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Title

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“Schools That Care”, a National Conference on the Social and Emotional Environment of our Schools, was held between 3-5 November 2008 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, IISc Campus, Bangalore. This article is a brief summary of the discussions and outcome of the conference.

The conference was born out of a deep concern with the practices predominant in our schools as well as a strong belief that schools need to actively nurture the “human” side of student growth and development.

The Teacher Foundation (TTF) organised the conference to create a forum for academics, researchers, government officials, school administrators and classroom practitioners to come together, share their ideas, experiences and concerns in making schools happier places of learning. The conference played an important role in highlighting the need to have a national forum to discuss the social and emotional climate of our schools.

One realises the importance of social and emotional development in children every time one hears of their difficulties in understanding and managing their feelings, working co-operatively in groups, motivating themselves, demonstrating resilience in the face of setbacks, etc. Various factors influence the social and emotional climate of schools and the conference focused mainly on one the teacher - student/parent interaction.

Speeches, video presentations, live demonstrations and brainstorming sessions, provided ample scope for participants to express their views and discuss issues raised.

Conference participants had the opportunity to view a film that focused on the quality of personal interactions in Indian schools, with footage from schools across the country. The film touched most participants including the teachers as it helped them look inside themselves. Instead of following the traditional method and having people speak about **the Way We Are**, the screening of the film,, helped set the framework for participants to reflect on an important issue.

The conference helped the participants, who included representatives from government, private and alternative schools, to share their varying approaches to **the Way We Could Be** along with certain techniques to address issues of concern. Some are briefly explained below.

Nali Kali and Samudaya Datta Shale are two programs initiated and implemented successfully in most schools across Karnataka by the state government to address this issue.

“Quality Circle Time” (QCT) model was demonstrated live with 30 children quite effectively. This model promotes positive behaviour, respectful relationship skills, self awareness and awareness of others, personal and social growth, etc. The session was very experiential and one felt that the QCT model would indeed be useful in our teacher training programs. But, how effective is QCT to address the issues raised in a school environment keeping in mind the challenge that exists to equip teachers to conduct these sessions? How holistic and effective is this technique? Is this model obvious in school environments that are practicing a holistic approach to address social and emotional aspects of development?

Practitioners from various institutions like Muktangam, Digantar, Centre For Learning, Shishuvan, Pravah, Valley School, Pallikoodam, etc., who are successfully practicing holistic approaches to address the social and emotional environment in their schools presented the philosophy and methodology of their school environment giving an opportunity for seekers to know the possible ways of achieving this in the school environment.

The social and emotional aspect of development is definitely a theme for literature, conferences, awareness camps, research, publications, etc., but the questions that emerged in the conference were, *“Is this a topic for a policy as the same topic is already mentioned in the National Curriculum framework 2005?”*, *“Is a teacher really aware of the care he/she needs to give?”*, Or *“Is the system at fault?”* These are questions that need one’s attention urgently.

Unfortunately, the teaching profession is perceived as easy, monotonous, and less challenging and is neglected. On the contrary, this profession is a challenging and dynamic profession that demands maximum creativity. Teachers have the scope to leave an impression on the lives of many achievers during their crucial growing years. A teacher is morally responsible for his/her behavior, ethics, values, knowledge, information and messages as they are observed by many young absorbent minds. It is very important that we uplift the teaching profession. The training programs that are designed and conducted for teachers should be made more experiential with a holistic approach.

Throughout the conference discussions focused on some areas that need immediate attention such as the student - teacher relationship, maintaining the right student - teacher ratio, balancing curriculum, creating a support system that would allow a teacher to be a healer, teacher welfare, quality teacher training, social inclusion/ exclusion, awareness of children’s rights, parent - teacher relationship, school counsellor, need to define terms like care, emotional needs, etc., the need for a school environment which is democratic, reformation in assessment methodologies, etc. The discussions focusing on these and other related issues will be brought together in a policy document that will soon be made available by The Teacher Foundation.

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