

14.**Application of Parenting Skills to Teaching for Greater Student Autonomy**

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“You give a poor man a fish and you feed him for a day. You teach him to fish and you give him an occupation that will feed him for a lifetime.”

--Chinese Proverb

Teaching someone how to do something is a feature of education. An individual, at least an aware one, continues to learn throughout life. A child's education begins even before he is born. The famous narrative from Mahabharata about Abhimanyu learning in his mother's womb how to navigate through the Chakravyuha, is backed by scientific studies and research on foetal learning. It has been found that almost all animal species learn about the world before entering it by being attentive towards the sensory stimuli experienced by their mothers. After being delivered into the world, the child first learns from his family the verbal and non-verbal language to communicate his needs and responses; and then, over a period of time, the learning of things is focussed more on gaining autonomy and independence. At a certain age, the child is expected to have learnt to perform daily ablutions on his own. In most of the cultures, the primary education of this kind is the mother's responsibility. That's the reason why a mother is called the first teacher of a child.

While home is the first school of a child, school and college become second homes for him. Parenting and formal education are two sides of the same coin as both form the basis for the growth and development of an individual. Being one of the oldest civilizations in the world, India has witnessed many changes in approaches towards both parenting and education at different points of time in history. The parenting style of Indians has lately been influenced by the Western culture, and so has been the education system here, but the outcome of both practices is expected to be rooted in Indian culture. This inherent dichotomy of modern Indian mindset needs to be examined in order to comprehend the impact of parenting and education on a child in modern India.

What is the purpose of education? Is it to fill the minds of students with theories and information which they can reproduce with accuracy at the time of examination? Or is it to equip them with the necessary training and technical know-how for a certain job or profession? The answer would be neither of these. Education is a process that must ideally lead to self-determination and autonomy in an individual; much like parenting that must ideally help a child become independent and self-sufficient. As suggested in the Chinese proverb quoted at the beginning of this article, giving alms to someone will not help them in the long run, educating them will. In the words of American educational philosopher, Robert M. Hutchins, the purpose of education “is not to fill the minds of students with facts... it is to teach them to think.”

The ancient education system in India was based on devotion to authority, importance of knowledge and learning, focus on morals and ethics, and respect for culture and traditions. The child-rearing styles shared these values, too. In this way, both parenting and education systems complemented each other. People, mostly from privileged classes, used to send their wards at an early age to gurukulas where the children were educated in different disciplines of academics, arts and traditions. With the opening of Hindu and Buddhist urban learning centres such as in Varanasi, Takshashila and Nalanda, Indian education reached greater heights. Foreign invasions from 12th century onwards had a detrimental effect on the traditional educational systems as many of the prestigious learning centres were attacked and burnt by the invaders. During the British rule in India, Thomas Macaulay was appointed as the Chairman of the General Committee of Public Instruction. “Macaulay strongly believed that traditional India had nothing to teach regarding modern skills; the best education for them would happen in English. Macaulay called for an educational system - now known as Macaulayism - that would create a class of anglicised Indians who would serve as cultural intermediaries between the British and the Indians.” (Wikipedia) Macaulay proposed, “We must at present do our best to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.”

The Macaulay system of education persists in India in the sense that, with the emphasis on score in examinations rather than on learning, it aims to produce followers, not leaders. Even more devastating is the attitude of the youth towards our native languages which are sidelined in favour of English. An average Indian student is focussed more on getting a degree than learning something. The spirit of inquiry is missing among the new-age students. The sole aim of their lives seems to be getting a job and earning lots of money, which would have been acceptable in practical terms if only it had brought stability or peace to the restless new generation.

What is the purpose of parenting? Is it to create a prop for parents to lean on in their old age? Or is it to gain social approval and commendation by raising a worldly successful child?

The answer has to be emphatically in the negative for both the hypotheses, even though the child-rearing practices in modern India are more or less aimed at these very objectives. The adherence to values and norms of culture, which was a part of the parenting and education systems in ancient India, have disappeared from the centres of learning, and the westernized modern parents are themselves failing to provide the children a healthy and respectful understanding of their cultural heritage. Still, the parents and families expect the grown-up children to follow the traditional Indian way of looking after the aged and the elderly, of making the family proud by grabbing a lucrative job and earning in six figures.

Parenting needs to be aimed at creating self-respecting, independent, autonomous entities who may contribute positively to the welfare of society in particular and of mankind in general. It has to be selfless in the sense that the dreams, goals, achievements, and pursuits of the child should not, in any way, be determined or affected by the hopes and expectations of the parents. But, at the same time, a sense of devotion and commitment towards the family needs to be cultivated in the child which would keep him grounded as well as rooted in culture. In this way, a subtle balance of freedom and discipline has to be exercised while rearing a child. The oscillation between fascination for the western notion of independence and attachment with the Indian notion of family-bonding is making the modern Indian parent confused and indecisive, leading to ambiguity in their concept of parenting, which may have far-reaching consequences on the emotional, psychological, and social life of their children.

In the field of education, the teacher must assume the role of a conscious parent who provides all necessary material to the child and yet encourages self-sufficiency in him to use that material to the best of his abilities. In a conventional classroom, the student is expected to almost blindly follow the teacher, curb his curiosity, and cram the facts for examinations. But, for a student to grow into a responsible, independent human being, it becomes imperative for the teacher to provide an environment for participative learning, to encourage the inquisitiveness of the student, and to shift the focus from learning for examinations to learning for life. In a situation like that of COVID-19, the use of information technology and online platforms for teaching might limit the role of a teacher to some extent, but the guidance and support of a mentor in all areas of life, including education, will always be indispensable. It is up to us to decide whether we wish to let the impersonal form of technology take over as mentors for the future generations or we are willing to take up the challenge of gearing up for a new role of tech-savvy educators who are equipped with valuable knowledge and skills to provide value-based education.

If classroom teaching subscribes to the ideals of participative learning and makes provision for independent exploration by the student, it will become much easier for the teachers as well as the students to draw optimum benefits from online classes. The teacher must help the student cultivate the habit of self-study quite early on in his academic life. Mock-classes can be part of routine assignments given to students in the classroom. This will inevitably lead to self-sufficiency and autonomy in the student, without causing any indifference on his part to the existing system of education. The parenting attribute of exercising authority while giving a free rein to the child's imagination and interest can be applied by the teacher to the field of education. There may be food, clothes, shelter, etc. available in a home, but the role of parents is much more than that of providers. Similarly, sources of information are found aplenty online. The relevance of a teacher in such a scenario can be ascertained only if the teacher has something to add to the already available material. The emotional and psychological attachment with parents has profound influence on the character and personality of the child. Parents' approval or disapproval may construct or destruct his sense of self-worth. A teacher may also come to have that kind of life-altering influence on a student with his/her teaching practices. There have been instances in real as well as fictional worlds where teachers changed the course of lives of their pupils. Dronacharya and Eklavya, Aristotle and Alexander, Chanakya and Chandragupta Maurya, Ramakrishna Paramhans and Vivekananda, and Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller, are only some of the more famous examples of exceptional teachers and equally worthy students.

Parents need to pamper as well as discipline the child for his emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. Teachers need to inform, instruct, and impart knowledge with sufficient room for discussion and debate in order to help the student develop his faculties of thought, reason and intellect. Spoon-feeding of ideas or concepts will help neither in parenting nor in teaching. Children need to learn to survive on their own on the strength of what they learn in their homes and in classrooms. The world as well as the classrooms is increasingly becoming virtual and technological. Accordingly, we have to reframe and redefine our understanding and handling of our jobs as teachers and parents. It will be worth noting here that an ideal parent is akin to a responsible teacher and vice-versa. We owe it to our existence to make it worth our while.

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