

The Teacher as a Collaborator

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Teaching has been a rewarding experience for me. It has also been a heady mix of chalk and challenges. Two decades long association with children has nurtured and enriched my soul.

I have been party to their fun, tears and bruises. These little angels respond to love and love alone. They have a discerning ability to judge you — and if you pass their litmus test, there can be no award more fulfilling.

The trouble with experience as a teacher is that the test comes first and the lesson afterwards. We ought to tread carefully on the path of teaching. As Henry Brooks Adams said, “Teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”

In my teaching career, I must have tried a number of ideas, some borrowed from the veterans, some that I have invented along the way. The one that has still not lost its sheen is ‘collaborative learning’. As

our children inhabit a world sans boundaries, education imparted to them has to be delivered in a transparent and collaborative environment. This certainly awakens them to endless opportunities.

The challenge in front of a teacher is to be innovative and to make the learning environment engaging and exciting. A continuous improvement on existing practices year after year results in a sustainable and viable model. Collaborative learning in my classrooms has always paid rich dividends. Collaborative work has the ability to steer children confidently towards a common goal, taking in individual accomplishments as assets. Every member of the team is an active learner rather than a passive one. This is an important tool for holistic development. I have discovered that children work better, on the whole, when grouped with their peers. They become more focussed on their work.

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There is a sense of contentment when pupils are engaged in thoughtful discussions during group projects. However, it comes with its own challenges. I would not deny that there are heated arguments, sulking and sometimes even a walk out. The noise that I would call a productive hum persists as children work through their difficulties.

The quest is to turn every stumbling block into a stepping stone. They learn to work together for a stipulated period and eventually solve their own problems.

Collaborative learning enhances social skills and paves the way for interactive learning. Even a reticent child gets to voice their opinion and an opportunity to be heard in a comfortable, non-threatening and informal atmosphere.

Students with diverse skill sets merge together to produce exemplary work. A structured experience such as this mimics the workplace of the future where there is diversity in skill, culture, regional identity and work style. The children learn to respect views that differ radically from theirs. Negotiations, critical thinking, resolution of conflicts, clarifications and effective communication are the by-products of collaborative work.

The teacher who is a facilitator ensures a heterogeneous allotment of groups. The teacher uses labels or signs to demarcate and designate areas.

The role of the teacher becomes increasingly important as they set

rules, objectives and the time limit. They examines individual strength of the children and groups them accordingly. She nudges someone here, pats the back of another, consoles the aggrieved members and reassures a few. So, the teacher walks the tightrope that is never too lax and always taut! In other words, the teacher does a perfect balancing act! They allows the jogging of the brains, quietly watches the confluence of several insights, attitudes and skills. The children work together to reach a group consensus and have a little fun on the side as well. The teacher observes the transition. The metamorphosis is akin to a magical journey. Once the assigned work is completed, the review is extremely essential where each group assesses their work and discusses the lacunae as well.

As our country stands at the brink of unprecedented development and growth, the need of the hour is to develop a force of young individuals who can work in a pluralistic environment.

I swell with pride when a high-flying executive proudly acknowledges the efforts of his alma mater in preparing him for the role he plays today and I recollect with amusement how a ten-year-old, a quiet contributor to the group projects has turned into a fearless financial consultant. My belief in 'every child is a gift waiting to be unwrapped' has grown stronger ever since.