



Soul Culture: Creating an enabling inner environment for learning

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They were all working in pairs filling up the classroom with the usual hustle – bustle we can expect from 4th graders. The teacher rings a small metal bell and with its tingling sound, the chatter slowly gets lost into a soft silence. The children pick up their sitting mats, form a circle, close their eyes and begin their daily practice. All this while, I did not even notice the presence of the adult (teacher) in their classroom. As if she never existed.



Photo Courtesy: The Heritage School, Gurgaon

The scene narrated above is our witness of a classroom where one would see a lot of difference in teaching on the outside but would most definitely miss to notice or realise the amount of work done at the inner level of each child as well as the educator for it to manifest in such a beautiful sight. And we are tempted to add here that this inability to take cognisance of the inner world of the child is not something new in the field of formal education. In fact, what we seem to value and judge mostly in students is their ability to replicate or reproduce the pre-imparted knowledge in the same way as it was taught to them rather than gauging their individual abilities. Where on one hand, by having

standards and benchmarks, we try to bring in objectivity; on the other hand, we conveniently forget that learning is also a very personal and subjective experience. The intention here is not to negate the importance of laying down the goals that children need to work towards in a particular age group; but to highlight that the process through which each child perseveres these goals is his/ her unique journey and is therefore highly subjective.

So why is it important to nurture this unique inner environment of each child? What role does it play in the learning process of the child and is it really possible to implement this in mainstream school education? These are some questions that naturally follow from the above argument and would have crossed your mind as well. Let's address these one by one. Let us begin by understanding what the 'inner environment' of the child is made up of. According to the yogic philosophy, the mind is seen as having four functions:

Manas-The thinking and feeling mind

Chitta-The function of memory, habits and patterns

Ahamkara- Involvement and self-identification

Budhi- The discriminatory or higher order

thinking mind

We all would have witnessed these functions in our own experiences without knowing the yogic terminologies for the same. If we reflect on the kind of education most of us have been through and the kind of mainstream education most prevalent these days, we would realise that it focuses essentially on training the first two faculties. There are few schools who go beyond these two functions and attempt to involve the students deeply in their own learning, sharing the ownership of learning with them and cater to the development of self or Ahamkara in students. But there are still very few schools or educational spaces that cater to the fourth aspect – building a sense of discernment in the students by engaging their higher order thinking abilities. If we truly want to nurture each child’s uniqueness, we need to ensure that we engage all these four aspects of the mind while we teach. Among this, the fourth one, Budhi becomes the most critical aspect for two reasons – one; not much work has been done on it and teachers need to understand how to build a sense of discernment within their regular teaching and two; because we don’t just learn from our experiences but also a lot by reflecting on our experiences. The ability to reflect, judge and take decisions is what defines our capability to discern and forms a major part of how we lead our lives. By ensuring that all these four functions of the mind are active while children are learning, we will be engaging all the aspects of their being -cognitive, affective and physical; thereby creating an enabling inner environment for learning.

It seems like a tall order to create such an enabling inner environment within students in the course of our mainstream education. It definitely takes time and effort to build something like this but there are some very simple things that teachers can do to begin the process. The first

step towards this is to train students’ ATTENTION. Attention is the basic lens through which we experience our lives. So working with our attention goes far beyond simply relaxing stress or improving concentration. It can change the very way we perceive and experience ourselves (self image), other people and the world at large. There are many foundational practices and principles for training attention, some of which are drawn from various contemplative traditions and most of these practices are anchored in current research in cognitive neuroscience, evidence-based classroom pedagogy, precepts of social and emotional learning (SEL), and guiding principles of positive psychology. These researches have made it evident how training attention can result in structural changes in the brain leading to positive changes in people. For instance; the parts of the brain involved in self-reflection and empathy were significantly thicker in those who developed their attention skills. These were the anterior insula, which is involved in awareness of internal states, and Brodmann area 9/10, which is involved in the integration of emotion and cognition¹.

So how do we train students’ attention in order to build the kind of inner environment we are talking about. There are three phases in progression that can easily be integrated with all school programmes to develop this critical capacity within students:

Phase - I - Stabilising Attention

The first step is help students stabilise their attention so that they can take control of what they are attending to. This is done by:

- Engaging in focus and concentration activities
- Training the memory
- Fostering creativity and building problem solving abilities

¹ Lazar SW, Kerr CE, Wasserman RH, Gray JR, Greve DN, Treadway MT, McGarvey M, Quinn BT, Dusek JA, Benson H, Rauch SL, Moore CI, Fischl B. Neuroreport. 2005 Nov 28;16(17):1893-7.

Phase - II - Creating Emotional Balance

The second phase involves working with our emotions -diffusing negative emotions & enhancing positive states of minds by:

- Recognising/ becoming aware of the emotions
- Seeing the underlying patterns
- Making a choice of better alternatives

Phase - III - Discovering our unique self

Every child is born with an intrinsic sense of involvement with his/ her world; having done the foundational work of calming and balancing the mind and emotion, this natural sense of passion will find its full expression by:

- Developing the capacity to reflect and discern
- Discovering one's own calling and purpose in life
- Finding out one's core strengths and talents

The above structure is just a suggestive outline of how one can work with students at the level of their souls and foster an enabling inner culture

within them. Various experiences, activities and practices have been developed around this theme that can be easily integrated in the mainstream school curriculum. Some of these are mindfulness based practices by organisations like - Plum Village, The Hawn foundation - mind up curriculum and so on.

In order to successfully build an enabling inner environment within students, one needs to understand its importance in the students' learning process and also give it a substantial amount of weightage within the school curriculum. Apart from this, it is inevitable that the teachers are prepared for this - they receive trainings that build these capacities first in them and they then acquire the skills to facilitate these within their students. Above all, the educational spaces as communities need to understand the seriousness of working on this area and commit towards making it possible.

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