

Private School Culture and Pedagogical Practices: Glance into EWS Children's Experiences

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Abstract

The emerging trend of proliferation of private schooling in India forces to reflect on the confluence of elitist private school culture, teaching-learning discourse and Economically Weaker Section (EWS) or disadvantaged children's class-cultural conundrums within the school space. It has important implications for tiling the pathway for inclusion of disadvantaged children in the private school ambit, considering the provision in the RTE Act, 2009 for inclusion of 25 per cent children from disadvantaged sections in unaided private schools. This paper is an attempt to interpret the socio-cultural confluence of private school culture, teaching- learning processes and class-cultural specificities embedded in disadvantaged children's experiences as unravelled in private school setting.

Introduction

The Indian education system is one of the largest systems in the world, catering to millions of children each year. Fundamentally, it is largely a divisive school system that engulfs India's educational space with parallel co-existence of public and private school system cutting across differing cultures, student population, fee structure, etc. The shifting trend towards private school education is not just an Indian phenomenon, but such that is palpable worldwide, hinting towards private schools emerging as a popular choice among parents. A discourse on current trends of schooling in India indicates towards complex web of privatization, school choice, and social- class cultural distinctions used as axes to understand the enmeshed school choice discourse. The boundless hopes that private school education instil in parents who seek upward mobility and life-changing impacts by making their children study in English-medium private schools is consequential to the preference for private

school education that has burgeoned to cut across different social class strata. One can easily ascertain the indispensable role that private schools have commenced to play in the education sector by having a glance at the soaring numbers in which they exist. Noting the remarkable shift, the District Information System of Education (DISE) data (2015-2016) on percentage of schools by management reveal that nearly half of the schools in Delhi are privately managed; i.e. out of 5655 schools in Delhi, 46.38 per cent of schools fall into the category of private unaided schools (NIEPA, 2016).

With the advent of Right to Education Act (2009), and the provision of section 12 (1) (c); "25 percent reservation is provided for children from disadvantaged sections in private unaided schools". It is contended that by making 25 per cent reservations for EWS children in the private schools, the popular perception is that State is extending a 'fair chance to the children from weaker sections. However, ambiguity looms large over the implementation of the Section 12 (1)

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(c) at the grassroots intending to bring parity and equality of educational opportunity for children to gain quality education. Certainly, it has resolved a proportion of the problem by opening the doors for the economically weaker sections, who till now were standing on the periphery; however, still fundamental struggles persist which necessitate immediate reflection and redressal.

Characterisation Of School Culture And Climate

The word culture can be understood in several ways. Culture teaches any person to make sense of the world and its ways which would not have been possible otherwise. Theorizing about culture, Geertz (1973) states, “Undirected by cultural patterns- organized systems of significant symbols- man’s behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless” (p. 167). Sociologists tend to view the formal school system as an abstraction, the layers of its abstraction getting concretized by way of understanding how this abstraction incarnates in a particular social setting. The particular act of symbolizing or attaching specific meanings to things or events has several implications in every sphere of life; schools being no exception. Culture of an organization can influence its productivity, leading towards life-changing impacts for its members. Few researchers who have studied the impact of school culture and its effectiveness reveal how such culture has its impact on students’ achievements and effectiveness (Fyans & Mehr, 1990). Researchers cite the link between organizational climate and school culture with school effectiveness as direct. Since, the term organizational climate and culture may appear vague and elusive, it becomes pertinent to operationally define it for the sake of empirical data collection. For the study, the culture and ethos of the private unaided school was described under broad heads, namely— schools’

physical layout, admission process, vision and philosophy, space-time sites, and its classroom processes.

Research Design And Methodology

The study is contextualized in ‘naturalistic qualitative frame’ with the intent of locating the research work in the everyday life of the field i.e. private unaided schools of Delhi. Qualitative research has been metaphorically conceived as “*an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures, and various blends of material*” (Creswell, 2007, p. 34). The study was designed within the concords of the similar metaphorical definition of ‘qualitative research’ as shared above, taking an interpretive stance of ‘critical analytic perspective.’ The study is an ethnographic exploration, where the focus has been to ascertain an in-depth account of the events, relationships, experiences, interactions, and processes occurring in the field naturally. It is recognizable that “*human beings interact in diverse and dynamic environmental socio-cultural settings; consequently their behaviour cannot be understood without examining these varied relationships*” (Van Dalen, 1979, p. 295). In the aforementioned context, attempt has been made to understand the nature of interaction between things and people concerning school ethos, processes, pedagogic interventions, peer relations, parents’ expectations, teacher’s perceptions, children’s aspirations, so on and so forth.

Data Collection And Research Methods

The choice of the schools as falling under the ambit of ‘private unaided’ was specific as the purpose was to understand the school experiences of EWS children in the light of the provision 12(1) (c) of RTE Act. The participants of the study include school heads, parents, teachers, and children. In all, there were 20 participants who shaped the present research study. Sample of Schools— Two private unaided schools have been chosen for

the present study. Sample of Grades— One section each of Grade VIII was chosen for the present study. Sample of EWS children— Six EWS children studying in Grade VIII of both the schools have been chosen for the present study. Sample of Parents— The parents of all six EWS children participated in the study. Sample of Teachers— Six teachers (one class teacher and two subject teachers of each of the sample class) were chosen for the present study. Sample of Administrators— Principals of both the schools were chosen to be part of the present study.

It is widely acknowledged that interpretive methodologies are but one way of telling the stories about society, phenomena, culture or lived-reality, and every methodology just tells the different kinds of stories (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). They rightly affirm that *“there is no correct telling of the event...Each telling, like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective on the incident”* (ibid. p. 6). Since, there were layers of meanings surrounding the school culture and EWS children’s school experience, the choice of qualitative research methods seemed most appropriate and suitable. Since, each method is appropriate for acquiring particular set of data; out of all the qualitative for data collection, it was Observations, Interviews and Narratives were used generate varied interpretations of how children made sense of their schooled world. These methods yielded rich and comprehensive data collected from the field which aided to look at the phenomena from different angles. This also allowed for ‘methodological triangulation’ that brought authentication to the research results.

Interpretive Discussion Of Findings

The literature on high-brow school culture and its effectiveness in fostering the culture of inclusion considering the diverse student population invigorated the research with questions as: What does the private school culture embody? How teaching-learning processes crisscrossed disadvantaged children’s notions and experiences of private

schooling? How children’s socio-economic and class-cultural situatedness interact with school’s elite class cultural practices?

The findings of the study as delineated below highlight the social-class-cultural insinuations as a result of crossings between elite private school culture and disadvantaged children’s class-cultural backgrounds. The hidden cultural messages unveiled how the school culture personified elitism excluding upper-class children’s primary habitus, while being oblivious to the virtual cultural baggage that disadvantaged children carried along to school. Three dominant themes that emerged from data collection hinting towards adverse home-school continuity are spanned below.

- **Deep Structure of School Culture and Climate**

Colossal school building with aesthetically built infrastructure and air-conditioned premises, imitated model of no less than a 5-star hotel adorned with digitized smart-board classrooms, and enforcement of English as a medium of instruction ritualized in the school lending obvious familiarity of language to the majority of upper-class children part of the school. In the word-association tool used to ascertain EWS children’s connectedness with the school, the students used the words as *“sapne-jaisa”* (dream-like) which typified their experiences in the school setting.

Immense significance attributed to social class by school became visible through intense admission screening procedures that were followed during the year-round school admissions. The admission criteria fixed by the school invariably focused on culture shared between parents and schools with maximum numbers (while screening) allocated to parents’ parental income, and occupation level, thereby emphasising the necessity of viewing home-school relationship as a “strategic one.”

The kind of professional and extra-curricular exposure that the school provided by offering Robotics, Animation,

Geospatial Technology, etc. necessitated not just the availability and access to the material/ technological objects such as computer systems, laptops, tablets back at home, but also indicated general know-how and inherited proficiency in operating the same. This invariably, hinted towards disadvantaged children's lack of resources as also familiarity with use of the same.

How the school function to reproduce social-class membership with symbolic elements gets also manifested by adopting different strategies that articulate the school's philosophy and vision to the parents at large who were the schools' favourable clients. The school's vision of creating leaders who excel in the top fields indicated the broad philosophical underpinnings, where the potentialities and capabilities of majority of its children convincingly ensured "elite outcome that lasts lifetime." The school created a social space, where the differences in children's talk, behaviour, and attitude produced different types of "ideal" students in view of both, teachers and principal. The extent to which children were able to internalise school goals and learn what is it that holds value inside the school speaks volume about how in different characterizations, social class differences were played out disguisedly.

At school, certain responsibilities were accorded to a particular set of children and capabilities were determined by children's manifestation of the same in different arenas at distinct stages of schooling. Those who were expected by the teachers to bring laurels that could be showcased and mounted in the school reception's glass-cases were entrusted with most of the key responsibilities, and that could not be a matter of mere chance that none of the EWS children's achievements showcased on wall of fame.

- **School as an Epistemic Space: Function of Teaching-learning Process**

Teaching and learning is what engages teachers and students most inside the school. NCF 2005 places immense stress on the pedagogic practices followed by

the teachers inside the classroom so as to ensure optimum learning— that which is meaningful and child-centric. It is essentially the teaching and learning process that assumes centrality in day-to-day school processes. During observations, it was revealed how the exchange of ideas between the teacher and the children from the initial stage of brainstorming to latter stage of explanation of the text saw complete absence of participation by EWS children. For instance, during one of the classes making use of Video Presentation, before the video was played, EWS children were seen to be eagerly looking forward to it; however as soon as the video played, the English accent in which the narrator spoke made it hard for them to grasp the exact words and initiate the process of meaning-making at their end. When asked about their non-participation inside the class, it was shared, "*Maam kuch samajh hi nahi aa raha tha kya bol raha tha woh*" (Maam I was not able to understand anything that he was saying). Although, smart boards were used regularly inside the classroom to induce better learning in children; their relevance in terms of enabling the EWS children to advance learning through different teaching aids stood meaningless because of the teaching contents' class cultural trait. Even during periods of other subjects, the entire teaching-learning process was defined through the lesson plan that the team of subject teachers prepared every fortnight. The lesson-plan was a standardised template designed by the school, to be filled by the teachers adding learning objectives, teaching aids, teaching content, homework and assessment tools without much variation or scope for individual attention and support.

While teachers were engaged in the process of teaching; the learning on the part of the EWS children was not definitive. Most of the times, children were found to be excusing themselves for water or washroom, and even practicing the habitual act of keeping their heads down during lessons. During the teaching-learning process, the teacher

hardly made any attempts to ascertain the EWS child's readiness or interest and just as books were considered sacrosanct in the conventional teaching; lesson plans were meticulously followed without any deviation under the garb of progressive approach that the school claimed to practice; thereby keeping the entire process as disconnected and lifeless for the weaker section students.

As far as teaching within the classrooms was concerned, the teachers were found to be experimenting with the pedagogical practices and the lecture method was not observed to be the dominant teaching method used in the classroom. The teachers took initiatives in creating a participative classroom, where the children were encouraged to actively participate in the teaching-learning process; however such participation was essentially definitive, where only "bright" children (who also happened to be of upper class) were encouraged to share their views and opinions on the topic taught. Observations revealed that no extra focus or special attention or individualised learning was fostered by the teachers inside the class to cater to diverse students' needs. During interviews, the teachers often cited additional administrative burden of maintaining online assessment portals for every student's progress as a barrier to meet the goal of providing inclusive education.

For the teachers, ensuring discipline was more important than experimenting with teaching methods or ensuring individualised learning. The teachers justified their inconsiderateness and indifference to children's backgrounds by labelling children's own disinterest in studies as the root cause of their under-achievement and non-participation. The teachers had found justifications in the children's 'social backgrounds' also which according to them were such that were responsible for the lack of generating any interest or motivation in studies. Non-involvement of parents in children's studies provided legitimacy to indifference of teachers. This way they could shift their responsibility on children

and their familial milieu which according to the teachers clutched children to make any progress inside the school. The teacher-student interaction inside the classroom was strained as the teachers hardly felt any motivation to teach to 'these' children.

The unfaltering emphasis on English language to be used as a medium of communication at each space-time site manifested the school's commitment towards producing a "high-brow" culture. The pedagogic practices emphasising on the use of English as a medium of instruction and interaction at school, which in most significant ways reflected upon the educational pursuits of children who are familiar with the language and demonstrated fluency separating from those for whom English language was as alien as the school set-up.

• **Maintenance of Social-Class functions at School**

To understand how social-class differences were re-produced inside the school, a microscopic view of everyday practices as prevalent inside the schools was done. The private school essentially constituted a homogenous group comprising upper class children belonging to rich and affluent families. Close home-school continuity was discernible as the destinations chosen by children for vacations were more or less same as the ones chosen by school itself. On an occasion, soon after the summer vacation, when the teacher decided to ascertain children's experiences during holidays, brimmed with emotions and excitement the children of the class had so much to share, using optimally the free-flow pedagogic space extended to them. To the same setting there was another sight that showcased a group of children who were muted discretely on that day; complete silence engulfing EWS children. Children's narratives revealed solemn reflections on their holiday experiences to be trivial and inconsequential, and hence not worthy of being shared publicly. In the absence of such an inclusive scenario, the

routinised teaching and learning process inside the classroom became a highly class centric space; a space where children from differential backgrounds and experiences found no space to participate and share their own experiences; as they are not considered legitimate. Their personal knowledge, their experiences, their world-views were pushed out of the brackets of 'normativity' and considered not worthy of providing any insights or contribution to the knowledge pool. What is necessitated in schools is clearly marked by Bourdieu (1990) when he says it is "*the scholarly mastery of scholarly language and know how than practical mastery of the mother tongue and know-how*" (p. 72). When probed later about children's non-participation inside the class, it was shared, "*Meri koi vacation thi hi nahi.... main sirf nani ke ghar gaya tha rehne... woh koi vacation thodi hoti hai*" (I did not have any vacation, I just went to my Nani house and that is not a vacation). Elaborating further it was added, "*Aur bache to kaha-kaha gaye... horse-riding... scuba pata nahi kya hota hai woh kiya... main to sirf khela nani ke ghar pura din... stapoo, gallery, maram pitti bas yahi*" (Other children went at so many places... they did horse-riding and scuba I don't know what that is.. I just played all day at grandmother's house). Thus, in children's view, vacation could be defined only in one way as defined, perceived and accepted by the class teacher.

The nature of 'homework' that was given to children was always the most contested terrain for EWS children at school where they used to get daily worksheets in almost all school subjects. So as to enhance children's learning, every week they were given practice questions and activities in the form of worksheets that were uploaded on the children's portal (to be printed by children themselves). Children were expected to get the printouts and paste the worksheets in their notebooks after duly completing the same. This kind of routine homework by the teachers came as a burden for EWS children who did not have computers or printers

at their home unlike other children of the class. As a result, EWS children almost always failed to complete their homework on time; subsequently witnessing guilt and embarrassment when as a punishment they were made to stand at the back of the class (at times even out of the class) due to delayed submission and incompleteness of work. The children faced unequal distances from academic culture that was prevalent back at home and at school. While other children had the necessary resources and know-how; the EWS children faced challenges on both the counts.

A complete absence of EWS children from the Olympiads organised by the school in different subjects manifested not only their incapacity to shell out extra-money for the test fees, but also exorbitant investment that such tests call for in terms of amassing competitive books and encyclopaedia which opens the gates for knowledge enrichment. Inside the school, it was the class teachers who prepared the list of children who she anticipated held cognitive supremacy and academic ascendancy for achieving ranks in the Olympiads. Beside, a formal list created by respective class teachers, the other children were also voluntarily invited to seek participation in it. The final list necessarily included names of the subject-wise toppers who happen to be also belonging to the upper-class; besides voluntary participation of middle-class children; invariably leaving out those who were considered academically less-able. The teacher's low expectations from the EWS children made children also internalize the same at different steps of their educational journey.

Conclusion

The findings reveal some ideas in the direction as to how the cultural composite of an elite private school life intersects with the disadvantaged children's experiences at school. The issue of quality of private school education presents different sets of challenges for children belonging to EWS category. *EWS children's every day school*

realities were characterized by their inability to understand the official language of the school; the unavailability of free pedagogic spaces to share their real-life experiences; lack of systemic support provided by school authorities to relieve the economic burden; children's continuous absence from classroom discussions; school teachers' prejudiced assumptions regarding children's socio-economic backgrounds; adoption of conventional or clichéd teaching methods by teachers (even when classroom discussions happen, they cater to "intelligent" children of the class); hegemonic representations of the textbook content; severe disciplinary mechanisms adopted by school adults; archetypal parental aspirations, and so on. The research findings raise crucial questions on two pertinent points; first pertaining to the nature and character of quality education provided by the private schools; and second pertaining to the extent of inclusion of EWS children in these private schools. The findings revealed how schooling becomes an ongoing struggle for EWS children to pave their trails to success. The daily interaction between school experiences of EWS children as "students" inside the schools with their social-class situatedness back at home, clearly brings to the fore a crucial fact that while state distributed 'free entitlements' to these children as benefactors at the policy level; the schools, at the grassroots refrained from making any systemic or pedagogic interventions to make the illusive dream of

'inclusion' for EWS children possible. In such a scenario, for EWS children, having access to private schools, was not a meaningful "addition" to their educational strivings. Hence, EWS children's journeys from margins to the core, for it to be meaningful must go beyond their official inclusion in numbers to participatory inclusion in excellence.

The study unveils the hidden class-cultural messages that breed entitlement and entrenched inequality, thereby widening the gap between privileged and disadvantaged. This indeed has important implications for recommendation in RTE Act for inclusion of 25 per cent children from disadvantaged sections. For inclusion to go beyond access, and ensure equitable participation and achievement among disadvantaged sections, the private schools need to re-work on their structures, functions, character and culture characterising the expectations inscribed in NEP 2020 to impart inclusive and equitable education.

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