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GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT IN EDUCATION

May I start by turning the above statement into a question, Are we getting the balance right? What sort of balance do we have in mind?

I am going to focus on the balance between academic achievement and sound psychological development of our students or what we have been referring to, for some time now, as holistic development.

Schools and curricula aim to give students what those who set policies think is right for today's youth. A lot of academic energy goes into this work, and rightly so. The top down approach might offer ideas and strategies to the educators but is it always in touch with the reality of the classroom and our students' needs in the 'real' world?

During one of my recent visits to a school, I was discussing effective communication and its relation to conflict resolutions, with a class of fifteen year old young ladies. At the end of the session one young lady expressed her apprehension saying that at school they learn a lot of things but not always what they really need to get along every day when they go 'out there.' This might be the view of other students.

Self Esteem

My difficulties belong to me
A Adler

I believe that today's schools and curricula should increase their focus on the development of mature, independent, and confident thinkers who are trained to co operate with and contribute to the kind of society they live in. I know this is being done in some schools but are we getting the balance right?

Students enjoying a high level of self-esteem are more likely to be responsible and accountable citizens. Since self esteem starts developing in children as young as two years of age, Kindergartens and early primary schools play an important role in this. Focusing on formal schooling in Kindergarten damages self esteem since very young children can only learn through play. If early childhood inferiority feelings, due to the smallness and weakness of very young children turn into inferiority complex learned helplessness sets in . But early childhood inferiority feelings can also be the stepping stones to learning instead of the stumbling blocks to personal development. Nurture plays a very important role here but stronger than nurture is the child's own apperceptions of herself, others and the environment.

Feeling good inside, building a positive self image, believing in one self and enhancing resilience is the road to success. Over zealous adults pressing for reading and writing, without first helping children develop intrapersonal skills, may put children 'off' school because of damaged self esteem.

How do we get round to tackling such a tall order of skills development and attitude orientation that fall on the shoulders of those caring for very young children. An eminent psychologist wrote that "all I need to know to live I learnt in Kindergarten." Our very young children deserve the best trained carers, a lot is being done here, which is a good omen for the future.

But is the balance right in all our early childhood classes and what would improve it?

Late Childhood and Youth

Dr R. Dreikurs said that we need to stop teaching subjects and start teaching students. When it comes to passing on knowledge and updates I believe that the internet, wherever it is available, is doing a good job. All students need is to master ICT skills, and learning how to learn. I believe that most schools are fulfilling this need. But the computer deprives the user of direct human contact and interaction. Exclusive computer based learning might foster personal isolation, and present a different reality to the concept that we are social beings and flourish better when we work in groups

When our students leave schools they have to face, what A. Adler called the major tasks of life in the 'real' not the virtual world. That is the challenges of paid work, social relationships, intimate relationships and spirituality. Beyond the shelter, order, and dependency found in schools these tasks take a different perspective.

Being able to cooperate and manage conflicts at the place of work require the training and acquisition of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Having emotional intelligence gives one the ability to turn negative emotions into positive energy. After all we are masters not victims of our emotions and how we feel is up to us. Helping students work upon and develop these intrapersonal and interpersonal skills would be an asset when it comes to solving intimate and social conflicts.

Diverse roles for educators

This is a tall order for educators' training. It also means developing a different perspective of the educator's role in the life of a student. When training still gives more emphasis to the traditional subject certification approach than the psychological development of the student, I see this as creating an imbalance. A system that still points out failures instead of strengths might create deficient development when it comes to self esteem and self confidence. Believing in one's self is crucial when it come to motivation and the visions that drives one forward.

Educators need to become more aware of the child's thinking and feelings in order to be able to redirect faulty conclusions. Influencing faulty thinking is the essential role of the educator, rather than focusing on behaviour and trying to change it with punishments or conditional rewards. Only intrinsic change in thoughts can result in a real change in behaviour. This again requires particular teachers' training.

The Holistic Development

The sound psychological development of a human being rests on three important corner stones. A student needs to think and feel she is accepted, respected and significant in a group. Such a student feels encouraged and ready to collaborate with and contribute towards the goals of the group. It follows that the reverse is possible when these positive thoughts and feelings are absent. Teachers' empowerment based on these lines enable the educators to understand better and offer effective guidance to their students.

In a world that is becoming one global village because of today's technology, human relationships based on understanding and cooperation are the peaceful way forward.

It has been said that societies get what they deserve. Perhaps the other side of the coin is that societies grow also in families and schools and reap what they sow.

Parenting Education

Another point I believe is relevant to all this is the schools' support and education offered to parents. By this I mean offering parents programmes in parenting skills that are in line with the teachers' training of understanding the child. Parenting could be the most difficult job in the world but does such a commitment receive the professional training it deserves? Should new parents be encouraged more and have more possibilities to attend effective parenting programmes before the child is five years old? Having sound foundations is much better than having to unlearn and build again.

What changes might help schools to move more towards the holistic development of each student? Having a system that points out and builds on strengths. Having a wider assessment systems that cater for both academic achievements and skills Varying teaching methods that include different learning styles in democratic schools, etc. One may argue that all this is already on paper in various policies. Does it follow that it is also in application?

I believe that competition in education defeats its aims. Why do our students still need to face national tough competition that determines their future when they can hardly understand all this. We talk about the pressure on ten year olds, is talk enough? How is it that in many European countries a high percentage of students move on to higher education with less pressure. Competition brings out the best in products but the worst in people. Such competition serves no purpose since we believe that each student is unique in her stages and rate of development.

Students need to be encouraged more to see learning as a gift they owe to themselves. Parents support and encourage this while providing a care environment. Educators only facilitate learning. This also implies that students should be involved more in decisions and school policy formation, especially in matters that concern them. Age appropriate participation should be encouraged and respected. This is the age when children should be both seen and heard.

Personal challenges, identified by educators on a one to one basis, help students move from a minus to a plus position and generate motivation without hurting the student. Another relevant point is moving more towards deeper instead of surface learning. Aiming at long term formation is pedagogy for the future.

All this has to start at the very early stages of formal schooling. The importance of the formation years of early primary cannot be over stressed. Early childhood education lay the foundations to the answers of, who I am, what others are, and what the world is. Very often we carry our childhood all our lives.

Some of these suggestions may be already common to some schools or can be easily implemented. Others need long term planning and implementation. My experiences of the effect of enhanced teacher student relationship based on mutual respect and encouragement are positive and long lasting.

As Pestolazzi wrote more than two hundred years ago 'Learning is not worth a penny if courage and joy are lost on the way.'

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