



When I was asked to write about social science teaching and reflect on why our school system is so focused on giving children one right answer, one right approach and one way of looking at the world – I started looking back at my own school days. Yes, teaching has become uni-dimensional, children are expected to learn facts and reproduce them. Many young people find civics and history terribly boring and admit that they forget what they learn as soon as they come out of the examination hall. Why is this so? Can it be different?

This left me wondering how and why some of us grew up asking questions, demanding logical explanations and challenging superstitions and prejudices. While family and peer group play a huge role in determining values and practices, it has long been accepted that the school can indeed play an important role in moulding our world view. In the pre-independence period, schools set up by social reformers made a big difference. Equally, right up to this day, the kind of school we go to moulds us to a large extent. What and how we learn, the kind of teachers we have, the way curriculum is transacted is known to impact not only what we learn, but also how we learn and how we relate to our environment.

I was studying in class 8 in Kendriya Vidyalaya Pattom in Trivandrum, Kerala. The year was 1968. We had just moved from Shimla and being children of a central government officer, we barely stayed two years in a city. A teacher in school, I do not recall his name, was passionate about the civil rights movement in the US. He was a great admirer of Martin Luther King and the assassination of such a great leader in March 1968 had disturbed him greatly. He introduced us to the historical speech – I have a dream – and many of us learnt to recite the speech. One day he talked about Sri Narayana Guru (1855-1928), a revered spiritual leader and social reformer who revolted against casteism and propagated the new value of freedom and social equality. He asked if we would be willing to do a comparative study of the two great reformers.

Some of us volunteered, not knowing much about civil rights or the social reform movement in Kerala.

We started reading about the civil rights movement, assassination of Martin Luther King, struggle for equality and

justice in the US. Classmates who could read Malayalam read up about the Kerala social reformer and shared it with the rest of the group. We gathered press clippings, went to the British Council library, the public library and talked to people. We then went to the ashram, heard lectures, walked around and talked to people. We stayed together and ate together – students of different castes, religion and speaking different languages (Kendriya Vidyalaya was an amazing melting pot, there were students from all over the country). Small groups of students worked together to write about the two great leaders. We then put up an exhibition of sorts in our class. It was the most wonderful two-weeks of my student life.

Coming from a traditional Brahmin family, I was not adequately exposed to ideas about caste inequality. The first time I heard about it was during the anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu (when I was studying in class 5 in Kendriya Vidyalaya, IIT Madras) and I recall elders arguing that Brahmins had no future in the state and we should therefore learn English and Hindi well. There were others who disagreed and talked about historical injustice. The discussions used to be heated and children were often asked to go out and play and not eavesdrop on conversation of adults.

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The short two-week project opened my eyes to caste and race, social discrimination and the spectre of inequality and injustice. On completion of the project I started questioning traditional practices, subtle and overt forms

of discrimination, consciously befriended children from different communities and backgrounds. I used to make it a point to eat in the homes of my friends. The biggest change that came over my friends and me was that we started questioning and started reflecting on everyday experiences. We discussed the food shortages of 1968-69, the unrest in society and stark inequality. Our world was turned up side down in a short span of a few weeks. It did not seem such a momentous experience at that time, it was only many years later as an adult that I realised how the kind of education I received made such an impact on me. I also realised that our teacher did not tell us what to look for and what not to look for, what to believe and most importantly he did not lecture us on caste or religion. Our teacher just let us explore and reach our own conclusion.

Many decades later I had the privilege of documenting the work of Bhima Sangha, an association of working children in Karnataka. During my trip to Kundapur in Dakshina Kannada, I came across Makkala Panchayat (Children's Panchayat). Children up to the age of 18 elect their own representatives at the Panchayat level and form the Children's Panchayat. The adults' Panchayat conducts the elections, following the formal procedures – filing nominations with a returning officer, campaigning and elections. The program was designed to provide experiential education in democratic values and practices. After the elections of the children's Panchayat, a Task Force is constituted. This is a representative forum comprising all the local government functionaries, elected representatives and Makkala Panchayat. The forum is key to continuous dialogue and collaboration with the government. Since its inception, a wide range of children's problems have been discussed and solved: for example, building a footbridge across a seasonal stream to reach school, persuading the community not to employ children as domestic labour, stemming the out-migration of children to work in hotels and creating alternative schools in locations that do not have a school within reach etc. Interfacing with the local government has created an opportunity for the program to work with primary schoolteachers to improve the quality of education and also make the school an enjoyable place for children. (Vimala Ramachandran, *Getting Children Back to School*, Sage Publications, New Delhi 2003)

I have seen similar work through Bal Panchayats in other parts of the country. What was significant about Makkala Panchayat was that it was an integral part of education,

learning about democratic processes and internalising the values of equality and fair play. Experiencing elections, taking decisions through dialogue, convincing each other and learning to work with and live with different world views was a powerful way to nurture democratic values and respect for others.

Over the years I have also seen similar processes adopted in some Mahila Shikshan Kendra (managed by Mahila Samakhya) – where gender relations, social injustice, empowerment through collective forums etc. – are woven into the curriculum of the intensive learning program. The Nirantar (a center for gender and education based in New Delhi) publication titled *Window to the World* (An analytic documentation of the experience of bringing out a curriculum for rural women, New Delhi, undated) outlines step by step how the MSK curriculum was evolved in Banda, Uttar Pradesh.

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Almost four decades later I had a chance to go over the civics textbook prepared by Delhi SCERT. Friends and colleagues from Nirantar who were involved shared the draft. The textbook was not like conventional textbooks, it encouraged the teacher to work with children through projects, encouraged them to look around and learn about their own neighbourhood and their city. I remember sharing my own experience with some of them.

During this period I had the privilege of visiting Rishi Valley School (Madanapalle, AP) two times a year and saw how project based study of history, civics and almost all the subjects gave the students an opportunity to read, discuss and think. It opened their minds and encouraged them to question. And most importantly, the teaching learning process was entirely devoid of fear and punishment – the children enjoyed learning.

The National Curriculum Framework recommended that experiential teaching and learning draw upon local history and culture. I was immediately reminded of my two-week project, how the process of searching, reading and discovering lives and ideas of two great people started a process of critical thinking, something that has stayed with me through my years as a student, later as a teacher and now as a researcher and writer.

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An experiential learning process involves both the mind and the heart. When the heart is convinced, the information is internalised immediately. For the heart to be convinced, the information must not only be authentic in the eyes of the teacher but must be like a mirror that reflects the “truth” as perceived by the students. Engaging children in such a process demands a lot more of the teacher. She is not the fountainhead of all knowledge, the know all – but a facilitator

who enables her students to explore, compile and analyse. Once we get the hang of searching and finding information, critically reflecting on them, discussing them and then forming an opinion –we can use this in any situation.

Such learning processes also reaffirm the value of common sense and relate daily experience as citizens to concepts and history. This process can also help students critically reflect on social relationships, dominant prejudices, injustice, inequality, gender relations and a range of social issues like corruption, violence etc. Building bridges between common sense and the world of knowledge (as sanctified in textbooks) yields valuable insights to educators and students.

All this is easier said than done. Is our teaching force prepared for such a drastic overhaul of teaching-learning processes? Exposure to new ideas, a different vision of the learning and teaching need to go hand-in-hand with a conscious effort to unlearn. Civics and social science teaching lends itself to experiential learning. It is possible to initiate it at a very early stage in environmental sciences from class 1 and gradually build on it right up to secondary education. The canvas would no doubt expand, but once teachers and children get a hang of the process, then it is possible to take the process forward.

One of the huge challenges that we face today is that politics and politicians want to determine what right history is and what right civics is. History and civics have unfortunately become a political battleground. The only way we can put an end to this is by introducing experiential learning and teaching, so that we make space for local experiences, local culture, history and most importantly, meaningful education that teaches our children how to learn and not what to learn.

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