

A voice in the learning journey

Education

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ON the first day of school, there is always much anxiety yet excitement on the part of students.

They are all ready to go with new thoughts and ideas for a new year.

But do teachers and students actually talk about what is in store for them, what they expect out of each other and how they can make another teaching and learning year meaningful to both parties?

One of my effective tools is to spend the first or even the second day of teaching, talking to students and listening to what they expect out of coming to school. Then teachers can share their own vision, mission or outcome that they expect out of the students being taught.

Through this two-way session, there needs to be mutual respect. The most important is for the teacher to allow student voices to be heard.

In my three decades of teaching, such a simple but in-depth process has provided effective consequences where student motivation is concerned. Because students are given priority and they have a say on what they expect out of each subject, they feel empowered and take responsibility of their own learning credibility. This does not mean that students can do whatever they want but there is ground for listening to their voices. Teachers too have their say in explaining what is expected out of them and how they are going to explore the subject to be taught together.

If every teacher spent some time in their classes to talk to students, the whole teaching and learning process will become interactive and more meaningful. It does not matter if the students are in the high decile, average or low decile classes. They all have their mind sets when they come to school and teachers should tap these invaluable ideas to talk about students' needs and aspirations.

In some Western schools that I have visited and researched, the working agreement between students and teacher is even formalised, written down and signed by both parties. Some even go to the extent of putting up working agreements in the classrooms. Consequently they do review and negotiate if the statements made in the working agreement are too rigid or loose. But most important is students have their shared responsibility to ensure that the learning and teaching process is theirs to share and teachers do not teach in autocratic nature which is sadly evident in many Asian schools.

So I encourage teachers to start thinking creatively and constructing a working agreement with their students to ensure that every student has a voice in his or her own learning journey. It takes a little psychology and soft skills on the teacher's part but the effects of such an agreement would last the whole year through and make school a place that students are eager to be in.

Once students see the meaning of school beyond books and grades, they would be attracted to the inner experiences and yearn for more and more. It is time to provide that space and empowerment for students' voices.

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