

TO TEACHER, WITH LOVE
(An offering of three good books on Teacher's Day)

Arvind Gupta

Every child learns to talk and communicate before she goes to school. This stupendous skill is learnt without being taught. Most children have a 'gleam in their eye' before they go to school. But soon this gargantuan combination of education and bureaucracy fails them. Schools replicate the power structures of the larger society of which they are a part. Uniform, assembly, protocol, attendance, homework, tests, exams define a school. But all these rituals have very little to do with real learning. Obedience, discipline, pin-drop silence and regimentation seem to be the rule in most schools. We do not need enormous centralised schools in order to have quality education. This is the reverse of what we have been told and sold. All over the country we have destroyed small schools in which it might at least have been possible for teachers to do some of the things, which Gijubhai Badheka did. In their place we have built giant school-factories, which we run, for the most part, like armies and prisons because they seem too big to be run like anything else. The idea behind this was that in small schools we could not afford to have the kinds of equipment, material and specialised teachers that we thought we needed to get enough variety and depth in the children's learning.

Changes in the school system--if they are to be of lasting significance--must spring from the actions of teachers in their classrooms, teachers who are able to help children live creatively. New programmes, new materials, and even basic changes in organisational structure will not necessarily bring about healthy growth. A dynamic and vital atmosphere can develop when teachers are given the freedom and support to innovate. One must depend ultimately upon the initiative and resourcefulness of such teachers and this cannot be promoted by prescribing continuously and in detail what is to be done. In education we cry too much about money. Sure, we could use more; but some of the best classrooms and schools I have seen or heard of, spend far less per pupil than the average in our schools today. We often don't spend well what money we have. We waste large sums on fancy buildings, unproductive administrative staff, on diagnostic and remedial specialists, on expensive equipment that is either not needed, or under used, or badly misused, on tons of identical and dull textbooks, readers and workbooks, and now on gee-whiz devices like computers. For much less than what we do spend, we could make our classrooms into far better learning environments than most of them are today.

Divaswapna

Divaswapna (Daydreaming) by Gijubhai Badheka, is an Indian classic on education. Bereft of educational jargon, it is an inspiring tale of a school teacher who, despite severe odds, tries to make learning fun. It tells what one teacher was able to do when given a chance and a little help. Even in the 1920's, Gijubhai was able to sense the futility of stupid textbook. Faced with a rowdy and unruly class, he decided to tell them a story. Immediately, there was pin-drop silence. All the children were glued to the story. The school bell rang, but the children insisted and begged, 'Sir, can you make the story

longer! We are willing to stay back after school.' This transformation came about not because of the cane of the teacher or the power he wielded, but because he was doing something innately interesting. For the next ten days the children heard more and more stories. The children were now 'hooked'. On the eleventh day, the children demanded a new story. The teacher then honestly confessed, "Well, I have told you all the stories I knew. I don't know anymore. Isn't it silly, that we have a class of 50 children and all of us have the same set of books! There could be nothing more foolish than that! So don't buy any textbooks this year. Instead, give me the money and I will buy three different story books / picture books for each one of you. So, instead of 3 stupid textbooks you will have 150 interesting story books.' Thus, with no support from the management (or for that matter, from the World Bank or the EU) this visionary teacher, eighty years ago, with the children's own resources started a classroom library. Much later in the 1970's, the radical pedagogue, Paulo Freire gave the slogan, 'Not the word, but the world.' But Gijubhai was practicing it so much earlier, in our own Bhavnagar!

After hearing a story the children would enact it the next day. Soon the children became very proficient with words. They did not mug the dialogues, for they had become very adept in inventing their own dialogues on the spot! Gijubhai had a penchant for converting all dull curriculum into games. For teaching verbs, for instance, he made many slips of paper with 'action words'. These slips were folded and put in a basket. Each child had to pick up a slip, read it and enact it. The other children had to decipher it. It was fun and participatory, and in no time the children learnt their verbs very well.

Gijubhai took the children out for field visits. The children greatly enjoyed these nature trails and collected various specimens of igneous and sedimentary rocks, bird feathers / nests, and samples of medicinal plants. Soon the children had collected a veritable museum of natural history in their school. In the process they were also emotively linked to their natural environment. And all this was done in the 1930s--before 'environmental education' became a catchword!

Danger School!

Danger School! by Paulo Freire is another landmark book. For years he taught unschooled adult peasants to read and write in remote and poor villages. His method was a politically radical, grown-up version of the method that Sylvia Ashton Warner described in her book *Teacher*. Sylvia, who taught Maori children in New Zealand for twenty-four years, realised the incongruity of teaching language by using English primers that had little respect for, or reference to the children's lives. Sylvia discovered that all children lived in the twilight world of 'sex' and 'fear' but no teacher wanted to touch these issues. She devised an ingenious method and, everyday she asked the children for an emotive word, a word which deeply concerned them and which they really wanted to learn. If they said, 'drink' (as many children had alcoholic fathers) then that word would be up on the blackboard and etched forever in the children's minds. In a period of six months the children prepared sixty illustrated primers. Now the written word made sense to them. The themes reflected their life's culture, concerns and problems. Following a similar method, Freire began by talking with Brazilian peasants about the conditions and

problems of their lives, and showed them how to read and write those words which were most important to them. He found that it took only thirty hours before the wretchedly poor and demoralised peasants were able to explore reading on their own.

Thirty hours! One school week! That is the true size of the task. Of course, the Brazilian army did not like Freire making peasants literate and politically conscious and threw him out of the country. How many hours, weeks, months, and years do our children spend in schools without even learning the basics!

Before children can understand a thing, they need experience: seeing, touching, hearing, tasting, smelling, choosing, arranging, putting things together, taking things apart and experimenting with real things. Learning by doing is connected to looking more critically at your own reality. It encourages creative thinking, self-expression, originality, the confidence to experiment, the courage to make mistakes, learn control and perfect skills. Burettes, pipettes, test tubes and other fancy laboratory apparatus often threaten children. Principles of science are best understood if children can see them. For them the whole world is a laboratory. Life, for them is a series of experiments. They have an innate ability to see patterns in 'little' things around them. The Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) showed the possibilities of doing more with less. Children could do exhilarating science with simple things. The ability to improvise experiments with almost zero-cost holds great promise in this resource-starved country. The message is loud and clear-- school children can do great science with little money and resources. Newspapers make great caps. Origami—paper folding--is a wonderful way to learn practical geometry. With two film-roll bottles and a piece of old cycle tube you can make a pump to inflate a balloon. You can even pop the balloon. Bottles, rubber slippers, crown caps, broomsticks, matchboxes ball pen refills are not 'junk' but 'resources' to make lovely action toys. We buy more than we need and generate enormous amounts of junk, burdening the earth. To heal the earth we need to reduce, recycle and reuse. Sustainability demands that we do more with less. Often, creativity blossoms in conditions of scarcity.

Totto chan

Totto chan is the single landmark bestseller on education ever. This book has sold over seven million copies in Japan alone! No book on education, from Montessori to Piaget, has captured the popular imagination to the extent that *Totto chan* has. The National Book Trust has published this in eleven Indian languages. Every single person, teacher or parent, child or adult, must read it. *Totto chan* is the story of an inquisitive girl and how she was thrown out of her previous school because she did not 'fit' into the standard mould. Fortunately, for little Totto chan, her mother was a very wise woman. She did not tell Totto chan about this incident and took her to another school where she was welcomed by Kobayashi, the principal. The new school was made of old railway carriages and had just fifty children. Classes were held in the old carriages, with one compartment acting as the library and another as the science laboratory. Kobayashi and his school welcomed children with physical disabilities. He organised races, hurdles and other games in which the physically challenged children won. The prizes in these competitions were carrots and green spinach!

When *Totto chan* was printed in Japan in the early 1980s, it rang a chord in millions of hearts. The book broke all publishing records. It juxtaposed mass-produced factory education against a sensitive personalised education, where the child was at the centre of things. The book proved that there are no problem children – only problem schools and problem societies. The National Book Trust has done a great service by publishing both *Divaswapna* and *Totto chan* in 11 Indian languages at a throw away price.

If you find it difficult to get these books you can download them from <http://arvindguptatoys.com>

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