



Enabling Learning outside the Classroom

Sriparna Tamhane

“A child is not a vase to be filled but a fire to be lit” was the opinion of the French renaissance scholar and writer Francois Rabelais. Numerous educationists of eminence across centuries since then, have held that the true purpose of education is the blossoming of the individual in every possible way. Why, then have we focused so hard on “filling the vase” in our schools, while the “lighting of the fire” doesn’t seem to fit somehow into the overall agenda at all? Why have we turned education into the mere transfer of information where the entire focus of one’s life is one’s performance in exams?

Just as a plant needs the right soil to grow, a child needs the right environment to blossom. Whether at school or home, the right environment for the child is one in which she gets some space to breathe, to discover herself, to gain confidence and realise her own potential.

Yet how many of us can honestly give true credit to the school environment for equipping us with confidence, with compassion, with the ability to think independently and make judicious choices instead of filling us with inadequacy, paranoia, fears and insecurities that have made us anything but confident and well-rounded adults, ready to cope with life?

We have ignored both the environment in the classroom and interaction spaces outside the classroom, and grossly underestimated the influence these have in shaping of the personality of the child.

The way a child is treated by parents and all caregivers has an impact on how she grows and develops. A loving and supportive environment helps children to grow and learn naturally, without the worry of acceptance and praise. The emotional environment of the child therefore, is as crucial as the physical. In a country that often has to struggle with the latter (physical), the emotional environment seems a far-fetched thing. However, a nurturing environment needs no particular infrastructure barring the warmth, understanding and sensitivity of the adults dealing with children.

The classroom itself, could set the tone for the first initiation of the child into a democratic set up, where each one is respected and allowed to explore at her own pace, in a non-threatening and happy environment. Children learn best when they are happy and free. Not free to always do what they feel like but free to explore, interpret and express. One cannot expect the child to develop, particularly in areas of cognition if she is not given adequate opportunities to learn. A variety of experiences provided through drama, music, dance, art and craft, open ended games, are effective ways to give ample opportunities for the child to develop. It is also important to tune in to the emotional worlds of the children. One could spend quality time with the children through conversations, walks, collaborative activities or play. One simple process that I can recall, that had added immense value to our interpersonal equations within the classroom was a process of sitting in a circle

sharing things, an activity we had named “Mad, sad and glad”. As the name suggests, each one of us, students and the educator, shared something that he/she was mad, sad and glad about. Initially inhibited, children soon began to trust each other and shared their joys, sorrows and frustrations quite openly. Needless to say, voicing things helped in understanding each other better. It very often gave us the scope to rectify things or find solutions. As an educator, I was privileged to get a glimpse of the inner worlds of the children and that helped me in making an attempt to reach out to them more effectively.

Since the classroom environment is talked about quite often, it is the spaces outside the classroom that I specially wish to draw attention to. It is these spaces that shape young minds, and, therefore, there is a dire need to handle them with sensitivity.

Let us talk about the school assembly to begin with. The way the assembly is conducted in a school reflects its culture. This is a time when the whole school meets and therefore has abundant scope for shaping young minds in the most positive manner through thoughts, discussions, expressions through the various arts, collectively shared in order to enlighten, inspire and enable. Yet very often we turn this very sacred space into spaces where children “compete” and “perform”, rather than truly share and grow. Is this space just about checking whether children stand in straight lines, whether or not they turn out always in the most neat and proper uniforms, where only the most able students get an opportunity to perform or are these also spaces that bring out the best in each individual? One of the most touching moments of my life was when a physically challenged child was helped to climb up to the stage to share the day’s news. She stumbled forward and stood awkwardly before the mike. Her wobbly delivery, barely audible, was far from perfect but a lifetime’s lesson in building her confidence and the compassion of the young audience.

The same could be said of cultural programmes in schools. How often is the teacher so focused on the right performance that her neurotic control over the situation creates enormous pressure on the children, more so since it is also sensed as the reflection of her own ability? How often have we seen children hurt because of rejection, tense because of the projected pressure and restricted in expression as they are hardly ever given the opportunity to think and speak for themselves, to make choices? Like all other spaces within the school, here too, they are merely expected to only follow direction, not take initiatives because of a common misconception that left to themselves, children can only create chaos. Performing on stage helps in breaking inhibitions and removes shyness and awkwardness over a period of time. Unfortunately however, only the best get to perform and the others are categorically kept away in the fear of ruining the performance, not recognising the fact that the opportunity given to a relatively less talented person might enhance her self-confidence profoundly and miraculously. An extremely positive step that the school can adopt as an enabling environment is to give an opportunity to every student to perform, no matter how. The spirit should be that of participation rather than performance, in order to benefit all, not a selected few.

The sports field is another such space where tremendous learning happens, not just of focus, practice, tenacity and team spirit but also of healthy competition. Although the term healthy competition might sound like an oxymoron, there is a point being made here. It is impossible to keep children away from competition on the sports-field, where passions run high. Yet it might be possible to explore ways to teach children to put in their best to win and yet be able to lose gracefully; To appreciate a worthy opponent, to appreciate a game for the sake of the game and praise the worthy without bias; to applaud, to celebrate, for oneself and others and last but not the least, to develop the much needed spirit of sportsmanship without which one is left incomplete in life. My mind goes back to an event

which will remain etched in my memory forever. It was a relay race, with each participant sprinting to outdo the other. The race reached its final round, where one girl clearly went way ahead of others, a sure winner. Amidst thunderous applause one watched with some amount of curiosity as the girl paused just a couple of steps before the finishing line. She waited for the other three to catch up and then hand in hand, they ran upto to the finishing mark - a thing quite unheard of on the sports field but that day the young teenager changed the rules of the game like never before!

Ever seen a child or her parents cringing at the thought of a parent –teacher meeting? While these meetings can be a boost to the parents of the “obviously gifted”, it is indeed an ordeal for the one who is not academically bright or the one who does not do her homework or the one who loses her stuff....the complains are numerous and often made with great insensitivity, in front of several others. I remember a child who sobbed uncontrollably at the end of one such meeting

because almost every teacher predictably just complained about her till she just about had enough. I think they managed to damage her self-image forever that day. It is time to make these spaces respect differences and the privacy of the children, time to get sensitive about giving feedback. The PTM or the Parent Teacher Meeting is another space which can be enabling or disabling forever, depending on the handling of it. If only one first genuinely tried to bring out the best in every child, without ignoring what needed to be pulled up, one would make it a kinder world to live in! inadequacies but by highlighting her strengths that one generates confidence in her.

In the words of Sri Aurbindo, “As in the education of the mind, so in the education of the heart, the best way is to put the child into the right road to his own perfection and encourage him to follow it, watching, suggesting, helping, but not interfering”. This is the kind of environment that the different spaces in the school could provide, to make in truly enabling in every possible way.

Sriparna currently, as a resource person at the University Resource Centre, Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore, has been creating digital and non-digital resources for a website for teachers (www.teachersofindia.org). She has been a teacher of English and Social Studies in the J. Krishnamurti Foundation schools for 15 years. She has been involved with curriculum development and the creation of teacher enrichment modules. She has also mentored teachers and facilitated enrichment workshops for them. She can be contacted at sriparna.tamhane@azimpremjifoundation.org

