Is it enough for education to be child-centred?

If one enters a school today, the classrooms look livelier and more cheerful than before. Students make models. They cut and paste charts and take part in projects. They use digital tools. There are stories, drama and songs, everything.

Overall, the classroom environment, the forms of teaching and the tools have changed greatly in the last ten years. Compared with the silent classrooms where only the teacher spoke, this is a welcome change.

This change did not happen by chance. The educational thinkers of the 20th century criticised teacher-centred education and placed the child at the centre. As a result, new approaches such as play-way learning, activity-based learning and experiential learning came into school education.

Even so, one basic question still follows us: activities have increased, but has learning become deeper? Our conversations about education mostly stop at how to teach. The question of what students have learnt is not discussed enough.

For better understanding

Let us see this difference through an incident in a classroom. A teacher asks the students to make a model of a plant. Students cut and paste coloured papers, write the names root, stem and leaf, and make a beautiful model. The work finishes neatly. The students are happy. The teacher is also satisfied. A photograph is also taken.

In another class, before starting the same task, the teacher asks a question: "Why do roots grow inside the soil?" Students put forward answers based on their guesses, imagination and everyday experiences. Some say, "Because there is water inside the soil." Some say, "So that the tree does not fall down." Still others give other reasons. Some answer wrongly. Some reject the views of their friends. They explain the reasons for their own views. During the discussion, some reconsider their thinking and change it. Only after that is the model of the plant made.

Seen from outside, the same lesson was taught in both classes. But in the first class a task was completed; in the next class an understanding was formed.

A good class?

We placed the child at the centre. Have we also placed their immediate wishes at the centre? Students should not get bored; learning should always be easy and joyful; there should be no feeling of failure; there should be no difficulty. Such expectations have today become the unwritten principles of education.

As a result, in many classrooms, more importance is given to whether students are enthusiastic than to whether they are thinking. A class that runs noisily is believed to be a "good class".

The classroom should be an emotionally safe place. But it should not be a place without intellectual challenge. The work of education is not to follow every wish of the child. It is to guide them towards an understanding they have not yet reached.

Intellectual habits are formed only through this journey of learning. Raising questions, examining reasons, evaluating evidence and considering alternative views are the foundations of deep learning.

Do we teach these habits of mind directly? Mostly not. We believe that if good activities happen, these habits will form by themselves. However, it cannot be assumed that everyone has learnt just because everyone took part in an activity. This is the time to judge the success of a classroom not by how enthusiastic the students were, but by which intellectual habits they used.

Learning tool

Instead of waiting for such habits to form as an indirect result of activities, why not make them direct learning goals? Instead of saying "Today we made a STEM model", classrooms that say "Today we practised making decisions based on evidence" and "Today we learnt to explain our view with reasons" will create deep learning. Then the activity will not be a goal; it will be only a tool for learning.

What we are speaking of here is not about creating intelligent students. It is about the nature of learning. Even if they are slow learners, every child can learn to raise questions, examine reasons and express their thinking. All such habits of mind are possible for all children; they differ only in the speed of learning and in the amount of support they need.

Though children differ in individual differences, socio-economic background, every classroom can develop such habits of mind.

Our attention should turn from the number of activities to the depth of the learning they create. The success of an activity is not that it was completed successfully. Whether it has brought any change in the student's understanding is the real measure. Activities are only doors that help one enter learning; they do not become the house itself. What is needed now is learning that trains student’s thinking. That is why, in the age of artificial intelligence (AI), the work of schools has not reduced. On the contrary, it has become more important and different.

In education, the twentieth century removed the teacher from the centre and brought the child to the centre. The challenge of the twenty-first century is more subtle than that. It is not enough for education to be child-centred. It must be centred on learning.

A firecracker lights up the sky for a few seconds and goes out. Though a sunrise happens slowly, it gives light for a whole day. The bustle of a classroom may attract the eyes like a firecracker. But the true success of education lies in that sunlight that rises slowly in a student's thinking.

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