

Why Dedicated Junior Campuses Enable Better Learning For Our Young Ones?

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Today, it is a well-understood fact that formative emotional, social, cognitive, physical and motor development takes place in the early years of childhood. But the jury is still out on which physical environment would support the delivery of effective and immersive learning. Should there be dedicated junior campuses for younger children or should they be attending school along with older students in a K-12 campus? There are several arguments in favour of the former point of view.

International best practices point to the efficacy of having dedicated junior schools. For instance, only 10 per cent of schools in the US are K-12. The country's system is divided into three levels of schools: elementary (Grades K-5), middle (Grades 6-8) and high (Grades 9-12) and each level typically has its separate schools.

Perhaps the strongest argument for dedicated junior campuses is that children have different developmental needs at different ages and stages and providing an environment that caters to the specific needs of a particular age group best facilitates better learning outcomes. A physical environment, or infrastructure, that serves all ages might find it difficult to meet the specific needs of any.

There is an evolving belief that the physical environment should be acknowledged as the third teacher. Adhering to the maxim 'form follows function,' physical spaces that are dovetailed into the curriculum maximise learning outcomes and support a focus on engaging experiences for students and faculty. In a dedicated junior campus, the school building would necessarily be designed to be child-centric.

Learning in spaces such as these is therefore stimulated by a domain that includes physical surroundings, furnishings and play materials; the social environment which includes activities and social interactions; and the inner or spiritual environment of thoughts, intentions and imaginations held by the child.

In fact, a smaller school would encourage better social integration of young children. It would be an environment where it is easier for children to get to know and interact with each other; social development would take place at a faster pace than in a larger school where the younger kids tend to be overwhelmed by people who appear to them to be adults.

Emotionally too, a smaller school would possibly be an environment that is less intimidating and threatening for younger children. The feeling of emotional security and belongingness generated by a small school would contribute a great deal to young children settling down faster in school while an emotionally safe space would encourage them to be themselves, and therefore more receptive to learning.

A smaller safer school would also help the young child to build her self-esteem and become more confident and independent in an environment where everyone one around her is of a similar age. Self-confidence gained by learning in a favourable environment adds to the personality development of a child and results in improved social skills, minimal behavioural problems and better learning outcomes.

Then, of course, there is also the question of bullying. While some K-12 schools encourage older children to assist in the younger children's learning by reading to them and so on, this possibly has a benign impact in a controlled, classroom environment. However, non-supervised interactions between younger and older children (say, during lunch hour or bus ride) may not always be positive and, in some instances, may translate into bullying.

Younger children blossom in a supportive environment. And dedicated junior schools could very well be the space where they are not intimidated, feel safe and secure and develop without tension amidst other children of a similar age.

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