

THE JOY OF LEARNING

Where is the joy of learning?

This “business of schooling” is serious. There’s no time for exploratory learning and the joys of creativity when syllabi have to be completed and marks scored. Learning and the joys of creativity when syllabi have to be completed and marks scored. Learning and scoring are two distant ends: if you fail to see that, you lose the battle. As Somit Chakrabarty, a former school topper, cynically remarks, “you learn by rote-reproduce that as answers and promptly forget....success depends on powers of memory than on real intelligence or understanding. “Students, teachers and parents are caught up in the scoring game. A School’s credibility depends on it.

“The evaluation system and particularly the public schools try to select the best and the process of elimination is a handy tool to show improved results.”

(Hindustan Times, Delhi, 5 March 1997)

The **Economist** has published a study on the educational standards of 41 countries, based on science scores of 13-year olds. Surprisingly, Singapore and the Czech Republic fared better than countries like America or Britain, who spend more per pupil. Evidence suggests that **teaching methods are the key**. In teaching maths, for instance, the countries topping the list, spend more time on basic arithmetic, emphasize mental maths, rely on standard teaching manuals and favour whole-class (as opposed to group) teaching. If education is the key to success in the new world economy, it is reassuring to know that money is not the sole criterion.

(The Telegraph, Calcutta, 7 April, 1997)

SCHOOLING OUR CHILDREN

Rohit is eleven, and studies in one of the leading schools in Delhi. He is bright and brimming with energy-participating enthusiastically in all school activities. Yet, since Rohit came to class VI...equilibrium at home seems to have been disturbed.

Mohan, his architect-father shared his experiences:

“After the first semester examination, my wife and I were summoned to the school and told plainly that we parents had to pay more attention to Rohit’s studies. With a class of 45 students and four sections of the same, how could my “talkative, inattentive, troublesome...son”, be attended to. Clearly the onus was on us to improve his grades.

My wife was humiliated and upset. She decided to give up her career and take charge of Rohit. As soon as he returned home from school, she began her t9rade to get homework and study done. But it was a catch 22 situation. The more she pressurized him, the more he rebelled.

So, we decided to change tracks. For Science, we went to the Natural Science Museum. Rohit fiddled with magnets and mirrors...we learned Mathematics playing Monopoly and quizzed each other for Geography. Rohit learnt. Even if he didn’t, I didn’t care. Let him take his time.

There were some teachers at school who chipped in with our efforts, putting in extra time after class and egging him on at other activities, too. My son seemed to bloom: he was happy and confident (later learnt it was because he was excelling at cricket).

Then, came the next round of exams for the final term. Rohit seemed nervous and apprehensive again. We had got some amount of studying done-but it wasn't enough.

This time, he didn't fare, too badly. He did well in Computers. Science and Geography but his performance in other subjects wasn't too encouraging. I', still awaiting other results. And I wonder...Is he ready for class VII? Even if he qualifies at what cost? Would the same rigmarole be repeated in the next class? What more is required? Some teachers had helped. His mother sacrificed her career. I had become a social recluse. But how long can we continue like this? Rohit had to eventually be on his own. Would he manage in the senior classes...the Board exam? In a 45students'-class, with minimum teacher contact, by and large, only the good can succeed. While the bad, only become worse. Or must we, as parents take on the teaching of our children in deference to careers? Am I pushing my child too far? Do other parents, share my dilemma?"

(as told to Thelma Abraham)

“The current system does not permit the process of teaching-learning in a conducive strain-free atmosphere.”

(S.L. Jain Secretary, Forum for Public Schools).

THE QUESTIONS

Mohan's concerns are shared by many parents, often resulting in mounting pressures on children and a myriad of other behavioural problems.

- Is the teacher-student ratio unviable for effective learning for the majority of students?
- How do children cope with the competitive pressures?
- English seems to be an almost unanimous favourite (irrespective of grades) while many of the students I spoke to have a “Mathematics block”-why?
- Is rote learning and formulated answers the only way to success-all through school life?
- Is there a decline in disciplined behaviour both at school and home? Does this correlate with academic decline?
- Do teachers themselves lack commitment?
- Do parents put in quality time to guide their children's learning?
- Are we 'spoon feeding' or really teaching children?

Students, parents, teachers pass the buck on to each other and of course, we all blame the system of education. But even within the existing system, I believe that individuals can make a difference to bring in the joy of learning.

(Thelma Abraham)

School chat series

Oct-November, 1996