Transformation or tinkering?

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WITH schooling recognized as one key indicator of the human development index, a lot of money and effort has been invested in this sector in recent years. In the eighties, when educators and NGOs were interested in starting programmes with a focus on learning and education, international and other resource agencies often said that it was not their area of priority. Some others felt that socially organizing the people was enough and everything else would fall into place. At that time the 'correct' activities in development circles were health, mobilizing people or pursuing an integrated development project.

One could argue till one was blue, but education was not seen as an instrument for bringing about social change. Only a few agencies had schooling as their focus and this too possibly because of its organizational compulsions or 'safety'. With the welcome, widening interest in school education over the past decade, it is time to examine if one is moving in the right direction.

For those working on the education system, one of the first questions relates to the objective of this intervention. Is the aim to make the system more *efficient*? Is that sufficient? To make a system that has not worked for fifty years deliver a little more – is the effort required worth it? Or do we want to *reform* one or more elements of the system? Or does the school system need to be *transformed* for true learning to take place, for it to be in consonance with its larger environment and to enable children and educators to live and generate values considered important for human society? Or should all this be done simultaneously so that the investments of time, effort and money are worthwhile?

But inescapably, investment in education must contribute to creating a vibrant individual, a brilliant community and a sparkling state. Each unit must contribute to the other, shining not from an artificial source of light, but its own.

It is difficult to be original about educational ideas, concepts, methodology and so on. Most of it has already been said or worked on by someone or the other during the past hundred years or so. What has to be done today is to put these ideas into practice, into the schoolroom, the school system, so that the actual actors – the child and the teacher – benefit from it. And such practice needs to become an aspect of their daily life. Ideas like child centred education, participatory methods and activity-based learning have become a part of the educator's parlance thanks to the efforts of the New Education Policy (1986), DPEP, joyful learning programmes, and the efforts of many individuals, NGOs and a few schools. But for these principles not to remain mere slogans or rhetoric, in fact for these principles to work in depth, the relevant frameworks need to be aligned.

One framework that we can start with is the Constitution of India. The ideas of democracy and equality delineated in the Constitution are universally accepted. But does democracy exist in the classroom? Does it form a part of the training given to the teacher? Or is democracy just a chapter in a textbook, to be regurgitated for the exam? If children do not experience democracy how will they grow up to behave democratically as adults? Is it acceptable that these ideas be merely enshrined in the Constitution, even as we continue to be authoritarian in our training institutions and schools? Should we remain feudal in the work-place? If one of our aims is to make the nation functionally democratic, we have to make other frameworks correspond to it.

There are other frameworks, some broader and others more specific, that need to be considered. These need to be reflected upon before attempting to change existing systems or processes. Essential frameworks include human values – what is it that we want to pass onto the next generation? The culture base of the school community, the principles of learning, the curriculum, the learning materials, the training methodology, one's understanding of the child and so on are important frameworks that need to be aligned.

A good education system must not offer a concoction of mixed-up messages; together, the frameworks need to have a cohesive effect in the classroom and on the child. This will hold true for whichever framework we adopt. Only with such an alignment can the human, social and pedagogical principles generally accepted by the education community become part of the classroom.

What then are these essential principles that need to be made tangible in the classroom, for quality and integrated learning to occur every day. We cannot have quality education behave like the kurinji flower of the Western Ghats which blooms once every 14 years!
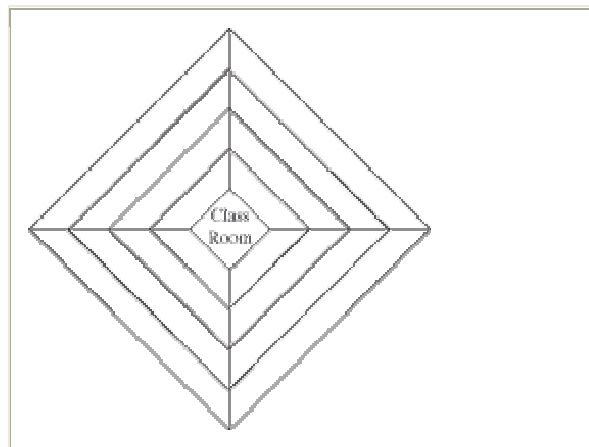
The most critical element is the teacher-child relationship which forms the basis for schoolroom interaction. To enable the teacher to function in a fashion that builds a bond between the child and the teacher certain things need to be in place. The crucial factor is

that the atmosphere, the method of interaction and communication in the learning environment needs to become less authoritarian and more humane. This change is urgently needed.

The relationship has to be based on affection and dignity that are the primary values of a good society, rather than fear, humiliation and misuse of power. The teachers need to be made conscious of the cause and effect of their professional behaviour in training programmes to enable them to create a relationship that is functional (and not dysfunctional) for learning to occur. And we know from studies and experience that children learn better, with greater comprehension, if the teacher shows interest and if the classroom environment is congenial.

The next critical area that needs some focus in order to make an impact upon the school system relates to the notion of the child – the developmental stages a nascent human being goes through, the perception of how a child learns and the child-society interface. This should form the cornerstone of the education edifice and everything else needs to be structurally engineered from here. After all, isn't the school meant for the child? The teacher's preparation, the textbooks-workbooks, the methodology adopted, the syllabus, the learning material, the ongoing support to the teacher by the supervisory personnel, the school building – all have to be geared to the child's needs.

We often consider the child only from the requirement of becoming a future adult. But if his present needs are not fulfilled it will be difficult for him to become a wholesome, mature adult. Each child's present, the here and now, is important and he has to learn for his life and its requirements at that moment. A child's physical as well as psychological needs have to be met at appropriate stages for him to evolve into mature adulthood.

There is sufficient documentation available on the child's developmental stages. However, since most education reports only make a cursory mention of this area and leave the rest to child specialists, let us get perceptions right to enable us to go to deeper levels of discussion and practice.

The child does not develop like a plant, merely growing from small to big, but more like the butterfly that goes through a metamorphosis at every phase. The child's needs in each area of development – the physical, the cognitive and the affective domains – change as he moves from one plane to the other. For example, the pre-primary child, upto approximately six years of age needs to work and think through his hands much more than an older child; only then does real learning occur and the personality of the child gets integrated. The child between six to twelve years (more pertinent for the Universalization of Elementary Education) is voraciously hungry to feed his intellectual capacities. This is his age of reason, making connections with all that is available in the entire universe. It is also a time for the imagination to expand and to see things holistically.

The adolescent, after the personality is grounded from birth to the six years' phase and an intellectual base is established in the six to twelve years' plane, is intrinsically creative. He also wants a taste of the larger society that he will soon become a full member of. He wants to understand the underlying basis of human society, the links between land, modes of production, money and how mankind has developed. This he wants to learn, not through books and lectures, but through life and interaction. There is now an underlying need to search for the ideal and the perfect in human society.

The supporting points of a learning web have to be placed so that the child learner captures the essence of the world, the universe. If these concept points are narrowly spaced out or weakly constructed, the area of learning will be smaller and limit the range of comprehension available to the child. Both the horizontal expanse and the depth of knowledge will be lacking. Children's capacities are grossly underestimated through the school system and the volume and weight of the school bag is often mistaken for academic skill, conceptual clarity and rigour.

But is any of this taken into account while planning for schools? Children drop out for good reasons. The school environment does not run parallel to their natural learning processes. Indigenous communities, in touch with their children's needs, often understood this better and had evolved paths of learning and rituals to mark these and other milestones and processes.

Besides converting the teacher-learner relationship into a more healthy bonding and addressing the learning curve of the child through the progressive planes on his way to becoming an adult, what else needs to be made visible in the classroom for an effective programme?

The first feature one looks for in a classroom is whether the children are active or passive. Is there life in the class? Are children moving and talking? Human beings have two main forms of expression – movement and speech. Imagine what would happen to a person who has these capacities but is tied up for the larger part of the day. It is even worse for the children because these are the two fundamental skills they have mastered by the time they enter school. But as soon as they go in with an expectation of learning and being with their friends, they are asked to be quiet and keep still. This is de-humanizing and is violence perpetuated on the young.

We do not protest strongly enough against this but are quick to disapprove when children, reacting to this oppression, become restless, angry, dull or listless. That is their way of protesting and letting the adults know what is happening internally. It is important that the child needs to move and speak in class as is natural to any living being, following of course the ground rules that one talks softly and walks quietly when there are so many people working together. And we know that learning happens best when there is an activity the child can do and work on with his head, heart and hand.

That the child is a constructor (not merely a placid consumer) of his own fund of knowledge is a well accepted idea. But how this can be manifested in the normal government school or even the supposedly good English medium school remains an issue. One way is for practitioners to get over the hurdle of 'herd' teaching as the only way of managing a class. There has to be a mix of individual, group and collective lessons. Just as an adult cannot be 'one of the masses' all the time and needs to be alone, work as a member of a team and at times be a part of a nation or any other collective, a schoolroom too has to offer these diverse experiences as a way of life to the child. The child needs to be comfortable working by himself or herself, should spontaneously absorb the rules of being a member of a group and also understand what it means to be a part of the collective class or school.

During individual work time, using the learning materials for different subjects, the child needs to choose his work after an initial introduction. The choice of activity and learning during this time has to be his own, with the teacher guiding when necessary. Through this individual work, alongside some interaction with other children and group work, the child constructs his concepts that nobody else can do for him.

By the simple fact of moving and talking in class and creating and constructing his conceptual foundation through individual and group activity the child gets an opportunity to become an exploring learner. Moving the teacher from a fixed position at the head of the class to the midst of children offers the teacher an opportunity to shift from his usual stance of a 'policeman' to that of a guide and a true educator. But to enable the teacher and the taught to go beyond the merely symbolic and to bring about a pedagogical change in the classroom requires that the training programmes also fall into a broader framework.

Both the principles and practice of sound pedagogy have to be made into a continuum, a kind of a Möbius strip. These linkages need to be worked into the training methodology so as to make it participatory and professional, enabling the teachers to become partners in the process of transformation.
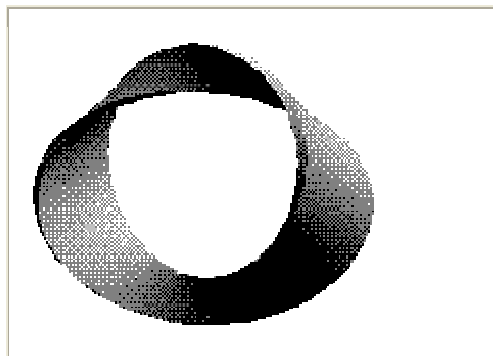
Currently, the teacher trainees in training institutions are treated like cadets for two years with little internal, personal preparation for evolving into an educator. Once in the field,

the untrained mind of the teacher operates on the basis of old biases and prejudices collected through his own schooling and life experiences. Part of the teacher's preparation should be to examine these experiences and beliefs, analyze and reflect upon them within the precincts of the professional course. This reflection could be on anything from the theory of child behaviour to how one has to teach art skills, so that the teacher is armed with fresh perceptions, fundamental thinking skills and an understanding of functioning in a changing school culture.

If done systematically following the psychological (rather than merely the logical) process of learning, there would be no need to go through massive in-service training workshops, organised even when a reformatted textbook is introduced for class I. A trained teacher can surely look at any textbook and teach from it? If a few teachers cannot, they can get help from their colleagues. But if all teachers across the state need to be taught how to incorporate every change introduced, then it is time to review the training system and the support structure offered to the teacher at his workstation.

What is called for is a belief in teachers, a belief in children that they can do a lot if given the space and the environment. The same teachers in a private school deliver. The same teachers in a training context show remarkable qualities. The same children in demo schools set up during training sessions work diligently, enthusiastically and naturally. The underlying issue seems to be the use of control, power and authority. In a stifling, over-structured system the demand is to follow blindly what is handed down; the individual does not come into play in such a scenario. But if there is an opening up, a letting go by the authorities, there is a good chance the situation will change.

The planners, the managers, the supervisors of such a large system do require professional courses in management and HRD to recognize these concerns and learn styles of management more relevant for today's world to be in line with the larger frameworks adopted by the nation. If only we learn to manage these issues with greater ease and élan, we could introduce systemic changes without a fear of losing control. The autonomy offered to every unit of operations will then initiate a dynamic that could make each school and each teacher generate a more positive energy within the parameters of the state education system.

To bring in qualitative changes is difficult, especially in the field of education, which is rather amorphous and has more intangibles than most other areas. Arriving at standards and specifications for the various components and processes of the system is an important first big step. What is equally essential is a leap of the imagination. One has to imagine what is not there, what could be possible, what could be a new landscape. This image has to be held in the mind so that it can be transformed, in time, into a functioning reality.