

# School as a Microcosm of Society

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The social milieu of a person is the immediate world for him/her. We grow up experiencing this immediate world of ours and it shapes our perspectives and thoughts from a young age. School is an integral part of this immediate world and this institution is expected to prepare us to decide what is right or wrong, to understand the values of life and become better citizens. Schools also function in this social milieu and societal practices are reflected in the school practices too. Schools do not just train individuals for employment but also serve a greater purpose of instilling democratic values, like equality, justice, and respect from a young age.

I got the opportunity to teach in one such school which functions with complete awareness of the purpose of educating the children who come there. The Azim Premji School, Barmer, was set up with a vision of providing a holistic learning environment for children, a place where they learn new things, be themselves, learn values required to be good human beings and responsible citizens. Currently, the school has classes I to IV, hundred and thirty-nine students and nine teachers. The school offers co-education and caters to children from all backgrounds. The aim is to bring children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to create a space for diverse interactions and opinions.

The school has children from all social classes, various parental occupations and religions etc. The children are predisposed to the thoughts and beliefs of their respective families and community and this is reflected in their behaviour towards each other and their thoughts on various issues. As teachers, we understood that we are there to guide these children to make them academically sound and better human beings. Usually, schools have a dedicated class for value education or from a very young age, morals are taught through stories or lectures, but in this school, we tried to make the school environment such that children would see these values and ideas in *practice*, the values which our Constitution strives for and which will shape these children into responsible citizens who value the rights of other people, who raise

their voice for what is right. And for this, a school needs to demonstrate these practices. Practices where everybody is treated equally, where issues are resolved with reason and discussion, respecting everyone despite the differences etc. Children learn what they see, so we aimed to make our school culture such that children see examples of these values everywhere, be it their classroom, playground, mid-day mealtime or assembly.

## Creating a culture of dialogue

Dialogue, or conversation, is a tool to convey our thoughts and we need to recognize the importance of resolving issues through dialogue. All the teachers worked rigorously to develop a culture of dialogue in the first three grades that we taught. Class I children were new to the school system, but those of class II and III were already a part of a system where discipline and punishment were very closely interconnected. All of us believed that children learn best when they learn in a fear-free environment, hence, instead of shouting or punishing children when they ran around, hit each other, used bad language, talked during class, we talked with them and asked them the reason for not following rules. The children would either respond with a reason or stay quiet.

This new-found freedom was a bit confusing for them and they did not know how to handle it. Some children took advantage of it because they knew no one would shout at them or punish them. This continued for two to three months and at one point, I wondered how we would complete the syllabus if we spent so much time talking to the children about following rules. But we did. Be it in the corridors, the classrooms, at mealtimes or assembly, whenever students did something disruptive, we talked to them. After around five months, we could see how this had impacted the children's thinking process. Instead of fighting with their friends, they would talk and resolve matters among themselves.

## Rules made together

While we were working towards developing a

culture of dialogue in our school, we recognised the importance of discipline. Freedom and discipline work together and one cannot override the other. So, we worked on developing some common rules for everybody – what is acceptable and what is not; what should be done if somebody breaks the rules etc. We developed these rules in our common assembly where children came up with a lot of ideas and everybody collectively decided the rules of our school. Later, we also made our classroom rules, which the teacher and children would follow to create a better learning environment.

As we had already established the importance of dialogue, whenever a child broke a rule, other children would talk to the child and ask why he/she had done so. This applied to the teacher as well – when teachers broke rules, children questioned them. As time passed by, we noticed that while in the beginning, everything appeared chaotic: we received 15-20 complaints about a single child in one day but later the complaints came down to 2-4 per day about the same child. Often, the entire period would pass in talking about an issue, but slowly everything became orderly. And after six-seven months, not only teachers, but also our students worked towards creating a ‘learning environment’ in the school.

### Values for life

The beliefs of family and community affect the thinking process of children which makes it difficult for them to see things through an unbiased lens. The students’ beliefs about caste, colour, gender, and economic status were starkly visible to us. Children would casually comment about the skin colour of another child, judge them by their clothes, higher caste children would not make friends with a child from the lower caste, they made groups, not including the opposite gender etc.

We encountered these issues almost every day and talked about them with the children then and there. We discussed that the religion or caste of a person did not make them different. We also spoke to them about the hardships some students face at home and how they still put their best efforts to study. When eggs were included in the mid-day meal menu, students who did not eat eggs would make faces, sit away and some even stopped talking to their friends who ate eggs. The teachers discussed this issue in the assembly, the classroom and with children individually. We focused on the value of respecting the choices others make. To present a better example, teachers who did not eat

eggs sat in the line at mealtimes with students who ate eggs and, gradually, other students also started to sit with them and after a few months, there were no separate lines for food; everybody sat together and ate. It took time, required patience and effort, but the children finally started to respect the differences and qualities of each other.

### Democracy as an integral element

Very often, when we see primary grade classrooms, we notice that, mostly, the teachers are leading the process. Primary school is the foundational stage for children where they can be brought up to recognise the importance of democracy, equality and respect for one another. We tried to develop a system where neither the teacher nor a few students would dominate the classroom processes and everybody got to participate.

It was part of our rules that everybody, including the teacher, would wait for their turn to speak, raise their hand, and not interrupt when someone else was speaking. Every voice would be heard and if there were differences in opinion, we would hear the reasons and let children decide if they could agree with each other. This system helped those students who thought they knew everything and would always speak and give answers first. They learned to wait for their turn, respect others’ opinions and accept their own mistakes.

To manage the classroom, the teachers did not decide who the class monitor would be. Instead, there were discussions and the teacher would ask who would want to *volunteer* to be the class monitor. After taking the nominations, based on the students’ behavior, sense of responsibility, etc. the class would decide who would be the class monitor. Every two months, the monitors were changed by the same process.

For the better functioning of our school, we made different committees – sports, midday meal, library, assembly etc, and children were put in charge of the functioning of these committees. Each committee had 10-12 elected students. Before the school closed due to the pandemic, the children had begun campaigning and the candidates had visited all the classes to show their election signs and speak about the work they would do. Teachers helped everybody understand what a fair selection process is and how a democratic process leads to

the better functioning of a system. We will continue this after school reopens.

All the teachers worked together, had discussions and kept individual and class records of students so we knew exactly who needed guidance and in which areas. In this process, teachers also learned to be patient and democratic in their approach towards students. We did not depend solely on lesson plans to teach values to our students, but found space for it wherever we could. We discussed the values intrinsic in the academic content; appreciated small acts of compassion, team spirit, love and care our students and teachers demonstrated. We will continue to put our best efforts forward to guide students to be better human beings and responsible citizens.

### **Handling situations: some examples**

#### ***On stealing***

During assembly, we discussed the habit of stealing money or other things and how it affects our mind, how it can become a habit and can be very difficult to change later. Children shared a few examples of how they have friends who steal. We did this because I came to know that one of the children stole money from home to buy chocolates for her friends. Without mentioning her name, we had a general discussion on sharing and asking parents for things that they needed. Later, I talked with the child and tried to explain to her the ill effects of this habit. She also admitted that she takes money without asking and will not do it again.

#### ***On helping others***

We get complaints from students about those who do not help other children. I ask them why they come to me, instead of speaking to those who do not help others. I add that it is not a bad thing to inform others about their areas of improvement. One should share things and help each other to become a better person. I told them how we, the teachers, do the same. At times, we have our own disagreements, but we understand that for the betterment of everyone, we need to share things and ask for help. We also talk about constructive feedback and how we can do this without making the other person feel bad.

#### ***On kindness***

The seating arrangement of the class was changed because we felt that we need it to bring change in children's behaviour towards each other. So now they sit in a circular arrangement. We were having

a discussion in class and somebody took the name of a child and said that he would not know about this concept (there were also comments on some children's appearance). So, we had a very detailed discussion on why these children face difficulty in learning and they know and understand a lot of things that others do not. We talked about this particular child's family circumstances and how despite it, he has come a long way and improved in many ways, his writing skills, understanding of things, behaviour etc.

We also talked about another child and his home and how his mother works very hard to earn to support their family. So before saying anything about anyone, we should think because we do not know how hard they are trying to work. We should help our friends, especially G1 (students who are struggling in foundational literacy and numeracy) students to learn better and faster by helping them to learn what we already know and to become good friends.

#### ***On teasing***

During assembly, I saw Raghav crying and asked him what had happened. He explained that he had applied a lip balm which was glittery, and a classmate had said that he had put on lipstick and was looking like a girl. I asked him what was there to cry about? Is it bad to be a girl or is it bad to put lip balm? We had a very detailed discussion; we told the children that putting on lipstick or lip balm does not make anyone a man or a woman. And why did they think only women wear lipstick, there are men in the world and in our country, who apply makeup and even wear women's clothes. They do it because they like it. We also stressed that no one should start crying over small things. We also said to the girl who had teased Raghav that she should have asked him if she was curious and should not say things that can hurt others.

#### ***Respect for common property***

We have our library corner in every classroom where we hang books on a rope. One day, a child told me that two of the students were throwing the books on the rope. I talked to them and asked them why they did it. I talked about children who make the effort to keep the books in place and how they would feel when they see them throw books. I then took out all the books and told them that there will be no books in class from now on because if we cannot respect the resources we have, then we cannot have them. We should take care of the

things we get because keeping our class properly managed is our responsibility. I asked both of the boys if I should take the books away. Both the children accepted that they had been irresponsible and put the books back on the wall.

### ***On violent online games***

Suresh mentioned that some boys were pretend-playing *PubG* in class, so I asked them who all were playing. At first, Suresh mentioned two names but when I asked whoever was playing to stand up on their own, many of them stood up. I asked them if they liked pointing a gun at their friends and kill them. They said no. Then I asked if the classroom is a place to play such games. They said no. We discussed how playing games for extended periods of time on mobile phones affects the eyes and mind etc. I highlighted some news stories about how children get addicted to mobile phones and games. I told them that playing games is not a bad thing but there is a time and age to do this and that the classroom is not a place to play games which depict any kind of violence.

### ***On smoking***

When the students of class two told me that one of them was imitating the puffing of a cigarette using a pencil in place of a cigarette, we had a long discussion about cancer. The students seemed to know about the adverse health effects of smoking. The child who was imitating a smoker also spoke about his family and surroundings that had

impacted his behaviour. His parents and everybody in the neighbourhood chewed tobacco and smoked, which had impacted his life too because many times we found tobacco packets in his bag and had detailed discussions on them. He does not chew tobacco now.

### ***On bullying***

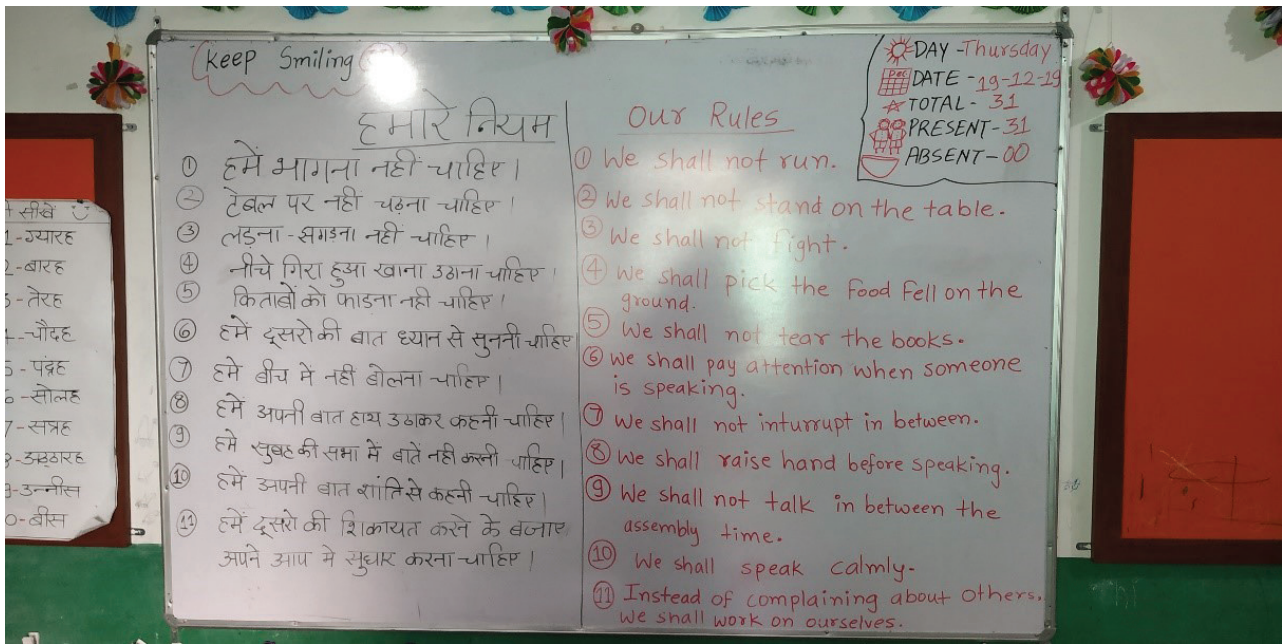
A few students complained that two children had taken off a child's pants in the bathroom. I asked the child and he confirmed this, but when I asked the boys who had done it, they denied it. Some other children confirmed seeing it happen and that the two boys were also seen beating this child many times.

I talked to them about the habit of hitting others, specifically, those who do not retaliate. I told them that such people are called *bullies* and how their victims are sometimes driven to leave school, suffer from low self-esteem, depression and can even take extreme steps when unable to cope with such situations. Both the boys apologised to the child and wrote down that what had done was wrong, and they would not repeat it.

There were other incidents reported to the teachers – of throwing stones at others, plucking flowers in the school premises, or giving *galis* (abusive words). For every such situation, children were not punished or insulted before the others. They were made to realise the consequences and convinced to not repeat such behaviour.

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identities of children.*





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