HOL(E)-ISTIC EDUCATION

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Ask parents of today what they want their children to become when they grow up. Some may respond with the exact name of a profession. From the classic doctor or engineer to the so-called more 'open-minded' ones choosing music artiste or sports player! Whatever the profession these parents choose, for most the basic premise is for their children to pursue a livelihood with passion and one that provides for financial sustenance. Along with building capabilities for economic success, these parents would also like their children to develop life skills that nurture in them a sense of self and abilities to live harmoniously with and in one's milieu. Then there may be those who will delve into an all-encompassing aspiration for a well-rounded individual! One who has unique ideas, aesthetic appreciation, with humane thoughts and the conviction to follow through on those in one's deeds. For these parents, financial security of their grown – up children is a by-product and a guarantee of a balanced education. And a few more may believe that education means all of these and more!

Juxtapose these individual expectations and aspirations from education through schooling to those of society's. If expectations from schooling reflects a society's views of what it values and wants to nurture in its future citizens, then the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 is one document that we can refer to see what we as a country value. The aims of education listed under the NCF '05 can be seen as the nurturing of the unique potential in every child, through individualized attention and care, in all areas of development viz. language, cognitive, moral, emotional, physical and social. So to speak a 'holistic' development! NCF 2005 aims at connecting knowledge to life outside the school ensuring that learning shifts away from rote methods. It recommends a curriculum that goes beyond textbooks and examinations that are flexible. The holistic development that the NCF'05 refers to is a result of various everyday experiences of a child and is not restricted to any subject or classroom. Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), still in its nascent stages of understanding and implementation, is one step towards looking at the all-round development of a child by shifting away from examination-driven teaching.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. So a closer look at the schools' processes and procedures should help us see the extent of resonance of these philosophical 'big' ideas, as aspired for in our policies, in practice. Mention of 'ideal' classrooms quite often conjures up images of seats all lined up perfectly, with students seated quietly, facing the teacher as s/he lectures to the class regardless of the students' receptivity. This still is predominantly how teaching-learning happens in a lot of classrooms in our country! It is prudent to state upfront that while there is no contention about the value of lecturing or tutorials in the teaching-learning process, the indiscriminate use of it with no other modes of engagements in the classroom is a serious concern. It perpetrates the practice of approaching children's learning as an extremely passive exercise. Learning, then, is presumed to be synonymous to children collecting information to fill their minds and regurgitate it at the behest of a test, which attempts to check just that! The processes in such classrooms assume teachers

as the bearers of information, which needs to be passed on to the students, without involving the students' discretion or participation. The focus is also skewed disproportionately towards learning the 'what', i.e., the content while 'why one needs to learn it' or understand 'how one learns it' is completely side-lined.

Typically, the syllabus of the conventional subjects like science, language, mathematics and social science is pre-decided. This implies that the content & the competencies that a pupil needs to master through the academic year are decided at the beginning of the year. The objective of the teacher is to transact the whole syllabus and test students at pre-decided intervals for mastery over the content. Unfortunately, the competencies that the students are expected to demonstrate are limited to recalling information, taught in class or as written in the textbooks, as a proof of their learning. This is considered a satisfactory indicator for the teacher, the students, and the parents to know how much learning has happened. The focus is hardly ever on understanding, application, analysis, evaluation or creation. And what is also ignored in the process are the different so called 'non-cognitive' skills that can be nurtured in the students, based on the content viz. reasoning, cooperating, communication, problem solving, responsibility, perseverance, creativity, appreciation etc., which are an integral piece of the aims of education as per NCF'05.

Compounding the issue is the existence of the unscientific yet prevalent notion of developing the so-called 'cognitive' skills in children only through subjects like mathematics, science and other 'academic' subjects. While, the lesser recognized 'non-cognitive' skills are predominantly associated with the 'non-academic' subjects like sports, music or art. This traditional distinction between the cognitive and non-cognitive seems to be only superficial as no mental process be it of reasoning, cooperating or empathising is devoid of 'cognition' (defined in the oxford dictionary as related to the mental activities involved in acquiring and processing information). While there is a lack of a clear definition of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, there exists a general consensus on some skills that fit better under one category than the other. For example, be it in a classroom or on a sports field, planning, problem-solving, remembering rules are parts of the larger activity of co-operation. But based on aforesaid classification, of these skills, problem –solving, remembering-rules are accepted more under the cognitive domain while planning and co-operation are seen to fit to better under the non-cognitive one.

This is not to suggest that an independent syllabus needs to be drawn up for each of these skills or competencies. On the contrary, it would be against the spirit of nurturing such competencies to have a syllabus that specifies a 'list of contents' that a student should become familiar with during the academic session. There are two reasons for stating this. First, the evidence of development of the 'non-cognitive' skills is not in knowledge of the skills but in its practice. Secondly, the skills are fluid i.e. knowledge of the skill, or the ability to demonstrate it, does not guarantee its practise in everyday life. Say, for example, Rekha refuses to assist Seema in academics only because Seema belongs to a different socio-economic background. Rekha knows that it is desirable to help others, and has also mastered the subject in which she has to provide assistance. But, the social-economic difference restrains her from helping someone else. Exposure to more 'content' or stories on sharing and co-operation is probably not what will cajole Rekha to help Seema. Hence, as illustrated by the example, knowing certain desirable attributes does not always ensure its practise in everyday life. The skills are displayed depending on various factors such as motivation, consequence, and context. It is, therefore, difficult to assess non-cognitive skills through one-time assessment, be it paper-pencil test or a situation test. Therefore, conclusions about a child's 'non-cognitive' skills have to be in multiple

instances and through multiple modes.

Keeping in mind our national aspirations from education and the practical issues that exist in achieving those, attempts are being made to change teaching practices to be more child-centric. The intention is to make pupils feel part of the learning process through interactions with both their peers and teachers. While the students and the teacher explore the facts of a subject, a healthy regard can also be maintained for the process of learning it. To achieve the aims of education (as envisioned by the NCF'05), it is important that we focus on 'how' children learn, and 'why' something needs to be learnt instead of focusing on only 'what' is being learnt.

To illustrate, consider a teacher who facilitates her students' learning on the topic of rotation & revolution of the earth. She asks them to think what would happen if the earth stops rotating on its axis or its revolution around the sun. Using models of the solar-system, the teacher then helps them to simulate the effects of rotation and revolution. She uses the strategy of questioning to help them visualize these phenomena and the effects of these movements or their absence have on life on earth. The children then try and reason what would happen in each of these scenarios. The teacher doesn't pose questions about the usually rote-learnt facts like the number of rotations of the earth around its axis or the duration of a revolution around the sun. This example illustrates the regard to the process of arriving at their deductions as much as the final conclusion. As the students delve into higher levels of thinking - analysing and evaluating the content, they also engage with each other, putting forth their points of view, reasoning with and attempting to convince each other. These processes are nothing but skills of reasoning, problem solving, thinking creatively, negotiating, and working co-operatively, which are usually clubbed under 'non-cognitive' skills.

Similarly, to assess students for attention and persistence (commonly clubbed under non-cognitive skills), a context is quintessential. This context could be a mathematics or music class and a teacher could observe and check whether a student is being attentive to the instructions and procedures to solve math problems or alternatively to instructions and techniques of playing an instrument respectively. So, contrary to common belief that sports, art & craft and other 'co-curricular' activities are the specific areas through which 'non-cognitive' abilities can be observed, assessed or developed, these can be done throughout the time that the child spends in the school, irrespective of subject or activity.

The intention behind the above examples and arguments is to highlight the benefit of looking at the 'non-cognitive skills' as a part of all the things that a child learns and does in the school, instead of seeing them separately. Instead of a life-skills course here and a moral value lesson there, a comprehensive approach would help alleviate the overwhelmed feeling in teachers and students about teaching and learning an additional subject. Such an approach would account not only for the learning of subjects but would provide a better chance to achieve the aims of education by looking into other aspects of it, thus making it holistic!

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