

Elemental tensions in education

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The origins of schools lie largely in the folds of religious institutions. This goes back a few thousand years, for example in India, to the Buddhist monasteries, church established schools and universities in Europe and madrassas in the Arabic world.

These institutions dealt with a fascinating tension. Good education develops a thinking person. So what's to stop such a thinking person to start questioning the basics of the religion in whose school he developed? Various strategies were perhaps used to resolve this issue, to develop the "thinking believer", so to speak: a thinking person but with unquestioning faith. As history suggests, such strategies had varying success. They often ended up only developing believers, with lip service to thinking. But sometimes, and in some places, the thinker would win with his believing self being a mask only.

Much has been thought and written about this inherent tension of education, between its function as an agent of conformity versus as an agent of liberation, not merely in the context of religion, but in other societal contexts as well.

It is a struggle that will always exist as it arises from the dynamics of conflicting forces of change in any society. Education is, in this context, only another battleground; perhaps more important than most others as it is the organized tool of society to shape new generations and determine the course of the future.

Another elemental tension in education, which has been largely resolved, is about the principles and ideas of how children actually learn well. We may not necessarily see evidence for this even in our best schools, but other than fringe elements, there is a large consensus on these ideas. Some of these ideas, probably familiar to you, are: rote memorization doesn't lead to learning; a child constructs/develops her concepts—you can't "give the concept to her"; each child is different and learns her own way; social and emotional aspects of learning are important; children have different abilities and their own pace of learning which need to be supported; a child is an integrated individual and must be treated as such, and that cognitive development is intricately linked to social, emotional, ethical and physical development.

The exhaustive list of these ideas and principles will be much longer. This consensus has developed over the past 100 years or so, driven by developments in fields as varied as psychology, neuro-sciences, sociology, and philosophy. John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, John Holt, Maria Montessori and Jiddu Krishnamurti are only some who have helped shape this consensus. It has received philosophical support from the ideas of

people ranging from Rabindranath Tagore to Michael Oakeshott and the overall global growth of humanistic, democratic ideals. This consensus has many names to its many nuances but it is best to avoid these names because they tend to draw fine exclusionary boundaries, whereas the core ideas are common.

In very simple terms this consensus translates to an educational approach that sees the child as actively building knowledge and understanding. It recognizes differences among children, and devises different strategies to address those differences. It creates a supportive social and emotional environment and facilitates the development of the child as an integrated individual.

To make this happen, the importance of the teacher and the school is the crux of the matter. It demands a high capacity empathetic teacher, who acts as a facilitator and has the freedom to creatively respond to the needs of the children in her classroom. It demands a school culture that creates and supports this environment of freedom, creative enquiry and socio-emotional development.

Therefore, this consensus around the nature of learning and how good education happens, directly implies that schools must be creative, empathetic and empowered. This is not merely because of humanistic or liberal democratic idealism, but due to the very nature of the child and her development.

India's intent and goals in education are directly informed by this progressive consensus in education. The National Curricular Framework 2005 has crystallized and consolidated the movement in the direction, which started in the mid-1980s. The goals of education thus articulated also reflect our constitutional ideals i.e. they bring together what is educationally effective and is socially important. We have made the right and good choice.

However, this choice has introduced another elemental tension in our education. The bureaucratic system that is supposed to realize these educational goals is rigid, top-down, unresponsive and unthinking. It considers the school and the teacher as the lowest functionaries in its ladder, and therefore accordingly has disempowered them. Not even by remote chance will this command and control system foster the creative and empathetic schools that are required for these goals.

Our educational goals and the system that is supposed to realize them are pulling in opposite directions. Nothing short of a genuine empowerment of schools, and a system to support that will solve this deep conflict. Schools need their own version of the panchayati raj, a sort of school-swaraj.

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