



Postcolonial, Inclusive Education in the Southpoint Vidyashram

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As an answer to the question, “What would constitute an excellent *Indian education for Indian children*?” the school called The Southpoint Vidyashram was set up in 1990 in Varanasi, U.P. by our society NIRMAN. The answer to the above question was two-fold. One, the education must be inclusive. It must include children from any and all backgrounds, varying by class, religious or regional community, gender, and ability. Indian schools, obviously, are *not* inclusive. Students were differentiated always according to class and often by other criteria as well. Two, the education must be *excellent*. Children must be taught skills that empowered them to fulfil dreams, and more difficult, made into lifelong learners. We called these approaches ‘postcolonial’ and developed them continuously with research in our Centre for Postcolonial Education.

What does the name ‘postcolonial’ mean? We call the problems of Indian education *today* ‘colonial’, by which we mean: (i) there is a hierarchical ideology among educators, in which some children are believed to be constitutionally incapable of learning, and (ii) there is a poverty of resources and concepts as to how to teach in progressive, child-centred, inclusive ways. By calling the solutions ‘postcolonial’ we mean: (i) our schools should embody the politics of equality, where everyone may be regarded as a learner, regardless of family and community background, values and practices, customs and habits and (ii) we should create resources, from our own repertoires of practices, including curricula, teacher’s education and the arts. Our findings have been that both these solutions are precisely doable. They depend on the construction of a robust family-school relationship.

In this paper I will expand briefly on our journey from 1990 to today. Our hope is to enlarge the dialogue and to reach out further to assist others with similar solutions.

THE POLITICS OF EQUALITY

The discourse of the child

We can re-construct the discourse of the child in India from various sources: mythology, observation, interviews, fiction, and historical research. We come to the interesting finding that there is a *double* discourse, according to which a child is simultaneously two things. One, a child is malleable. Education is a powerful process and any child who undergoes it is likely to be transformed, not only intellectually, but also socially, emotionally, psychologically and discursively. The power of education to change one’s life cannot be exaggerated. The second discourse is that some children can never be changed. There is a core essence within some people that leads to their utter resistance to change.

We recognise the hierarchical roots of this double discourse. The children who are supposedly resistant to education are those from certain classes and communities already labelled ‘backward’. But ironically there are many such children in middle - class, modern families as well and then it is individual children who are characterised by this intransigency.

The solution that we adopt in our school and would like to propose to others is to ignore this second discourse and work to expand the first one. When teachers are taught methods and given ideas, as to how to work with a variety of children in their classrooms, when difference is purposefully addressed, then they work within the first

discourse. They recognise that we have the concepts in our own cultures and move on to only use them imaginatively to create teaching that includes everyone in its target group.

The Discourse of Modernity

The big danger is to hold a static concept of 'Indian culture' such as is done by many scholars, educators and lay people and then to be unable to devise solutions to problems since 'culture' is such a big thing to fight. Our approach is that culture is complex and multi-layered, dynamic and fluid – or, as I put it, it consists of multiple discourses. There are discourses about some aspects of modernity, specifically about individualism and choice that could hinder children's growth or could empower them. One could strategically choose to highlight selected discourses and sideline others and those inside the culture will feel comfortable and be co-operative.

In brief, the aim here is that the classroom not be the typical disciplinarian one where the teacher is the sole authority in power. The separate identities of children must be recognised, and in spite of age difference with the teacher and other background and familial differences between students, each one must be given dignity and respect. This is practically expressed in the spatial layout of the classroom, in the procedures and rules made for everyday functioning and in bigger rituals and language use. It is more intricately expressed in the curriculum, in which every single topic could be taught with an approach that respects the interests of children, their burgeoning views of themselves and their worlds, their energies and imaginations, and their huge abilities to reach far beyond their immediate surroundings. Plans could be made where, given age levels, the total approach in the classroom is based on the most fundamental principles of democracy and inclusiveness.

The adult as learner

For these fairly profound changes in the ideology of the school – to treat the child as always competent to learn, always engaged in learning albeit at her own pace and always equal to others – teachers have to be helped to conceptualise themselves in new ways. They too are part of a multi-layered plural

set of discourses that constitutes Indian society and culture. In their own homes, for instance, they have myriad rules. At the same time, certain basic rules, regarding time, or the rights of individuals, may be lacking, which are very necessary in school. That teachers bring their home cultures into their school practice is not to be bemoaned, but to be worked with.

We have developed three strategies to work with teachers to enable them to break out of the cycles wherein they mechanically reproduce whatever they themselves have experienced in their own less-than-adequate schools, and their otherwise-culturally-rich families.

- (i) An intellectual approach. Teachers are treated as intellectuals who are educated, like ideas, and can analyse. They are taught through select lectures and discussions of pertinent topics, ranging from the effects of colonialism in India, to caste, to the media, to gender roles. The teaching is very carefully crafted to be interactive, as a model for the best kind of teaching that they should also become comfortable with in their own practice.
- (ii) A technical approach. Teachers are treated as smart and professional workers who deserve to be given a work place and environment within which they can fulfil the requirements expected from them – to both professionally complete their duties, and to be imaginative in that they deal with a dynamic group called children. We design to give them the maximum support for a child-centred classroom and a smooth working schedule, as well as a stream of ideas regarding how to live out the philosophy intended to be put into practice. Not to get into the minutiae, but the designs include bookshelves, storage space, soft boards, floor and child-friendly seating, teaching resources, light and air.
- (iii) A performative approach. Teachers are required to play many theatre games, do exercises, and master the elementary arts of performance. Philosophically, this leads to the ability to radically re-conceptualise oneself, one's behaviour and one's potential. More pragmatically, it opens the doors of the

imagination to work with space, other people, both colleagues and students, and undertake tasks more creatively. Theatre is the single most potent source of radical re-structuring and breaking out of the cycles of reproduction we are all trapped in.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF INCLUSIVENESS

The curriculum

Now we come to the second part of the two-fold need of change in Indian education, the first for the politics of equality, the second for the technology for equality. As much of the discussion on curriculum and our own experience tells us, there are many possible approaches to the same subject-matter, some of which marginalise children of certain backgrounds more than others. The bigger, Indian, problem is that the teaching is so uninteresting in most of our schools that even children who are intelligent and love to learn get put off by school work, and become poor students, or even drop out of school. We have a two-pronged policy in our school: first, to make the teaching rich, sufficient, and exciting, so that children are wooed to learn and can complete their work themselves, going on to become independent learners. Not to have to depend on adults at home for home-work assistance is crucial in breaking the cycle of exclusivity in good education. Second, we have the more ambitious policy of actually devising texts and workbooks which seek to use community, local and national narratives in an imaginative, even fantastical way. Following on Kieran Egan's arguments, our belief is in the child's capacity as

artist, poet and philosopher, to be able to deal with content that, though familiar, is exoticised in a way that children's imaginations demand.

The hidden curriculum

The easiest to grasp, this is the constant attention to detail with the posing of the simple question, "What is the child learning from this?" remembering that to not teach is often also to teach. For instance, if there is a Hindu festival and children are taught what it is, that conveys to them the sense of its importance to adults. If there is a Muslim festival and children are not taught what it is, it similarly teaches them of its lack of importance to the adults concerned. More subtle things, such as pictures on the wall, the very nature of the wall, as well as every single practice or occurrence under the school roof and in outside spaces, teaches children how to think about themselves and adults, about their world and the adult world they are learning to negotiate.

Conclusion

The proof always lies in the doing. We firmly believe that claims cannot be validated by reading policies. Curriculum is not what is planned but what is executed, not what is intended but what is experienced. Teachers may be judged not by their years or degrees of training but by observation in the classroom. So, the above is the briefest introduction to a very detailed plan that is daily lived out in The Southpoint Vidyashram, which is proud to invite one and all to observe in person and learn from its philosophies and practices on its site.

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