

False dichotomies of education that we must strive to overcome

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Should education develop children's capacity to question things in society or their capacity to contribute constructively? Posed in this manner, it is almost certain that most will say education must do both. But in the practice of education, one of these objectives often gets far more importance. There are those educators and institutions that, in practice, are far too focused on the capacity to question, while there are others (perhaps a larger proportion) that don't think about it at all. Young people who have only learnt to question and not contribute are dysfunctional; on the other hand, those who are educated to be unquestioning contributors can hardly improve the world. These are two extremes that emphasize that education must do both—in theory and in practice. There are many such complementary matters which are too often perceived to be dichotomies. Good education must account for all these matters, and not make choices between them because these are false choices. Let's consider some of these.

First, freedom versus discipline: Too often, in the reality of school cultures, discipline and freedom are seen as opposites; either children are disciplined or they are free. We know that both freedom and discipline are equally important. Not only in education, but in life. But channelling freedom and discipline together towards learning is a constant struggle for educators. And so, educators often choose between the two. It is easier to handle students with one rather than both. This is educationally ineffective, and potentially creates lifelong problems for students.

Second, memorization versus understanding: Rote is not useful, while we know that understanding is very important. But understanding and memorization are not in conflict. Neither are practice and creativity. In fact, memory plays an important role in developing conceptual understanding, as does practice in creativity. An educational approach that relies on one alone cannot achieve its goals. The two must operate together.

Third, knowledge versus skills: Children are heavily burdened by the requirement to acquire knowledge in their subjects. Yet, precious little is done to develop their skills and capacities to process and use that knowledge. For instance, the development of an ability to communicate, or think critically, takes a back seat to soaking knowledge and content in courses. This has fuelled the other extreme where skill development attempts to compensate for the inadequacies of education systems (or replace them). However, just as education that doesn't develop skills is not useful, development of skills without content is inadequate and usually impossible.

Fourth, education for employability and employment versus a liberal education: Education that does not emphasize general capacities of critical thinking, analysis and development of character undermines citizenship. At the same time, education that ignores economic goals of productive livelihood too undermines the individual. The two have been unnecessarily seen as dichotomous. It is a challenge to the education system and educators how to have liberal education which also equally develops capacities such that students can find gainful employment.

Fifth, collaboration versus competition: Not so much the formal structures of curriculum but the practices and cultures of our institutions, particularly of exams and entrance tests, present these as dichotomous. From life experience we know that competition of various sorts is a reality, and without collaboration, human beings can't function. Thus, institutions must be able to foster an environment of both collaboration and competition together, much like life.

Sixth, the common-size-fits all versus the contextual: Let's take a couple of matters of policy. In any education system, some matters have to be common across the system, while some must be entirely contextual. This is a basic feature of any education system that serves any society. For that society to function as one unit there are common things that must be learnt. But equally clearly, there are contextual matters specific to areas, places, cultures and more. It is this balance between the common and the contextual that education policies must achieve, rather than serving any extreme. A related matter is that of empowerment and instruction. The nature of education is such that empowering institutions and educators makes it most effective. However, this autonomy has to be within a common set of principles across that education system. Complete autonomy on everything is as dysfunctional for societies and communities as a deeply hierarchical, tightly prescriptive approach.

Good education requires not dichotomies, but a consistent endeavour to balance and achieve complementary ends, both in theory and in practice.

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