[**Strategic thinking**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1607643/strategic-thinking)

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MANY of us remember the all too familiar question from our childhood days: ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ Clichéd as it may be, it was one of my favourite questions to answer because it gave me the opportunity to come up with a different answer each time. It gave me a chance to paint scenarios in my mind and rationalise them with reasons — a road map as it were.

Strategic thinking involves road maps, not necessarily about career goals. It begins very early on in life with ‘big ideas’ that we explore with a series of short questions. It helps children create a vision with several dimensions of possibilities, narrow them down into goals or scenarios and then work towards developing the means or tactics towards those goals.

Strategic thinking requires a degree of questioning and reflection that can be taught and exercised at any age, any level. For example, when we build a scenario, can we also develop assumptions to aid our thinking, can we question our assumptions and reflect on the validity of information we have? If we hit strategic blind spots, can we drop our plan and visit other choices available, or do we stick to a faulty plan and call it failure?

It might be a gross generalisation to say that most students who don’t find success quickly start regarding themselves as failures but time and again, as teachers, we come across students who lose confidence and faith in themselves when they hit roadblocks. If we were to help these students think strategically, it would imply giving the word ‘failure’ another name, develop a different road map, set new goals and come up with a set of tactics to chase them.

Children’s right to express themselves must be safeguarded.

In a nutshell, strategic thinking is about envisioning where one needs to be and walking backwards from there, rather than going down a path without clear foresight. Perhaps students need mentors well before they embark on the journey as these might save them much heartache later. Few schools offer mentorship programmes, which function much like mirrors, helping the reflection reach back without hindrance. It allows a dialogue that gives students allies and, if group work is involved, the input from peers is a valuable asset.

Recently, I heard an interesting comment — ‘enlisting a friend is better than reading a book’. Perhaps the choice would be contextual, but in terms of charting out a vision, a goal and its challenges, it would certainly help to enlist the diverse opinions of friends and even foes. Just like the antagonist is essential to a fictional tale, children need supporters as well as those who can question them. In fact, questioning and opposing are both sides of the same coin — they help solidify children’s conviction in their thought processes as they begin to communicate and reflect.

Adult appreciation of children’s thought processes is essential to the development of a strategic mindset. Children don’t necessarily need approval or validation, but their right to express themselves must be safeguarded and valued; the responsibility to accept and not correct rests with the teachers. Spending time listening to convoluted reasoning may serve better than dumbing them down, which most traditional education systems have unfortunately done. For teachers, it’s a slippery slope of course, and not everyone can manage to maintain that very evasive balance.

It doesn’t help to remind children that the world is a tough place and that they will have to work really hard to get where they want to be. Such life lessons are often imbibed through learning by example. While talking to children, it would be wiser to flip that narrative and help them envision the world as their oyster where just about anything they want is well within reach. Many would say this is easier said than done, but a large part of it has to do with how children are taught to visualise their goals.

Part of strategic thinking is about contextualising what can be achieved, rather than building castles in the air. ‘What do I need to accomplish and how do I bring it within my reach’ are questions that children might need to be taught to address. Sometimes, working backwards is the best way forward — developing a vision of the goals and then working on a plan to get there.

Finally, celebrating is as important as working hard. When children learn to give themselves validation and approval for each milestone, it becomes a self-perpetuating process of gratification followed by greater motivation. Identifying milestones is a necessary part of strategic planning, and that is what celebration achieves. It brings success to the surface and leads to greater impetus and inspiration.

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