

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WHY'S AND HOW'S OF EDUCATION

*Education is the inculcation of the incomprehensible into the indifferent by the incompetent.*

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At first glance, this Keynesian one-liner may appear to be a harsh indictment of education. That such an important social need as education is condemned so roundly calls for a closer scrutiny of the whys and hows of education. To begin with, why do we send our children to school?

We send our children to school because we believe that schools take care of our children *in loco parentis* and prepare them for life. No one can quarrel with that premise. And, what is more, most of us would agree that caring for other people's children is morally a greater burden than looking after our own. It is not surprising, therefore, that educators in every age have raised questions concerning the role that schools should play in preparing children for life.

What do we understand by 'preparing children for life'? In general terms, it means equipping the children to make the most of their intellectual, physical and emotional potential for development by helping them to create a capacity to learn from their free-ranging interests in the world around them. Besides, it also means initiating them into the do's and don'ts of being useful members of society. Although we may find these general aims unexceptionable, we may not all agree on what materials and strategies to use to achieve these aims.

Naturally, this has resulted in an ongoing debate. The educational systems and the children caught up in those systems are constantly being discussed in public and in private. But, it has not always led to a convergence of views or a clear understanding of the issues involved. And, this is hardly surprising. Think for a moment of a single class in a school, of the number of subjects taught in that class and of the differences between the children in that class with regard to their abilities and interests and their social backgrounds. Add to that the differences between one day and the next, between one teacher and another and between one year and the next. Multiply these complexities by 30 or 40 till you have a school and multiply and multiply till you have all the schools and you will then have some idea of the difficulty in making general statements about our concerns.

Yet, we cannot proceed without making general statements of our concerns. To begin with, the importance of education as an instrument of socialization cannot be over-

emphasized. Creating a congenial atmosphere is vital to learning. In any well-ordered society, the children have to be guided to resist subversive peer pressures and affiliations that are often beyond the control of the school. The school cannot do this job alone, and the parents cannot totally hand down to others their responsibility for guiding their children, either. In this regard, there is need for effective parent-teacher rapport. All links such as parent-teacher associations, open-days, invitation to school functions, regular school reports and, most of all, informal contacts between teachers and parents are extremely useful. This also implies a need for teachers whose training has included some practical sociological studies.

However, socialization is only an adjunct, a necessary one no doubt, to the main task of devising and delivering an 'academic curriculum'. An academic curriculum has a three-fold application. First and foremost, it applies to the composite content of all the subject syllabuses, the selection and arrangement of topics in a logical continuum in each syllabus and the aims and objectives of teaching them. Secondly, it applies to the various methods to be used to achieve the stated aims and objectives of each syllabus. Lastly, it applies to the different mechanisms of assessing the levels of student-achievement with regard to the stipulated objectives.

No doubt, the success or otherwise of a school curriculum on offer hinges on several factors. One factor is the degree of the teachers' dedication to the task entrusted to them in 'delivering the goods', in a manner of speaking. Needless to say, their commitment to their profession hinges on the parity of esteem that they may enjoy with members of the other professions in the community. Clearly, that has a bearing on their professional qualifications and antecedents and the emoluments they receive. Another factor is the system of sanctions and rewards employed by the school to inculcate discipline and its perceived evenhandedness in administering it. No less important a factor is the adequacy of the infrastructure available to the school to facilitate all-round education. But, these factors will avail little if there is no philosophical basis to devising a curriculum and delivering it. It is necessary, therefore, to explore with great sensibility the ways and means of deriving educational policies from philosophical reflection. And, it is such reflection that determines the content and methodology of teaching and the concomitant strategies adopted by the school.

The greatest drawback of the teaching fraternity in Kerala, by and large, is that they have no clear vision of what a subject syllabus should comprise. What is needed is a syllabus that is pragmatic and relevant and has clear objectives. But, that alone without the appropriate methodology to teach it would not suffice. Let us, therefore, take a closer look at the rationale on which teaching methods and strategies are based and how they impinge on the growth of our children. An obvious question springs to mind. Do our schools recognize and make allowances for the differences in the children's aptitudes and abilities so as to guide each child to develop his own potential? Does he have the freedom to tailor a course for himself given the parameters of a formal curriculum? Or, is he thrust into an academic straitjacket that inhibits free play of his interests?

Often, not much more than lip service has been paid to the concept of ‘different strokes for different folks’. The reality has been classroom-bound and rigidly arranged according to a timetable. What is taught, for what it is worth, is strictly predicated on passing examinations. All the pupils, regardless of their differences, move together in a lock-step fashion in which all are taught the same materials at the same level of difficulty, at the same time and at the same pace. Also, as in a poultry farm, they are effectively cut off from contact with the outside world like the battery hens that cannot range freely, let alone see the light of day. And again like battery hens, they gobble up the same dull feed and lay the same unappetizing eggs.

Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian educationist and onetime UN educational consultant, describes such education using a different analogy. This is what he has to say: “*Education has become an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher, the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat*”. According to him, this approach is generally narrative in character. Such a teacher refuses to admit that when he narrates, he is delivering a monologue that inhibits interaction between his pupils, let alone between himself and his pupils. Such a teacher tries to impress by sound rather than by substance and expects the pupils to sit in monastic silence and hang on his lips.

In a rigid situation such as this, pupils are often taught too many things and not necessarily the best of things for them. Ironically, even their parents quite happily coerce the children into uncritical acceptance of this authoritarian approach. The children soon wise up to the reality that they should adapt to the precept of the system or perish. And that is: *The teacher knows best what is good for you, so you will not question him*. This is another way of saying, “*You have no right to think; let the teacher do your thinking for you*”. Consequently, the children resort to rote learning and parroting. What the children mostly do in class is to guess what the teacher wants them to say.

Constantly, a teacher expects the children to supply the ‘right answer’ to what might be called ‘guess-what-I-am-thinking’ questions. It is as if a question cannot have more than one connotation or, for that matter, one answer! The net result is that the children are not trained to think on their feet and to think critically, or to follow their own lines of inquiry. They are hardly, if ever, expected to make inferences, formulate definitions or ask substantive questions, for is not the teacher the unquestioned arbiter of all knowledge? Accordingly, the teacher chooses the content of education and enforces it on the child as if he were a *tabula rasa* or a blank slate on which the teacher writes what he regards as useful to the child. Needless to say, this is largely a teacher-centred approach.

In this day and age when, thanks to technology, we have the far corners of the world virtually at our fingertips, it is paradoxical that our policy makers have been laggard in moving with the times. The truth is that our present-day child, unlike his counterpart in the past, is constantly being exposed, in one way or another, to a wealth of

information about our global village even before he begins his formal schooling. At that point in his life what he lacks is the maturity and experience to interpret this information meaningfully and relate it to real-life situations. If learning were a matter of merely receiving and storing inert knowledge, then, lapping up the undifferentiated mish-mash that the media have to offer will do these children no more harm than being taught unimaginatively by an authoritarian teacher who is too set in his ways to change. Or, being taught even by a teaching machine that can be programmed to do the job much more efficiently. At least, the machine will not get tired or lose its patience or, for that matter, its memory. But the drawback of such a reliance on the media and the machines would be that it lacks the human dimension of experience so vital to the give and take of dialogue that encourages the children to think critically and to interpret the facts that they receive in their proper perspective.

In other words, the experience and maturity of a sympathetic teacher as a facilitator is vital to receiving a good education. You see, true education, rather than being a one-way information transfer, should be a participatory undertaking of the teacher and the taught. In the process, they enlighten each other through the mediation of the outside world. The shared knowledge they have together gleaned acts as a frame of reference for posing different problems and finding solutions for them. And the answers that they reach help them to see their shared knowledge assuming new dimensions and meanings every time it is applied anew. Knowledge is never an end in itself, but is a potent agent in the understanding of the living present. Far from being a static body of absolute truths handed down from the past, it is constantly in a state of flux. It is dynamic. As knowledge changes, or rather as new knowledge modifies the old or is superimposed on the old, the seekers of knowledge change too, as do their approach to solving problems. Thus, we can see that both the teacher and the taught, or rather the facilitator and the facilitated, are equally transformed. They gain new insights into the world around them. Our search for knowledge, therefore, ought to be a process that calls for life-long learning.

The hallmark of a good teacher is his enduring capacity for continued growth. If, on the other hand, he feels intimidated by the expanding horizons of knowledge, he tends to take the line of least resistance and fails to update his knowledge and his strategies to keep pace with the changing needs of a new generation. When an artificial syllabus has been institutionally established and ingrained in routine, a teacher finds it easier to walk in the beaten paths than to break new ground. Indeed, he feels threatened if he is asked to adapt himself to the changing needs.

Witness the dinosaurs of Kerala fighting, tooth and nail, to defeat the effective implementation of the DPEP (Department of Primary Education Project), an eminently pragmatic, child-friendly approach to teaching based on empirical methods. To hide their real intentions, those ossified teachers have thrown up a smoke screen by imputing that this is an ineffectual model of primary education, offered to us by the World Bank as part of a Neo-colonialist Conspiracy to produce a generation of half-baked children who would be easier to re-colonize. The reality is that it is the product of the authoritarian

system of education obtaining in Kerala that is half-baked and is found wanting in competitive examinations at the all-India level. What was astonishing was that even some of the leading thinkers of Kerala such as Judge V. K. Krishna Iyer and Sukumar Azheekode, who should have known better, joined the chorus of dissenting voices. It is hard to imagine that DPEP could have been a political bogey to them! The only charitable explanation for their attitude might be that they are still trapped in a Dickensian time warp.

We are all too familiar with the narration, the dictation of notes, the rote learning and the regurgitation of this undigested fare in a predictable manner in predictable exams, mainly testing the mechanical skills of recall and recognition. Examinations thus become the be-all and end-all of education. They determine the aims and objectives of the curriculum. As a result, appropriate methodology go begging and, along with it, the opportunity to develop in children the cognitive skills of critical thinking and creativity in solving problems. This exam-oriented approach also suppresses their spontaneous spirit of inquiry.

Therefore, what is called for is a paradigm shift from rote learning to problem solving. Schools should encourage children to inquire, investigate and look for answers. They should learn where to locate facts and how. To begin with, they should be trained in library skills. They should also be given training in the skills of skimming, scanning and note making. These skills should help them to utilize time and effort optimally. These skills also promote cognitive learning and discourage rote learning. Rote learning is compartmentalized learning and serves only to make our children think in boxes. Instead, they should be challenged to integrate their knowledge across subject boundaries. That is, they should know how to relate what might at first glance appear to be unrelated pieces of information. In this way, children can view each new learning point not in isolation, but as part of an integrated whole.

For example, the study of physical geography can switch from interest in physical features to the impact that these features have made on human life and vice versa. Thus, geography can be looked at in terms of history, of ecology, of science, of economics and of their social implications. Look at what the industrial emissions are doing to the environment, at what the CFC's are doing to the Ozone Layer, and at what wars and conflicts are doing to the people, to their way of life, to their means of livelihood. This may also help to introduce them to the basics of sustainable economic development, equality of opportunities and social justice. True learning depends on seeing relationships between facts and events that may seem unconnected. Only a sufficiently motivated child will have the perseverance for such sustained effort.

Comenius (Jan Amos Komensky, 1592-1670) the great 17<sup>th</sup> Century teacher believed that instead of a diet of books and nothing else, the children should learn from 'the living book of the world'. Rousseau (Jean Jacques Rousseau, (1712-'78), perhaps the most important educator of all, said that each individual should learn, in accordance with his own inborn nature, by making his own discoveries, in a natural progression and

at a leisurely pace. Teachers should make sure that learning is a happy experience. John Dewey (1859-1952) talks about a philosophy of education based on a philosophy of experience. The philosophy in question is one of education *of, by and for* experience or one that might be called an *experiential continuum*. Every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes it, while this modification affects the quality of subsequent experiences. As the poet states it, ‘...all experience is an arch wherethro’/ Gleams the untravelled world whose margin fades/ For ever and for ever when I move’. Jean Piaget (1896-1980), the great educational psychologist, thought that children should not be over-taught or hurried along.

All this is in sharp contrast to the unseemly haste with which we as parents over-urge and over-work our own children to serve our selfish ends. The children have become mere economic commodities in which we make investments, hoping for future returns. We teachers and parents alike continue to direct and drive our children without giving them the right to make their own choices and make demands on us towards fulfilling them.

Let me hasten to add that there is a small minority of teachers who encourage children to bring their ideas and experience to bear on sizing up academic problems and working out solutions. These teachers work hard to keep pace with the children’s demands for the cognitive skills needed to achieve the short-term objectives they have set for themselves, with the curriculum acting only as a general frame of reference. Unfortunately, their ranks are not large enough to make an impact on the aforementioned ‘dinosaurs’ whose interest it is to perpetuate the easier option of ‘treading the beaten path’. This would effectively pre-empt the children making demands on the teacher.

Ideally, education should have no ends beyond education *per se*. To be educated is not to have shaped an end product like a doctor or an engineer or an accountant or a lawyer; it is to shape something with a different perspective. What is required is not an unnaturally fast progression for something that lies ahead, but to strive with commitment at worthwhile things that lie to hand. In the words of R. S. Peters, my Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of London Institute of Education, “These worthwhile things cannot be forced on reluctant minds. They are acquired by contact with those who have already acquired them and who have patience, zeal and competence to INITIATE others into them.” The emphasis is added.

Not long ago, a newspaper article titled aptly enough, ‘**Considering Children: A Parent’s Guide to Progressive Education**’ had this to say: *Just as machines should be used by people, and not people directed by machines, so should teachers be used by children and not children directed by teachers.*

This is not to say that the teacher should let his pupils do what they like. If a teacher goes into a classroom and says, “Right then boys, what do you want to do today?” and he gets chaos straight away. Children can only decide what they want within

a tight and secure framework in which initially the teacher should be in friendly control not so much to manipulate so many puppets on a string as to offer the children a multi-dimensional frame of reference within which to develop their potential. And, just as people deliberately accept instructions from machines as when the alarm clock is set to wake you up or the computer tells you what button to press, so should children, of their own choice, accept instructions from teachers. The situation in which children are sufficiently motivated to accept instructions willingly to achieve the objectives that they have set for themselves represents a very high point of discipline. Such discipline, rather than being externally imposed, is self-imposed.

The foregoing may have conveyed the impression that this form of education as initiation into intrinsically worthwhile things is solely classroom-bound. There are other things that matter, such as a child's competence in being a team player, or in performing on the stage, or in speaking in public, or in writing for school journals or in giving expression to one's bent in fine arts and handicrafts. Then, there are opportunities for developing leadership qualities, especially in a residential school that ought to draw its scholars from different social, economic and religious backgrounds. Unless the children learn early in life to live and let live, they cannot become socialized. The ability to see the other man's view with tolerance is the first step towards socialization. That is also the quality of a leader who does not lay down the law, but is willing to recognize and accept other people's views.

Parents and teachers have a responsibility to be role models for their children. They are indeed at the same time agents of socialization and instruments of social control. Parents, therefore, must maintain an ongoing relationship with the school. As members of the parent-teacher association, they, or their chosen representatives, must constantly monitor the performance of the school in all its spheres of endeavour in order to be able to suggest improvements, but without in any way interfering in the day-to-day running of the school. They must also offer the school such assistance, both moral and material, as is needed from time to time. All this is crucial to improving the general tone of the school.

If we can, thus, create a congenial atmosphere in which the children, of their own accord, motivate themselves to discover their latent interests and talents, then much of the heartache that we as parents suffer on seeing our children being indecisive in their struggle to find their places in life can be avoided. No doubt, this is easier said than done, but if our politicians and our policy makers have the will to make radical changes, much of the deadwood in the form of antiquated educational theories and unregenerate educators can be surgically removed.

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