

marching towards the future
Azim Premji - Chairman, Wipro Limited

"March-past is a very healthy and good exercise for children; It trains them to be disciplined, to follow a pattern. It is very important to inculcate discipline in our children."

This seemingly innocuous statement was almost like a constant refrain of this person who felt very strongly about discipline in schools. I did not like this thought and I was trying to understand what it was about this apparent need to enforce discipline that bothered me.

I realized that my problem is not with the march-past, but with the idea behind that this person was espousing – the idea of discipline that really meant enforced conformity. I also realized that we see similar processes all over the school - uniforms, the seating arrangements, rules on hair-cut, the idea of pin-drop silence in a classroom and so many others. These activities reinforce in a child's mind a notion of conformity, of the need to stick to rules, of the need to obey unquestioningly.

And these principles even find their way into the classroom and regular curriculum - there is only one right answer (a different answer even if it demonstrates a lot of thinking on the child's part is still unacceptable), a child who asks too many questions is either not paying attention or is a rebel; and hence bad.

These rules slowly start influencing the way the child thinks and responds to external situations in school or outside. The need to find uniformity becomes compulsive. The need to conform is overwhelming. The stress associated with doing something 'different' is too formidable to even consider.

It is an irony that an institution that should be encouraging creative thinking, unbridled exploration of the world and freedom of thought has become a space where a more rigorous idea of conformity is imposed on our children. Discipline is as important as creativity, but that is discipline that is from within, not driven by external expectations of conformity.

Schools are meant to be spaces for learning, where every individual has opportunities to explore, to understand and even confront popular notions. I think it is important to reflect on the culture we create in a school with sensitivity. A sensitivity that accepts that a school has to encourage inquisitiveness, the spirit of inquiry, the urge to question and reflect and understand the reason for the way things are. We need to base these on fundamental principles of democracy; and these should be the only non-negotiables. This is indeed a very complex issue, as with any other real world issue that we deal with.

To my mind, this is one of the most crucial issues within education that we indeed need to deal with. How do we redefine the idea of a good school? While riding the crest of a wave of economic development, and as our country deals with myriad issues - increasing disparity that the current economic and social order is furthering, serious ecological issues and an increasing trend of narrow mindedness.

It is evident that coming generations are going to have to revisit the fundamental principles on which our society is built to work towards a resolution of these basic issues. This will only happen if we nurture an environment in schools that encourages and facilitates creativity, critical thinking and the spirit of democracy. Schools need to be spaces where children are free to explore new ideas and challenge current paradigms. Then is there a possibility of a new generation of leaders who will be rid of the shackles of the past. And think afresh and work towards the kind of society we aspire for.

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