Importance of Psychological Well-being at School

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Abstract

The significance of early years of child's life has consistently been an area of concern for professionals working in the field of child development, mental health and education. The longest part of a person's academic life is spent in school, an institution that transforms a naive child into an informed adolescent. Since, about fifteen years of one's life are absorbed in his/her schooling, the environmental factors of the school as well as processes become extremely important. A positive curriculum, directed towards holistic development of the child, can be a boon for the child, whereas, curriculum transacted just for the sake of completing the syllabus, and evaluating the children merely through examination grades could yield mind-boggling results. In this context, 'inclusion' in schools becomes vitally important. When a child is able to interact with other children with different abilities, the acceptance for people with special needs in the society comes naturally. The school becomes responsible for what children feel about themselves, and how they regard the others around. Recently, there has emerged a need of developing individuals who become better thinkers rather than rote-learners, better leaders rather than followers, and better creators rather than fillers. It therefore becomes very crucial to ensure that appropriate, and not approximate levels of health and well-being are maintained in schools, so that a strong foundation is laid for the life ahead.

Key Words: *Health, Curriculum, Pedagogy, School, Teachers.*

> *We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the foundation of life. Many of the things we need, can wait. The children CANNOT. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed to him we cannot answer "Tomorrow". His name is "Today" -*
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> (Gabriela Mistral, 1948).

Introduction

The time we are in, is referred to as 21st century – a period of rapid growth and development, a period of possibilities and opportunities. The above mentioned words by Gabriel Mistral are about 70 years old. A lot of development has happened in these years, but these words still hold their worth. The programs designed for children have to focus on the importance of 'today' in their developmental as well as temporal sense. It is the childhood, which thus becomes extremely important as a period of investment for future.

Brain development is most rapid in the early years of life. When the quality of stimulation, support, and nurturance is deficient, child development is seriously affected. The effects of early disadvantage on children can be reduced. Early interventions for disadvantaged children lead to improvements in children's survival, health, growth, and cognitive and social development. Children who receive assistance in their early years achieve more success at school. As adults they have higher employment and earnings, better health, and lower levels of welfare dependence and crime rates than those who don't have these early opportunities (UNICEF, 2013). The years that encompass middle childhood and adolescence are spent in schools. In the society today, there is a huge uproar in choosing high profile schools especially for the children of the upper middle and elite class. But this doesn't spare the lower middle or other SES groups of society from bearing the brunt of admissions. It reiterates the question as to what happens in such well-renowned schools that everyone talks about it? Does some magic happen in the lives of pupils due to the glorious building of the school, or is it the upper class English standards and attire of the teachers that promotes development of children. As academicians, we understand the ground reality. It doesn't take so much money, but a conscious effort by the functionaries of

school to make a difference in the lives of students. Some important factors of the 'school' that become responsible for affecting the psychological health and well-being of children shall be discussed in the following sections.

Curriculum

According to the history of education, the term 'curriculum' was originally related to the concept of a course of studies followed by a pupil in an educational institution. Today, the term 'curriculum' is mostly used to refer to the existing contract between society, state and educational professional with regard to the educational experiences that learners should undergo during a certain phase of their lives. Thus for majority of authors and experts, curriculum defines the 'why', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'how', and 'with whom' to learn. (Moyles, 1998). It seems to be an exhaustive definition of curriculum focussing on multiple aspects of it. The written document called 'syllabus' used in schools, completing which, seems to be all the work, is not at all to be confused with curriculum. Syllabus is just a small part of curriculum. The latter includes ideology and philosophy of the institution; teaching-learning process, and the pedagogy; and most importantly, the school's view of education and of children.

It therefore becomes quite relevant to decide how and what should be taught, or what is worth teaching? Now, as stakeholders in the field of education we have to decide which route do we need to take? Should we use learners' viewpoint in deciding what should be taught to them, although it eventually brings us amidst hundreds and thousands of learners and their interests whose viewpoints cannot practically be taken and adopted and we can only end up thinking on behalf of students and not actually think like them? The alternative option could be to find out the intrinsic value of knowledge and then pass it on to the students which can qualify itself as 'learnable' or rather, usable. (Kumar, 2009) If the curriculum includes the ideology of the school which is developmentally oriented and is inclusive, the same shall be transacted in the classroom, and such an ideology would have to manifest in the teaching and evaluation process.

Pedagogy

According to National Curriculum Framework, 2005, the child has to be treated as the active constructor of knowledge and should be refrained from information overload. The document also stresses that the teaching process in the classroom should be innovative and creative such that it promotes thinking in the child, and the content of instruction should be related to the social reality of the child It should be rooted in the soil where the child lives. Does it really happen? Are we in the process of believing that the child is the centre and a decision maker in the process of learning? It becomes very hard for us to believe that children are intelligent and active. As Bruner (1999) opines, 'Modern pedagogy is moving increasingly to the view that the child should be aware of his/her own thought processes, and that it is crucial for the pedagogical theorist and the teacher alike, to help him/her to become more meta-cognitive. Achieving skill and accumulating knowledge are not enough.' (Pp. 18). Bruner highlights the importance of meta-thinking, thinking about thoughts, and making the child aware of what is going on. The system that we have in place doesn't let that happen.

The child is so burdened with syllabus that understating her own thought processes becomes nearly impossible, as also teachers or school is unable to give any scope for such an activity. This becomes even more critical with older students, who enter into the 'stress and storm' (Hall, 1975) period of adolescence. Adolescence as a stage is, in itself demanding because of all the biological changes happening in adolescents. It is the time when their health is threatened by chemical abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and dietary problems; and if in such period we assume that conventional textbook course that conveys knowledge about normal and abnormal body functions is sufficient, then our assumption is probably incorrect. (Champagne and Mcquade, 1995)

Role of a teacher

There lies a huge impetus on the 'teacher'. She is the live player of the curriculum. Her role makes her an average teacher or a teacher with advanced skills. A teacher with basic skills would rather know what she is teaching but she is likely to explain the concepts of the textbook in a predesigned way. She would evaluate students on set patterns of evaluation using a particular teaching approach in class. Also, she is confined to perceive herself as the active speaker and children as listeners possessing little or no knowledge. Lastly, she is likely to focus on a few children in class who actively participate in the class while leaving the rest. If these are the traits of a teacher with basic skills, what a teacher with advanced skills would be like?

Well, she would know the level of understanding of her students, and how much they already know. She would use a teaching approach which is relevant for all. She would know how to make content of instruction more challenging for children with higher intelligence and how to make it easy and understandable for children of average intelligence or the ones with special educational needs. Not to forget, she would perceive children as active constructers of knowledge and would pay special attention to those who do not otherwise participate in the class and devise ways for their active participation.

So much has been just said about a 'good' teacher that it becomes so essential to understand how well she is trained to become a successful teacher. It reiterates that her training should follow the same principle and method and her trainer should possess all the qualities that we expect out of this trainee-teacher when she goes in the field. So what does the training do? Kumar (2008) answers it as, 'the basic implication is that training makes no difference. It remains a normal achievement, a diploma or degree, which makes you eligible for job but carries no substantial value. The skills learnt are rooted in a concept of teaching that has little relevance to the children of today or to the policy framework guiding education. On values and attitudes, the training process makes no impact, indeed, it is not intended to'. (pp. 40) The word seems to be of utmost importance, and provides us with a valuable suggestion. In order to promote the well-being of students in the class, we first have to promote the well-being of transactors of curriculum, the teachers, so that we can ensure that they practice what they have been taught.

Diversity and Inclusion

In the Indian context, cultural diversity and a long history of exclusion lend their own meaning to the term 'inclusion'... As the country grows and previously excluded groups amass into schools, an inherited colonial education system and the scale of the country make transition to inclusion an unwieldy, contested affair. (Joshi, 2008) It is imperative how we see inclusion as a solution to provide mental well-being to students. When a society is inclusive of all the differences, and an individual has to eventually grow in with the different people around her, why not make schools inclusive? These schools will make the child understand and appreciate different capabilities. Therefore, it is very essential to understand what do we mean by an 'inclusive' school. Schools that are inclusive adopt the belief that wherever possible, all children should learn together regardless of differences; that all children learn and achieve their potential; and that the continuum of students' needs should be matched by a continuum of programs, support and services. All students regardless of their ability or disability benefit from schools adopting inclusive practices. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 document highlights the fact that the benefit is mutual when there are typical and atypical students in a classroom, both tend to learn from each other and are able to accept the differences that exist. The characteristics of an effective as well as inclusive school can be summarized in the following points:

•   Such school is driven by a moral imperative to improve the learning outcomes of all students, regardless of their capacities and backgrounds.

•   It adopts a whole school focus that is reflected in the school's vision, beliefs, policies and practices.

•   It is deeply committed to the belief that all children can learn.

•   The school focuses on students' learning needs rather than on learning disabilities.

•   It provides learning programs and tasks that are targeted to students' learning styles, interests, and needs.

•   Such school has a strong performance and development culture that supports all staff and volunteers to continuously improve their effectiveness to promote student learning. (Dept. of Education and training, 2003)

Conclusion

What we mean by education is a very critical concern. It should aim at developing natural abilities of the child and build his character; education is responsible for the development of personality and preparation for the adult life, wherein, it is able to create productive citizens who have a sense of unity and community amongst themselves. (Sharma, 2000) A large mass of people is dependent on schools for educating their children. In a country where there are first-generation learners, going to school for the first time, school becomes the only respite. Schools can play an important role in the mental health and well-being of their students and staff. Obtaining the skills needed for academic success can contribute to a better life quality of students.

A positive school environment can promote good mental health in students and staff; in turn, good mental health of students and staff can promote academic performance in students and reduce staff absenteeism. Bullying and feelings of not being accepted by peers and teachers contributes to poor mental health in students. (SHE, 2014) School is not just an institution of education; it is an integral agent of development. A school with its efficient environment and conducive processes can do wonders to the lives of students. Society doesn't thrive on competitions, it grows on co-operation and brotherhood. If school has decided to prepare students to become respectful individuals of society, then the institution itself has to make a conscious effort towards thwarting any instances of evoking unhealthy competition in the minds of pupils. School is entrusted with the responsibility of making children more conscious/ cognizant of the needs of others, making them critical thinkers. Thus how it is done shall make the difference for the years ahead.

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