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Spaces for difference

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Nearly twenty years ago we had the first meeting of the Alternative School Network and we have met regularly ever since. A number of us involved in alternative schools have tried in different ways to share our resources and insights through local interventions in government schools, by conducting teacher training sessions, preparing resources in the form of textbooks and teachers' handbooks, and acting in advisory capacities for curricula planning at both state and national levels. It is, therefore, sad that the Right to Education Act does not allow any space for diversity. It will not be possible for alternative learning spaces to continue and if they do they will be expected to conform to the rule that states: "The curriculum and the evaluation procedure for elementary education shall be laid down by an academic authority to be specified by the appropriate government, by notification".

The irony is that some of the very schools that have tried to put into practice the ideals laid down in the Act (See Chapter V, Section 29, 2.) that speak, for example, "of learning through activities, discovery and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centered manner" will be faced with problems of recognition or if they are recognized will find it difficult to retain their essential character.

Many of us have worked with children for whom the system has not worked and we wonder how many more children will be in classrooms physically but not engaged mentally because of their different needs. It has been well documented how children from different social, economic, linguistic backgrounds feel marginalized within the classroom by teachers from dominant groups. In addition, the assumption that all children progress at a single pace that is related to age is obviously untrue and automatic promotion will not solve this problem.



It has become clear that the very notion of 'alternative' as being outside the system is now threatened. It has, therefore, made some of us rethink very seriously the meaning of 'alternative' in the present context. It is not thinking that we are special and therefore not accountable but trying to find a way of engaging with the government that does not compromise a commitment to people who we work with. Accountability is qualitatively different from submission to standardization where rules and regulations become more important than people and even ideas.

Recently there was a meeting that was intended as a dialogue between those involved in alternative schools and those who had

been instrumental in framing and passing the Right to Education Act. Earlier a petition had been presented to the Education Minister in which it was quite clearly stated that many people connected to the Alternative School Network endorsed many aspects of the RtE Act but there were also real problems. There was also a request to consider, for example, a National Council for Alternative Education and a suggestion that the existing NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling) could be strengthened to allow a more flexible form of recognition. Also there was an idea that a more meaningful training for teachers could be offered.

However, so far there has been very little official interest in pursuing such options. There was a sense that ideas had been taken and used but the organizations that had tried to live something over many years had indeed been ‘dumped’ as obsolete in a new vision of mass education. ‘Small’ seemed to be not ugly but irrelevant in the effort to bring about sweeping changes.

I think that the ‘dialogue’ has to be strengthened by an honest critiquing of the Act which questions what appears to be the hubris of those who defend the Act with such vehemence. Questions need to be asked about how the final form of the Act has been changed, how it has been diluted and even distorted from the original intentions. Further, the Act needs to be challenged where there are inconsistencies, unrealistic goals and vague generalizations about the meaning of quality education.

There have been a number of efforts to define alternative schooling but I think that the answer lies not with the handful of small schools that have called themselves alternative but with any school or any teacher within a school that has tried to give children the sense that they matter and are to be included and respected in a changing world. In this sense I would include as ‘alternative’ lawyers, administrators, human rights activists and planners who are endeavouring to pass legislation that is not just about numbers, blanket solutions and control but a more nuanced response to the complex needs of children of our country. This is certainly a different and an alternative perspective from a dominant view which believes that things, techniques and ideas matter more than people.

The modern phenomenon of standardization whether it be the shape, size and colour of tomatoes, the drastic reduction of the strains of millets and grains or the uniformity of a curriculum and syllabi in schools is increasingly having an impact on our daily lives that reduces our real choices to a minimum. We read about the dangers of imbalance caused by monocropping, the loss of cultures and erosion of languages and yet there is the dream or nightmare of reducing things for convenience to a single shape and size. The danger is that ‘the prescribed curriculum’ is actually understood as a prescribed syllabus, and this means in practice the likelihood of prescribed textbooks, a prescribed pattern of periods and prescribed systems of assessment.

Forty years ago I had the opportunity of spending a month with Sri Radhakrishna Menon and his family in Danagram, a village near Kozhikode, Kerala. Radhakrishna Menon was an outstanding educationist committed to the ideas of basic education and putting into practice the vision of Sarvodaya. As the headmaster he saw the local government school which had been running on Gandhian lines become a standardized government school bound by rules and regulations which left little space to do anything but finish the required ‘portions’. It is true that he did try to communicate to the pupils a different set of values through his own life but beyond an evening voluntary gardening club he was unable to implement a different kind of curriculum or practice. The school fulfilled the requirements of certain norms but in time has probably become indistinguishable from any other mainstream government school.

The practice of reflective teaching must include the freedom to continue a search for a method and curriculum that tries to meet different children’s needs and clarify their responsibilities in the here and now. This cannot be ‘upscaled’, replicated or imposed from above but needs space to evolve in diverse ways. Accountability is qualitatively different from submission to standardization where rules and regulations become more important than people.

Ten years ago I spent a brief morning in the Balwadi at Sevagram, near Wardha and certainly there was not a trace left of what the school must have been in its infancy. This school represented the sad remains of a great idea not unlike the mechanical plaster statue of Gandhiji across the way in the Museum that was destined to perpetually go through the motions of bending down to scoop up the handful of salt but never quite succeeding in touching the ground.



It was therefore a great joy to go back to Sevagram about six months ago and to see the flourishing school of Anandniketan. At present, the children learn through gardening, craft, cooking and a host of other purposeful activities that enable children to become independent and responsible. Alas, this school is now also faced with meeting ‘norms’ despite it being officially designated as ‘a heritage school’.

The 'norms' concerning physical infrastructure and teacher pupil ratio as laid down by the Act are reasonable and humane and do provide for the health and well-being of any child. However, what is disturbing is the growing possibility of control of all schools by a basically unsympathetic administration consisting of people who are not necessarily informed or concerned with the education of children as growing people. Decisions about what individual children need at different stages or what is appropriate for children to learn in different physical, social and cultural settings are likely to be increasingly taken by centralized bodies that consist of bureaucrats that have limited experience of teaching and often little awareness of children's varied needs. There are certainly exceptions within the multilayered hierarchical structures and there are individuals who strive to use their position to bring about change but there is also a weight of apathy that paralyses rather than mobilizes creative initiatives.

There is a certain naivety in people working in projects thinking that they can stand in splendid isolation outside the system but there is also a naivety in those who believe in a bureaucratic system that imagines things are substantially going to change with legislation where there is neither the political nor popular will to transform unjust structures into democratic systems that work. It is salutary to read the comments of J.P. Naik in his book *The Education Commission and After* commenting on the failure of the 1966 Commission when he writes about the professed objective of creating an education of the people, for the people and by the people as being unrealizable because "...in our heart of hearts, we really desired to continue the elite dominated society. There is therefore little wonder that we failed; in fact, given our real social objectives it would have been a surprise if we had succeeded."

The Right to Education Act which has been heralded as a great triumph was followed by a budget that increased the government's commitment to education by 0.04 per cent which does not even keep pace with escalating inflation. Meanwhile a floodgate has been opened to the private sector through the so-called Public Private Partnership scheme that means the government in effect can potentially abdicate its responsibility to actually provide the schooling that it has made mandatory. Large corporate bodies and industrial houses are increasingly playing a pivotal role in not only supporting schools financially but at the centre of determining educational policy.

Interestingly the alternative schools were told that they had no option but to fulfill the required norms as no exceptions could be made. The example given was that schools related to extremist and fundamentalist organizations would start making claims for differential treatment. However, what was not mentioned was the fact that it is such schools that usually have well established political connections often reflected in the school's management itself and thus have no problem in getting official recognition. This nexus between politicians, businessmen and those managing schools even make it possible for rules to be flouted such as in Karnataka where new English medium schools are officially not permitted but in practice are mushrooming.

One had anticipated that elitist schools, such as those that belong to the Public School Headmasters' Conference including Doon School and Mayo College, would manage to circumvent demands made on them to share their resources but one would not have imagined that they would be amongst the first to lobby and get a sympathetic hearing for getting an amendment to the Act to be exempted from the screening procedure on the grounds that they provided 'quality' education.

Schools with political or economic clout with officialdom are in no danger from the recent Act but schools that have been concerned precisely with some of the ideals laid out in the Act are the ones that are most vulnerable. The Right to Education Act has set rigid norms for some without jeopardizing the entrenchment of privilege for others and so, unwittingly or by design, endorses an unjust system to continue as it is.

It is very hard to see how the quality of education will be improved or how schooling will become more equitable but it is already evident how this Act is being used by the bureaucracy as a lever for yet more corruption and extortion. An alternative school in rural Andhra Pradesh was approached surprisingly soon after the passing of the Act and was told that the form for recognition would cost Rs.10,000.

The laudable insistence on the certification of a professional training may well exacerbate the corruption of D.Ed. colleges. These institutions are themselves required – presumably at some expense – to get annual recognition before they can charge their students exorbitant fees which sometimes include an extra charge for the benefit of not attending classes or for being saved the botheration of teaching practice and field experience! The D.Ed. itself is badly in need of being reformed and revitalized if it is to effectively prepare teachers for the classroom that is envisaged within the RtE Act.

Similarly, the folly of imagining that the 25 per cent admission of students into elite schools at the government's expense is going to be a transparent and fair process and not used by those who have the political means to put pressure is dangerously simplistic.

One only wishes that the government had started by simple practical measures within their existing schools like providing toilet facilities that function, leg room for children to sit comfortably in overcrowded classrooms and teachers that are present and actively engaging children in learning. A beginning could be made so that these basic measures could at least be put into practice in the capital's municipal schools where such things are often shockingly absent! There would then be some possibility of something changing but instead we have been given an Act that may well get tied in knots by litigation and stay orders and manipulated by a "business as usual" mentality that still effectively keeps the disprivileged in their place as thought fit by the powerful.

This Act has forced alternative schools to come out from their comfort zone where there has been remarkably little interference over many years mainly because earlier there was an indifference on the part of the government but now schooling has become potentially a lucrative business and significant in the political arena not least in the face of growing pressure from international marketing forces.

Does this Act mean the end of the very idea of alternative schooling? It is not so much the mere survival of a handful of schools

that may have been struggling for existence anyway that is at stake but the harder challenge is to ensure that all children get the possibility of a meaningful education and are not left to compulsory substandard schooling. It is also about demanding that spaces are given to encourage diversity and innovation with a degree of autonomy in order to respond more effectively to different contexts and children's needs.

The recent legislation in theory may provide a tool to fight for greater justice but we cannot afford to underestimate the power of structures and people in positions of privilege and control to resist change. It will be vital to monitor how this Act in practice impacts children's lives in a range of areas and contexts. There is an even greater need for clarity about what is alternative and what choices are in front of us that will enable us to hold on to what is essential and to find ways that we can live and work for.

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