

WHY ARE SCHOOLS SO BORING?

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“What a dangerous activity reading is, teaching is. All this plastering on of foreign stuff. Why plaster on at all when there’s so much inside already? So much locked in? If only I could get it out and use it as working material. And not draw it out either. If I had a light enough touch it will just come out under its own volcanic power.” Spinster (Sylvia Ashton Warner)

“Children WALK to school, Children RUN away from school,” this British Telecom advertisement perhaps sums up the reality of today’s schools.

What do children do in schools? They wear a uniform and carry a heavy bag. The school gong ushers everyone for an assembly, sermon and a prayer. Then children tiptoe to their classes, often with a finger on their lips. The class starts. The teacher speaks; the children listen, take notes, and mug them up to regurgitate them in future tests and exams. The school is cut off from life. The classroom is a world of silence, of immobility. The pupils keep quiet, listen, obey and are judged. The teacher knows, gives orders, decides, judges, notes, punishes. The school is a world of uniformity, of artificial communication and of punishments.

Schools are opposed to natural learning. At home children learn from their parents, grandparents and other adults. In turn, they also teach their younger siblings. School is the direct opposite of natural learning. Here, all children of a certain age are segregated and put into separate classes. The only adult they come into contact with is the class teacher – who has a paper degree but is usually devoid of any demonstrable skills. He /she can do little else but teach. Pitted with one single adult the children are deprived of wider adult experience and company. The result is not diversity but homogeneity of experience.

Many teachers, principals and even parents think that when a child enters schools he / she is a clean slate, on which any alien state sponsored curricula can be written. Rather, the child is a malleable lump of clay which can be wilfully moulded by the school. That the child is young and impressionable is certain. But when children come to school they bring with them hordes of experiences. Any child-centred pedagogy, instead of negating the child’s own experiences, should build upon what the child already knows.

Instead, the children are drilled into doing the most boring exercises. Text books have become synonyms with learning. Very few schools have good libraries with supplementary books. Most school libraries are locked and inaccessible to children. Rare is a school which encourages children to visit book shops and Book Fairs to choose and select books of their liking for the library. The Centre for Learning (CFL) in Bangalore

has done this for a long time. And this is reflected in the fine collection of books and the Open Library they have.

Children singing a nursery rhyme like ‘Jack and Jill went up the hill,’ or ‘Ring-a, ring-a roses,’ is a common sight. Why are our children made to suffer these rhymes which have no relationship to their lives or their reality? Well, one may say that this is part of our colonial heritage. The British gave us the English language and along with it a bagful of their cultural icons.

“Rain, Rain go away, Little Johnny wants to play,” is another such nursery howler which totally negates the Indian child’s own experience. In overcast, drizzly London, a child wanting to go outside to play might like to shoo away the clouds and stop the rain. But it is just the opposite in India. After the arid summer and the monstrous blasts of hot air, people all over India pray for the rains to relieve them from hell’s inferno. All our regional languages are rich in folk songs which welcome and embrace the rain. For despite all its technological progress, one rain deficient year can spell disaster and starvation in India. Rain is so important to us. How can we ever shoo it away?

The first words, songs, stories have intense meaning in a child’s real life. They should be part of the child’s cultural milieu. The alien stuff taught in schools – which have no bearing to the learner’s experience soon becomes boring and a chore. State produced text books are often didactic, sermonizing and they tend to talk down to children. Soon children loose interest in studies.

This is a true story of an American School. It was located in a poor area with a preponderance of African Americans. These children evinced no interest in reading. Despite several remedial programmes the school made little progress. Soon a young trainee teacher was assigned to the school. She had little experience, but was bright and sensitive. She soon realized the incongruity of state sponsored textbook which did not reflect the lives of her learners. She could also feel that African Americans were steeped in music. Music was their life. So, she put up chart sheet on all the walls of her classroom, and asked the children for their popular songs. As soon as she wrote the popular songs on the charts, the children were reading them (as they knew them by heart). Thus these deprived children got immersed into the written words through their own songs.

How about art?

If you ask a primary school child in Delhi to draw an outdoor scene it will most likely be two isosceles triangles side-by-side connected with an arc. The triangles represent hills and the curved piece the peeping sun. Such hills are not part of the Delhi landscape. This is no fault of the child. This is what she was taught in the class.

If you ask children to draw a house they invariably will draw houses with inverted “V” pitched roofs. In reality, it might be difficult to spot such houses in Delhi. Probably they

had seen such pictures in some book, or were merely reproducing what the teacher normally drew on the blackboard.

The un-contextualised rote-learning is evidenced in the kids' representation of houses with pitched roof. No one talks about the need for developing creativity in the kids. This is possible only if the teachers themselves had been brought up to think and learn in such an enlightened mode. One thing is for sure, kids need to be made conscious of their own surroundings. Contextualisation needs to be encouraged in our educational system. But first, what's needed is the realisation that creativity is critical to any liberal educational system!

The greatest sin we can commit against our children is to make them sit still on a chair for long hours. Most schools just do that. Children's life is motion and activities and most learning should be by doing. Rote learning and parroting out definitions and formulae can numb the mind. Before the children can understand a thing, they need to experience: seeing, touching, hearing, tasting, smelling, choosing, arranging, putting things together, and taking things apart. In short, they must experience real life and experiment with real things.

Fifteen years back I used to teach in Mirambika – an experimental school run by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The school is located in Delhi on a large, green campus, opposite the NCERT. I used to often take the children for tree walks. Soon the children become very good at recognizing and identifying trees. Unlike birds, which fly from place-to-place, trees are rooted on a spot and one can observe them in their pristine beauty with the changing season. Soon the class decided to put name plates on the trees. We found that the cheapest ways of making name plates was to take old FROOTI packets (Tetrapaks) open them up and write on them with a ball pen. While making name plates every single child first made a name plate of their names and pinned them to their shirts! Then each child made a name plate for a tree and tied it like a rakhi to the tree. In the process the emotive bond between the children and trees strengthened. Later we put name plates on all the trees in an adjoining park and public street. This, apart from being good public education was also good learning for the children.

Today majority of the schools fail to capture the imagination of children. They have become dens of boredom. Children go to school because they are forced to do so by their parents. There are some schools which have shown sensitivity towards children and cut down on authoritarianism and bureaucracy. I earnestly hope that there will be other schools who will take a cue from this.

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