[**Classroom culture**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1726248/classroom-culture)

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RECENTLY, I was asked to conduct a professional development session for teachers on positive classroom culture. I began by asking them what a positive classroom meant in their context. I got a variety of very different answers, which got me thinking about how we perceive the needs of our learners.

Some teachers seemed to believe their students can only learn in an environment of ‘tough love’, and that they’d recognise the value of that experience once they transition to adulthood. Others felt helping students feel secure and happy in an atmosphere of learning without fear is an important facet of a positive classroom culture. Yet others spoke about encouraging students to speak up, to accept making mistakes as part of learning and to maintain a bias-free environment.

While most of these are indeed critical to a positive classroom culture, teachers are largely at a loss when asked how they can achieve these aims. They try very hard in intuitive ways, and many achieve the desired aims — they manage to keep some students happy, motivated and inspired. However, for such efforts to be scalable and sustainable, a process of teaching social-emotional well-being among thinking skills is required. Not only is it important for students to learn to get along without bullying each other, conflict-resolution skills are necessary as an active part of learning. Collaboration is another aspect of a positive classroom that can be taught over time by encouraging children to help each other as they progress through classwork.

In traditional classrooms, most students work individually, trying and managing on their own to different degrees of success. Teachers can make the tasks easier for them — and hence for themselves — by teaching them how to seek and give help. Training students to work collaboratively often proves to be a firm foundation in teamwork that helps them through their professional lives. Often, we find that those who struggle as team players aren’t the ones who lack ability, but in fact those who haven’t learnt to ask for help. Unfortunately, our schooling system doesn’t encourage much teamwork. Most classrooms have an ‘each one for themselves’ approach, that later translates into an individual race for success at the workplace.

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When students work with each other and co-create in classrooms, they learn to rely on each other’s differentiated set of skills. Not everyone is great at everything, but everyone is great at some things and it’s crucial to tap into individual abilities. Students who learn to work together experience learning holistically, as opposed to merely understanding concepts.

Another aspect of a positive classroom is allowing students some control where they can make decisions regarding classroom rules, etiquette and take on different kinds of responsibilities. Students feel valued when they are part of a decision-making process, and where they can take on responsibility that impacts others.

While teachers work hard towards engaging students, they are often reluctant to let go of control, perhaps out of fear of being perceived as ‘soft’ or unable to assert authority. In fact, quite recently, a well-liked teacher at a school was told by her management to toughen up as ‘this isn’t a popularity contest’. Some soft and kind teachers are not only considered pushovers, but also somehow non-serious — as if being liked by the students shouldn’t be high on their priority list. This mindset is rampant and counterintuitive at best. After all, how can we expect students to be fully engaged and immersed in learning with a teacher they don’t find likeable?

Respect without fear is a concept still alien in many of our classrooms, especially to teachers accustomed to using fear as a tool to gain respect. It would be fair to say this is a deep-rooted structural characteristic of a society that values compliance and conformism at any cost.

The problem is, the road to positive classrooms is particularly rocky. We can, however, start somewhere if we wish to raise children for the 21st century. Most mainstream schools don’t have a structured plan for positive classroom culture. Learners are mostly at the mercy of individual teachers who may have the self-awareness to bring positive classroom strategies into action in small daily doses through ad hoc activities and verbal efforts.

The reverse is also true, where teachers’ negative attitudes may erode the students’ desire for learning. Mostly, such teachers are quick to discipline negative behaviour in their students, but not as efficient at lauding efforts towards betterment. Catching small acts of kindness that students show towards their peers is sometimes more important than calling out misdemeanours to discipline students.

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