**Time to revisit our preschools**

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My first task at my university abroad was to review a policy document in detail. As a typical desi, I decided to do the review at the last minute and skim through the document a night before understanding the gist of what that paper was all about.

After all, this is how I had studied all my life back in Pakistan where last minute focus got me the grades and at times laurels from the teacher as well. On the day of our lecture, my French professor asked me to come up and explain what was wrong with this policy paper. Now I knew what the paper was all about, but I had no idea about what was wrong with it. I tried to use flowery English and beat about the bush only to be asked to take my seat and instead a Spanish classmate was asked to come and do the same.

To my surprise, she spoke for less than a minute and laid bare the issues and loopholes of that paper in detail and with precision. Her short analysis was as crisp as the stiffly ironed shirt I wore to impress my lecturer. She outsmarted me with simple English, casual attire and a better sense of analysis. Later I asked her how she could see the policy document from that perspective and she replied by asking how I could not do the same simple task.

Weeks later, I realized why I fell short of what was expected of me in class that day. While I was parroting my ABCs, nursery rhymes, 123s etc in my preschool, she was focusing on thinking skills, cognitive skills, exploring nature and herself in her preschool.

While our primary and secondary schools have been the focus of many deliberations and discussions, it is our preschools; the feeders that have been ignored, less debated and less prioritized. A close look at our preschools will show us the consequence of that costly oversight.

Most preschools either become entry platforms into some elite schools or they become popular venues where kids are taught to speak and write beyond their age levels. This isn’t just a school policy, it is something derived from the demands of the parents who believe in a content heavy, homework laden, demanding curriculum preschool, where their child can speak or write more than other kids and is able to get A grades from pre nursery onwards.

In short, a foundation of parroting, rote-learning, grade fixation and heavy content digestion is laid for the child. Sadly this enables them to get into popular elite schools of the town, whose entry test content and pressure is not only inhumane, but also kills the spirit of a child. Perhaps many parents do not see beyond grades and beyond getting admissions into certain schools. All of these have consequences which we must pause to think about.

There are countries in Europe where the child starts to write in lower primary years and not in their preschools. These are places where a child’s thinking, oratory, creative and problem solving skills are developed by learning through play, learning by doing or through real life experiences all around them. They are basically prompted to think, analyze, question and probe. Alphabets, numeracy etc can be learnt in higher classes and can come later. Such young pupils with a developed cognitive skill and sharp critical thinking skills become lifelong learners and learn the art of adapting themselves to any environment and take up all types of challenges in life. Hence, the West is where the bulk of research, developments, innovations and creations happen today.

It is time we remodeled our early years into a similar pattern, which also means we revisit the framework for our primary years and beyond. After all, you cannot have a more open ended, free thinking, abstract early years and then a demanding content heavy Grade 1 and beyond.

Our obsession as parents, as teachers, as schools and later even as students should not be grades alone or how well we can rote learn. The new age demands totally opposite skill sets now. The game has changed more towards how well we can philosophize than to parrot. This is the era of skills whose foundations need to be laid down in preschools with a more concept based education system instead of the present content heavy curriculum. A child has to enjoy and learn and be exposed to an age appropriate level of education. The demands of a popular school’s content-heavy entry test should not determine the present and future of our young kids.

Preschool is an age to experiment, play, explore, dig and question everything around them as a constant learner. This is certainly not the age to constantly copy and write, repeat, not question and learn stuff by heart. This way we take the essence out of education and make it an unhealthy environment of so-called learning – and that too in the most important years of your life.

What worked for us as students years ago may or may not work for our kids today as students in just the same way as the learning trends and methods of our parents as students was very different from our time in school. We forget that times, methods and even education systems evolve over time and we have to think for ourselves and research instead of blindly following others in the family, neighbourhood, workplace or society. Each child is different and so each child’s learning ability, skill, mind and capacity will be different.

It is painful to see a young five-year-old or even younger child carry school bags, do tons of homework at home every day and get tuitions after school or study extra at home because they have to achieve an A grade all the time or they have to beat many others for a seat in a coveted school. No legendary school is worth a dime to kill the true essence of education in your child. No grade fixation is worth putting our kids under demanding academic pressures from such an early age in life. All of these have severe implications on the social, psychological and even physiological health of a child.

Our preschools must be forced to move away from traditional and outdated methods of teaching and curriculum frameworks and as parents we must research the good classroom practices of preschools of the more developed part of the world. Our children will grow over time, it is time we also grow as parents, teachers and schools.

Preschools are the core of our entire education and ages 0-5 are the most crucial years of their mental and personality growths. Let’s not take away the spirit of education from our own kids and make them literate only and not educated. Revisit the philosophies, goals and workings of our preschools now.

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