# **Learner autonomy and other ways to empower the next generation**

# **Source: Antonius Raghubansie, Head India, Teaching and Cultural Centres, British Council India**

Parents, over generations, have worried over the future of their children and do everything within their means to ensure their child’s future is as secure as possible. They set funds up to ensure financial security, invest early in real estate on their behalf and provide a caring environment to establish values for life.

Similarly, an important foundation factor for success that parents invest in is to give their children the best education and skills – to make them future ready and to contribute to the world around them. And here is the conundrum — digitisation and the pace of technology evolution is accelerating, continuing to change our future society and future work environment. This raises several questions about preparing your child for an uncertain future. Exactly what skills will today’s children need in their future? Skills that were considered valuable 10 years ago are fast becoming obsolete or have substantially transformed. Besides, change alone is not the issue.The rapidity of change is itself driving a sense of unpreparedness both in India and across the world.

Apart from technical skill sets, it is quite clear that even the life and soft skills needed in the future are different from what we develop today. Like all important lessons, these skills are best taught in childhood. Gone are the days when skills development, leadership acumen or critical thinking were part of only adult training programmes. In fact, even the UNICEF programme on skill development highlights that building such capabilities, “begins right from early childhood”.

There is an urgent need therefore, to equip children with the 21st century life skills, to prepare them for life outside the classroom. In this context, ideas of Digital learning, Learner Autonomy and Having Fun while learning become critical. Learner Autonomy, a popular term in the teaching ecosystem today, enables students to take control of their own learning, independently or in collaboration with others, both students and teachers.

But such institutions are few in India. That said, it is not the responsibility of the school sector alone. Parents too need to recognise the long-term value of new models of training and teaching. Often it may feel radical, and even more often, demand more intervention from the parents than do some past and current models.

In another fascinating social shift, today’s youngsters, who were born into the internet age, possess consummate digital skills that far exceed that of many adults. Often a popular water cooler conversation, it is also the norm for them. Today’s children are born into this digital and advancing ecosystem and, not having witnessed an age of ‘without’. It is therefore up to policy makers and educators, to make learning as native to their skill set as possible and ease the learning process. It is equally up to educators, policy makers and parents alike to also ensure that children are safe from harm, as the world of digital is not without misinformation and peril. The ability to differentiate the right from the wrong or incorrect must also be ingrained in the early years – the foundations of critical thinking.

And like every childhood education professional will say and every parent has known for millennia, a child’s attention span is small, and if we are to ensure that the new important lessons are learnt well, the right packaging is key. When designed to be engaging and enjoyable, lessons are learnt better, and teaching methodologies more effective. For instance, the British Council has recently launched an innovative course for early learners, ‘Learning Time With Timmy’ which brings to life the famous TV cartoon character who teaches children English through fun.

Renowned philosopher and educator John Dewey once said, “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” And if education is life, it definitely needs to transform for life in the 21st century and beyond.