

Thursday, January 18, 2007

# Think out of the box

Life is more about 'drawing inferences and 'reaching conclusions' than about 'filling in the blanks' and 'matching the following'. Then why are our schools and parents so set on raising non-thinking conformists?

A principal of a leading school in Chennai used to share this amusing anecdote whenever he had a training programme for teachers.

"What are you doing?" a teacher asked of a boy who was looking out of the window.

"Thinking, teacher," replied the boy.

"Don't think, and pay attention!"

This anecdote evoked a ripple of laughter but the underlying poignancy cannot be ignored.

## Thinking Beyond the Box

Do we unconsciously discourage the aspect of thinking in our children? The sheer numbers in each class is partially to blame. Even a simple re-phrasing of a question is frowned upon, as we are a mark-dominated society.

I remember an incident from my early years of teaching in the lower grades. This school is considered one of the best in India. There was a fill up the blank in the textbook:

\_\_\_\_\_ is in Agra.

I re-phrased the question in the semester exam,

You are standing in front of the Taj Mahal, which city would you be in?"

There was a hue and cry among the parents and the most vociferous among them were the teacher parents! They felt that the question was purposely misleading and led to the loss of that half-a-mark! This made me ponder about what we are trying to make of our children. We are trying desperately in raising a non-thinking, conformist robot. Is it possible for a child who is acclimatised to such a situation to suddenly become a thinking, rational individual taking over the mantle of the position of a manager? Is life going to just be 'fill in the blanks' and 'match the fol-

lowing' or is it going to be 'drawing inferences' and 'reaching conclusions' too?

Another incident that comes to my mind is this: The children had learnt that, the umbrella could be used for both rainy and summer season.

When they were asked to, draw the thing that is used for both summer and rainy season; they were flummoxed for they had not learnt it! If this kind of education is what we have dreamt for our future citizens then it is little wonder that only the cream is actually succeeding in the global arena. It is a well-known fact that academics alone don't lead to success.

Raising a "Think as you are told generation?"

There were times when children were encouraged to "do as they are told". Now we are re-phrasing the same to "think as you are told." We can proudly say that our potential is nothing but the very best. We can also say that we do have the inclination for hard work and perseverance. What we lack to a great extent is our inability to think beyond the box. This is mainly because we now live in a society where we all want only praise and no criticism. The parents are happy with big percentages, the teachers are happy that their wards are scoring huge marks, the management is happy that their school gets the best results! In all this "be happy" syndrome we forget that what we are leading to is a good 'rote learner'. Rote learning is only a small part in the process of learning and not the be-all and end-all.

Our education system doesn't really test comprehension skills. We ask more of questions that test the retention capacity of the child rather than their cognitive capacity. The essay writing still

harps on topics that are dull and oft beaten, whereas in the west children are encouraged to write on a topic that is current. This involves in-depth research and to reinforce the points with concrete examples.

## Turning children into life-long learners

Learning is a continuous process. It doesn't stop at school or on acquiring of the mandatory degree. It is a process that needs to be honed and polished at every stage of life. We need to inculcate in our children the thirst to acquire this knowledge. They need to be encouraged to learn for the sake of learning and not merely for the sake of progress cards.

The fact that these children will find it difficult to adapt themselves for the employable world will have the system to blame. We make more followers than leaders. We make more employees than employers. The present generation is more of 'need-to-be-told-what-we-have-to-do' and lack enterprise. The well-meaning parent who literally sits with his/her children while they complete their schoolwork not to forget the teachers who would love to take the easy way out of criticism further compounds this ennui.

## Need to change our mindset

An interactive classroom is bound to create more noise. Learning doesn't mean subject

oriented alone. A play staged or a reading class is also part of learning. Lateral planning and integrating disciplines will also help toward attainment of this goal. All these can definitely be tried out in the lower classes. They definitely don't need to be told the

'key words', instead they can be taught to identify them.

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## DEBATE

How does one teach children to learn for the sake of learning and not just for degrees? What should schools do to make students life-long learners? We would like to hear your opinion on the subject in not more than 300 words and within a week. Write to [education@deccanherald.co.in](mailto:education@deccanherald.co.in) or to The Education Desk, Deccan Herald, 75 MG Road, Bangalore 1.

