools reinforce masculinity by seating boys near the door and encouraging competitive sports, while promoting femininity by placing girls near the teacher, encouraging conformity, cooperative activities, and supportive roles.

During school visits, I have often noticed that even when the teachers attempt to interrupt the deliberate reorganisation of gendered territories, children themselves revert to their routine gendered practices. Children question, resist, and produce gender. For instance, girls remind the class

to be silent in the teacher's absence. Some girls take it upon themselves to prepare lists of students who 'talk'. They are not only monitoring the class, but also themselves, as 'good, disciplined girls'.

Schools can downplay the gender category by constant reiterations, such as 'All children can play football'. Concomitantly, schools must empower girls: 'We have a girls' cricket team, and we have to give them time to hone their skills'; 'Historically, we have not let girls lead either in the classroom or the playground - can a girl lead the sports team?'; 'Anyone can run fast if they practise and set their mind to it'; and call both girls and boys to lift furniture, manage the attendance register, etc.

Girls and boys in the playground

A school playground is a place where boys, in larger groups, often occupy the centre field and girls, in cliques of twos or threes remain at the margins, often only walking or talking. Even praise, like 'Oh! You run too fast for a girl!' devalues the entire class of girls. Let us look at some instances from observations at the playgrounds in different schools and see how stereotypes were challenged.

In a private primary school in Delhi, where I was an observer, collecting notes for my research, the class had just settled in after physical education. A teacher asked them, 'What did you play today?' Pat came the reply, 'Football, sir!'. The teacher's response was automatic, 'Nice! What were the girls doing?' One of the girls said, 'Sir, I was the captain!'

A girl, age 10 years shared, 'My class is playing kho-kho. I would too, but I am afraid of getting hurt.' The teacher said, 'I understand your concern about getting hurt, and it's okay to feel that way. For now, go play a little.'

A student interning in a primary school shared that a boy walked up to her and said, 'Teacher, I will run too! Give me a chance. You can make me stand behind the girls (at the starting point), far behind them. Yet, you will see that I will outrun them all.' The teacher said, 'Thank you for your enthusiasm! But for now, let's cheer the others and marvel at how fast they run!'

In primary schools in an urban city, we found that girls and boys, even as young as 8-10 years are organised into separate groups in the races. Girls only compete with other girls and boys with other boys. When boys ran, everyone cheered, but when girls ran, only a few girls cheered for them. During one such race, the teacher shouted to the girls, 'Be careful!', and 'Watch out!'. A girl shouted back, 'It

doesn't matter! I am having fun!'

In a secondary school playground, girls were playing kho-kho. A girl was winning, and soon enough, a boy shouted. 'Oh madam, first take care of your dupatta.' The other children laughed. The girl became conscious and eventually her performance deteriorated. In the next class, the teacher ensured everyone played without restrictive clothing.

Ridicule creates insidious pressure, and metaphors, sneers, and remarks impact self-esteem. How can we interrupt ridicule? Having strict rules against bullying, training for conscious listening, making children less aware and conscious of what they are wearing and more conscious of what they are saying, and speaking openly about the import and impact of words are some ways that help bring sensitivity to interactions.

Gendered division of work

Back in the classroom, boys move furniture and open gates, while girls handle distribution, assist teachers, and manage records, reflecting societal roles. Girls focus on efficiency and care, taking notes, and planning events, while boys are elected as leaders and encouraged to take on leadership roles, like class monitors or team captains.

Boys are trained for public roles, leadership, and formal work, while girls are relegated to domestic and care work, which is undervalued and underpaid. Gender roles are more sharply differentiated across social classes. Lower-class girls are expected to handle domestic responsibilities and acquire basic skills for jobs as adults, while higher-class girls are groomed as partners to successful men, trained in both domestic and leadership roles. I attended a debate in a school, where after a girl presented her arguments, the compere remarked, 'Did you hear how gently and softly she spoke? How beautiful to hear girls debate like this!' Thus, although being trained to become leaders, this girl and all the other girls listening are reminded that they have to be 'ladylike'. The irony was that the entire team of judges comprised women achievers who praised the boys for being soft and the girls for standing their ground!

Yet another aspect of this division of labour is linked to the idea of 'seva', that girls' role in society is to provide care and nurturance. It is often argued that all women/girls are naturally warm and caring and put the needs of others before theirs. There is an inherent flaw in such arguments. These are social roles, not limited to a certain biological category.

Just as it is absurd to claim that tall people make better judgements, it is equally illogical to claim that all girls are naturally more caring and emotional, and all boys are more rational and practical.

Both girls and boys process their roles in school and society by what they are being valued for. A gradual internalisation of the sense of work unfolds – the inner conversations girls have might be like, ‘Teachers value me for giving in, not resisting, and being obedient; I will be recognised and valued for doing tasks that help the school run more efficiently.’ Schools create conditions where girls settle for being disciplined, obedient, and conforming. This pattern can be disturbed where children are allowed to be conforming and non-conforming, obedient and unruly, disciplined and talkative. A teacher can praise a boy for being quieter or a girl for being assertive, thus, making space for all behaviours in the classroom with respect and the capacity to listen.

Girls and boys can be called on equally to help teachers and peers; both genders can be assigned tasks related to classroom cleanliness and maintenance. All competitive sports should have mixed-gender teams, and both genders should be encouraged to develop assertiveness and confidence.

Teacher-student interactions

Another important aspect of the school is teacher-student interactions. Let us look at some instances from classrooms to understand and examine these notions.

Students in a class are creating a ‘dhamaal’ (ruckus). The teacher tells the girls – Why don’t you listen? Why don’t you behave properly? She tells the boys – Why aren’t you serious? How will you earn money and support your family if you’re not serious?

Often, girls are admonished for non-conformity, for not being obedient. While boys who are loud and

brash are scolded, saying, they should be serious and responsible.

A girl and a boy get the same marks in an examination. The teacher tells the girl – ‘Well done! You worked hard!’ The boy is told, ‘You did well! You got all the formulas wrong, but you are sharp, and can do better.’

There are subtle differences in the inherent messages premised on gender. Girls are told that they are valued for their ‘work’, effort, and the hours they put in. Boys are told that they are bright and capable and have ‘potential’ and ‘possibility’.

Teachers can be trained to give feedback that focuses on individual effort and capabilities. Girls and boys can be praised for their critical thinking and problem-solving skills as much as their hard work and diligence. How can we change inner conversations that both girls and boys internalise about their abilities? By creating safe spaces in classrooms where children verbalise their fears, acknowledge them and plan for the future irrespective of what gender they belong to empowering both boys and girls.

In closing

Gender is ubiquitous in the school culture. It impacts every aspect of everyday school life including curriculum content, teacher-student interactions, extracurricular activities, play and social dynamics. Classroom dynamics and the hidden curriculum further accentuate prevalent gendered norms, rather than interrupting them. Teachers, school leaders and all actors in the school must be aware that school culture and school experiences generate meaning for students. To initiate change, the way forward is to bring thinking into our everyday actions, routines and practices at school. It is most important to recognise *who is being told to do what. Who is doing what?* Very consciously, all school actors must be committed to redistributing all roles between the genders.



Nidhi Gulati is a Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Delhi. She engages with education at the levels of field, policy, and pedagogy. Her research straddles the intersection of children’s lives and learning, aspects of school education, teacher identity, popular culture and the nature of childhood. She has been a member of various syllabi, policy and teacher education reform committees. She contributes regularly to a column on film appreciation for children. She may be reached at nidhi.a.gulati@gmail.com

Curiosity about the world around us often provides us with a strong motivation to learn about the world. Encouraging students to ask questions and to help them find answers to their questions can sustain their inherent curiosity and motivate their learning in school. In this article, I share some of my experiences of trying to encourage students to ask questions and my learnings from these practices.

I faced this challenge early in my teaching life. When I started as a starry-eyed, enthusiastic, but naive science teacher in a small alternate school. I was bombarded with questions by an equally enthusiastic group of students. For a new teacher, it was an amazing experience to see that students' daily experiences were triggering these questions. On a rainy day, a class III student came running to me, grappling to keep a slippery frog within their gentle grasp, and asked, 'Why does the frog pee not feel warm to touch as my pee?' Before I could wonder about the possible origin of this question, he obliged and told me the details of how he knew his pee was warm! It was clear to me then that this question, and questions like these, especially of children from early stages, are linked to their observations and experiences. What was not clear to me was how I should respond to students in such a situation.

Counter-questioning as a strategy

In the beginning, I thought that if I gave away the answers to the students, they would be deprived of the learning opportunity. Moreover, I thought, they would develop dependency on me to give all the answers. This was contrary to what I had in mind for them at that time – to help them become independent inquirers. I decided to deal with each question that came to me with a counter-questioning strategy. So, in response to their questions, I would ask them questions, such that the answers to my questions would provide them with hints to the answer to their question. I would frame the counter questions such that they were age- and level-appropriate. This also meant I had to understand their question, formulate the answer,

and then frame the counter-question. It took some time to get used to this strategy.

But instead of becoming curious inquirers, I noticed that the number of questions that the students were asking me began to drop. This, along with their complaint that I never answered their question, clearly pointed to the fact that my strategy of counter-questioning had failed.

The strategy was not a complete failure as such, because it worked well for students of classes V and VI. At this stage, students were transitioning from their home language Marathi to English. They were encountering a lot of new English words whose meaning they did not know. During class, they often asked me the meanings of unfamiliar words, and I modified the counter-questioning strategy into a riddle-making strategy. So, instead of directly giving the meaning of a new word, I would frame sentences using the new word such that the rest of the words in the sentence were familiar to students, and it was easy for them, then, to figure out the meaning of the new word. The students enjoyed solving these riddles and learning in a fun way.

Question box

While reflecting on the previous experience, I realised that I was treating all questions equally. For a small alternate school, this was not such an issue, and we could spend a lot of time perusing the elusive answer. But such an approach, I realised, would require a lot of time and effort if the number of students increased. Not just the number of students, but also other curricular demands of the school, would prove difficult to navigate.

So, when I shifted from the small, alternate school to a larger and more formal school setting, I decided to follow a different strategy. By this time, I had gained some more experience in teaching, and had started reading and discussing classroom experiences with fellow teachers. The idea of a 'question box' was suggested by a colleague.

As we saw in the case of the frog pee question, the wellspring of students' questions could be

varied and could potentially disrupt classroom proceedings. At the same time, I did not want to discourage students from asking questions. The idea of a question box was one of the solutions. At the beginning of the academic year, I asked some students in each section to bring an old shoebox, we decorated it and placed it in the class. I also kept pieces of one-side-used paper slips attached to the box for students to write their questions. Every time anyone had a question, and if that was not directly relevant to the class proceedings, they would write their question and their name on the slip of paper and drop it into the question box. They were also encouraged to drop their questions throughout the day if they wanted. Once in a while, when I finished my planned lesson and had some time to spare, I would open the box to take up a few questions. As a class, we would discuss possible answers and plan further explorations to get answers. At times, we had to seek clarification from the student asking a particular question before proceeding to find answers.

The use of a question box had clear advantages in generating questions, sustaining student interest in questions, and more importantly, in the process of finding answers. Additionally, opening the question box became a much-awaited activity, incentivising the class to finish assigned work on time to be able to have time for the question box. Adding their names along with the questions inculcated a sense of ownership and responsibility among them, allowing sustained interest in the quest.

My learnings

Through these experiences, I want to highlight a few of my key learnings as a teacher:

- The more varied experiences I could provide to students through my pedagogical choices led to more opportunities for them to observe and ask varied questions.
- My choice of approaches to handling student questions depended on the age, existing knowledge of the students, curricular constraints/ and needs, and the nature of the knowledge students sought.
- I preferred balancing between creating ownership towards their questions and providing a safe space to seek genuine information, depending on the context.

Apart from these, there are a few additional points, that, I think, have helped me in my quest to find ways to nurture the curiosity of my students. The most prominent among them is to openly acknowledge limitations to my knowledge. I prefer saying, 'I don't know, but let us/me find out...' allowing me to not only get myself some space to find reliable answers or frame an appropriate response for the situation but also demonstrate to the students that they too can find answers if they do not know something. Secondly, I think providing students with a safe space to ask questions plays an equally important role in encouraging them to ask more questions. This safe space also includes how we look at their mistakes and ours. In the end, we should keep in mind that having a class full of questions is a joint adventure for all involved!



Anagh Purandare is a teacher at Azim Premji School, Bengaluru. As a biology and science teacher, his interest lies in how children learn science and other interesting facts and phenomena. He can be reached at anagh.purandare@azimpremjifoundation.org

Fostering a Culture of Inclusion

An Account from a Classroom

Ananya Banerjee

The Government Primary School (PS) Bamhanpali, Raigarh, Chhattisgarh stands beside a long road that connects Bamhanpali village with the small town of Kharsia. The location of the school is convenient for both, students and teachers. On entering the school, the first thing one sees are the huge mounds of rubble that have been dumped on its premises. Inside the building, students of classes III, IV and V occupy the hall and the students of classes I and II sit in a room beside the hall. Though there is another room, it is not being used as the structure is falling apart - there was an accident during Diwali when the ceiling fan fell, but since the students were on vacation, no one was hurt.

The children who study in this school live in the village Bamhanpali. This village community has a mixed caste structure with mostly members belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Class (OBC) categories and a few belonging to tribal communities. The children's parents' occupations vary from farming and fishing to working as migrant labourers (mostly in Mumbai). The children from these migrant workers' families live with their grandparents or other relatives.

The purpose of my visit was to observe the class of Pandey sir, the Head Teacher at the school, who teaches maths and environmental studies. I have had a few conversations with him previously and knew he loves reading books and has spirited discussions around them in his class. His classes usually have a good mix of science and stories. That day, the class (mixed group of classes III, IV, and V) was reading a chapter on *Ants* from *Looking Around*, NCERT Class V, Environmental Studies textbook.

Classroom interaction

Pandey sir started the class with a discussion on the basic information about ants and asked if the children had seen ants around them. As expected, the students responded with a resounding yes! Then they started relating their experiences. One child mentioned that in his house, he sees the big black ants with pincers. Once, one of those bit

him and he had a fever for one day. Another child mentioned that he has seen red ants every time any food is left unattended, and it gets difficult to get rid of them as they bite. Yet another student added that she loves the small black ants as they do not hurt anyone, and it makes her tickle when one lands on her and starts crawling.

Pandey sir listened to every word they said and sometimes joined the conversation to encourage every student to share their thoughts. Next, he moved on to the chapter and started reading from the textbook. After every section, he would pause and ask the children if they were following what he was reading. If there were any queries, he answered them. At the end of the chapter, the children were a bit confused about the anatomy of an ant, they were comparing it with the human body and could not understand how an ant with six legs along the length of the body could function. Pandey sir proposed that the next day, they would look at an ant under the microscope to help them better understand the anatomy of an ant. This suggestion brought a roar of approval as the students got excited to be able to use a microscope.

While all this was happening, one student was talking animatedly with her friend, and they were engrossed in their conversation. Pandey sir noticed this and asked them to share what they were talking about. The student got up but hesitated to speak. When she spoke, she shared that in her community, they also ate ants. She looked around anxiously wondering how her classmates would react to this unusual practice. But before her classmates could say anything, Pandey sir called her to the front of the class, and then he mentioned to the class that ants are also a great source of protein and many people consume them. He then asked the girl to explain how they cook and eat ants. She shared that they first collect ants and then grind them with salt and chilli powder because if they do not do so, it can cause fever. After grinding them, they make the ground paste into balls, fry and eat them. Pandey sir then asked what happens if they get a fever after consuming ants, and the girl replied if

that happens, they just sleep with a wet cloth over their head for the night and the fever usually goes away by the next morning. The class ended with this.

Reflection

A pivotal moment in the classroom occurred when a student shared her cultural practice of consuming ants, and instead of dismissing the practice, Pandey sir seized the opportunity to explore the cultural significance of the practice, thereby fostering respect for diverse cultural identities within the classroom from an early stage. This inclusive attitude aligns with the principles of multicultural education, which advocates the celebration of diversity and the promotion of different cultural experiences among students.

P.S. Bamhanpali and Pandey sir exemplify the resilience of educators in fostering inclusive learning environments. The school embraces a philosophy of inclusivity, striving to accommodate the diverse needs of its students.

In essence, my experience at P.S. Bamhanpali reaffirms my belief in the transformative potential of inclusive education. By embracing diversity,

promoting equity, and fostering a culture of inclusion, we can create a holistic learning environment where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. Through ongoing commitment and collaboration, we can continue to build inclusive learning communities that celebrate diversity and promote the holistic development of all students.

By removing barriers and encouraging equal opportunities, inclusive practices cultivate a sense of belonging and acceptance among students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and abilities. This celebration of diversity nurtures empathy, understanding, and respect among students, contributing to the foundation of a more inclusive and unified society.

Additionally, inclusive practices play a fundamental role in reducing stigma and discrimination, they challenge stereotypes, and create a more inclusive environment for all, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive.

A positive classroom culture is essential for student learning as it creates an environment where students feel safe, supported, and motivated to engage actively in the learning process.



Ananya Banerjee is a Resource Person at Azim Premji Foundation, Raipur, Chhattisgarh. Prior to this role, she was teaching in the Department of Sociology, St. Xavier's College, Bardhaman, West Bengal. Her academic background comprises an MPhil in Sociology, and she has a keen interest in conducting field-based research in the domain of education. She may be reached at ananya.banerjee@azimpremjifoundation.org

Establishing a Non-Threatening School Environment | An Account from a Classroom

Anil S Angadiki

'The school environment is okay, and you are taking care of our child more than we do, but there is a need to keep students under control, otherwise, they will not follow anyone's instructions.'

'Since you are not punishing children, my child has started retorting to me, which should not happen.'

'If you don't have control over your students in the classroom, then how will you teach them?'

'This is not the right method of teaching students in school, we have not seen this before; it may spoil them.'

Many more such observations and suggestions would come from the parents whenever we met them during parent-teacher meetings or home visits. This would also come from other stakeholders who visited our school children during the initial years of the establishment of the Azim Premji School, Yadgir. (one of the six Azim Premji Schools started across the country in 2012). The school started in a godown with some modifications to run classes as the permanent premises were under construction.

The reactions and responses mentioned earlier were received regularly as we set out to establish a fear-free environment without physical punishment, mental harassment or discrimination.

In 2012, 32 students enrolled in class I. They were all from the nearby villages and most of them were first-generation school-goers. We were equipped with our school policy and guidelines which largely had components based on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009, National Education Policy, and National Curriculum Framework. There was a team of leaders and resource persons from the Field Institutes of Azim Premji Foundation, having experience in working with alternative schools, NGOs or the public education system, who supported us in building our capacities to practise and gain experience in establishing a belief system in the school based on the principle that *any child without stress or fear, having good relationships, and consistent opportunities to participate/*

contribute, will gain confidence and become competent in learning and expression. Achieving this was very important for all of us to demonstrate the possibility of building such an environment and its positive impact on the learning of children.

Our challenges

The main hurdles we faced were:

- We, the teaching faculty, had previously worked in schools that had formal setups and mostly believed in punishment to help children learn and become responsible individuals.
- The parents, who had no idea about a 'fear-free' school environment were completely against this ideology.
- The children, who joined our school without school readiness made the teachers' attempts at dialogues to resolve conflicts or follow instructions, very difficult.

We needed to remain steadfast in our convictions to effect change through our beliefs and practices.

To make the learning environment stress-free, we built a setup where children could come into the classroom at their will. In the beginning, when we called them inside, most of them would remain outside, playing, sitting alone or wandering around the campus. This brought forth several challenges – some students would cross the school boundary and run into the adjacent fields to go back to their villages. We had to run after them to bring them back. There were instances when a few children became aggressive and used abusive words. The patience and how teachers dealt with these behaviours were exactly the opposite of how they were treated at home for such actions. This played a key role in establishing positive feelings among students.

We started having regular dialogues in groups and one-to-one interactions on the behavioural aspects whenever an issue was observed. We started teaching them how to converse with others, particularly to avoid using abusive language; and how to resolve conflicts. A few other activities, like

film screenings in smaller groups using laptops; and indoor activities, like storytelling and role plays, started helping us build a positive relationship with students. This led them to spend more time inside the classroom. Over time, except for one or two students, almost all started coming to class on time and participating in class activities.

Engaging children

We started engaging with the children by reciting action rhymes; starting the class with story narration and art activities, like drawing, painting, and clay art; and screening short films/videos. These were enjoyed by all students. Outdoor activities included taking them around the campus (nature walk), discussing and observing, involving students in gardening activities, group games, and establishing rules for the games. Also, using a variety of displays prepared jointly by teachers and students for language and mathematical concepts helped in their participation in learning.

All these activities while based on the curriculum, also contributed to developing the basic values of

playing and working together and supporting and helping each other. The use of examples during dialogues and discussions in the class and assembly helped students understand the importance of positive behaviours. For example, the morning assembly started providing a supportive space to keep the students seated in one place while performing/watching activities, discussing school-related matters, experience sharing etc. This made them ready for the next routines of the school.

The teachers sitting beside the students during class and mid-day meals; joint efforts in keeping the premises clean; and all other school activities consciously modelled equal treatment for all, avoiding discrimination and setting up non-hierarchical conditions. Most of the activities/and practices built a good relationship between students and teachers. Students started expressing their thoughts and views during class and even began sharing personal experiences, like challenges in their families, etc.



Figure 1. Film screening in a classroom.

Setting up processes

Gradually, we started developing rules for classrooms and the school through discussions with students, for example, seating arrangements, keeping things neatly in their allotted place, using dustbins, using washrooms properly, waiting for their turns to speak, not using abusive language or hitting others, not wasting food etc. Initially, a few simple and practical rules were made and displayed in and outside the classroom, which were referred to during dialogues whenever conflicts arose.

All of us, teachers, had regular team meetings for discussions on our experiences, the challenges and what we could do to improve the situation. Books, like *Divaswapna* by Gijubhai Badheka, *Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window* by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, *The Diary of a School Teacher* by Hemaraj Bhat, *Summerhill* by A S Neill etc., were read and discussed by us in groups. We started the practice of observing each other's classes and using recordings of our own classes to understand the positive aspects, especially, the pedagogical aspects to establish a child-centred practice, manage the class better, and get better participation from the children. Regular parent-teacher meetings also helped us maintain a continuous dialogue to convey our practice and parents' responsibilities at home.

These practices continued through the academic year and facilitated setting up the school culture. It was a surprise for all of us when the second batch of students on joining school, started sitting in the classroom, actively participating in activities without much effort by the teachers. We attributed

this to the new students having observed the senior batch, which strengthened our belief and conviction around the possibility of establishing a non-threatening culture in the school.

'Freedom with responsibility'

To make students responsible, we started establishing a few democratic practices, like setting up committees to manage school routines. Every student in the school became part of one of these committees and got involved in the decision-making, keeping everyone informed, taking part in the execution, and working on life skills, like handling emotions and problem-solving through forums, such as *School Mahasabha* (general assembly). Providing spaces for students to express themselves, celebrating events meaningfully, and designing a variety of activities within and outside the classroom helped us set up our school society.

From the experiences of different schools, such as the example of A S Neill in *Summerhill*, we assessed what and how their learnings could be adapted to our setting. This evolved into what we consider 'freedom with responsibility' – as teachers (including the principal), we are not just responsible for setting up practices, but also accountable for the sense of responsibility these would build among the students. We observed and negotiated our interventions in committee meetings, asking ourselves questions like: Where should I, as a teacher, give my opinion? To what extent should my suggestions influence the committee's decisions regarding the functioning of the school?



Figure 2. Students enjoying activities outside the classroom.

All our students and their parents are happy about the caring and non-threatening practices in the school and the number of enrolments has gone up remarkably. During the journey of creating this culture, a few teachers who had a different mindset, either left or were asked to leave, which in turn supported all the stakeholders to persevere

in realising this shared goal. Our children have been praised for their good behaviour and confident body language by outsiders, particularly school teachers from government schools in other districts. This kind of recognition and feedback keeps us motivated to achieve more in this direction and work on recognising and filling any gaps that may exist.



Figure 3. Outdoor activities retained children's interest in learning.



Figure 4. Children's schoolwork being shared with their parents.



Figure 5. Children gradually got used to school routines.



Anil S Angadiki has been with the Azim Premji Foundation since 2012 and currently works at the Azim Premji School in Yadgir, Karnataka. Prior to joining the Foundation, he taught Chemistry to classes XI and XII. He may be contacted at anil.angadiki@azimpremji.org

Creating a Culture of Strong School, Parents and Community Ties

Arddhendu Shekhar Dash

The holistic development of students is best achieved when schools, parents, and the community collaborate closely. By fostering strong relationships with both the community and parents, schools can offer more learning opportunities, and access valuable resources and local knowledge. Given that children spend significant time with their families and community, schools need to plan regular, structured engagement with parents and the community as a part of school culture for the development of the students.

At the Azim Premji School, Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh, we have been organising engagements with parents and the community to understand the community, build strong relationships, and create a supportive learning environment for our students. In planning these engagements, we have carefully considered the timing when community members would be available to ensure the effectiveness of the engagements. Here are some practices our school has implemented over the past few years to create a positive learning environment. I hope this will help other schools in their engagement with community members.

Orientation of parents

Every parent aspires that their child should get the best education from the school they go to. But in most cases, parents do not know their role in the learning and development of the child. In most families, parents do not spend time with their children to discuss their learning and progress, so their curricular expectations are also not clear. To overcome this challenge, we organise several need-based orientation programmes for parents.

- **Curricular support:** With the parents of children in the Foundational Stage, we discuss the curricular expectations for different grades, the approach to teaching, and how they can support their child at home. After the workshop, we have seen an increase in the number of parents involved in providing academic support to their children, and parents have contacted teachers with queries on homework, etc.
- **Storytelling:** The easiest and most effective way to connect parents and children is through storytelling. We conduct storytelling workshops in which we show parents how gestures, voice modulation, the use of props, and asking



Figure 1. A parents' workshop in progress.

questions at the end of the story can make the process more effective. We also provide a few stories to parents and encourage them to tell these to their children and share their experiences. We tell them how storytelling helps in the development of language skills. After the workshop, parents share videos of their storytelling at home and the videos reflect positive outcomes.

- **Good habits:** There is an orientation programme for all parents on food habits and homework. We discuss the importance of having eggs and milk for good health and nutrition and its impact on children's learning. Despite religious beliefs, most parents generally agree to their children consuming eggs. We also discuss the importance of keeping aside a specific time for their child to study at home and complete their homework. After the workshop, many of the students start dedicating a few hours at home to completing their homework.

Inviting parents and the community to school events

All the events organised at school play an important role in demonstrating the culture of the school, areas of interest of children, and the bond between the school, parents, and the community. The events at our school are all designed to facilitate the active participation of parents and the community, and we invite all of them to participate.

- **Annual Sports Day** is the most eagerly awaited event of our school where children, parents, community and teachers come together and participate in different sports activities. All of them forget their age and roles and play together in a friendly manner and enjoy themselves. This event helps in building good communication and relationships among them, reduces barriers between teachers and the community, and makes parents feel comfortable sharing their views with teachers.
- **Bal Shodh Mela** showcases the school's teaching-learning processes and helps the community understand the importance of its contribution to these processes. In this event, children from different schools work on one or more issues and present their understanding through models, charts, and discussions. It helps them explore and understand the issue and possible solutions and present them to a large audience. Teachers and the community ask children questions and realise that learning is not limited to textbooks. This brings into focus the importance of local knowledge, how learning relates to their real life and different ways of solving problems. Community members feel motivated by seeing the confidence of the children on various issues and the event broadens their understanding of education.



Figure 2. Parents and community members visiting a Bal Shodh Mela at school.

- **National festivals:** We invite parents and all members of the community to participate in all national festivals at school. Children feel enthused to showcase their skills and perform in front of their parents and community, who in turn encourage them.
- **Parent-teacher meetings:** Every quarter, we organise a parent-teacher meeting in which the teachers discuss the learning progress of each student with their parents. They also share some of their observations and how both school and parents can contribute to the learning and development of the child. The teachers also communicate the efforts of the school for the betterment of the students.
- **School community network meeting:** In these meetings, the school shares its overall progress in academics, achievements and the School Improvement Plan (SIP). We discuss the expectations of the community and how the school and the community can work together for the benefit of all children. Since these members are representatives of different communities, they interact with parents regarding issues, such as attendance, and better focus on the learning of identified students. They take ownership of the smooth functioning of the school and also share some expectations of the community, such as children's exposure to skills like sports and music after school.

Organising events in villages

It is important for the school to reach out to the community and find certain platforms to conduct activities and planned interactions with them. These events focus on building awareness of social issues and providing a platform for students to build confidence in performing before large audiences. In our school, some of the performances of students and teachers are meant to create awareness of social issues in the community.

- **Performance by students and teachers:** We have performed *Nukad Nataks* in various villages with messages, such as a clean and healthy society and the harmful effects of using smartphones constantly. The dance and songs in these performances reflect the state's culture and traditions. We also conduct games and drawing activities that encourage all age groups to participate and enjoy. We have seen some old people get emotional during these activities as they recall their childhood. Through these events, the community understands the culture of the school and is happy to associate with it.
- **Community Learning Centre:** Considering the context of our community, one of the challenges we observed was that most of the students are not involved in any academic or constructive



Figure 3. A nukkad natak performance by the students in a village.

activities after school hours. With the help of some influential members of the community, we established a Community Learning Centre in the village where children would get a space to learn and do some creative activities in the evening. The community took ownership of starting the centre and we provided the storybooks and stationery. The children of classes III to VIII gather at the centre for around one and a half hours every evening and complete their homework, listen to stories, and conduct some cultural events. Providing this type of space for children helps in peer learning and encourages the role of community in the development of children.

- **Summer camp at villages:** We know that continuity in the teaching-learning process is important for students. To maintain the continuity of teaching and learning and use the holiday time for creative engagement, we organise summer camps in different villages. With the support of community members, we have identified locations in each village where, with the help of alumni and teachers, we conduct these camps. We work for two hours in the morning with students on maths, language, art, music and physical education and assign projects to them to complete during the holidays. The community appreciates these efforts by the school to support the learning of their children.

Visiting the homes of students

Understanding the community and the socio-cultural and economic conditions of students is crucial for teachers to know their students and helps in creating effective and responsive teaching plans. The teachers visit the homes of students and interact with the parents and other family members to try and understand things like the students' responsibilities at home and factors that impact their learning in school. New teachers who join our school also visit and interact with the community to get an overall understanding of the context from which their students come. This helps not only in building good relationships with parents, the community, and children but also helps in planning lessons.

It is through regular and planned interactions that we established close ties with parents and the community. By making interactions with them a part of our regular work with the students, this mutual respect and support is now an integral part of our school culture.



Arddhendu Shekhar Dash is the Principal of Azim Premji School, Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh. Prior to this, he was a Resource Person at Azim Premji Foundation. He has a master's in mathematics and has been working closely with teachers on maths-related issues. He conducts workshops on conceptual understanding and pedagogical strategies used in teaching maths. He enjoys doing maths with children and is deeply interested in exploring and designing tech resources. He is also engaged in the process of designing the curriculum for Open Distance Learning and writing textbooks for Chhattisgarh. He may be contacted at arddhendu@azimpremjifoundation.org

Reading is not only for learning purposes but also for fun, entertainment, and healing. Reading helps us learn new words and skills, enables us to think critically, challenges our viewpoints, shows us new perspectives, fuels our imagination, makes us curious and prompts us to explore different beliefs and cultures of the world.

Eklavya Foundationⁱ provided sets of children's literature to some Government Primary Schools and Mohalla Learning Activity Centres (MLACs)ⁱⁱ located in the rural areas of Pipariya Block, Madhya Pradesh. These sets for classes I-V included, selected Hindi, English, and bilingual storybooks and poems published by different publications, such as Eklavya Publication, Pratham Books, Muskan Foundation, and Ektara Publication.

As part of the MLAC team, we undertook the initiative to build a reading culture among students and teachers at the Government Primary School and the community in Silari, a village in the Pipariya block of Madhya Pradesh.

Baal Mela for students and teachers

The MLA Centre, which was earlier run at a

volunteer's residence, has now shifted to the government school. As part of our work, we had to encourage students and teachers to read more books. The first thing we decided to do to create an interest in reading, was to conduct a *Baal Mela*, in which all the activities were planned around books and reading.

We displayed a variety of books, including *Big Books*, short stories, poetry, picture books, and bilingual books. The students and teachers were left to explore these by themselves. Along with this, we conducted several activities focusing on books, such as read-alouds, action songs, storytelling, book-talk, story-writing, drawing, completing stories, role plays, Pictionary and Treasure Hunt etc. During the activities, there were many questions and queries from both teachers and students. All seemed very excited and actively participated in each activity. These activities are otherwise also regularly conducted at the MLACs.

After the *mela*, we had a discussion with the teachers in which we talked to them about the activities conducted, the idea behind each and



Figure 1. A drawing made by a student after reading a storybook.

how these activities support learning and the love for reading. We shared insights, such as how these activities are planned, how suitable books for each activity are identified; and even how to create clues for a game like Treasure Hunt.

The teachers were curious and eager to learn. They shared that they receive books for the school but have no idea how to use them effectively. Students have many textbooks and exercise books that leave them with no time to read or explore other books. Also, the teachers' main fear seemed to be that the books would not be handled properly by students and if damaged, they would be answerable to the administration. This last point was the main reason that they kept books in boxes and did not want children to use them.

This fear of the consequences of books being damaged by children had to be dealt with. But this could not be done in one go. So, we started having regular conversations with teachers regarding the advantages of reading, including how they support children's learning. We carried out more book activities with teachers and head teachers during school visits, introducing them to different categories and genres of books.

The result of these efforts is that now when I visit the school, I see teachers facilitating some of the book activities that we shared with them earlier. Their worry about children damaging books, which stopped them from allowing them to read books, has also changed. They are all enjoying children's literature; the head teacher has even started writing stories for children.

Now, students proactively lead most of the book activities. They have also taken up the responsibility for maintaining the books in good condition and have set up a 'book hospital' to repair torn and damaged books. They have a book issue register where they enter the details before taking books home. Writings and drawings that are made by them have been put up on the walls. The academic progress of the children is evident and so are their confidence levels and transformed perspectives in their writings, thoughts, and conversations. Beyond these, when students borrow books and take them home, their family members also get a chance to read books.

Reading Mela for the community

To extend this reading culture beyond the school to the community of Silari village, we invited parents of students for a meeting, where we discussed the importance of reading; and shared the daily plans of reading activities that we conduct at the MLAC and the objectives and outcomes of these. We shared the learnings and progress of children as a result of these activities.

When we asked them about their interest in books, their responses were (i) we have an interest in reading but do not have access to books (ii) we are illiterate, that our children are getting an education, is enough (iii) we are daily wage labourers, we do not have time to read or (iv) we do not see any use of reading books.

We did not have ready answers for these. Instead, we planned a 'Reading Mela' at the *Gram*



Figure 1. The Community Reading Mela at Gram Panchayat, Silari.

Panchayat office of Silari village, where, along with parents, other community members, including the *Sarpanch* and *Sachiv* also gathered. We had planned several book activities in which they could all easily engage. For the read-aloud, we chose *Mizbaan*, a collection of Bundelkhandi folk stories as this is the language they speak in this region. Another fun activity was 'collaborative art' where everyone had to draw something to connect it with others' drawings. We could see them all enjoying, having discussions, asking questions, and exploring books. At the end of the *mela*, we asked everyone if they wanted to borrow books to take home to read. No one showed willingness for this.

After a few months, during the parents' meeting, we did the same activities again. This time, some of

the parents themselves asked whether they could take some books home. This was the breakthrough moment that I had waited for! Currently, in the village of Silari, there is a small community library run by volunteers. Community members borrow and read books regularly.

From worrying about the vast syllabus to complete or that students might damage books to making an effort to understand and facilitate reading activities, teachers from the Government Primary School, Silari, have come a long way. Setting up libraries is only the first step in creating a culture of reading, building the habit of reading through various other initiatives to sustain interest in reading requires time and consistent work.

Endnotes

- i Eklavya Foundation is a non-profit, non-government organisation based in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh that develops and field tests innovative educational programmes.
- ii Mohalla Learning Activity Centres (MLACs) are run in a few villages in the Narmadapuram district of Madhya Pradesh. Facilitated by volunteers from the villages, these are run for two hours before school starts. Along with academic subjects, other hands-on activities, fun games, etc., are also conducted.



Melody Xalxo works as a Project Associate with the Eklavya Foundation. She works in the Holistic Initiative Towards Educational Change Project (HITEC) at the Pipariya block of Madhya Pradesh. She has done her MA from Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She enjoys reading children's literature with students and teachers. She also enjoys painting, and writing and has a keen interest in nature education. She can be contacted at melody.xalxo18_mae@apu.edu.in

A School Where all Students Feel Safe, Valued, and Seen

Priyanka D

On one of my visits to the Government Higher-Primary School (GHPS) Goravanahalli (Maddur, Karnataka), I saw a primary-grade student, Pranitha playing the role of a teacher in the classroom. She was imitating her teacher, Savitha Ma'am with whom I have closely worked for a few years. Pranitha asked the class, 'Dear students, are you ready to listen to a new story today? Shall I begin with a rhyme or an activity, what would you like?' (She waited for everyone's response). The students gave multiple responses. Anil said, 'Let's begin with a rhyme'; Preeti replied, 'Can you teach the song you sang the last time, ma'am'? Many others said they wanted to play a game. After listening to them all, Pranitha said, 'We shall take up what most of you want (most of them had said they wanted to play a game). Okay, let's play a game.' Then, looking at a student, she said, 'Rajesh, you should listen carefully to me, okay *magu* (child)? Did you work on the school map project?' Rajesh replied, 'Yes, but it is not yet complete.' Pranitha replied, 'Okay, no problem. We will do it in the evening.' This went on until the teacher arrived. It is quite common to see students pretending to be the teacher in their absence – wielding a stick to show authority, sitting on the teacher's chair, speaking in a stern voice, and giving commands. This was different.

In this instance, the student, throughout the conversation, addressed her classmates as '*magu*', asked for majority views, was gentle, and appreciated their efforts. The student used the terms that were generally used by her teacher and behaved in the way the teacher did. She believed that being humane, demonstrating fairness, and showing love were the traits of a teacher.

Building a relationship

This school remains open till 5.30 PM. After 4.30 PM, the teacher and students gather at the school grounds and engage in various activities. They sing, play games, talk about things happening in the village, and do project work, crafts or homework together. Evening walks are a common practice on this school campus spread over three acres. The

teacher and students go around to look at the trees and plants – there are more than a hundred trees, including coconut, jackfruit, mango, teakwood, tamarind, banana, neem, etc. The students have also grown greens and vegetables in some patches.

I have had the opportunity to spend some evenings at this school watching them. So, I asked the teacher how this positive relationship was built. She told me, 'Students talk and express themselves when they are given space. Students here feel free to shout, run around, ask questions and talk about anything that comes to their mind. Every evening is different, and we are open to new things.' Indeed, the students seem to feel warm, heard, and safe around her. They stay until the teacher leaves the school. This has become a regular practice, and parents know that their children are safe at school.

When students come to the teacher with conflicts, she listens to both sides, asks for reasons, and shares her views, gently guiding them. She does not believe in punishment, instead, she helps them reflect on their acts. She says, 'Students look for the teacher's validation, so, I try my best to balance my emotions, not saying things that are unpleasant or hurtful to them.' When the students ask her about something she does not know, she never hesitates to say, 'I don't know this, but tomorrow, I will find out. If not, all of us will try to find the answer.' Savitha Ma'am tells parents to regularly ask their children what they are learning at school. This, she believes motivates the students to learn.

How was the school transformed?

It has been nine years since Savitha Ma'am joined this school. The situation was not the same then. Students were not regular to school. Since a large section of the community is engaged in manual work, mainly in garment factories or as daily wagers, they were unable to pay any attention to their children's learning. Sometimes, the children were left at home to take care of their younger siblings. Savitha Ma'am visits students' homes and communities. She says, 'Knowing students' backgrounds is the key to building a good relationship with them. Also, the

more we know, the more sensitively we behave.'¹ There were also safety issues at school. After school, unknown community members and senior students used to enter the school campus and misuse the property, also engaging in activities, like drinking, playing cards, etc. The Head Teacher, School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) members, and teachers, together made some efforts to deal with these issues. The children were made aware of the problem, and they started convincing their parents to not damage school property and help with safeguarding the school. With the support of the community, these activities stopped.

Apart from this, the teachers and the Head Teacher made concerted efforts to build awareness of the importance of education. Enlisting the help of senior students, they took the following initiatives:

- Organised meaningful celebrations of national festivals during which students presented plays on constitutional values for parents, panchayat members, and the community
- Held meetings with the women of the community on girls' issues during periods
- Displayed students' learning in small exhibitions regularly
- Most teachers tried not to take leave for many years to set an example for their students. This resulted in a hundred percent attendance of most students
- Provided special care to students whose parents were alcohol addicts, speaking with each one

of them regularly to understand how they were feeling at home and in school

Visible signs of transformation

- Parents used to call students in the middle of the class through the windows (the windows face the road). Now parents take permission before entering the class and calling students through the windows has completely stopped.
- Parents visit the school during parents' meetings, 'Samudayadatta shale'ⁱ meetings, during functions, and make regular visits to drop off and pick up their child. Teachers interact with parents and update them about their child's learning. Not just academic but non-academic progress is shared and discussed during these meetings.
- All students engage in all the school activities without fear or reluctance; no student is left behind. Students engaging in school-, taluk- and district-level competitions have created hope in parents about the school. The school has won top prizes in *Pratibha Karanji*ⁱⁱ for nine consecutive years at the cluster and taluk levels.
- Students assume leadership roles and plan cultural activities. Almost all students have taken part in stage programmes, like anchoring, planning activities, etc.
- The school has built a culture where senior students guide their juniors.
- Regularly, during the morning assembly, there are quizzes and sharing of new things that students have learnt.



Figure 1. Students learning in pairs outdoors as the teacher guides them.

- Children care for each other, treat each other with respect, and no longer use abusive language.

Savitha Ma'am says, 'Values are mutually learnt. Students should think of the school as their space, a place to grow, achieve, and be happy. The school should help children develop self-confidence and make them feel safe. Our attitudes and positive

relationships with students play an important role in this. We should let them know that we have hope for them, so they feel responsible and do better than how they are doing. We should be careful about how we treat them. Students remember the way we treat them, and they should cherish this later in their lives. They deserve the respect we give them.'

This article is based on a study conducted during 2018-19 in the Maddur block, Mandya district, Karnataka.

**Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



Figure 2. Every child is encouraged to participate and each one's voice is heard.

Endnotes

- Samudayadatta shaale* is a designated day for teachers, SDMC members, parents and volunteers to come together to create the School Improvement Plan.
- Prathiba Karanji* is a programme for school students where cultural and literary competitions are conducted at cluster, block, district and state levels.



Priyanka D completed her master's in education from Azim Premji University and joined the Azim Premji Foundation as a Campus Associate in 2016. Currently, she coordinates the work of the Foundation in the Ramanagara district, Karnataka. She has been part of language resource development and has contributed to *Kalika Chetharike* and *Jaadui Pitara* (NCF-FS). She enjoys working with teachers and children; planning and demonstrating progressive classroom teaching and learning processes in language. She may be contacted at Priyanka.d@azimpremjifoundation.org

I have had the opportunity to observe and understand several schools and have realised that the reason a school is good, and the children are happy and are learning well is that the atmosphere or the culture of that school is 'different'. The most important aspect of this culture is the feeling of ownership and responsibility that the students, teachers, and parents have for the school. This article discusses some special features that are generally found in such schools.

Knowing their students

The first and most important aspect is that the teachers in these schools have a good understanding of the social and economic situation of their students. They address the students by their names and create a fear-free environment in which students interact naturally with them. The teachers make sure that the social status of the students does not affect their personality development in the school, nor hinder their learning.

In such schools, the teachers also know when and why their students remain absent from their classes. They interact directly with the parents and these interactions are spontaneous and natural. The teachers are aware and sensitive to the problems faced by the parents. In the rural context, it has been observed that children lend a helping hand at home during harvest and sowing seasons. When the children remain absent from their classes, teachers spend extra time to help them.

Such teachers have a good understanding and sensitivity regarding the students' language/dialect, food habits, living conditions and circumstances. They make efforts to understand the local language and how students refer to local items, conditions, expressions or feelings.

Active learning

The second aspect that can be seen is that in these schools, the children accept responsibility for their

learning. They can be seen helping each other earnestly during the teaching-learning process. The teachers create an atmosphere in the classroom where students learn from each other.

I have also realised that teachers in such schools have a solid understanding of the interests of the students and what is unique about each one. They make lesson plans for their classes based on this understanding. They also know exactly what the learning levels of their students are, and based on this, students are grouped and regrouped frequently.

Such teachers work actively to ensure that the children learn to take responsibility for themselves, become responsible individuals, develop leadership qualities, and become strong physically and mentally. It can also be seen that in such schools, the students have an easy relationship with their teachers and like to be in the company of their teacher. They can often be seen holding their notebooks/workbooks and asking the teacher to give them more work to do.

Meeting parents' expectations

The third aspect that I have understood is that teachers have a good grasp of parents' expectations and to meet these expectations, they put in hard work and effort in the teaching-learning processes of their students. They conduct regular monthly and quarterly meetings with the parents/guardians and consider it their responsibility to inform them of what their children are learning at school. Often, they also convey where the children require special attention. The current needs and issues that concern parents are discussed, such as their wish for their children to learn English. The cooperation of the parents is visible in different ways in the school, for example, in the construction of the school building and its maintenance (beautifying the surroundings).

Adherence to constitutional values

The fourth aspect that I have understood is that there are also many social problems in our village

societies, such as caste and gender discrimination, or prejudices against other religions or economically weaker sections. In such schools, the teachers seem to realise that educational institutions are bound by our constitutional values and the purpose of the school is to develop sensible and good (better) citizens and to create a milieu that is free from discrimination. A good understanding of this can be seen in the thoughts and behaviour of the teachers. Hence, they make all the practices in the school free of discrimination. They discuss this with the parents too. The effect of these efforts by the teachers can be seen in the form of positive changes among the parents, and consequently, society.

Focus on foundational skills

The fifth important aspect that can be discerned is that teachers in such schools focus on their students' foundational skills and understanding of concepts instead of rote learning. Notably, I have found that these teachers unequivocally understand that reading and writing, thinking and contemplation, imagination and logic, etc., are skills which form the foundation on which education rests. Hence, proper attention is given to building such skills in these schools.

I have also found that children in these schools are enthusiastic about learning and have an interest in reading and writing. Children put across their views without fear or hesitation. The teachers emphasise that the responsibility for their learning lies with each student; and that the teacher is there merely to aid this process. In their classes, the children can often be heard saying, 'Sir/Madam, what shall we read next? What shall we write? Shall we read the next lesson? etc.' I have never heard these teachers say that they get tired of teaching. I have also seen that when school gets over, students do not seem to be in a hurry to go back home.

Students' sense of ownership

This brings me to the sixth aspect, which is that children have a major role to play in the running of these schools. The participation of the students in the organisation of the school, in conducting the daily prayer session, games, various programmes organised in the school, and national festivals/celebrations is important. The children have a sense of belonging because of which the buildings look neat, tidy and safe in such schools. I often get to hear from many teachers that some anti-social elements from the village misuse the school premises after

school hours. But in such schools, the students and their parents keep a sharp eye on this and consider it their responsibility to keep the school buildings safe and secure. The students and their guardians feel that the school is a property that belongs to them as part of their village community, and it is their responsibility to ensure that it is safe.

School head's leadership

The seventh aspect is the role of the school heads in such schools and their able leadership. The school heads have clarity regarding the aims and objectives of education. They believe that their responsibility is not just to teach children various subjects, but to also work towards developing good citizens and a better society. Their interactions with the children are natural and spontaneous and they regard children with love, giving them advice from time to time.

They set themselves up as models for the school and have friendly, yet professional relationships with the teachers. They keep in mind that they have to provide the necessary facilities to ensure that the teachers enjoy their teaching tasks. They are alert to the problems related to teaching being faced by teachers and if needed, they also take the help of the concerned departments or institutions to resolve these.

These school heads also conduct timely inspections in the school to stay abreast of the learning status of the children. They provide opportunities for the students to participate, as well as perform well in various sports and cultural competitions at the school, block and district levels. It is evident that when schools perform well, then the guardians also feel a natural sense of belonging with the schools and come forward eagerly to help the school in ways that they can.

In these schools, proper attention is paid to the functioning of spaces like the school assembly, children's library, children's food and seating arrangements, and equipment for sports, as well as to beautifying and keeping the premises clean.

Team spirit among teachers

One last thing that I understand is that teachers work together as a team in these schools. A single teacher can make individual efforts in the teaching of a subject, but when the whole school works together as a responsible organisation, then the situation is far better. When the teachers are seen to have a sense of belonging and responsibility

towards the school, then they work towards the all-round development of the students; and they work keeping the overarching goals of education in mind. Because of this, students can be seen to be learning in these schools. They also eagerly take part in all

the activities of the school. The students do well in various competitive exams and have a deep sense of belonging with their school. The cooperation of the education department officials is also evident in these schools.



Shobhan Singh Negi heads the Azim Premji Foundation's work in the State of Uttarakhand. He has been with the Foundation since 2010. Prior to Uttarakhand, he worked for 8 years in Barmer, Rajasthan. He may be contacted at shobhan@azimpremjifoundation.org

Any practice invariably stems from some foundational values. For example, when a school decides to include a secular prayer in the morning assembly, it is demonstrating that it values secularism and inclusion. If some schools replace prayers in the morning assembly with a pledge for the nation, they are demonstrating that they value patriotism over any religious affiliation.

The Nature and Purpose of School Culture, Prakash Iyer, p. 6

A school is a second home for children as they spend most of their time there and it is the teacher who makes them feel welcome, loved, and safe. It is a universal truth that when we feel loved, we perform better; when we feel safe, we gain confidence. Making school a happy place for all children is not easy for the teacher when the teacher is loaded with work. It is all the more difficult in a single-teacher school where the teacher has to pay attention to the learning of each student, as well as their well-being and perform all administrative tasks single-handedly.

I met one such teacher, Prabhu Ram, at the Government Primary School, Ladla ki Bhagal, located in the historic Kumbhalgarh rural block of Rajsamand District in Rajasthan. Prabhu Ram's influence on his students' education becomes apparent to anyone who visits the school. I first met the teacher when I visited this school during the pandemic. What struck me at that time were the valuable teaching-learning materials (TLMs) that

he had painstakingly produced. Creating a vibrant and fun environment based on students' learning levels helps engage children better in the learning activities.

One TLM that stood out was a TV set that the teacher had created with thermocol sheets. Inside this frame, the display content had printed stories and slides that could be manually scrolled left and right. The 'TV screen' displayed large, colourful storybook pages and students could 'change the channel' and 'watch' other stories. The teacher used it by running the story on the screen manually, and as the story progressed, he paused to ask questions and engage students in predicting what might happen next. After the story, students broke into small groups to draw their favourite scenes or write a short continuation of the story. By simulating a television experience with this handmade TLM, the teacher created a dynamic and interactive learning environment that made reading and learning both fun and educational.

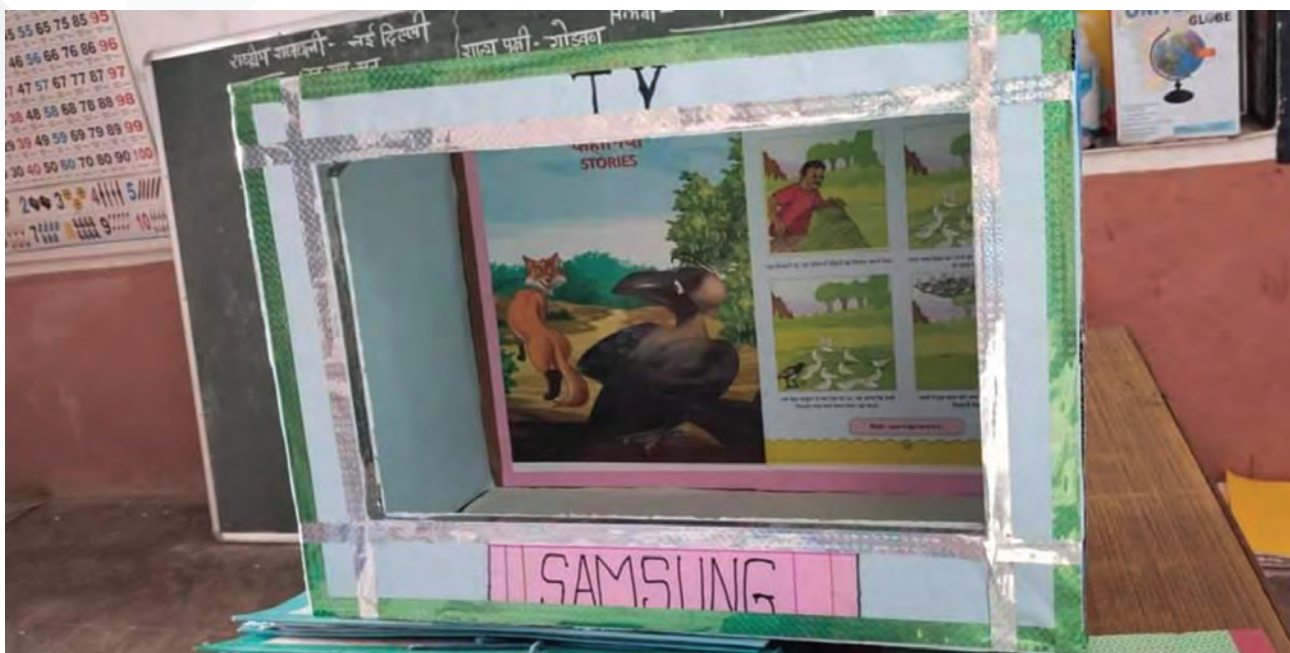


Figure 1. The 'TV set' created by the teacher.

When I visited the school a second time for an assessment study of the children, I had more time to spend with them and was amazed by their remarkable learning and confidence levels. In many schools that I visit, students appear self-assured during informal conversations but when I ask questions to assess their learning levels, they start to show signs of nervousness. Here, the students freely responded to my questions, even though this was the first time I was interacting with them. It seemed like the school was a happy place for them, and to find out more about what made it so, I decided to spend the whole day at the school.

Encouragement and support

The school has only two classrooms so classes I and II sit together in one and classes III, IV and V in the other. This arrangement is carefully designed, keeping in mind the student's cognitive and academic development. Having all the younger children in one room enables the teacher to better understand their individual needs and learning styles, providing instruction accordingly.

Additionally, this arrangement fosters peer support when the teacher is not present in the classroom. During such times, class II students often take the lead and support class I students based on the instructions given by the teacher. I have observed that they collaborate effectively and offer mutual support.

Unenrolled children (who come along with the enrolled students) also sit with classes I and II and begin learning alongside them. In one instance, during a lesson on letter recognition, the teacher wrote all the letters on the blackboard, and then, as he called out a letter, he also called out a student's name to come up to the blackboard and identify the letter by circling it with chalk. After some time, an unenrolled child also approached the teacher and requested a chalk so he could participate. The teacher gave him a piece of chalk and the child went up to the blackboard to circle a letter. The teacher asked the class to clap for him. When I discussed this later with the teacher, he explained that this is the first step in learning for the child and for the others, this encourages inclusive participation.

Prabhu Ram's teaching approach is child-centric, and he incorporates resources beyond textbooks, some of which are created by him and displayed on the classroom walls. The classrooms are rich in print environment that he has created in his free time.



Figure 2. The print-rich classroom created by the teacher.

One of the best aspects of his teaching was the effective use of available resources. While discussing the maps of India and Rajasthan displayed on the wall, the teacher showed students how to read maps. Then, each student was asked to share what they had learnt, with the teacher prompting them with related questions. If a student was confused, the teacher modified his questions to assist them. He used many other resources, like the newspaper and the globe, to teach language.

Prabhu Ram pays equal attention to every child and ensures that they all receive equal opportunities. For example, when teaching the chapter on festivals in the country in class V, he listened to the experiences of the children in celebrating the festivals mentioned in the chapter, giving them space for discussion. All students from classes III, IV and V participated in the discussion. Later, the teacher encouraged all of them to write answers to questions based on their respective grades.

I did not find a single student who was not taking part in the class proceedings, and every child in his class was happy and confident. They responded and asked questions when they did not understand something without any hesitation. If they wanted to say anything during the discussion, they raised

their hands, waited for their turn, and engaged in their work. Class decorum was maintained by the students even though there was more than one grade sitting together.

Ownership and responsibility

The teacher is fostering a positive learning environment where children feel a strong sense of belonging by actively involving them in daily activities, such as assembling in school and entrusting them with the care of classroom materials. This approach empowers students, instilling in them a sense of responsibility for their learning space.

By allowing children to participate in organising and maintaining classroom resources like toys, books, and teaching materials, the teacher is cultivating a culture of ownership among the students. This

not only teaches them essential life skills but also nurtures their connection with the school community.

Observing children taking the initiative to responsibly use play materials during lunchtime and then meticulously organising them afterwards reflects their understanding of the importance of respecting shared resources and their commitment to maintaining a tidy learning environment.

Overall, through these inclusive practices, the teacher is creating a supportive and empowering school environment where children feel valued, respected, and actively engaged in their learning experiences. The teacher is empowering these children with essential skills and confidence that will be a part of their personalities for life and form the basic culture of this school.



Swati Bhandari is part of the Field Research team of the Azim Premji Foundation at the District Institute, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh. She joined the Foundation as a Fellow in 2017. Swati loves travelling and exploring new places and different cultures. She may be reached at swati.bhandari@azimpremjifoundation.org

How Children Imbibe Social and Behavioural Practices

Umashanker Periodi

I started conducting children's workshops in 1980. The first independent workshop I conducted was where I lived – a semi-urban slum of Mangalore, Attavar. It was a summer camp for children in fine arts and theatre with creativity as the main theme. This workshop taught me many things and I started conducting a series of children's workshops in my village. These continue today and are conducted by the children who we trained and my daughters.

Besides the focus on the themes, in these workshops, we have consciously emphasised certain social and behavioural practices which the children gradually internalise and begin to practise. Over time, these have become a part of the culture of these workshops, which the children have adopted in their everyday practices.

Ownership and participation

In these workshops, the one thing we have practised from the beginning is to share and discuss the details of our plan with the children. After we share our plan, we ask them for their opinion. Initially, children are hesitant to speak. Children speak only if they feel that their words will be taken seriously. Also, adults are scared of asking for children's opinions because sometimes they do not know what to do with those. For example, there have been occasions when we have discussed the workshop plan with the children, and they have suggested we change the order of the activities. Now, as organisers, we would have planned things in a certain way, so when a child suggests a change, the immediate response is to say no; to dismiss it. What adults can do in such situations is to ask children the reasons behind their suggestions. Sometimes, children can come up with brilliant ideas. Adults should be flexible and have the maturity to change plans. We also noticed that when we agreed to incorporate their ideas, the children immediately developed an ownership of the workshop; they began to feel that it was their workshop. Then, conducting the workshop also becomes easy because the children participate wholeheartedly.

In these past years, we have sat with the children, morning and evening, and have held discussions with them. Now, discussion has become a natural part of these workshops. Children are convinced that we will listen to them, and act upon their suggestions. Everybody knows that there will be discussions and that they must participate. This has become a part of the culture of our workshops.

Discipline

Discipline is another difficult aspect that we have worked on with children. This too has to be done continuously and consistently. So right at the beginning of a workshop, we sit together and set certain norms of behaviour that all of us agree to follow. We have a rule that there will be an open discussion but after we agree on the norms of behaviour, all of us have to follow those. Also, if a change is required, it will be done only after another discussion involving everyone. No one person has the right to change any decision taken by the group; it can be changed only by the group. We started with very simple and doable things, like keeping footwear in a straight line outside the room. Today, this has become a habit of all our children. Even if somebody leaves their footwear somewhere else, one or the other child will pick it up and place it in the designated place.

Cleaning our space was another aspect that we decided should be done in rotation by everyone. The workshop space is cleaned before and after every workshop. The thinking that 'we must leave a place better than how we found it' is deeply ingrained. Both girls and boys share this work of cleaning the place equally. Facilitators also clean and do not just oversee the cleaning. This has helped in motivating all the children to do this work.

Conserving resources

Not wasting and using resources judiciously is also a conscious decision and we keep reminding children of this while distributing resources, such as paints, craft paper, scissors, etc., which come at a cost. When children throw away materials,

we draw their attention to it and collect these with them to use again later. In this way, we show them how we must value resources and use them with care. Some articles are common and are used collectively in groups, like scissors. We show them how to keep them safely in one place after use so that they are available for others to use when needed. We reiterate that resources belong to all of us collectively and we should take only as much as we need. As facilitators, we too are careful and use resources with sensitivity and care. Children learn a lot from the way they see us using materials.

Fearlessness and fraternity

Building an atmosphere of fearlessness is a difficult task because by the time children are 6-7 years old, they have already been instructed with: *don't do that, don't do this, don't touch that, don't touch this, don't say that, don't say this*. This makes them quiet and has a very damaging effect on them – they become scared of making mistakes. The fear of making mistakes and the fear of failure are two of the greatest enemies of creativity. Children stop exploring, experimenting, and doing new things. In our setup, we build an atmosphere where children are not scolded, let alone punished. We do not raise our voices and consistently keep repeating to the children that there is no need to raise their voices; that they just need to speak in a tone and at a volume that others can hear them. Children are allowed to express their opinions, ideas and thoughts without restraint. It took us about 5 to 6 years to create this environment but now we can see children being open and saying what they want to say without any fear.

Fighting among themselves is natural in children. While boys have physical fights, girls tend to form

cliques. Both these behaviours are detrimental to their growth. We wanted to create a loving and caring atmosphere but could not fathom where to start. Then, one of our facilitators came up with a wonderful suggestion. She said that fraternity has to start with us so, we consciously made attempts to be good and kind and take care of each other. People do not recognise these behaviours easily. It takes time. We would speak to children about respecting and loving others. It was easier to say but the more important thing was how we as facilitators were treating the children. All of us would treat children with a lot of love and care. I feel children can feel this love and care and it will generate similar feelings in them. Now we do not have to remind them; the love and care are transferred from senior children to juniors naturally. Building a culture is not easy; it requires understanding and convincing. The practices have to be followed consistently until they become habits. Habits slowly form a culture. One thing that we should keep in mind is that no amount of 'telling' has any impact on people. What is said is heard and forgotten, what is practised is learnt and followed. It is also very clear to me that if certain behaviours are 'displayed' only to impress people and do not come naturally as part of our natural conduct, others can see through the charade and reject those.

In all these years, one thing that we have realised is that building a culture is both difficult and easy. It is difficult because it is very complex and requires time and experimentation. It is easy because if we 'live' the culture, we do not need to do anything more; we just need to practise what we want the children to learn, and they will follow us. What they pick and what they ignore is not in your hands. But the possibility of being followed is more.



Umashanker Periodi has been with the Azim Premji Foundation since 2003 and in the development sector for four decades. A postgraduate in social work, he has been involved in mobilising Dalits, tribals and other vulnerable sections in the demand for their rights. A founding member of Karnataka State Trainers Collective, he has trained teachers and field workers in 'Barefoot research'. He may be contacted at periodi@azimpremjifoundation.org

Doing Away with the Fear of Maths

Rajni Dwivedi

Mathematics often scares children and many adults too. All children have to learn mathematics till class X, however, by the time they come to class III-IV, they drift away from it. The same children, who in classes I and II were eager to understand and made an effort to engage with maths, start falling behind. And as they move up to higher classes, they start panicking at the name of mathematics. The policy documents in India have been highlighting this issue and the most recent, National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 also states that there are two major aspects that cause fear of maths: (i) the nature of the subject and how it is taught and assessed; and (ii) how it is perceived in society. (NCF-SE 2023, p. 271)

In this article, we will first briefly talk about the processes and practices that create this fear of maths. Then, we shall discuss how it can be transacted in class so that all children develop an interest in and understanding of maths. This is based on the work that I am doing with classes II, III and IV.

How maths is taught

The initial classes (even up to class IV) do not focus on anything other than counting and the four arithmetic operations. Stepwise solutions of questions are written on the blackboard and then each step is explained. After this, children have to copy the solution from the board. Another task is learning arithmetic facts, definitions and algorithms by heart. Children try to memorise these but as they progress, the load of the 'seemingly meaningless definitions and processes' and fully remembering them and applying them correctly at the appropriate place keeps increasing. As the size of numbers that children have to deal with increases, children find it impossible to comprehend this size and it becomes difficult for them to use algorithms, shortcuts and tricks to get correct answers. Since they have no idea what number they should get as the answer, every number seems equally correct (or wrong) to them. This increases the fear, anxiety and sense of

helplessness associated with maths.

The obvious question, then is, can there be some processes and practices that make children not only learn concepts of mathematics but also enjoy learning them? NCF-SE 2023 states, 'The Mathematics Education curriculum not just aims for capacities in foundational numeracy, mathematical thinking, and problem-solving in students, but also intends to nurture joy, wonder, and curiosity and the ability to see patterns and appreciate the elegance and aesthetics of mathematical concepts and ideas, while at the same time eliminating the fear of Mathematics that is widely prevalent today.' (NCF-SE, 2023, p. 37)

There is no reason to be afraid of maths

It is often said that the behaviour of the teacher, and a natural atmosphere in the classroom, help make children feel comfortable. And if the teachers themselves do not see maths as terrifying, then children will have no reason to feel petrified by it. This is similar to the fact that if you are scared of lizards, your children are likely to be afraid of them as well.

My experience has been that generally at the beginning of class I and II, children do not fear maths. If I give them the opportunity, they try to engage and make efforts to understand concepts. Therefore, processes that make maths interesting for children must be initiated in these initial classes. The effort should be to provide challenges of an appropriate level and opportunity for them to attempt to find the answers, however much time and number of trials it takes, and to not provide them solutions as an easy route to learning.

In my interaction of teaching-learning of mathematics with children of classes II, III and IV, I have observed that there is not enough work done with children on reading texts while doing maths. Children look at the numbers, signs and symbols

and the order of questions in the given exercise and make a guess as to whether they need to add or perform some other operation. On their own, they cannot read instructions, verbal problems, examples and other texts given in the book. And as they move up to the higher classes this task of reading and comprehending keeps getting more difficult. Gradually, they keep moving further away from maths. It is therefore important that they learn to read mathematics from the beginning. They should read instructions, and if they cannot understand, there should be a conversation about that in the classroom. They should read word problems on their own and make new word problems themselves (verbally first and then in writing) to become familiar with mathematics and mathematical thinking. For example, problems, like a basket has 10 mangoes and 5 more are added to it, how many mangoes are there in the basket; if one table has 4 legs then how many legs would 4 tables have? Both these can be seen as questions of addition, but their nature is different.

Learning to read helps children in many ways. For one, it develops in them a self-confidence with respect to learning. Secondly, while reading, children start comprehending the difference between different types of questions, which means that they also start understanding concepts of mathematics a little better. I have been working with the current class II for about one and a half months. We read short instructions and word problems, and each child makes an effort to understand them. Sometimes, a few children need a little more help in reading and I have to work with them individually. Sometimes, their friends help them with reading and sometimes, they write the questions on the board and read with each other's help. But now all the children have started to read. When I tell them that we now have to read and help them in the process, they start realising that reading is essential and that it is something they can do.

It is said that reading and writing proceed concurrently. And because they can read, they read the given questions carefully. And they also make their own questions when asked to do so. And slowly, they do it even when they are not asked to do it. Mostly their sentences are similar in construction to those in the worksheet or the textbook, but it has new numbers and some new words. Now, they often ask, 'Shall we make our own questions?' This shows that they enjoy this task.

It is important that whichever the class, children are given tasks that they can engage with. In class III, there was this question: Make different sums to get a total of 3500. Even after explaining the question to the children in their own language and giving examples, many children could not understand it. But when they were given the task of making different sums to get the total to 20, and a couple of examples were discussed with them, they understood and made many new questions. Here, I would like to underline a few other important points that can be helpful for a teacher.

Some good practices

Firstly, while doing maths with children we must use a language that children are comfortable in. The second thing is to remember that a special feature of maths is its patterns. Let's go back to the previous question where students were asked to make different sums to get a total of 3500. If children are not able to engage with some ideas when presented with large numbers, then the same concept can be worked on by using smaller numbers. The third is about the nature of the exercise. In this task, on the one hand, children were working with concepts of addition, subtraction, and small-large numbers, and on the other, they were also learning to look at numbers in relation to other numbers. Then, such questions can have many answers – all of them correct. The fourth is about the range of possibilities for it. Many questions of this type can be made, each with many answers, and as children make questions, they find more and more can be made, and then it becomes a game for them, which they try to play for as long as they can.

The maths classroom has to be such that children can talk about the given questions and how they have understood and gone about solving them, irrespective of whether they have done it correctly or not. Many times, when they are asked: how did you do this question? Then while thinking about the process they followed, they themselves realise where they have made a mistake and how it has to be corrected. For example, in class III, one response to the question, 'Write a number that has one at the unit's place and two in the ten's place,' was written as 12. When I asked the child to read again, the child corrected it immediately.

Similarly, many words like ascending and descending, units and tens, and preceding and succeeding numbers are concepts that children will be able to comprehend more easily if there are conversations about them in the classroom.

For example, the word *ascending* was explained by class III children in various ways – some said increasing order, some said like 1 to 10, some said from lesser to greater, and so on. In addition, we discussed questions like why one number comes before or after another. Such conversations help children comprehend the concepts and make their own definitions. Creating something yourself gives one enormous pleasure and self-confidence.

The belief that mathematics is learnt in a linear manner and in a definite time frame also leads to a sense of fear. If the children have to learn to think and appreciate abstraction, then we have to spend as much time on each concept as is necessary for the children to grasp it. And then the teacher must come back to the same concept after a few days. 'Teaching' a concept hurriedly and believing that 'once taught or completed' it is over, only to complete the syllabus, accomplishes very little. In fact, if children are still struggling to understand a concept and the next one is introduced, and this continues, many children are completely left out of the process. It is therefore necessary to give children ample time to engage with, understand, and do mathematics. For example, if working with the number line, then it is not correct to assume that just making a number line from 0 to 10 and from 0 to 100 and showing some numbers on these is enough for students to understand the concept. Understanding a number line means children are able to place different numbers on it on their own.

They should be able to see how big or small a number is when compared to another number and therefore, where it should be placed on the line. It is also very important for them to realise that the concept of a number line is linked to lesser and greater numbers and operations of addition and subtraction and is not an isolated concept.

Often concepts are taught in a linear way - one by one - as if they have no relationship with other concepts. Concepts in mathematics are interrelated and the understanding of each becomes better when it is understood as part of a whole in the mind of the learner. But while teaching, this is forgotten. So, all concepts – counting, numbers, numerals, addition, subtraction, place value, and writing in ascending or descending order - are there in the mind, but each is separate and has no connections. This is what makes seeing, comprehending, creating and playing with patterns so difficult. Therefore, it is necessary that children are asked such questions or given such tasks in which they have to make an effort to use the understanding they already have of concepts.

One important purpose of mathematics is that children learn to 'mathematise' and think logically. More often than not, children are not exposed sufficiently to maths and therefore find it uninteresting and dull. Making patterns, exploring and discovering, attempting one question in multiple ways, and making questions of maths are all part of mathematising, which should be enjoyed by all children.



Rajni Dwivedi is associated with Azim Premji University and is a member of the Editorial Board of the university magazine, *Pathshala - Bheetar aur Bahar*. She may be contacted at rajni.dwivedi@azimpremjifoundation.org

School culture would essentially mean establishing a purpose of education among its stakeholders – school administration, management, teachers, children, parents, and community – that transcends narrow instrumental aims of education, such as credentialism, skill building, employability, and even continuity of knowledge generation. This is not to say that these cannot or should not be aims that a school seeks to achieve. However, if these become the substantive reasons determining the existence of the school, then we have reasons to worry. If schools do not teach us basic human values, such as respect for diversity, a sense of justice, responsibility and honesty, ways of discerning between right and wrong in terms of their legal, moral, social, and environmental implications, and understanding ourselves in relationship to others in ways that are empowering, caring, and critically reflective, then we probably lose the very purpose of education.

It is important to note that culture is not a 'given' set of identifiers, whether we call them rituals, everyday practices, or belief systems of a school. Culture is made and remade by the constituents of a school and is temporally fluid, which means that schools that might have a culture over a certain period of time with certain constituents (such as its management, headteacher, teachers or student profile), could well have a distinctively different culture over another time period with a different set of constituents. Another mistake we tend to make in the Indian context is to draw an equivalence between cultures of schools that belong to very different institutional settings. Let us take two hypothetical examples to illustrate this. Though hypothetical, these draw upon contemporary social, cultural and economic realities of the school education system in India.

School A

This government primary school was established in the early 1970s in a prosperous rural area, not far from the district headquarters yet lacking regular

public transport facilities, with agriculture and related activities as the main occupation of the households. The school served around six villages in the panchayat, and in the first two decades catered mostly to the dominant caste in the panchayat who had benefitted from the Green Revolution and were eager to educate their children. The Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) households in the area were not in a position to send their children to school as the opportunity costsⁱ for them were very high, and sending children even to government school had direct financial implications that were beyond their financial capacity.

The number of teachers in the schools was adequate, and with a dynamic headteacher, they were able to engage meaningfully with the dominant caste children who had some amount of exposure to education at home, with parents having completed basic levels of schooling and having an interest in supporting their children's education with the required time, opportunities and facilities beyond school hours. The few children who came from the lower strata of society were neglected in school, and teachers, in their practices, maintained social boundaries that existed in the surrounding villages. In terms of performance, from the dominant castes, the school had very high transition rates into further levels of schooling, and a significant level of dropouts from among the disadvantaged groups in the early years of primary or as the children completed the primary level.

Over the decades, there were changes in the head teacher and teachers in the school, administrative transfers and promotions, and a few small private schools also came up to cater to the growing aspirations of parents for English-medium schooling and an overall perception that government schools did not do justice to the education they wanted for their children. Many children from the dominant castes moved into these private schools while children from SC, ST and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and more girls from these groups came to access the government school because government

schemes at the central and state levels made the opportunity costs and direct financial costs of government schools much less than it used to be. Teachers struggled with these transitions of educating first-generation school-goers, and children with very little support for education at home. However, the presence of either an able head teacher or a couple of teachers who were dedicated to their work and thought of the school and its past performance as a legacy that was handed over to them to uphold, made sure that the new education programmes were implemented with integrity in the school. While beliefs about caste divisions persisted among the teachers, and these were often seen in different aspects of the school environment, teachers also realised the importance of reaching out to the community to make them aware of the benefits of schooling, regularity of attendance, and basic forms of home support for the education of children. The school managed to achieve an almost complete transition to the next levels of schooling of current enrolments – those that come predominantly from the underprivileged groups.

In terms of school practices, what has sustained over the years is a school assembly in which children stood in lines class-wise and gender-wise but which has always included equal opportunities for female and male students in various activities that constitute the assembly – singing of the state and national anthem, presentation and sharing of students' work from their classroom sessions, sharing of important state- and national-level issues by the children under the guidance of a teacher. Other practices that have sustained is the professional camaraderie among the teachers where they have found it useful to dedicate half a day every week to discussing the challenges they face in class, sharing their approaches to addressing these issues and seeking suggestions from each other. This has been sustained irrespective of the involvement of the head teacher, though the first head teacher was instrumental in starting this process.

School B

This private unaided school was established around the same time as *School A* – in the late 1960s. The school started as a trust under a well-known corporate entity, which had multiple business interests but was also known to have made philanthropic investments in education and healthcare in various locations. The school was

established in the heart of a tier-1 city with a considerable size of the middle and upper-class population from whom came the initial enrolments, and which gradually increased through word-of-mouth recommendations among the same population group.

With sufficient resources at its disposal, the school, from its initial stages, could build state-of-the-art infrastructure and facilities and recruit well-qualified teachers from urban middle-class backgrounds. Over the years, these standards have been maintained and updated as required. A self-selection process sustained the school in terms of the families/children who accessed the school and teachers who came to teach there. A low pupil-teacher ratio, a holistic approach to the curriculum (including co-curricular activities), autonomy for teachers to experiment with new pedagogical thoughts, and freedom provided to children to develop outside both regular disciplinary modes of mainstream schools and demarcated boundaries of subject domains, ensured that students became more self-confident and capable as they transitioned from the school.

In alignment with its overall teaching-learning environment, other school practices also developed in unique ways. Assembly was conducted in the form of songs sung voluntarily by students receiving training in classical music in the school. It was held in a concentric circular arrangement, non-segregated by class or gender, with students and teachers using the allotted time after the songs to engage in discussions around various issues that they submitted in a suggestions box. Student voices were given space and contentious topics were debated in keeping with the norms that had been collaboratively developed for such discussions by the teachers with the senior students. Some of these contentious issues were taken up in student-led clubs to be pursued as projects, under the guidance of teachers.

However, this situation sustained only till the early 1990s. With a changing economic scenario, and the growth of more private schools of equal or more repute in the same city, the school had to contend with questions about the preparedness of its students for a competitive world. A strategic revisioning was initiated by the trustees, leading to a change in management and a total overhaul of the processes and practices of the school. Results in public examinations, the performance of the

students in curricular and co-curricular events across the city, and the pathways of students after they transitioned into their higher education and professional lives became the main driving factors.

The earlier low pupil-teacher ratio was replaced by large-size classes to justify the financial viability of changes in infrastructure and facilities to make them equivalent to purported global standards. Likewise, teacher autonomy gave place to a system of managerial accountability with a rigid hierarchical school administration system keeping a close watch on teacher performance, which in turn, was linked to teachers' professional continuity and growth in the school.

School culture: Different institutional contexts

The first thing to note about these two examples is that both schools have undergone changes in their school culture over the four decades. *School A* has oriented itself to a more inclusive culture, even though the belief systems of the teachers in the school are still strongly embedded in the immediate social and cultural environment of the school. Similarly, *School B* had to align itself to external pressures of a changed economic scenario that has had repercussions on the aspirations and demands of the middle and upper classes from the education system. As compared to *School A*, *School B* has moved from a normative school culture (based more on values and purposes of education) to an instrumental school culture (based more on aims of education focused only on economic readiness). So, school cultures do change over time.

The second point is that we often make the mistake of comparing the cultures of schools that exist in very different institutional contexts, such as government schools with private schools (more so with private schools that are accessed by the middle classes and upper classes). Government schools are still quite strongly embedded in the micro-contexts (social, cultural, political) and have porous boundaries with these contexts, where the schools often reproduce the micro-contexts or need to be attentive to them, explicitly and implicitly. This characteristic is tied up with the very nature of government schools, which seek to cater to the idea of education as a 'public good' and have made themselves available increasingly to marginal population groups hitherto excluded from school education. The school cultures of government schools too cannot be seen without the context of the institutional system within which

they are embedded – the school administration system at large, but also the culture of governance in the particular state.

Private schools, on the other hand, never had such an onus, though there have been private schools (in a minority today) that have followed the same principles. To an extent, private schools of various types have the characteristic of a 'gated community' where they can choose to distance themselves from their micro-context and instil processes that can orient children to a distinctive school culture.

ⁱⁱ At one end of this spectrum, we are likely to see elite boarding schools and several alternative schools that cater to the upper middle classes and upper classes. At the other end of the spectrum, we see small private schools across both urban and rural geographies that cater to the relatively poorer sections of the population with some ability to pay. Across this spectrum, private schools have, in general, tighter administrative systems that lay down corporate-like processes for school practices to align with. The macro-institutional ambit of these schools does not extend beyond their management bodies, just as their aims do not cater to a population group that is far less privileged than the relatively homogeneous extended middle- and upper-class they usually cater to.

School culture: What matters?

The examples in the previous section, from both *School A* and *School B*, contain factors that educationists have considered important for vibrant, positively oriented school cultures. However, it is not easy to offer simple unambiguous answers to the question 'what matters' in terms of school culture. For example, though autonomy at the school level in terms of decision-making for curriculum, textbooks, teaching-learning materials, pedagogy, and assessments has been widely emphasised as being a sign of a positive school culture, it might be difficult for a private school to instil this in its early years as teachers need more hand-holding and mentoring to understand the basic ideology, principles, and processes that have been envisioned to guide the school. This again is difficult for a government school in the absence of a supportive head teacher and a supportive administrative system that endorses such autonomy as a value to be nurtured.

Given this ambiguity, a more pragmatic approach would be to go back to where we started – the purpose of a school. If we see a normative idea

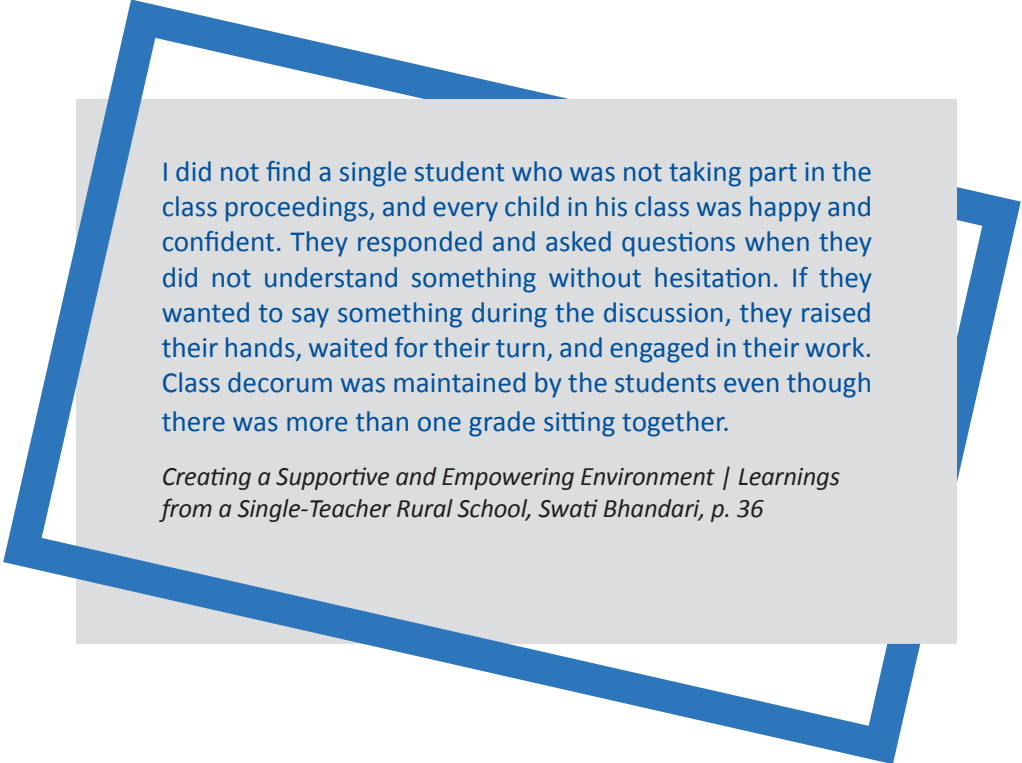
of education as a public good manifest in the rituals, belief systems, and everyday practices of a school, it is more likely that the school has been trying to develop a school culture that would be characterised by factors that educationists have deemed important in their studies of school culture;

that is, a respect for and critically reflective practices related to basic human values, such as diversity, integrity, perseverance, resilience, autonomy, responsibility, and self-esteem, all of which permeate the environment of the school and its linkages to its various stakeholders.

Endnotes

- i The loss of other alternatives when one alternative is chosen.
- ii The ability of private schools to attract families from a spatially dispersed population group, as compared to a government school, also acts as a natural dis-embedding process from their micro-contexts for the private schools.

Rahul Mukhopadhyay is a faculty member at Azim Premji University, Bhopal. He may be contacted at rahul.mukhopadhyay@azimpremjifoundation.org



I did not find a single student who was not taking part in the class proceedings, and every child in his class was happy and confident. They responded and asked questions when they did not understand something without hesitation. If they wanted to say something during the discussion, they raised their hands, waited for their turn, and engaged in their work. Class decorum was maintained by the students even though there was more than one grade sitting together.

Creating a Supportive and Empowering Environment | Learnings from a Single-Teacher Rural School, Swati Bhandari, p. 36

Rudresh S

Quality public education is crucial for India's development, particularly at this juncture as the country navigates rapid economic, technological, and social changes. Public education is essential, especially when children from vulnerable and underprivileged families are primarily enrolled in government schools. Providing quality education to every child is a constitutional mandate of the government. Developing and sustaining a culture of certain school practices can provide quality education in the long term, irrespective of changes in teaching faculty and administration.

Creating a sustainable school culture is paramount for fostering an environment where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. This article explores essential practices that contribute to a sustainable school culture, focusing on a learning-enabling environment, fear-free and child-centric learning processes, strong school-community relationships, and support for higher education for students. There were attempts to develop constructive practices in schools under the Azim Premji Foundation's Child-Friendly School Initiative.

Table 1. The five domains of Child-Friendly School Initiative.

Sl no	Domains of school practices	Purpose	Indicators of development
1	Safe school environment	To attract children to enrol in school	Classrooms with sufficient air and light, a functional library, play space, student cabinet, greenery, meaningful school assembly, functional toilets, safe access road to school etc.
2	Classroom environment	To retain children in school and ensure regular attendance.	Provide students with free access to learning resources; utilise appropriate educational displays, exhibition of children's work, learning pandaal ¹ in lower grades, running blackboard for children, no corporal punishment in the classroom, etc.
3	Teaching-learning process	To strengthen learning and cater to diverse needs based on diagnostic assessments of students	Encourage peer learning, use of the library and laboratory; activity-based, project-based and hands-on learning; connect lessons to real-life situations using concrete objects and students' experiences, etc.
4	Teacher development	To engage students according to their learning needs and employ diverse pedagogies	Teachers regularly prepare lesson plans and learning resources, attend cluster-sharing meetings and contribute to the discussion; attend annual workshops conducted by SSA; function as Master Resource Persons, and organise school-level/cluster-level capacity-building based on needs; discuss classroom challenges with other teachers etc.
5	Community and parent participation	To sustain the school culture and evolving practices	Organise regular parent-teacher meetings, ensure that the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) includes parents from all social groups with 33% women; create platforms for the community, panchayat, and alumni to contribute and take on responsibilities during special events, like learning exhibitions, school annual days, enrolment drives, and school development plan and its execution, etc.

Child-Friendly School Initiative

The Child-Friendly School Initiative by the Azim Premji Foundation was implemented in Surapura (a subdivision in Yadgir district of Karnataka) between 2005 and 2012. The intervention primarily focused on developing school practices in five domains: school environment, classroom environment, teaching-learning process, teachers' professional development, and community participation. Initially, it used 214 indicators of development spread across these domains, this was later revised to 60 indicators, which are provided at the end of this article.

As a result of these interventions over 6 to 7 years, the schools in Surapura experienced significant positive changes, such as increased enrolment, reduced dropout rates, improved student attendance and learning, and continued education beyond the school level. Many students successfully cleared entrance exams and enrolled in institutions like Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Morarji Desai Residential School in large numbers.

Though the Child-Friendly School Initiative ended in 2012-13, practices in the five domains developed by schools remain an integral part of the school culture even today, more than 10 years later. This article explores some of the practices developed and sustained in different schools and their effects in the long run.

Learning-enabling environment in school

A learning-enabling environment is fundamental for the academic success and personal growth of students. This environment goes beyond physical space, providing opportunities for students to learn in a fear-free, participatory, and needs-based engagement. Schools must foster a supportive environment where students feel valued. They must also provide a rich array of learning materials and experiences that cater to diverse learning needs and interests, encouraging curiosity and critical thinking.

Case Study: Tackling migration

Jumalapura Dodda Tanda is a remote village known for the migration of its people for work. Children used to migrate to Pune, Goa, and Bengaluru with their parents, leading to irregular school attendance and eventually, dropping out. The Head Teacher, Achchappa Gouda and his team made

arrangements for students' stay in the school with dinner and breakfast, supported by the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme, and the personal investment of parents and teachers. Teachers resided in the school along with students to look after them.

This initiative ensured regular attendance, which improved student learning outcomes and 50 percent of class V students cleared the qualifying tests for Morarji Desai School, continuing their education until class XII. These positive results convinced parents of the importance of education, leading to a current enrolment of nearly 590 students, with almost 470 attending regularly though there is no boarding facility in the school now.

Case Study: Overcoming the language barrier

Gaddada Narayana Tanda, a hamlet with a high migration rate, faced a language barrier as the children's home language is Lambani but the medium of instruction in school is Kannada. Kashibai, a dedicated teacher, convinced parents to send their children to school regularly by visiting their homes and many times even their agricultural fields. She overcame the language barrier by learning the students' language and having the older students help the younger ones.

The school developed a culture of self-learning and peer learning, which empowered the students to manage the classes themselves in the teacher's absence. The mechanisms of group work and peer learning enhanced social skills and deepened understanding through collaboration. They started learning in groups with peer support.

Completing homework on the playground after school closing, using concrete materials and activity-based learning, maintaining a student-run bank for financial literacy, and access to and use of library and Learning Corner; dynamic art, paint and origami displays in the classrooms have all contributed to meeting learning outcomes and sustaining the culture even after a decade. Bagyashri, who has come in place of Kashibai, has ensured that all the practices initiated previously are continued, especially community relationships.

These practices helped students meet learning outcomes at all stages, and almost 80-85 percent of class V students get through Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya or Morarji Desai Schools every year. Visualising these practices, regularising them with support, developing a shared understanding among all stakeholders, and being able to demonstrate the outcome of these practices in terms of students'

learning and promoting the continuation of education beyond school culturised these practices and sustained them even after a decade. All of the alumni of this school completed class XII, and most of them are in universities.

Fear-free/non-threatening teaching-learning process

Creating a fear-free, non-threatening learning environment is essential for students to feel safe and confident in expressing themselves. This involves establishing a classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities and all students feel supported. A child-centric pedagogy tailors the teaching-learning process to individual needs, interests, and abilities, recognising that each child is unique and learns differently. Encouraging students to ask questions, explore, and engage in hands-on activities sparks their curiosity.

Gaddada Narayana Tanda school, which is described above, has most of these features of a non-threatening environment and a child-friendly pedagogy. The school was able to culturise the practices of being sensitive to language and learning difficulties; respecting each child for their unique abilities; giving freedom to children to express their thoughts and ask questions; and exploring through guided projects. There are other schools that have developed many practices, which lead to a child-friendly environment and a child-centric approach to the teaching-learning process.

Case Study: Student leadership

At the Lower Primary School, Huvinahalli, a teacher, Navani, developed an innovative initiative to enhance student leadership and responsibility through the formation of a school cabinet. Students elected to key ministerial positions – Prime Minister, Education Minister, Health Minister, Environment Minister, and Sports and Culture Minister – reflect a microcosm of governmental structure. The Prime Minister oversees overall coordination; the Education Minister focuses on the academic processes and regular classes, helping in the library, managing classes during teacher absences, and helping students with homework; the Health Minister is responsible for maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in the school campus, during MDM, as well as for promoting health awareness among students; the Environment Minister works on developing gardening, sustaining greenery during holidays, and promoting environmental education; the Sports and Culture Minister is responsible for

organising sports events, cultural activities and fostering talent in various extracurricular activities.

Each minister works with a group of students to carry out their respective activities. Weekly cabinet meetings and monthly reports build students' presentation and articulation skills and confidence. The school has managed to maintain greenery on the campus, develop learning materials, and promote health awareness through these initiatives, that are sustained by regular activities and teacher support. To ensure the sustainability of this cabinet practice, the Huvinahalli school has regularised activities and integrated them into the school routine. Each minister has a well-defined role with specific responsibilities that are monitored and supported by teachers. Regular meetings are held to discuss progress, plan future activities, and address issues that arise. This process has been followed for the last 10 years.

Teaching plans and academic meetings

At the Government Model Primary School, Hunasagi Camp, two key initiatives have significantly transformed the educational experience: teacher planning for classroom engagement based on students' needs and conducting regular academic meetings. Initiated by the Head Teacher, Basavanagouda, these practices have improved the quality of teaching and learning notably, contributing to increased student enrolment and overall school development.

One of the cornerstones of this transformation is the systematic approach to teacher planning for classroom engagement. All teachers prepare detailed lesson plans and get them reviewed by the Head Teacher regularly. These plans are designed to meet the specific needs of their students, ensuring that each lesson is relevant, engaging, and aligned with the curriculum. These are revised based on reflection on the implementation of the plan.

Complementing the individualised lesson planning, the school also holds fortnightly academic meetings led by the Head Teacher. These meetings provide a platform for teachers to share best practices, innovative teaching methods and effective use of learning resources.

This collaborative environment fosters professional growth and the continuous improvement of teaching strategies. Teachers discuss various difficulties they face, whether related to concepts, student engagement, or classroom management. The meetings also focus on student-related issues,

such as absenteeism, dropouts, and academic performance. This allows the school to develop targeted interventions to resolve academic and other issues.

Conclusion

Creating a sustainable school culture requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the physical environment, resource availability, emotional safety, personalised learning, teacher development, and community engagement. By implementing these practices, schools can create an enriching and

supportive environment that enables students to reach their full potential. In the examples discussed, head teachers have played a crucial role, teachers have worked as a team, and the school-community relationship has been consciously built. In all these schools, certain practices are contextually visualised, shared understanding is built among all stakeholders, processes are set, mechanisms for implementation and reviewing are in place, and finally, the community, teachers and students value the outcomes of these practices motivating them to sustain these practices.



Figure 1. A child-friendly school environment fosters learning and all-round development of all children.

The complete list of development indicators used in the CFSI programme.

Child-Friendly School Initiative Shorapur

School Improvement Plan Baseline Sept-Nov, 2009

Cluster Name:

School Name:

SI no	Fortnightly Indicators
F1	SDMC and community supervise the quality of food served in mid-day meals
F2	Classrooms are clean and hygienic
F3	Different work done by children, like project work, painting, and crafts are attractively displayed and written material is displayed on notice boards or walls
F4	Resource corner -- books, TLMs, equipments easily accessible to children is provided
F5	No cane is seen in the classroom
F6	All areas of the school are maintained clean and hygienic (no cobwebs, paper pieces, plastic tea cups outside the windows, waste thrown around etc).
F7	Simple basic greenery in the school campus -- garden, plant and trees
F8	Clean drinking water is made available for all children
F9	Functioning, usable toilets (there is a water facility, mug, a cover for rain, a door that can be latched and used) separately for boys and girls
F10	Records are neatly organised and kept in an identified space
F11	Sports items are neatly organised and kept in an identified space
F12	There is a clean and hygienic kitchen/cooking space
F13	There is enough and separate space identified for storing groceries for mid-day meals (the space should not take up the teaching-learning area)
F14	All teachers including HT come on time (any time before the school commences)
F15	All teachers including HT leave on time (any time after the school hours)
F16	During the games period, children play under the guidance of teacher
F17	Record the total number of students enrolled in school and headcount by the Margadarshi (guide)
F18	Record the total number of teachers on roll and the number of teachers present
F19	A library is maintained and is actively used by the children
F20	First-aid kit is available and usable
	Monthly
M1	SDMC meetings have been held regularly with the required quorum
M2	The minutes of the SDMC meetings indicate discussions related to school (enrolment, retention, learning of children, strategies for dropout children etc)
M3	There is an attractive learning pandaal in the classrooms
M4	Proceedings of weekly teacher meetings are recorded and followed up
M5	Each teacher has a clear/well-prepared lesson plan for each topic/unit
M6	Each teacher maintains a diary to make notes of the day's activities/proceedings
	Quarterly
Q1	Community has made contributions, such as assistance in teaching/creating TLMs/other support in classroom
Q2	Academic and management issues of school are discussed with Gram Panchayat members at regular intervals and records of discussion maintained
Q3	There is question box available in each classroom for the students
Q4	There is an equipped laboratory for children of higher classes
Q5	Children with special needs are identified and the list is available in the school
Q6	Student cabinet exists and is active
Q7	Progress on the School Improvement Plan (SIP) is recorded
Q8	There are no dropouts in the quarter

	Annual
A1	SDMC has been constituted as per government norms (critical indicators: 9 elected members, all of them parents)
A2	The community has made donations over the last year (monetary/material/labour)
A3	Parents meetings are conducted as per norms (twice in a year)
A4	There is adequate protection from sun and rain for the children inside the classroom (it has proper roof, doors, windows etc)
A5	There is enough light and proper ventilation inside the classrooms
A6	There is enough space to sit and move freely in the classroom
A7	Classrooms have proper and clear blackboard which is visible to both children and teachers
A8	Classrooms of class I and II have running blackboards accessible to all children
A9	Classrooms has different wall writings and displays covering all subjects
A10	There is a compound with a gate all around the school (the compound can even be a bio-fence, but should be without any breaks)
A11	Walls are painted and maintained clean
A12	There is at least one classroom for every 40 children
A13	There is an adequately sized playground for children to play
A14	Annual Sports Meet is conducted
A15	Children's special talents are identified and recorded
A16	Cultural events (quiz/drama/storytelling etc) take place regularly (ann/quarter)
A17	School has a list of roles and responsibilities for HT, Teachers and SDMC readily available
A18	School Improvement Plan has been made and is available
A19	A complete list of competencies for all classes and subjects is available with the HT and with respective teachers
A20	The timetable for all classes is prepared and readily available with the HT
A21	Books and uniforms are distributed to all children on time
A22	Annual School Day event has taken place
A23	Annual group events, like Metric Mela has taken place
A24	All achievements (KSQAO* and other such) records of the school are displayed prominently
A25	All teachers have attended their allotted SSA training in the previous year
A26	Teachers have carried out research/action research in the previous year

*Karnataka School Quality Assessment Organisation

Endnotes

- i A Learning Pandal displays children's work hanging from the roof (chappara) in the classroom, as in a Nali Kali classroom.



Rudresh S has been with the Azim Premji Foundation for the last 20 years and currently heads its work in the states of Karnataka and Puducherry. Having worked in the field of education for 15 years, he has been associated with various efforts in early language and maths education and teacher professional development initiatives of the Department of Education, Government of Karnataka. He may be reached at rudresh@azimpremjifoundation.org

Opportunities to help children learn better and build fulfilling careers in education.

Azim Premji Foundation is hiring
Resource Persons and Schoolteachers.

Eligibility

Resource Persons:

- Graduation with a minimum 5 years of teaching experience OR Postgraduation with a minimum 2 years of teaching experience.
- Candidates with relevant on-field experience in the social sector may also apply.

Job location:

Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand,
Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh,
Rajasthan and Uttarakhand

Schoolteachers:

- Bachelor's degree in your subject and teaching degree (B.Ed., D. Ed or D.El. Ed) with at least 2 years of teaching experience.
- An ability to teach in English coupled with knowledge of the local language.



Scan to
know more



**Apply
Now!**

Earlier issues of the Learning Curve are available at
<https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/learning-curve>



Hindi and Kannada issues are available at
<https://anuvadasampada.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/>



To subscribe to the Learning Curve, please fill out this form:
<https://bit.ly/4czcJ6a>



For suggestions, comments and to share your personal experiences, write to us at:
learningcurve@apu.edu.in

Announcement

Restructuring of School Magazines

Azim Premji University, as part of the Azim Premji Foundation, with its stated commitment to public school education, is constantly exploring ways to help strengthen the public education system in India. As part of this commitment, we publish a set of periodicals to support school teachers, educators and other stakeholders with insights, opinions, and perspectives on pedagogy, processes and the well-being of students. Currently, the University produces four magazines on school education – *At Right Angles* (on mathematics), *iWonder...* (on science), *Pathshala* (a general magazine on primary school education in Hindi) and *Learning Curve* (a general magazine on primary school education in English, Hindi and Kannada).

From the next issue (December 2024), *Learning Curve* will focus on other critical aspects of public education, such as policy, its impact and implementation, curriculum, financing, and other developments in the field of education. In its new avatar, *Learning Curve* will serve as a platform for diverse perspectives, new and informed positions and thought-provoking points of view in these areas.

Pathshala will be the University's single, general magazine on primary school education and will be published in Hindi, English and Kannada for readers across the country. It will include some of the themes and content that were part of *Learning Curve*.

We will facilitate a smooth transition of readers, subscribers and patrons of *Learning Curve* to *Pathshala* in the coming weeks, alongside building a community of readers for *Learning Curve*.

We look forward to your continued support of all our magazines.

**Learning Curve
is changing!
Announcement
overleaf**

Azim Premji University
Survey No. 66, Burugunte Village
Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura
Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka

Facebook: /azimpremjiuniversity

Instagram: @azimpremjiuniv

www.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in

X: @azimpremjiuniv