Seven lessons that we can learn from creative children!

When Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, our former President honoured the creative children from around the country on November 11, 2011 at IGNITE function at IIMA organized by NIF and Honey Bee Network, he underlined the need once again for rethinking the pedagogy for future India. There is no doubt that children are generally born creative. Why should then schools and colleges work hard to stifle their creativity? May be, because otherwise, the offices and companies will not have compliant, congruent and conformist workers. Should we not worry if in the process we lose diversity, and sap the seeds of innovations that can make society more creative, collaborative and compassionate?

What are the lessons we have learnt from children innovations over the last decade or more? First lesson is that they are far less patient with the unsolved problems than our generation has been. We knew about various problems, but instead of trying to solve many of them, we learned to live with them. It did not bother us. Inventing reasons for not solving was easy. Once we learn to live with say ten problems unsolved, living with the next ten similar problems becomes easier and after that, we do not even notice many of these. Shalini from Patna, Bihar saw that older people use walker but these are not flexible enough to support climbing upstairs. She conceived a walker with spring-loaded self-locking front legs. When the user pushes the front legs on upper stairs, the rear legs rest on lower stairs. Hence, the walker will be very stable. It can be taken to next step easily and facilitate the climbing. A very empathetic innovation indeed.

Second lesson is that children can easily connect the separate solutions, which have remained unconnected so far. Intelligence is defined often as the ability to connect seemingly unconnectable. Mayank Walia from Jalandhar saw that we already had scanner, which connected printed text into digital text. He also saw that open source solutions existed for converting digital text into speech. The breakthrough followed soon after. Once these were connected, we could easily help blind people read any book, not just Braille ones. I knew these two solutions as well but this thought did not occur to me. I had, may be, learned to live with this problem but Mayank was impatient, thank God.

Third lesson is that we should not make feasibility an enemy of desirability while promoting creativity and innovations by children. If Mayank or many other children like Mohit from Sidhi, MP were expected to make a working model of every idea that they proposed, then they would imagine only what their existing repertoire of operational skills made possible. Mohit found what many readers must have noticed that people who are advised medicines sometimes forget to take them on time. Shweta and Jaskiran from Jalandhar, Punjab thought of another related idea which is to get an indication on the medicine foil itself about the expiry date so that one does not consume time expired medicines. Would we have got these ideas if we had insisted that we will accept only those ideas about which proof of concept had been developed?

Fourth lesson is that many of the ideas that children think are about making life of elderly or women better, and reduce their drudgery. For example Dhavala from Udupi suggested a solution for squeezing a bedsheet after washing. Everyone in middle class or lower class families has faced this problem but did we ever try to find a solution? In general, we know that the problems faced by women tend to be solved by formal institutions and even grassroots innovators less often than the ones faced by men. In that context, this kind of sensitivity is highly appreciable.

Fifth lesson is that gender balance among children innovators is much better than among adult innovators even at grassroots, certainly at institutional level. Why should not we use this evidence of last so many years at NIF and Honey Bee Network to make a difference to the opportunities we provide to creative children, particularly girls?

Sixth lesson is about increasing concern among children about conserving natural resources and environment. Mohit saw the enormous wastage of water when we keep bucket for filling water under the tap and get busy with other work. He could not stand it and thus suggested a meter in the tap with an alarm so that when preset volume of water (say 14.5 l has flown), it will sound an alarm and close the tap to prevent the water loss. How much water saving can thus be made worldwide when such a solution becomes available?

Seventh lesson is that most of the creative ideas are coming out of small town, cities and locations and not metros. And yet if you look at the public policy, there is much higher thrust in providing facilities and support to people in bigger institutions, town and places. May be children in bigger places are being groomed to administer and run this country while the ones in smaller towns with bigger minds and heart will generate enterprises, trigger new ideas and thus unfold creative resistance. Through this tension, hopefully, identity of a new democratic India will emerge which will be irreverent, imaginative, inclusive and innovative.

Government is thinking about providing innovation scholarship to children and I hope that scheme will draw upon these lessons and not straitjacket the conditions for recognition, reward and resurgence of the creativity among young Indians. May the ‘fireflies of creativity’ illuminate our path ahead. Write back about your experiences in nurturing childrens’ creativity.

When did you think of a new idea last?