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# WHY SHOULD AVNI GO TO SCHOOL?

WE NEED SCHOOLS THAT HELP CHILDREN FIND THEIR TRUE STRENGTH WHILE BUILDING THEIR ABILITIES TO THINK, CONNECT AND APPRECIATE

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**EACH** time this year, millions of young parents go through the new, and often agonising, experience of getting their children admitted to a school. Most are happy to get 'any good school,' without necessarily opening the Pandora's box of what makes a school 'good.' Nonetheless, the adventurous few do, and I am sure many more are unable to silence the restless and troubling questions beneath the surface. Several years ago I came face-to-face with this question, and in sharing that experience may be of some use to fellow parents.

Few years ago, I quit my job in Paris to return home to pursue my calling in India. Within months my wife and I were confronting the nerve-wracking, mind obsessing, multi-thousand rupee question which many parents face: Which school would our daughter go to? Avni was barely five then, and in my 'previous life' I would have been content with applying to a dozen respectable schools, making a few phone calls and then hoping for the best. However, now I was in the midst of educating myself about education and researching the future curriculum for iDiscoveri education programmes: I found myself grappling with the troublesome question: Why should Avni go to school in the first place? What did I expect from her education?

I myself grew up thinking that my father's objective in sending me to school was to ensure that I went to IIT. And when I did not get in, I thought that the entire school experiment was a failure. And now, most 'practical' veteran parents I knew unflinchingly quoted jobs, a livelihood, or prestige as 'obvious' reasons for educating their child. These, I did understand, were important consequences of education. But, were they the underlying purpose of education? Unsatisfied, I turned to more learned minds who had given this question some thought. It did not give me the answer, but I did get some clues.

Her education should help Avni understand the world around her. Howard Gardner, the famous Harvard psychologist who developed the multiple-intelligences theory, suggests a foundation of the basic literacy (reading, writing, mathematics and now computing) and of the sciences. A grasp of man's basic symbolic systems and respect for reason and truth are necessary tools for him to explore the world. This, I believe rightfully, has been the primary agenda of most schools. Whether our schools succeed in equipping all children with these basic human treasures, was something I was less sure about.

Her education should help Avni appreciate the world around her. Here I refer to values in the broadest sense and allude to an overarching ability to discriminate in a cultural, moral and social sense, including: appreciation of the arts, language and our historical and natural heritage. The



Buddha said: "A spoon can lie in a bowl of soup for four thousand years, and not know the taste." For our children to taste, our rich culture, heritage, and values must be brought to them in a relevant and contemporary form, and embellished with personal examples. It is this ability, to taste, that makes our life rich, humane and ultimately worth living.

Her education should help Avni connect with the world around her. This is the ability to manage a constructive relationship with those around us, and indeed, with ourselves. This has been completely ignored by classroom education today. Emotional Intelligence, which includes abilities like empathy, self-esteem, listening, communicating, personal leadership and an ability to work in teams, is the need of the hour. In our culture, the Bhakti movement emphasised 'loving reciprocation' as an important goal in human attainment. Schools must foster this, if you have to move beyond the divided world of hate that threatens all our children.

However, what I hope for most is that her education will help Avni discover the world within her. The importance of knowing the self is the secret that many of us discover late in life or never at all. There is something brilliant within her waiting to happen, maybe a painter or a writer, a mathematician, a musician, an engineer or a dancer. Anything. Let her find it. J Krishnamurthy said 'self knowledge is the beginning of freedom,' and it is that freedom I wish for my child to have. (And yes, I do hope she passes the board exams in 2013).

*(The writer is the co-founder and managing director of iDiscoveri Education, a social enterprise with a mission to renew education in India and beyond)*