

The true meaning of education

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Hindi Medium is a recent Bollywood release starring Irrfan Khan and Saba Qamar. Directed by Saket Chaudhary and written by Zeenat Lakhani and Sanket Chaudhary, it revolves around the anguish of parents seeking admission of their children in the so called 'good schools.'

The admission crisis has been prevalent in metro cities for decades, now it is making its entry into small towns and semi-urban areas as well. Although not very coherent in presentation of its theme, the movie not only portrays the drama of schools admissions, it also presents some filmy solutions to it. Popular belief about nursery admissions is very much what the movies shows. But rarely do we understand the foundations of this madness.

The seventh All Indian Educational Survey of NCERT (2002), reported 6,51,064 and 2011 Census documented 7,48,547 recognised primary schools in India. This shows the growing number of schools in our communities. The 2011 Census also shows that around 158.7 million children are in the 0–6 year age group, of which an estimated 60 million are in the age group of 3–6 years.

If we compare the number of schools (though it must have risen by 2017) against the number of children, we can estimate about 80 children are to be accommodated in one school. Given the fact that most of the schools have three to eight sections for primary classes, 80 is fairly a small number of children per school.

Though the data shows that there is no dearth of schools, there is a loud hue and cry over nursery and primary admissions in our country. Contesting the data, we argue that the madness for school admission is for quality in education. But is it really the quality that is making us go hysteric over the admissions or our misconceptions?

The idea of education came to be conceptualised by societies to preserve and transmit their skills of living and recreation to the coming generations. Later on, schools were conceptualised as common place for education but unfortunately they became synonymous with education.

In the current academic discourse, education is referred to as the process of acquiring knowledge, understanding and critical thinking skills while exploring one's potential.

Schooling, on the other hand, is the act of subjecting a child to an institution where the above mentioned things are done in a structured way. Education is a much more broad and pervasive concept than schooling. Contrary to this, we as parents believe that facts, figures, competitions, facilities, infrastructure and scariest of all, results, define a good school. The knowledge of maths and science is same in all the schools, it cannot change.

Lifelong learners

But more, importantly, children have to be educated to be lifelong learners, to live, to explore and learn from their and others' stories. Sometimes, schools may obstruct it. Thus, the idea of schooling and education overlap; they are not synonymous. As Mark Twain has rightly remarked, "Don't let your children's schooling get in the way of their education".

We may assume that some schools are better in educating than the others. We are right. Nevertheless, that process is never exclusive to a few 'branded', expensive schools of the town. Education takes place everywhere, wherever the child goes. As a critical foundation of education, researches in the developmental psychology have established that early childhood years are vital for growth and development of physical and mental skills.

For these to develop, we need physical and emotional security, opportunities for explorations, health and nutritional enrichments. Our child can be and should be educated wherever these conditions are met, including our home. Goes without saying that the rush for admissions is created by our misconceptions about schooling and education. When we choose the international and air-conditioned schools, we are choosing our life styles. Let us not confuse it with education.

Although the movie Hindi Medium does not reflect all these statistical and psychological bases, the protagonist (Irfaan Khan) withdraws his child from an elite school, sends her to a government school and funds the school for betterment.

The movie fails to provide a broad-based rationale for choosing a government school. However, when we understand the true meaning of education, it is real and doable. One can hope for more such responsible media initiatives to educate us about the true meaning of education.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, School of Social Science, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru)

