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**Dr. Gagandeep Bajaj**  
Shyama Prasad Mukherji  
College, University of Delhi,  
Delhi, India

## Nurturing non-cognitive abilities: Towards holistic education

**Gagandeep Bajaj**

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### Abstract

This paper outlines the contours of non-cognitive abilities. As teachers and teacher-educators, we are increasingly concerned not simply with the content students learn but also with the kind of people they become. This takes us beyond the relatively structured world of text, syllabi and cognitive areas into the intangible, subtle universe of interests, values and inner motives. Non-cognitive abilities include personal traits, attitudes and socio-emotional skills that influence the interaction of an individual with the environment. They determine how people remain goal-oriented and navigate challenges with perseverance and resilience. Non-cognitive abilities play a pivotal role in personal and professional accomplishments. Given their importance in fostering well-being and a sense of agency, it is meaningful to explore how they can be nurtured through education.

**Keywords:** Non-cognitive abilities, holistic education, interests, attitudes, values, interpersonal relationships

### Introduction

Today's fast-paced world presents many unique challenges for children in contemporary times. Turbulence in the social structure is common. The phenomenon of working parents has resulted in a paucity of time for children to interact with them, share their experiences, seek advice and support as they navigate life. The value clarification and goal setting process which has customarily been family mediated has slowly but surely been appropriated by the media. Although free access to information has made today's adolescent a citizen of the 'global village', yet viewing this information in context and interpreting it to formulate a worldview needs guidance. Furthermore, the pressures of excessive competition, career choices and peers amongst others exacerbate their existential dilemmas. In such a scenario, an exclusive focus on the cognitive aspects of schooling is insufficient. The number of marks that a student has obtained on a pen and paper test is not enough to 'know' about the innate nature of the individual or what she hopes to become. The student does not merely bring a 'mind' to school. Rather, she is a whole person who comes to school with dreams, hopes, goals and aspirations. The individuality, autonomy and dignity of every child need to be acknowledged and honoured if we hope to cater to the holistic development of the learner.

Non-cognitive areas have been relatively neglected in schooling processes. Traditionally, the predominant view has been that schools are largely concerned with the intellectual capacities of the child. Science and Math are the subjects of choice, towering over others subjects. The unwritten rule is that a student who excels in these two subjects is 'intelligent', revered by teachers. However, research in education demonstrates that learning depends not only on cognitive abilities, such as, problem solving, reasoning and analytical thinking but also on non-cognitive abilities. The way learners feel about themselves as individuals, as well as, their interaction with other people influences their learning trajectories. Their sense of self-worth, ability to stand in the face of adversity, self-belief and capacity to collaborate also determine success in life. Alvarez-Huerta *et al.* (2022) <sup>[2]</sup> reiterate the importance of non-cognitive abilities in an unpredictable and rapidly changing world. They point out the inadequacy of subject-specific knowledge. Instead the importance of empathy, critical thinking and innovation is highlighted along with the urgent need to incorporate these in the curricula and pedagogic components. Non-cognitive abilities include attitudes towards self and others, motivation, interests, goal-setting, communication skills, perseverance, emotional

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Gagandeep Bajaj**  
Shyama Prasad Mukherji  
College, University of Delhi,  
Delhi, India

intelligence and resilience. These form an integral part of the development of the child and facilitating their integration into all aspects of schooling is essential. As is apparent from the above discussion, non-cognitive abilities do not lend themselves to any particular subject or school activity. In fact, they permeate every learning experience. It is their subtle, diffuse and intangible nature which makes it challenging to quantify them.

### Interests

Interests are crucial in helping us decide long-term goals, career paths, as well as, short-term activities. They motivate people to participate in specific activities and are seen as a major driver of learning. Silvia and Kashdan (2009) <sup>[8]</sup> suggest that interests comprise of two components, namely, emotional and cognitive. Interests can be categorized into literary, social, artistic, mathematical, to name a few. Interests could be personal or situational in nature. Personal interests are integral aspects of the individual which guide her actions over longer periods of time. They are firmly embedded and relatively stable. In contrast, situational interests are specific to particular circumstances. An activity might capture a person's attention temporarily only to be replaced by another one in quick succession. (Krapp *et al.*, 1992) <sup>[5]</sup> As might be expected, whenever students' interests are activated, they learn more effectively. In fact, a major source of concern in contemporary education is the students' lack of interest in school subjects and learning activities. A natural corollary of this is a discussion in educational discourse about the means to develop interest in learning related activities amongst students.

### Strategies for Enhancement

Identification of the areas that students are interested in is perhaps the first step in the direction of formulating strategies to enhance student interest. Informal observation of student activities is a potent way of identifying their areas of interest. Formal interaction and surveys are also used for this purpose. Interests are as varied as the number of students in the class. Hence, classroom pedagogic activities should be diverse enough to cater to all sections of learners. For instance, if a student is interested in History, she may research about the Harappan civilization with focused attention and process the material more deeply, while another student might be inclined to draw sketches of the civilization's artifacts. Similar flexibility ought to be accorded to students during choice of assignments and projects so that they can work on themes that they are passionate about, rather than the ones assigned by the teacher.

Innovatively designed classroom spaces can also create interest and avenues for exploration. For instance, an artistic corner or a science zone can be explored by students in their free time to undertake constructive activities related to their special interests. Additionally, personal interests of students can be tapped by designating them as resource persons for orienting others. The teacher is one of the most vital links in the process. Her personal experiences and narratives can be an engaging source of inspiration for learners.

### Attitudes and Values

Attitudes are significant contributors to the non-cognitive domain. They influence our thoughts, feelings and actions. An individual's predisposition to respond in a consistent

manner towards persons or ideas distinguishes attitudes from temporary mood states. Values, on the other hand, are more stable as compared to attitudes. Basically, values are foundational beliefs and principles that direct a person's decision-making and life choices (Schwartz, 1994) <sup>[7]</sup>. They encompass large areas of experience and are more inner directed. In terms of the relationship to the self, attitude changes effect the organization of the self, significant changes in the value system entails a basic restructuring of the individual's personality.

Both attitudes and values are valuable components of the educational experience. Educationists, such as Dewey, Swami Vivekananda and Freire emphasize the role of education in developing positive, scientific, democratic and critical attitudes among students. Dewey has devoted considerable space to the relationship between education and democracy. He believes that education has a vital role to play in the nurturing of democratic citizens. Educators give precedence to attitudes and values because the attitudes and values that a child has, determine the ways in which she will incorporate school learning into her experiential world. Dissatisfaction with school and disaffection with teachers increase the likelihood of ineffective learning.

### Strategies for Enhancement

Schools can help students acquire desirable attitudes and values, as well as, change negative attitudes towards self and society. Mahatma Gandhi has denounced education bereft of character and morality. Enduring values of courage, honesty, determination, respect for others and tolerance are crucial for meaningful education. India has a rich tapestry of ancient wisdom and sagacity. Tapping into these narratives and utilizing contemporary insights as sources for class interactions can be useful.

Teacher awareness regarding the core attitudes and values that need to be cultivated in the classroom is equally essential. Positive orientations regarding their subjects, teachers and peers, along with acceptance of school structures are conducive to effective learning. Various opportunities for facilitation and mentoring are available to a conscientious teacher. Group activities and cultural exchanges in a multicultural classroom can promote acceptance of the 'other'. Theatre, role plays, case studies and focus group discussions provide contexts for learners to express their opinions about personal and social issues.

### Developing Healthy Interpersonal Relationships

The World Health Organization (1994) views life skills as abilities to face our life situations and cope with challenges successfully. It has identified ten core skills which constitute the underpinning of our personal and social lives. One of these skills is interpersonal relationships. It refers to the ability to forge healthy relationships with others. It also includes the ability to interact in ways that are mutually beneficial and synergetic. Often times, friendships begin in neighbourhoods or school, with physical proximity being the common factor. Another factor is a resonance in beliefs and attitudes, providing validation of our worldview. A similarity in personality variables also plays a role in forming friendships, allowing us to see our own traits in a favourable light. Agu & Nwankwo (2019) <sup>[1]</sup> studied psychological well-being and emotional intelligence in terms of their efficacy in fostering healthy interpersonal relationships. They found that emotional intelligence was significantly correlated with mental health and

psychological well-being. Individuals with high emotional intelligence were able to initiate and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with people around them. Nurturing effective communication skills is an indispensable component of developing healthy relationships. The ability to convey intended ideas and feelings to other people in a meaningful and socially acceptable manner is imperative in our personal and work lives. The need for understanding communication processes in education is crucial because they form the core of teaching-learning. Teachers communicate not only through words but also with facial expressions, hand gestures, body posture, tone of voice etc. Sometimes non-verbal ways of communicating are found to be more impactful. Issues in classroom communication patterns might arise due to a mismatch between the message that the teacher intended and the one received by the learners. These communication gaps could be a consequence of discrepancies between the words and body language of the teacher, erroneous interpretations by learners or cultural conflict. As in the case of the preceding sections, we now delve into some strategies for nurturing these non-cognitive abilities.

### Strategies for Enhancement

In the context of non-cognitive abilities, it is of utmost importance for teachers to understand the nature of interpersonal relationships so that they can be instrumental in furthering healthy relations in the classroom to create an enabling environment. Progressive educators, such as Dewey, have consistently encouraged educators to avoid destructive competition and develop democratic learning communities based on cooperation stemming from healthy interactions. Teachers can pay heed to these sentiments and promote cooperative group work and peer learning in a supportive environment. Cooperative learning strategies encourage learners to work towards common goals. Thus, they motivate each other to learn. Individual accountability and learning skills of working together while evaluating each other's work constructively are important variables. It helps students value each other, build relationships, become self-reliant and focus on learning tasks rather than competing for marks.

Clarity in classroom communication stems from organizing one's thoughts before speaking and using unambiguous body language. Teachers need to ensure that non-verbal communication is in sync with their words, since students tend to respond to the hidden message more than the words. Simplifying one's language and keeping it free from jargon can go a long way in enabling learners to clearly understand the crux of the message.

Active and empathetic listening skills are equally important. This entails paying full attention to what the child is saying, avoiding interruptions and accurately imbibing the main ideas in a non-judgmental manner. Paraphrasing is also a useful tool to ensure that there are no gaps in the communication process. Since parents are vital stakeholders in the educational process, communicating positively with families about the child's achievements and aspirations keeps the channels for communication open for a continued community dialogue.

### Holistic Education: Revisiting School Processes

Holistic education calls for a harmonious balance of cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. However, cognitive abilities have dominated the mainstream system at the cost of non-cognitive abilities. It is time to rectify the situation,

especially if we hope to nurture individuals who are erudite, compassionate, humane and socially conscious. Arnott (2021) <sup>[3]</sup> examines holistic education from the perspective of early childhood education. She positions holistic education as a supporting network for the whole child, her family and community. The concept of 'wonder' is employed to advocate for holistic education which is placed in opposition to majorly cognitive and academic learning. This segment of the paper underscores certain additional strategies which lend themselves to all areas of non-cognitive development.

### Curricular Processes

The organizational structure of the school can be conducive for providing opportunities for the internalization of the qualities of fair play, punctuality, cleanliness and cooperation. For instance, if classes and school functions do not begin on time then the students are unlikely to become sensitive towards the value of time in their lives. Moreover, the manner in which curricular processes are selected and organized has an impact on the development of non-cognitive abilities. Environmental education, for instance, not only provides content enrichment about environmental themes but also fosters sensitivity towards the environment along with a sense of responsibility for protecting it and taking environmentally conscious steps in their day-to-day lives. Likewise, areas such as, physical education and art education offer tremendous scope for free exploration of the environment. Creative expression, communication and self-efficacy are nurtured. Usually, examination oriented teaching excludes all such areas from the students' sphere conveying a message that achieving good marks is sacrosanct. Recent trends towards integrated curricula that are built around larger social concerns are promising. Pedagogic techniques which generate interest in the subject and a classroom environment based on collaboration, respect and a non-discriminatory appreciation of the students' efforts have a positive impact on the development of non-cognitive abilities. Additionally, a fair system of evaluation located in clearly articulated criteria provides feedback to students about their achievements, enabling them to formulate goals for future learning. Non-cognitive abilities are also honed through experiences beyond the classroom which provide students opportunities to explore their interests and talents. Many schools have a system of student government which serves as a crucible for leadership roles and independence. The freedom to participate in decision-making and problem solving offers valuable life lessons. Rulida *et al.* (2024) have emphatically stated that non-cognitive abilities play an important role in academic success as well. They attribute this to an enhancement in motivation and overall well-being of the students. Perseverance was identified as a key predictor of academic success. As a result, they have recommended that programmes strengthening perseverance should be designed. Strategies which have proved effective for nurturing non-cognitive abilities include project work. Sharing ideas, overcoming challenges and coordinating with each other for the greater good enables students to develop perseverance and resilience. Similarly, seminars and group discussions enable students to take control of their own learning and negotiate academic challenges with confidence. Pertinent social issues, such as inclusion, equality, intersectionality can serve for value clarification and perspective building

through discussion forums under the aegis of the teacher as a facilitator. The role of an empathetic, competent, sensitive and observant teacher cannot be overemphasized in this context. To fulfill the vision of holistic education, the teacher needs to go beyond her conventional role of being a transmitter of knowledge and become a friend, philosopher and guide.

Finally, building bridges between home and school by promoting interaction amongst both stakeholders is imperative. It helps the teacher understand the child from a new perspective. At the same time, the family feels involved in the learning process. Most schools have parent-teacher interactions but the discussion is very limited. Mediation with the family has to go beyond the marks that the student has obtained in the prior examination. Creative techniques for the family's contribution need to be designed. These could be developed in collaboration with the parents. Teachers and parents can and should be equal partners in the child's journey.

As long as there is a compartmentalization of children's life and educational experiences into areas which are relevant for examinations and those which are not, their true potential will remain unrealized. A holistic understanding of the student is vital if schools are to develop into nurturing institutions in the real sense of the word.

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