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Focus on 'alternative education' for children

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CHENNAI: As a parent do you sometimes find yourself wondering if your child is getting a "real education?" If he/she is going to the right school or learning the right way? If those questions keep you awake at night, then stay assured that you are no longer in a minority. A group of people were exercised enough the concept of real education to meet at a day-long conference last week to share notes and learn from others' experiences. "We sometimes say alternative education, in the sense that we follow a pattern that is not followed by conventional pedagogy as we see in schools today," Vidya Shankar of Relief Foundation, the conference organiser says.

While "alternative education" is often defined as "home education" for children that is not the line participants were advancing. "We are talking about facilitating home education and co-operative learning, with the involvement of parent networks. It is no longer a single child studying in isolation at home. 10-15 children learn together in a group in a conducive atmosphere created for them by their parents who will also participate in the process," she adds.

Real education allows the child to learn experientially. The tendency is to dismiss this as something for children with learning disability. Ms. Shankar says it is not the case. "The cue should come from the child. If your child will be happy learning in a large school with all its attendant expectations, then that is where he/she should be. On the other hand, it is possible to tell if a child is uncomfortable with that kind of a situation, if only the parents listen to the child." Children with multiple talents, creative and with an expansive view of the world are perhaps bored with "low-calibre teachers" demanding rote learning from them.

More career options

As for the theory about losing the competitive edge, it is not fazing them any. Ratnesh Mathur of Bangalore-based Geniekids says, "We believe that this will take students where they have not been before. There are more career options available for children and better acceptability for these choices." While among the majority of parents the emphasis remains on success, Mr. Mathur says there is a certain amount of awareness that everything is not quite right with the education system. In the organisation's experience working with parents and teachers, they find there is openness to such concepts. Parents not blinded by academic success will have to demand different things from a school.

Real education has to be a movement, says M.P.Vijayakumar, consultant, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan project. "Even if there is a small traffic tangle, we make a big noise about it. Here, statistics show that out of 65 lakh children in the State, 50 per cent do not learn (according to NCERT statistics). Should this not bother us?"

The key is to understand how children learn best, he explains. "Children do not learn by listening alone. They learn by doing and experience, sharing, articulating and expressing." It is this philosophy that is driving SSA's Activity Based Learning and Active Learning Methodology (inspired by the Krishnamurthy Foundation module). "ABL is not a panacea for all the ills. It is only a different approach and it has to be enriched periodically. We are trying to do it in our schools," Mr. Vijayakumar says.

He adds that the response has been overwhelming from aided schools and requests have also come in from private schools to share the models.