

Critical thinking: A priority for Indian schools

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Ramesh Pokhriyal, India's minister of education, believes that our National Education Policy (NEP) is so "impactful, interactive, innovative and inclusive" that Australia, Mauritius, Indonesia and the UAE "want to implement it in their countries as well". If this claim made at the recent 97th annual convocation of Delhi University is true, it is a huge compliment. Before rejoicing in this international recognition, let us consider the impact in our own country.

The NEP 2020 lays emphasis on developing the "creative potential" and "higher-order cognitive capacities" of students. That includes "critical thinking and problem solving" apart from "social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions".

To what extent have we moved in the direction of realising these goals? If an English language question paper that went viral on social media in February is any indication, we have miles to go.

When students of Class 10 at Chennai's DAV Boys Senior Higher Secondary School in Gopalapuram had their "second revision examination," the writing section of the question paper instructed them to write a letter to a newspaper editor. They were asked to condemn the "terrible, violent acts of miscreants who fail to realise that country comes before personal needs and gains". By miscreants, the school meant citizens protesting the farm laws.

Screenshots from this question paper created a stir on social media, most notably through the Twitter handles of singer-activist T M Krishna and Lok Sabha MP Shashi Tharoor. Instead of evaluating the writing skills of students, the school used an assessment tool for political propaganda. It could have given students a genuine opportunity to share their opinion on a current issue but it directed them to think along pre-ordained lines.

Though critical thinking is prioritised in the NEP, and in professional development programmes rolled out for school teachers, it is commonplace to think of

students as incapable of thinking for themselves. Morning assemblies, essay contests, elocution competitions and language classes are among the few occasions when they are invited to articulate. Unfortunately, what gets rewarded is an ability to please teachers.

In my unpublished MPhil dissertation titled "Learner-Chosen Topics and Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom" (2010) submitted to the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad, I argue that when students are given opportunities to use language in productive ways, the topics on which they are to communicate are controlled by teachers. It is implicit that students are not allowed to venture outside the territory marked out for them.

The writing task in the controversial question paper supplies the expected answer within the question itself. It states, "Destroying public property, disgracing the national flag and attacking police personnel are few of the various illegal offences committed, that can never be justified for any reason whatsoever". All protesters are being painted with the same brush, and students are being taught that dissent is dangerous and, therefore, unwelcome.

The fact that schools participate in upholding the political status quo is hardly a surprise but when such incidents come to light, we realise that the push for critical thinking is limited to lip service. The distinction between "real questions" and "examination questions" made by American philosopher John Searle is particularly useful as a theoretical framework. It has been outlined in his book, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969).

A real question is one wherein the speaker wants to find out the answer that is offered by the hearer. However, in an examination question, the speaker knows the answer before the question is asked. The

asking is only meant to check if the hearer knows. Examination questions are pointed requests directed at the hearer so that the knowledge and skills expected in that situation are successfully presented through the performance of the task.

When applied to the Chennai incident, this framework shows that the students know what they must do in order to obtain the allotted marks. The school is not interested in what they think or how they feel about the protests. Any departure from the expected answer could make them lose the marks allotted for that question. It is clear to everyone that the letter to a newspaper editor is effectively a letter to the teacher.

If schools truly want to promote critical thinking, they will have to view students as intelligent beings whose learning is not restricted to the classroom. They learn from peers, elders, popular culture, the internet and independent reading. Learning is not simply the digestion of facts made available on a platter. It requires engagement, analysis, reflection, discussion, and the consideration of multiple perspectives.

The social media attention made several alumni write to the school's director and board members of the Arya Samaj Educational Trust that runs the institution. They made their dis-appointment known through a

letter raising concerns about "the core values and mindsets being inculcated in students". The DAV Group of Schools issued a statement noting that "the specifically highlighted wordings of the question framed by a teacher do not reflect the institution". There was damage control but no apology.

Schools provide training in citizenship. They can create learning environments filled with fear where authority goes unchallenged and bullying is the norm. They can also nurture freedom of thought, and originality of expression. The NEP will become a living document only when schools get students to think critically and communicate with audiences beyond their own teachers through blogs, magazines, podcasts, graphic novels and other avenues.

NEWS ANALYSIS

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