

An Open Letter To Schools

Neeru M. Biswas on
benefits of
'balanced education'

DISCERNING parents and citizens in India today recognize the importance of well-rounded education for schoolchildren. It would be safe to assume that this is the motive behind plans for a swimming pool, activity room and other facilities for co-curricular activities besides an excellent academic programme in every school. In this article I put certain issues for English-medium schools to consider.

The subject of school education is a very wide one, especially in the Indian context, where even today, universal primary education remains a dream. This note does not include those situations where the option for the family is one of education or no education

your medium of instruction is English, points to a select and smaller segment of Indian society. It is also parents and teachers in this segment who can, in my view, make an impact on the quality of learning that takes place in the school, and, consequently, the quality of many of the leaders and doers of the next generation.

*** Teach by example — i.e. teachers must practise what they ask their students to do.**

Today, teachers leading children by setting an example is rare. For instance, children must, for "decorum", remain thirsty during an outdoor assembly, while teachers are served cold drinks. What happens is, "do as I say, not as I do". It leads to resentment and lack of respect for teachers among students.

*** Teach discipline through example and explain why a child is being asked to do something, e.g., not running in the school corridors.**

Discipline is instilled mostly through fear; the child would learn better if he knew why he had to do something, or why he was being punished. Usually a child is slapped and left to figure out why!

Children must be taught to have a healthy respect for authority, not to blindly follow someone in a position of authority.

There is a significant difference between respecting authority and blindly following instructions from someone in authority. The former allows for a dialogue and informed learning by the child, the latter generates passive followers who find it hard to take a rational decision subsequently. In most schools today, a healthy, polite exchange of ideas is never encouraged. If a child wants to know why he must do something, he is "disciplined" naturally.

*** Teachers must prepare well for class, and then show the maturity to admit a mistake or ignorance of some fact that a child may point out.**

* Teachers in India are often reluctant to admit their mistake or their ignorance if a child asks a question to which they do not know the answer. The strength of character is reflected in being able to stand up and say to the class, "I don't know, or I made a mistake, but let us together find

out the answer", or "I'll find out and tell you tomorrow". Since we all learn from our mistakes, such an attitude by teachers would help create a better learning environment for the children. (Note: it is not humanly possible to know all the answers!)

*** Have realistic expectations from children. Apply the principles of modern child psychology that must have been (or should be) taught to teachers in their B.Ed. course.**

There is an absurd expectation from children, for instance, three-year-olds are expected to enjoy handwriting, when it is a well-known fact that their fine motor skills, required for writing, are not fully developed at that stage! At that age children learn better through play, creative activity, songs and dramatics. I hardly see puzzles being used by schools in India for this age-group.

* Insist on children doing their own work at home, with *guidance* only from parents or tutors, if required. Disqualify work that is obviously done by a grown-up person!

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• **The child's opportunity to be creative in doing his project or homework himself being lost — may be it is collective result of our schooling that produces bureaucrats rather than world-class scientists and thinkers!**

There has to be an emphasis on creativity and individuality, within the broad framework of the school, among its guiding principles. Are we really interested in developing a generation of bureaucrats, at this stage of our history?

* Many schools that have various co-curricular facilities seem to be unable to optimize the use of these so as to benefit the largest number of students. Games and teams are not always organized well, and attention is paid only to the

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ly recognize that some parents do the homework for their children (especially projects), hardly any teacher avoids displaying the neatest and most adult-looking projects, as the 'best'. There are two issues Here:

The child is being taught to be dishonest — passing on the parent's work as his own.

• **The child's opportunity to be creative in doing his project or homework himself is being lost — may be it is a collective result of such schooling that produces bureaucrats rather than world-class scientists and thinkers!**

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competitive teams that bring a good name to the school. **The issue is: team spirit, sportsmanship and the ability' to lose gracefully are learnt well on the sports field, if properly encouraged. Aren't these desirable qualities for our children to have, along with a desire to compete?**

• The CBSE syllabus is quite unwieldy and somewhat irrelevant in places, and progressive schools must take leadership in moving the bureaucrats in the relevant departments to redesign the syllabus based on clear learning objectives for the students. NCERT books are poorly edited, and written in the most unimaginative fashion — there is a crying need for improvement. The standard of English could be higher.

* **The school must foster a cooperative and open relationship with parents,** and avoid taking advantage of the parents' situation by offering a T.C., if parents make a reasonable complaint or demand. In fact, parents would be very willing to help out in innumerable and valuable ways, if en-

couraged and treated with genuine respect and professionalism

* Recent reports in newspapers suggest that **many more children are facing psychological problems than ever before.** Modern society, with all its pressures, weighs heavily on the child. Small living spaces, busy parents and the absence of several siblings put pressure on the child. The intensely competitive environment and the relatively few opportunities for the next generation (mainly because of population growth) force the school and home to put undue pressure on the child. But, **do we really want a generation of what the experts call, "normal deviates"?**

Should we not help the child to learn to establish a balance in life — a balance between studies, sports, hobbies, controlled TV-watching and just plain day-dreaming? How many of us can afford to be single-minded about anything in our adult lives? Such a balanced person would be able to fit into the challenges of modern life with more confidence and poise.

