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A bagful of wishes

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Do not limit your child to your own education, for he was born in another time.

A Jewish proverb

The Right to Education Bill (affectionately RTE) was perhaps the defining education event of 2010 mandating good quality learning, and not just access to schooling, as a must-have for every child. This was a fitting end to arguably the most eventful decade for school education in India where several landmark policy prescriptions were given the stamp of approval.

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SE made its Class 10 examinations optional and introduced a system of continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) with the intent to end the tyranny of testing. The Sixth Pay Commission announced revised pay scales for teachers, bringing them at par with other professional sectors. A public-private-partnership (PPP) was announced to enable private organisations to service and manage failing public schools.

It is easy to discern the liberal philosophical roots of these policies, building on two centuries of thinking in India and across the world. Having its roots in the Latin word *liber*, which means "free"; liberal education is mostly centred around a vision of a rounded school education that is relevant to real life and is centred around the needs of the child. Globally, educators such as Dewey, Steiner and Montessori have shown the way to child-centred schooling that emphasises genuine learning and creative expression.

At home, J. Krishnamurthy spoke of education without fear, Sri Aurobindo advocated "free-progress", and Mahatma Gandhi's Nai-Talim emphasised vocational skills and dignity of labour. More recently, the NCERT's National Curricular Framework 2005 made a substantial case around two common sense principles: one, make the

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classroom content more useful to children in real life; two, shift away from tiresome rote learning to methods that make learning enjoyable.

I congratulate the vision and intent of the makers of these policies. However, I am less sure if liberal policies, on their own, will actually translate to meaningful learning for our children. In my decade-long association with hundreds of schools across the country, I have learnt that what needs to change are the practices at the last-mile of school education. To that end, I want three wishes for critical practices that can make liberal education a reality in every classroom.

I wish that hands-on exploration be part of our classroom curriculum. What if children were treated as little scientists who conducted experiments with their own hands, made observations, asked questions and came to their own conclusions while guided by the teacher?

For me personally, a defining experience was a class I attended with Eleanor Duckworth. She was our professor at Harvard University who would run classes in a very hands-on and experiential way. She would make us do permutations and combination exercises with clips, make us do area and volume exercises with chocolate bars, keep us up late at night and make us watch the moon to see what its shape was and the direction of the "rabbit". It was an astonishing experience in hands-on learning.

My second wish is to inculcate a reflective mindset and openness to feedback as part of the programmes to educate our teachers. Theoretical knowledge of psychology and subject matter understanding is certainly necessary but not sufficient to create good teaching practice, which is often limited to repeated transmission of textbook content. What if teachers observed each other inside the classroom, reflected honestly on how they performed, gave each other feedback and continuously improved on their practices?

After training over 10,000 teachers in this manner, I have seen the visible difference a reflective teacher can make on her students. Instead of running after marks and ranks, children in these classrooms think on their own, thirst for objective feedback on their performance, are not afraid to fail in new tasks and try repeatedly until they succeed.

My final wish is to get school leaders to be role-model teachers and learners. When I visited Kiran Sethi's acclaimed Riverside School in Ahmedabad, Mary Roy's painstakingly created Pallikodam in Kottayam, and the vibrant Harishree Vidyalayam in Chennai, I found one thing in common. The leaders of these schools spent their time and energy in the classroom; immersed in learning, modelling good teaching and coaching their colleagues.

For my wishes to come true, the theoretical world of academics and policy must meet the real world of teachers and students. Today they lie estranged in different galaxies. Good education management means bringing them together.

Once this happens, we can then look forward to a generation of curious, creative and fearless learners who can solve the most pressing challenges of our country. No problem will be too big for them. They will say: "Let's figure it out", and not, "It's out of syllabus"! That is when we will deliver a truly liberal education.

Ashish Rajpal is the co-founder & managing director of iDiscoveri Education.