



Creating a Learning Environment at Azim Premji School

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“ In brief, the environment consists of those conditions that promote, or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being ”

John Dewey



Learning is a continuous journey. This thought is as old as Confucius (551-479BCE) who felt that success in life is linked to learning, which should be instilled in childhood. The Buddhist “Vinay”, and in Islam, madrasa, both refer to a physical space where religious and philosophical discussion can take place. Plato’s “Academy” was perhaps the first school, or his most famous student, Aristotle’s “Lyceum” where the wealthy menfolk would gather to discuss philosophy, politics and learn from each other’s views. As time passed on society needed different kinds of workers.

It has been accepted by us that learning in a systematic manner through a structure, by a specified curriculum is demanded by the society; hence a modern system of school has come into existence.

Over the years such teaching learning has become mechanical, and the main thrust being on scoring marks.

In Azim Premji Foundation’s, ‘Child Friendly School Initiative’ in Shorapur, schools were observed on 214 indicators which included infrastructure in school, classroom environment, teaching learning process, teacher-capacity building and community participation in school. Now, 60 indicators are being used, focusing on intervening only in areas of capacity building of the teacher and on the quality of teaching learning process. Thus, these two areas remain very important to us.

Now while focusing on these two areas we also need to remember that, learning happens only when we look at the safety, health, equity and inclusion of each and every learner. Each of these

describes an essential feature of a quality learning environment. If we can make these four principles cohesive and connected in an effective manner while facilitating, then learning environment thus created remains sustainable.

Keeping these thoughts as much as teachers could understand, and as much as these were possible to bring into practice, I am referring to the newly appointed teachers coming with limited understanding of teaching learning process, the kind of which is being talked about here, we set out to establish the 'Azim Premji Schools'.

Thus, to achieve our goal of "Quality Learning", we looked down and around to see what takes this "quality learning" to happen. Is it the infrastructure, sitting arrangement in the class, a healthy MDM, being strict with the children, discipline them all the time, giving voluminous home work, take tests and exams very often, punishments? It's a long list to look at. That's what, many of us experienced when we grew up.

We understood that both physical and psycho-social environment needs to be conducive.



Psycho-social Environment.

In our schools we have tried to take care of every one of these areas as much as possible. Even before the school started functioning, we invited the children from the community to come and be with us at the school premise. (Fig.1)

Children with learning problems have been admitted in Sirohi, Rudrapur and Tonk. We found children at different levels; teachers kept track of

every needs of every child and prepared their lesson plans. It's not only the cognitive level of the child, it is also the child's regularity that is kept in mind. In Sirohi some students came with siblings, one came with either Dadi or Mother for some days. One of our teachers in Sirohi came to school every day with her one and half year old daughter. School routine was never hampered; all the staff cooperated with the mother and the child.

In the very beginning, many a times children would peep into the kitchen and express their wish to have a biscuit; we were ready for the first few months to take care of that. Sometimes students would have a ball all to her and stay out of the class for the whole day, teachers with great patience and love gave her that opportunity. She grew out of this habit soon. These small deeds were the teacher's achievements, which kept the teachers motivated.



Physical Environment.

All the Azim Premji Schools started out of rented premise, which are not meant to be schools, so not all the classroom are airy and well-lit. Not all schools have a playground.

Furniture is few in all the schools. Sitting arrangement is on durries on the floor to make the best use of the space. We have kept low tables for the children to use. Every class has strings to display children's work and a shelf to keep books. The teacher has put up some charts and posters. (Fig 2).

Insistence on physical environment has been kept low for three reasons. One, these are all rented premises; two, the school should not stand out in

isolation. The children should feel the school to be an extension of their community.

In Azim Premji Schools we made best use of the existing building and made minimum physical changes. Classrooms were clean and food was good, but most of all a bondage of trust and respect, freedom and understanding was established between every child and every teacher. Children who joined Azim Premji School, in Sirohi were mostly coming for the first time to school. Some were also the dropouts. Many never had the patience to sit in the class for even 15 minutes at a time. Children decided when and which class to sit in the initial days. After a month and half or so we found the same children wanted to be inside the class they actually belonged to.

Using abusive language and hitting and kicking each other were not exactly revengeful fighting but seem to me like enjoyment. As we discussed, it became clearer that this is what the children see and hear at home and around; so their enjoyment, pastime and enjoyment all are reflected in their fighting, vocabulary and lack of sensitivity towards each other. Such incidents



occurred very frequently, the children would come running to complain; every time they came



we had been gentle with them all, never questioned why, rather made them friends again and involved them in different kinds of games. Nothing much has changed but definitely the vehemence, attitude and frequency has definitely come down. They have shown more interest in other games than in what they did earlier.

Children never felt threatened in any way, they felt accepted without any condition, there was no burden of learning what they were not interested in, or any load of homework. Emphasis was mainly on teaching through meaningful activities, group work, and paired-work. Each child learned in her / his pace and was given qualitative assessment at the end of the session. Teachers have been checking the levels of the children and been restructuring their teaching process accordingly. (Fig 3 below).

Once I was asked by a confused parent of Azim Premji School at Rudrapur, as to what this school is trying to do, as he found the school process beyond his understanding. I simply asked him if his child comes to school regularly, so as to not open a dialogue for which I had not enough time. He answered with a broad smile, "Yes, yes, my son would not be absent for a day."

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