

Children Imbibe the Culture of their School

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This experience is from one of the schools I worked with during my fellowship.

A cluster-level *mela* was being planned. We, as fellows, had to work with multiple schools and spend our maximum time with the teachers and students there. We had to try and test activities/games and make sure teachers interacted informally with pupils through these. The teachers had to learn that working and interacting with the learners through activities could make the teaching-learning process more effective. With a hope that by the end of the *mela*, this journey and this experience of interaction and learning would have set an example for both teachers and learners.

It is common to view the rivalry among colleagues as 'workplace competition'. This often leads to the formation of groups and, looked at in a lighter vein, with some gossip, some laughs. I had been in the school for two days or so when I observed that the teachers split into two groups during lunchtime and picking up their lunch boxes, went into two separate rooms. As a fellow, I was confused about which group I should sit with, or if I should sit alone. The Head Mistress observed my dilemma and invited me to sit along with her group (let us call this group, *Harry*). We had a good chat about the food, culture and traffic of Bengaluru.

A few days passed by and I was building up a good rapport with all the teachers, when one day, a teacher from the other group, (say, *Potter*) asked me to have lunch with them. I accepted the offer warmly and had lunch with them for a couple of days, all the time maintaining a good rapport with both the groups. Even after 20 days of sharing lunch with both these groups, I did not hear any gossip or crosstalk in these two groups. I also observed that both the groups were absolutely fine with each other, sharing laughs, lesson plans and anecdotes about the children the rest of the time.

Finally, one afternoon, when I was with group *Harry* for lunch, the Head Cook approached the Head Mistress and mentioned that the sambhar and *burfi* prepared at the school kitchen that day had turned out to be delicious, so would they like

to have some of it. The Head Mistress asked the Head Cook to send the items through one of the students. The Head Cook nodded and left. After a couple of minutes, one of the teachers suddenly asked another, seated close to the door, to check which student was bringing in the food and she muttered that the Head Cook may send *anybody* inside the office room. By now, I had picked up their dialect and somehow sensed what the teacher may have meant by *anybody*. Meanwhile, the teacher seated near the door had got up and rushed out to check which student was bringing the food. She brought a girl along with her and made the girl serve food to all of them. Everyone enjoyed the meal.

This entire episode had made me very curious. In the evening, all the fellows met at the town bus stop daily to get back to the city. I asked one of them, who was a local, about the lunchtime incident, 'Did she mean caste when she said *anybody*?' My colleague replied, 'Yes. Didn't you realise that from day one? Why do you think there are two groups of teachers!' I was flabbergasted. I began to connect the dots, the grouping of the teachers had nothing to do with workplace competition, it was a clear demarcation based on societal norms of not sharing food between two *classes* of people. I cannot judge the actions of the teachers because this is how our society is and all of us have to follow its norms.

Citizenship is not something that is spoken of much around us. We read it in our social sciences textbooks. Perhaps, the first time we come across the word *rights of citizens* is when, as children, we see the dark blue ink mark on our parents' nails after they had cast their votes. When do we even hear the word *citizen* except in the context of an election? What is citizenship? We are what our society is. It is as simple as this – we imitate and follow societal norms. We need to prove ourselves to be good citizens in our immediate society and not in the capital city or on some border of our nation.

As is evident from this incident, teachers may also be following the same societal norms they were

born into and brought up with. They have learned that this is how society works and that they need to abide by these rules. In the same school, the national anthem was sung twice every day – once in the morning assembly and again at the end of the school day. The Head Mistress was so particular about it that she made sure that the school gates were locked when the school got over so that no

student could leave before the national anthem had been sung. The only reason for singing the anthem twice was to instil citizenship. However, as for the students, they may not learn everything taught to them, but they are sure to follow the actions and behaviour of their teachers. Unknowingly or unknowingly, we imbibe the culture of the school we attend.



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It would help a science teacher to look closely at how she could inculcate some basic democratic practices in the classroom, for example, the usage of common resources provided in the environment. This could be an important feature in science, especially during lab work – being aware that the space is common for all.

Chandrika Muralidhar, Democracy in the Science Classroom, p 30.