

Thinking Independently

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Abstract

From birth, we begin trying to make sense of the world around us. Young ones are the most curious and eager to know about the world around them. While infants think through sensation to get acquainted with their surroundings, they begin to engage in more abstract concepts as they grow. But as we grow, we are passed on some guidelines and rules on what to think and how to think, what the limitations on thoughts would be and what kind of product one should expect. Since everyone has a life with unique experiences upon which they build their perspective to look at a situation, why do we desperately want every child to think the same way? Does everyone think the same way, to begin with? What are the criteria for gauging one's thinking? While the schools still perpetuate the traditional, orthodox and restricted ways of thinking in the name of higher-order skills, the 21st century demands otherwise; unorthodox and innovative ways of thinking.

Keywords: *thinking, children, curiosity, independent thinking*

From selecting their toys for play to making their little games; from colouring the sky blue to observing different hues of the sky; from curiosity to touch a hot utensil to observing different concepts of heat and temperature, from memorising the multiplication tables to realising different ways of reaching a solution, children engage in a lot of thinking. A lot of thinking and free movement of thought is required to generate new and more effective thoughts. It isn't just one thought that makes the child realise that the rain, snow, hail, and vapour all are just water in different forms. Even if they are told everything about a phenomenon, the child would only selectively memorise what they can comprehend. Putting a child's thought in a box would be just to tell children 'what is', 'why is' and 'how is' and expecting them to stay within the given by either memorising the provided information or letting them think within a restricted, systemic and standardised way instead of letting one to further struggle with their thoughts and observe, organise, reorganise, question and find patterns on their own.

We often come across children asking us some questions which even we, as adults, cannot answer at times, and in exchange, we tag them as 'curious beings'. Calling children 'naturally curious' hides the process behind their curiosity. Children are curious beings because the world around them is new, and they have the freedom to explore the world around them. Children are independent explorers because they have the

freedom to play around and manipulate objects and their surroundings. Children are autonomous learners because they are not always dependent on adults to tell them about their surroundings; rather, they will first try to know it by themselves. They rely more upon their senses than on adults' instructions. They go through a scientific process while constructing knowledge about the world around them. They observe, theorise, test and revisit the theories, making thinking an integral part of the whole process. 'Children are naturally curious beings' is an overly stated phrase, but what happens to this curiosity when children grow into adults? What causes children to move from independent and curious thinkers to being submissive and docile beings? Why do many adults feel incompetent in making decisions for themselves?

The cause is rooted in childhood. Children start thinking when they are born, not like adults, but they try to make sense of the world around them, their experiences with people, objects, places, emotions etc., in their way. To make connections between different facets of existence is something a person has to do for himself; we cannot do it for others. Similarly, a child has to make sense of their world by themselves, and no adult can do it for them; they can only help when necessary. For that reason, children are always processing some theories consciously or subconsciously since they have a lot to make sense of in the world they entered not so long ago. The unnecessary interventions led by adults

can do more harm than good as it takes away the natural process through which children learn to learn and become autonomous thinkers. Initially, parents and then teachers at school intervene in children's decisions about their own learning experiences. There is always an authority figure to dictate what needs to be done and what not, what a child needs to know and what not, how the child must know it and how not, and all other Dos and Don'ts. Initially, this authority is external and causes a restraint in a child's learning experiences. As this becomes repetitive, the child gives up to external authority to validate their choices and decisions. They are not curious anymore about why and why not of the happenings around them. That is when the external authority has been internalised, and by the time children grow up, they feel incompetent in making decisions for themselves.

When children are born, they are unaware of the human-made rules, regulations, and limitations. As the child develops thinking in the early stages, they don't know there are human-imposed limitations on thinking too. While thinking does not naturally have limitations, humans have created some standards for thoughts. And any new generation takes off some limitations while putting in some others and, in this way, propagates a certain way of thinking. Since most children's lives are organised and dictated by adults, who themselves have been through the same and, by now, have become comfortable within their boxes. So, as children grow, their thinking also develops into traditional, conventional ways. They have to submit to the adults' imposed limitations on their thoughts to fit in the social settings. Their thinking is pushed within the boundaries of a box, and there comes a time when they stop putting effort into thinking beyond what is expected. Rarely anything new comes from it; it produces a replica of whatever is already out there—reproduction, not innovation.

Our thinking process is bound within the realm of accepted patterns in society. Going beyond which feels like breaking some laws. Since early childhood, children are taught what to think and how to think. These rules and regulations shape the way our thought process works, the information we want to process and the thoughts we want our mind to produce. A child in their early years has not yet internalised these rules

and restrictions on thinking and thus can think in any direction. That is why many times, adults are unable to answer the queries of young ones and instead tag them as curious beings. While on one side, they are tagged as curious beings, on the other hand, their thoughts are considered going wayward and must be directed towards the right way. Thus, adults continue to transmit their ways of thinking to the young ones, and in that process, we ignore what the child knows and focus on the child not abiding by the rules of the problem.

For example, a first-grader is given a set of alphabet flashcards and instructed to make words out of some given letters. The child successfully rearranges the letters and makes a meaningful word out of them. Next, the child is asked to use the letters of that word to extract some more words out of it, for example, making words from the letters of the word CARPENTER. The child struggles with it and thinks of a word which requires a letter that isn't present in the original word. Let's say the child needs L to make the word PLANT out of the letters in CARPENTER, but L is unavailable. When asked not to take any flashcard from outside the letters of the original word, the child takes a card from the available ones and writes the needed letter on it and puts it in place to complete the word, i.e. takes the C from the word CARPENTER and writes L on its backside and puts it on the place to form PLANT. But the child was interrupted again and told that it wasn't allowed. She was again reminded that she has to stick with the available letters only and can't make her own. So this time, instead of creating the letter on the card, she wrote the needed letter on the table where the letter flashcard was to be placed to complete the word. However, she is again interrupted until she gives up on creating a word that requires letters beyond the letters present in the original word. These kinds of actions show that children are capable of creativity. Adults often leave a chuckle at such actions of children before continuing to 'correct' their behaviour. It is a moment of awe for adults who themselves could and still can think outside the box, like children, but are bound by the standard and accepted ways of thinking and continue to perpetuate that way in the younger generation as well. That is why children are interrupted and dictated to behave in a certain way, read and write a certain way, and express themselves a certain way. These

situations push them into the boundaries of a box.

In the school setting, what often happens is that children are required to repeat instead of discovering for themselves. Most of the time, repetition of the given information makes no sense to them, and after a point, they give up trying to reconcile what people say about the world and what they feel about it. When students bring their queries to the classrooms, they are often shut down by the teachers. Children's queries prove they are thinking beyond the given and the expected. But in the classrooms, their queries are regarded as out of context, out of syllabus, illogical, irrelevant or disturbing to the class. It is rarely the case that children are encouraged to share what THEY think about a situation or text, and rarely children's queries are encouraged. And as time passes, they accept what the authority says as true and do not try to question or test it anymore. They become docile bodies, accepting control and submissive instructions. While schools claim to be preparing children for a better future by making them creative, critical and independent thinkers, schools are the foremost ones trying to perpetuate one way of thinking – the one which is widely accepted, expected and has only certain perspectives in it. The examination system is like the cherry on the top that ensures that the system perpetuates the 'one way' of thinking successfully by evaluating what the children can memorise from the given. The standardised answers to the exam questions based on which children are evaluated ensure no deviation in how children think. These standardised exams become criteria to gauge children's thinking, while these exams provide the least opportunity to think.

To quote J. Krishnamurthy from his book 'On Freedom':

“When you are told what to do, what to think, to obey, to follow, do you know what it does to you? Your mind becomes dull, it loses its initiative, its quickness. This external, outward imposition of discipline makes the mind stupid, it makes you conform, it makes you imitate. But if you discipline yourself by watching, listening, being considerate, being very thoughtful – out of that watchfulness, that listening, that consideration for others, comes order. Where there is order, there is always freedom.”

This is what one needs- 'freedom', freedom of thought. Freedom to think on their own, without any imposition from outside authority. One doesn't need a structured direction to lead the thoughts; that just leads the thinking towards reproduction rather than innovation. To move from the known and the given to the 'yet to know', we need to put our unique experiences, perspectives, and ideas into motion. This freedom of thought without dependence on outside authority is called independent thinking. One might think that being brought up in a democratic society, everyone is free to think, but that's not true regarding the practical grounds of the education system. A girl child brought up with the ideas of submission to patriarchy would develop her thinking the same unless she is probed to think critically about it. A child from a dominant class brought up with the ideas of power and dominance would probably grow up with an attitude of power unless he is facilitated to think critically about society's power dynamics and role in it. Family and school play a major role in perpetuating certain thinking through socialisation. The child's thinking is shaped by the thought processes and ideas of the people around them; thus not independent. That is why one might be living in a democratic society and still not be an independent thinker.

In the surge of the 21st century's demands of skilled labourers and entrepreneurs, thinking and producing what is 'given' has little to no value. The fast-changing world demands minds that go beyond the conventional and usual, providing new and innovative solutions to modern problems. Higher-order thinking skills like abstract thinking, imaginative thinking, and creative and critical thinking are observed as desirable, but what tops the list is 'independent thinking', that is, thinking without letting public opinion influence it. Independent thinking might be considered risky since it requires the thinker to go beyond the general and reflect on their thoughts through a 3rd person's point of view. The fear of authority and the limitations on thought made by authority prevents us from examining, questioning and inquiring. It prevents us from going beyond the given and provided. Therefore, independent thinking should be developed among children from the beginning as a quality of mind that knows the freedom, responsibility, and power of one's thoughts.

Independent thinking allows a person to look at a situation as it is without letting their thought be clouded by how they know of it or how they are told about it. At a young age, when children are mostly dependent on their senses for thinking, they observe their surroundings as they are. They haven't yet learnt the art of labelling everything. Unlike adults, they would observe birds for their features and activities, whose first instinct would be to identify and name the bird. This culture of objectivity devalues our ways of thinking and how we perceive our surroundings. It fools us into ignoring the different ways to approach a situation. Independent thinkers observe and learn at their own pace and do not hesitate to say they 'don't know' when they don't. They have the confidence to own a thought, which shows in their speech and actions. Therefore, it is the responsibility of parents at home and teachers in school to help maintain that confidence and not kill their self-esteem by imposing objectivity on them. Only when children can think independently and have independent ideas can they contribute to innovation. Therefore, to nurture this independence and creativity, schools should become a place to explore different ideas, perspectives and questions children bring to the classrooms. Observation, questioning and healthy debates should have a higher position in schools. Creativity should not be left for creative

competitions only, but it should be seen as an integral part of all classroom activities. The assessment criteria must consider different approaches and processes children apply to problems rather than sticking to an objective solution. For this, the teachers must first reflect on their own teaching. They need to identify where they need to interfere in children's learning and thinking processes and where they need to give space for the child to think on their own.

Thinking is, therefore, a quality of mind that develops as the child develops or is exposed to more experiences. And as facilitators, teachers don't need to develop a particular way of thinking among children but rather provide them ample opportunities to think by themselves, on their own- independently. The teachers must let children think independently, explore, examine and question on their way to learning. The free movement of thought makes the thinking process more worthwhile and prosperous. Independent thinking is a way towards thinking outside the box, beyond the given and expected, and towards creativity and innovation.