

Children who are Unable to Learn

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Teachers and children are the two most important links in the chain related to a school. They may be looked upon in any of these two sequential ways – first the teacher, then the children; first the children, then the teacher. This is so because till a few years ago, education was teacher-centred; now it is considered to be child-centred. New facts are coming to the fore with regard to how children learn and it is also claimed now that children construct their own knowledge. All that the teacher has to do is, create the circumstances for the child to learn with ease. Educationists also claim that eighty to ninety per cent of a child's learning happens from his or her surrounding environment and the atmosphere at home.

Even though this could be an issue for debate, it can surely not be denied that the teacher definitely has a significant role to play in whatever children learn at school. And a teacher would always like the children to be able to learn various skills and perform well. But another aspect in the process of teaching-learning is how much co-operation the child gets from his or her socio-cultural context, the environment at home, his or her upbringing, the parents' co-operation and discussions with friends. In the process of learning as well as construction of knowledge, both these points – the role of the teacher and the socio-cultural-familial context - have a significant role to play, though the level could vary, and in some circumstances also be in equal measure. I would like to underline some of the main points in this context. This is my personal view and so I would like to proceed on the basis of a small incident in which I was involved.

I was brought up at my maternal grandfather's place. We were fourteen children in all. Apart from me, the children of two other relatives were also getting education while residing with this family. Amongst the elders of the family – the maternal uncle and aunt, and the maternal grandparents (*naana-naani*) – a comparison would almost invariably crop up in terms of which of the children was the most intelligent, the cleverest and the wisest of all. One cannot really blame them for this,

for the education system in our country has based itself on such comparisons from the very beginning - in the case of education, almost at every level, children are put to comparisons. In recent times there has surely been some change in the situation and at the primary stage all children are considered to be of the same level and standard, and they move up from one class to another, but thereafter it is quite natural for some sifting to be done as they go through the system of examinations.

My grandmother considered my youngest maternal uncle's four children to be very intelligent, clever and sharp of mind. She would praise them no end as she related to me about the knowledge they had and the skill with which they would work when they were kids. I would often say to my grandmother that in childhood each child is a Birbal. The real worth is revealed only when one grows up. Back then I did not have much knowledge about children's nature, their psychology, their learning and understanding etc. But after having gained some bitter-sweet experiences related to children, I now believe that a child becomes what s/he does, moulded by the domestic circumstances and social environment s/he grows up in.

I felt this all the more deeply almost 22 years later when, in spite of having acquired quite a good education, and even after making a lot of efforts, all the four sons of my maternal uncle could not get work in accordance with their education. In the end, two of them started working on their ancestral agricultural land and the other two opened a shop. Had my grandmother been alive today, many of her ideas would have suffered a jolt. I would rather think she would also have blamed the teachers who had taught them, especially because I too was educated in the same school as theirs, except for the fact that we were not in the same class.

Having been engaged in teaching now for a long time I have now surely come to experience that a teacher never wishes that any child in his or her class should not learn or lag behind in the process of learning. The teacher prepares an effective plan

for teaching a class of an estimated 30 children. An attempt is made through various actions to reach the content to the children. Every possible attempt is, indeed, made to be successful in the work at hand. And yet some children do lag behind - a few remaining in such a state continuously. If, in a class of thirty, around five to seven children are unable to learn or are found to be lagging behind in the process of learning, why should only the teacher be blamed? Had the teaching-plan been at fault, not even twenty of the thirty children would have been able to learn – or, this percentage would have been very low. I have come across such examples in the classes of very hard-working, sincere and alert teachers.

Various educationists, teacher-trainers and those working on teacher-education give the examples of such slow learners and non-learners and put the whole blame on teachers. Questions are also raised about the teaching-methods of the teacher. Advice is proffered with regard to teaching in a different way by bringing in various theories and principles of teaching. They overlook the fact that each teacher has her or his own method and style of teaching developed during the process of working.

As has been pointed out above, many other reasons – the child’s societal environment, domestic atmosphere, quarrels between parents, lack of co-operation with the child, the company of friends etc. – could also be a hurdle in the process of the child’s learning. The child’s interest in and inclination towards a particular subject is also a factor in whether or not she or he is able to learn. It should also be seen as to how eager the child is to learn certain content or activity. In this context, Dr. Kewalanand Kandpal, Lecturer in the District Institute of Education and Training, Bageshwar (Uttarakhand) writes in an article on ‘A Model of Teaching-Learning Processes’ in the magazine *Shaikshik Dakhil* (Year 6, Issue July 10, 2017) – ‘Learning is a very personal and subjective experience. Schools try to bring in objectivity in the light of standards. This has an effect on the participation of children in knowledge-creation. There are two important parts of the teaching-learning process in the classroom. First, learning through teaching, and second acquiring skill through exercises and strengthening it. The first comes within the purview of the teacher’s work, and the second depends on the hard work of the student.’

It is thus clear that in the process of teaching-learning, the participation of the student is needed as much as that of the teacher. If this does not happen, it would be quite natural to have a contrary result. Kabir hints at this very point when he says - ‘*Guru bicharaa kya kare, jab sikhhi mahin chook/Bhaave tyon parbodhiye, baans bajaee phoonk*’ (What can the poor teacher do, when the shortcoming lies in the learner/It is just as if one were to blow on the bamboo with no results). I believe that a teacher’s method of teaching is very useful in the process of learning for the child, and so the teacher should constantly review his teaching methods and should also have an understanding of innovative practices and principles of teaching-learning.

After working as a teacher for three months in Azim Premji School, Udham Singh Nagar, I too had some experience with regard to children’s learning. When I observed issues such as the dialogue between a teacher and a child, level of attachment to classroom teaching, and the presence in school of both teacher and student, I found that of the 365 days in an year, it is just 200 days – or even less – that the teacher and the student are connected to each other or to the school. And the teacher and student are together on an average for just about three or three hours and a half daily. And even during this time, different teachers are interacting with the students at various points of time. And each of the teachers has a different way of talking and interacting with them. I therefore think that on the basis of such little time spent with the children, how do we nurture hopes and desires that the child becomes a thoughtful, alert and imaginative citizen?

I sometimes also feel that the teacher has to do a lot of work related to the school apart from teaching. Because of this even if he makes an effective teaching-learning plan, he is unable to work with the attachment to it that is required and to the extent to which he should be doing this. He is unable to keep patience and works in a discouraged state of mind. Whenever I talked to some educationists on this issue, they often ignored it by taking it to be something not related to teaching. I believe that when the issue is related to the teacher, education and the learner, why should it then be looked upon as being separate and different from teaching? This too must, after all, have some effect on the teaching-learning of children.

I don't know why but it has got stuck in my mind that we wish to view the progress of our children in the light of the ideas of foreign scholars, educationists and psychologists. We compare our system of education to that of countries like England, America and Finland and try to apply the methodologies and ways of working in those countries. We wish

our children's socio-cultural progress, learning and understanding to be in the context of the ideas of the scholars of such countries. And we think and wish so, even though the situation in our country is such that the ground for education is still culturally different to be suitable for the ideas from those countries to be sown here.

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