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## UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL AND SCHOOL CULTURE-A LOOK

**Qudsia Afreen**  
Guest Lecturer,  
Govt. DIET,  
Adilabad

### ABSTRACT

*“The highest education is that which does not merely give us  
information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.”*

*-Rabindranath Tagore*

*Schools are the important institutions for imparting education to pupils thereby shaping their personality and future. For quality education school culture is crucial and plays an important role. Basically school culture consists of the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours which characterize a school. Simultaneously school culture also encompasses other concrete issues like the physical and emotional safety of students, the public spaces and the orderliness of classroom to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. In fact a school culture results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions and practices.*

*In common parlance by a school we mean an institution designed to provide learning spaces and learning environments for the teaching of students (or “pupils”) under the direction of teachers. Most countries have systems of formal education, which is commonly compulsory. In these systems, students progress through a series of schools. The names for these schools vary by country but generally include primary school for young children and secondary school for teenagers who have completed primary education. An institution where higher education is taught, is commonly called a university college or university.*

**KEY WORDS:** *School and Culture, Learning and formal Education, Secondary Education, Kindergarten, Curriculum, Byzantium, Gurukuls, Arithmetic, Metaphysic, Tertiary Education, Parochial Schools, Stress, Perceptions, Linguistics, Cultural diversity, Criticism.*

### INTRODUCTION

Schools are the important institutions for imparting education to pupils thereby shaping their personality and future. For quality education school culture is crucial and plays an important role. Basically school culture consists of the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours which characterize a school. Simultaneously school culture also encompasses other concrete issues like the physical and emotional safety of students, the public spaces and the orderliness of classroom to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. In fact a school culture results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions and practices.

In common parlance by a school we mean

an institution designed to provide learning spaces and learning environments for the teaching of students (or “pupils”) under the direction of teachers. Most countries have systems of formal education, which is commonly compulsory. In these systems, students progress through a series of schools. The names for these schools vary by country but generally include primary school for young children and secondary school for teenagers who have completed primary education. An institution where higher education is taught, is commonly called a university college or university.

Besides to these core schools, students in a given country may also attend schools before and after primary and secondary education. Kindergarten or pre-school provide some schooling to very young

children (typically ages 3–5). University, vocational school, college or seminary may be available after secondary school.

A school may also be dedicated to one particular field, such as a school of economics or a school of dance. Alternative schools may provide non traditional curriculum and methods. There are also non-government schools, called private schools. Private schools may be required when the government does not supply adequate, or special education. Other private schools can also be religious, such as Christian schools, hawzas (Muslim schools), yeshivas (Jewish schools), and others; or schools that have a higher standard of education or seek to foster other personal achievements.

Schools for adults include institutions of corporate training, military education and training and business schools. In home schooling and online schools, teaching and learning take place outside of a traditional school building. Schools are commonly organized in several different organizational model, including departmental, small learning communities, academies, integrated, and schools- within-a-school.

Coming to history, the concept of grouping students together in a centralized location for learning has existed since Classical antiquity. Formal schools have existed at least since ancient Greece (see Academy), ancient Rome (see Education in Ancient Rome) ancient India (see Gurukul), and ancient China (see History of education in China). The Byzantine Empire had an established schooling system beginning at the primary level.

According to Traditions and Encounters, the founding of the primary education system began in 425 AD and "... military personnel usually had at least a primary education ...". The sometimes efficient and often large government of the Empire meant that educated citizens were a must. Although Byzantium lost much of the grandeur of Roman culture and extravagance in the process of surviving, the Empire emphasized efficiency in its war manuals. The Byzantine education system continued until the empire's collapse in 1453 AD.

Simultaneously, in Western Europe a considerable number of cathedral schools were founded during the Early Middle Ages in order to teach future clergy and administrators, with the oldest still existing, and continuously operated, cathedral schools being the King's School, Canterbury (established 597 AD), King's School, Rochester (established 604 AD), St. Peter's School, York (established 627 AD) and Thetford Grammar School (established 631 AD). Beginning in the 5th century AD monastic schools were also established throughout Western Europe, teaching both religious and secular subjects.

Remarkably, Islam was another culture that developed a school system in the modern sense of the word. Emphasis was put on knowledge, which required a systematic way of teaching and spreading knowledge, and purpose-built structures. At first, mosques combined both religious performance and learning activities, but by the 9th century, the

madrassa was introduced, a school that was built independently from the mosque, such as al-Qarawiyyin, founded in 859 AD. They were also the first to make the Madrassa system a public domain under the control of the Caliph.

Under the Ottomans, the towns of Bursa and Edirne became the main centers of learning. The Ottoman system of Külliye, a building complex containing a mosque, a hospital, madrassa, and public kitchen and dining areas, revolutionized the education system, making learning accessible to a wider public through its free meals, health care and sometimes free accommodation.

Further, in Europe, universities emerged during the 12th century; here, scholasticism was an important tool, and the academicians were called schoolmen. During the Middle Ages and much of the Early Modern period, the main purpose of schools (as opposed to universities) was to teach the Latin language. This led to the term grammar school, which in the United States informally refers to a primary school, but in the United Kingdom means a school that selects entrants based on ability or aptitude.

Following this, the school curriculum has gradually broadened to include literacy in the vernacular language as well as technical, artistic, scientific and practical subjects. Obligatory school attendance became common in parts of Europe during the 18th century. In Denmark-Norway, this was introduced as early as in 1739-1741, the primary end being to increase the literacy of the almue, i.e. the "regular people". Many of the earlier public schools in the United States and elsewhere were one-room schools where a single teacher taught seven grades of boys and girls in the same classroom.

Beginning in the 1920s, one-room schools were consolidated into multiple classroom facilities with transportation increasingly provided by kid hacks and school buses.

Coming to the use of term, in the United Kingdom, the term school refers primarily to pre-university institutions, and these can, for the most part, be divided into pre- schools or nursery schools, primary schools (sometimes further divided into infant school and junior school), and secondary schools. Various types of secondary schools in England and Wales include grammar schools, comprehensives, secondary moderns, and city academies. In Scotland, while they may have different names, all Secondary schools are the same, except in that they may be funded by the state, or independently funded (see next paragraph). It is unclear if "Academies", which are a hybrid between state and independently funded/controlled schools and have been introduced to England in recent years, will ever be introduced to Scotland. School performance in Scotland is monitored by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

In much of the Commonwealth of Nations, including Australia, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania, the term school refers primarily to pre-

university institutions.

In the United Kingdom, most schools are publicly funded and known as state schools or maintained schools in which tuition is provided free. There are also private schools or independent schools that charge fees. Some of the most selective and expensive private schools are known as public schools, a usage that can be confusing to speakers of North American English. In North American usage, a public school is one that is publicly funded or run.

It is pertinent to note that in ancient India, schools were in the form of Gurukuls. Gurukuls were traditional Hindu residential schools of learning; typically the teacher's house or a monastery. During the Mughal rule, Madrasahs were introduced in India to educate the children of Muslim parents. British records show that indigenous education was widespread in the 18th century, with a school for every temple, mosque or village in most regions of the country.

The subjects taught included Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Theology, Law, Astronomy, Metaphysics, Ethics, Medical Science and Religion. Under the British rule in India, Christian missionaries from England, USA and other countries established missionary and boarding schools throughout the country. Later as these schools gained in popularity, more were started and some gained prestige. These schools marked the beginning of modern schooling in India and the syllabus and calendar they followed became the benchmark for schools in modern India.

Today most of the schools follow the missionary school model in terms of tutoring, subject / syllabus, governance etc. with minor changes. Schools in India range from schools with large campuses with thousands of students and hefty fees to schools where children are taught under a tree with a small / no campus and are totally free of cost.

Remarkably, there are various boards of schools in India, namely Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE), Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE), Madrasa Boards of various states, Matriculation Boards of various states, State Boards of various boards, Anglo Indian Board, and so on.

Coming to Europe, in much of continental Europe, the term school usually applies to primary education, with primary schools that last between four and nine years, depending on the country. It also applies to secondary education, with secondary schools often divided between Gymnasiums and vocational schools, which again depending on country and type of school educate students for between three and six years. In Germany students graduating from Grundschule are not allowed to

directly progress into a vocational school, but are supposed to proceed to one of Germany's general education schools such as Gesamtschule, Hauptschule, Realschule or Gymnasium.

When they leave that school, which usually happens at age 15-19 they are allowed to proceed to a vocational school. The term school is rarely used for tertiary education, except for some upper or high schools, which describe colleges and universities. In Eastern Europe modern schools (after World War II), of both primary and secondary education, often are combined, while secondary education might be split into accomplished or not.

Remarkably, the schools are classified as middle schools of general education and for the technical purposes include "degrees" of the education they provide out of three available: the first — primary, the second — unaccomplished secondary, and the third — accomplished secondary. Usually the first two degrees of education (eight years) are always included, while the last one gives option for the students to pursue vocational or specialized education.

Similarly, in North America, the term school can refer to any educational institution at any level, and covers all of the following: preschool (for toddlers), kindergarten, elementary school, middle school (also called intermediate school or junior high school, depending on specific age groups and geographic region), high school (or in some cases senior high school), college, university, and graduate school. In the United States, school performance through high school is monitored by each state's Department of Education. Charter schools are publicly funded elementary or secondary schools that have been freed from some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools.

Remarkably, the terms grammar school and grade school are sometimes used to refer to a primary school.

Now a look at operation and ownership of schools.

In fact, many schools are owned or funded by states. Private schools operate independently from the government. Private schools usually rely on fees from families whose children attend the school for funding; however, sometimes such schools also receive government support. Many private schools are affiliated with a particular religion; these are known as parochial schools.

## **STEPS TO STARTING A SCHOOL**

In fact, the Toronto District School Board is an example of a school board that allows parents to design and propose new schools.



**Factors for Consideration**

- Goals: What is the purpose of education, and what is the school's role?
- Governance: Who will make which decisions?
- Parent involvement: In which ways are parents welcome at the school?
- Student body: Will it be, for example, a neighbourhood school or a specialty school?
- Student conduct: What behaviour is acceptable, and what happens when behaviour is inappropriate?
- Curriculum: What will be the curriculum model, and who will decide on curricula?

**MAIN COMPONENTS**

As already stated, schools are organized spaces purposed for teaching and learning. The classrooms, where teachers teach and students learn,

are of central importance. Classrooms may be specialized for certain subjects, such as laboratory classrooms for science education and workshops for industrial arts education.

**Desired Facilities**

- Cafeteria (Commons), dining hall or canteen where students eat lunch and often breakfast and snacks
- Athletic field, playground, gym, and/or track place where students participating in sports or physical education practice
- School yards, that is, all-purpose playfields typically in elementary schools, often made of concrete, although some are being transformed into environmentally friendly teaching gardens by landscape artists such as Sharon Gamson Danks.
- Auditorium or hall where student theatrical and musical productions can be staged and where all-school events such as assemblies are held
- Office where the administrative work of the school is done
- Library where students ask librarians reference questions, check out books and magazines, and often use computers
- Computer labs where computer-based work is done and the internet accessed

Now a look at the security issue.

It is pertinent to note that the safety of staff and students is increasingly becoming an issue for school communities, an issue most schools are addressing through improved security. Some have also taken measures such as installing metal detectors or video surveillance. Others have even taken measures such as having the children swipe identification cards as they board the school bus.

For some schools, these plans have included the use of door numbering to aid public safety response. Other security concerns faced by schools include bomb threats, gangs, vandalism, and bullying.

In case of health services, school health services are services from medical, teaching and other professionals applied in or out of school to improve the health and well-being of children and in some cases whole families. These services have been developed in different ways around the globe but the fundamentals are constant: the early detection, correction, prevention or amelioration of disease, disability and abuse from which school-aged children can suffer.

It is apt to note that internet-based distance

learning programs are offered widely through many universities. Instructors teach through online activities and assignments. Online classes are taught the same as physically being in class with the same curriculum. The instructor offers the syllabus with their fixed requirements like any other class.

Students can virtually turn their assignments in to their instructors according to deadlines. This being through via email or in the course webpage. This allowing students to work at their own pace, yet meeting the correct deadline. Students taking an online class have more flexibility in their schedules to take their classes at a time that works best for them. Conflicts with taking an online class may include not being face to face with the instructor when learning or being in an environment with other students.

Online classes can also make understanding the content difficult, especially when not able to get in quick contact with the instructor. Online students do have the advantage of using other online sources with assignments or exams for that specific class. Online classes also have the advantage of students not needing to leave their house for a morning class or worrying about their attendance for that class.

Students can work at their own pace to learn and achieve within that curriculum.

Some schools offer remote access to their classes over the Internet. Online schools also can provide support to traditional schools, as in the case of the School Net Namibia. Some online classes also provide experience in a class, so that when people take them, they have already been introduced to the subject and know what to expect, and even more classes provide High School/College credit allowing people to take the classes at their own pace. Many online classes cost money to take but some are offered free.

The convenience of learning at home has been a major attractive point for enrolling online. Students can attend class anywhere a computer can go—at home, a library or while travelling internationally.

Online school classes are designed to fit your needs, while allowing you to continue working and tending to your other obligations. Online school education is divided into three subcategories: Online Elementary School, Online Middle School, Online High school.

### **Occupational Stress**

Obviously, as a profession, teaching has levels of work-related stress (WRS) that are among the highest of any profession in some countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The degree of this problem is becoming increasingly recognized and support systems are being put into place. Teacher education increasingly recognizes the need to train those new to the profession to be aware of and overcome mental health challenges they may face. Stress sometimes affects students more severely than teachers, up to the point where the students are prescribed stress medication.

This stress is claimed to be related to standardized testing, and the pressure on students to score above average. According to a 2008 mental health study by the Associated Press, eight in ten college students said they had sometimes or frequently experienced stress in their daily lives. This was an increase of 20% from a survey five years previously. 34 percent had felt depressed at some point in the past three months, 13 percent had been diagnosed with a mental health condition such as an anxiety disorder or depression, and nine percent had seriously considered suicide.

Here it is apt to note that schools and their teachers have always been under pressure — for

instance, pressure to cover the curriculum, to perform well in comparison to other schools, and to avoid the stigma of being “soft” or “spoiling” toward students. Forms of discipline, such as control over when students may speak, and normalized behaviour, such as raising a hand to speak, are imposed in the name of greater efficiency. Practitioners of critical pedagogy maintain that such disciplinary measures have no positive effect on student learning.

Indeed, some argue that disciplinary practices detract from learning, saying that they undermine students’ individual dignity and sense of self-worth—the latter occupying a more primary role in students’ hierarchy of needs. Success in management requires learning as fast as the world is changing. Effective leadership is putting first things first. Effective management is discipline, carrying it out.

Having a thorough understanding of school in the preceding paragraphs, now we come to school culture. In fact culture is a sociological term.

### **WHAT IS SCHOOL CULTURE**

Basically, the term ‘school culture’ refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity.

Here it must be remembered that like the macro social culture, a school culture also results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions, and practices, and it is heavily shaped by a school’s particular institutional history. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members all contribute to their school’s culture, as do other influences such as the community in which the school is located, the policies that govern how it operates, or the principles upon which the school was founded.

Conventionally, divided into two basic forms: positive cultures and negative cultures, many researchers, educators, and academics have attempted to define the major features of positive and negative school cultures, and a plethora of studies, articles, and books are available on the topic. As such, broadly defined, positive school cultures are conducive to professional satisfaction, morale, and effectiveness, as well as to student learning, fulfilment, and well-being.

### **Characteristics associated with Positive School Cultures**

- The individual successes of teachers and students are recognized and celebrated.
- Relationships and interactions are characterized by openness, trust, respect, and appreciation
- Staff relationships are collegial, collaborative, and productive, and all staff members are held to high professional standards.
- Students and staff members feel emotionally and physical safe, and the school's policies and facilities promote student safety.
- School leaders, teachers, and staff members model positive, healthy behaviors for students.
- Mistakes not punished as failures, but they are seen as opportunities to learn and grow for both students and educators.
- Students are consistently held to high academic expectations, and a majority of students meet or exceed those expectations.
- Important leadership decisions are made collaboratively with input from staff members, students, and parents.
- Criticism, when voiced, is constructive and well- intentioned, not antagonistic or self-serving.
- Educational resources and learning opportunities are equitably distributed, and all students, including minorities and students with disabilities.

Coming to cultural reforms, school culture has become a central concept in many efforts to change how schools operate and improve educational achievements. Remarkably, whereas a school culture is heavily influenced by its institutional history, culture also shapes social patterns, habits, and dynamics that influence future behaviors, which could become an obstacle to reform and improvement. For example, if a faculty culture is generally dysfunctional— i.e., if interpersonal tensions and distrust are common, problems are rarely addressed or resolved, or staff members tend to argue more than they collaborate or engage in productive professional discussions—it is likely that

these cultural factors will significantly complicate or hinder any attempt to change how the school operates.

It is significant to note that since many members of a school community will benefit from a positive culture, and cultural factors tend to contribute significantly to emotional states such as happiness and unhappiness or fulfillment and dissatisfaction, the concept of a more positive school culture is exceptionally, in itself, disputable. Consequently debates tend to arise in response to specific reform proposals, rather than to the general goal of improving a school culture.

### **Ways to Improve School Culture**

- Establishing professional learning communities that encourages teachers to communicate, share expertise, and work together more collegially and productively.
- Providing presentations, seminars, and learning experiences designed to educate staff and students about bullying and reduce instances of bullying.
- Creating a leadership team comprising a representative cross-section of school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members that oversees and leads a school-improvement initiative.
- Creating events and educational experiences that honor and celebrate the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the student body, such as hosting cultural events and festivals, exhibiting culturally relevant materials throughout the school, inviting local cultural leaders to present to students, or making explicit connections between the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and what is being taught in history, social studies, and literature courses. For related discussions, see multicultural education and voice.
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- Establishing an advisory program that pairs groups of students with adult advisor to strengthen adult student relationships and ensure that students are well known and supported by at least one adult in the school.
- Surveying students, parents, and teachers about their experiences in the school, and hosting community forums that invite participants to share their opinions about and recommendations for the school and its programs.

Yet given that organizational dysfunction is, by nature, an entrenched pattern of often unconscious behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that tend to obstruct organizational change and improvement—and because human beings can become deeply attached to emotions and behaviors that may make them less happy, fulfilled, productive, or successful—attempts to reform school cultures may be more likely encounter resistance, criticism, or controversy in schools which otherwise need cultural reforms in earnest. In recent years, problems pertaining to school culture are being cited as reasons for why schools should be closed or why a significant number of the teaching faculty should be fired.

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