

Speech entitled given by Mrs. Tarla Nanavati, Principal of Sri Atmananda Memorial School, at the Association of ISC Schools Principal's Conference (1997):

CREATING REAL CHANGE IN EDUCATION

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[Model School for the KPM Approach to Children]*

Much has been written and said about how the present system of education must change to retain the basic values of India while preparing children for the challenges of tomorrow. Even during our country's beginnings, our revered leaders expressed the ideals of building character, developing wisdom as well as knowledge, and instilling moral and spiritual values whole opening, broadening, and elevating the mind. Today these qualities are even more essential as different cultures occupy one global village. The aim of the education at Sri Atmananda Memorial School is expressed in the following paragraph by Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon), who has given the inspiration for the school's teaching approach, [the KPM Approach to Children]:

"There is a latent push in any man which is only a search for perfection. Rightly pursued, one finds this in one's awakening experience to one's real nature through the atmosphere between the real teacher and the taught. Education is only an attempt towards this. Atma Vidya Educational Foundation strives to perfect this aim."

*Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon)
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How should the educational establishment change to bring about the results that everyone wants in our children? Even after decades of educational commission reports and many funded projects for reform, we do not see positive results.

Rather, we see a pattern of regimentation that robs children of their self-esteem, and a system of rote memorization that blocks the child's ability to think for himself. Not only the child, but the whole society, suffers as a result. According to Dr. Philip John, a child psychiatrist, the alarming rise of adolescent suicide in Kerala is directly linked to the educational grind that children are put through. Dr. John has said, "This terrible fate of our children may have to do with their lack of social skills to cope with stress, as their entire childhood is spent in competitive memorizing and mimicry."

From your own experience in trying to improve education, I hope you will agree that two fundamental changes must occur in the teacher before we will see real change in education: first, changes in the teachers' attitude towards their own role in education; and second, a deeper understanding of how children develop into adults.

Before there can be real change in the classroom, teachers need to re-examine their role in the learning process. It is in the relationship between the teacher and the child that learning takes place. Teachers should become aware of the enormous influence they have on children and how their enthusiasm, motivation and dedication affect a child's learning experience. They need to learn how to motivate children according to the children's own interest. For this,

teacher must be supported in their efforts by a school environment - and an administration - that encourages natural active learning.

Just as memorizing a textbook is not real learning, teachers cannot learn to be real teachers from a book. At Sri Atmananda Memorial School, we give experiential training for a period of a year where the teacher trainees are immersed in an environment of active learning in the lower primary section. The teachers are trained to create games and activities directly related to the syllabus, which spontaneously attract the children to the subject. For example, to introduce a unit on rural populations, they may recreate a rural village with paddy fields, a well, and a *grama sabha* meeting. Or, they may introduce fractions and measurements by cooking, dividing and distributing a cake.

You may wonder why I stress the lower primary years so much at a conference of secondary school principals. It is because the foundation laid in the lower primary years, where full regard is given to the children's thoughts and feelings, results in a high school environment where students are self-motivated and fully focused on the academic goals. They go about this learning in a completely natural and self-confident way.

Finding and expanding the child's interest is the main work of our teachers. For the beginning high school students, the chemistry teacher said that attracting the children to the curriculum was his primary concern. The extensive syllabus he had to cover was secondary. He organized fun experiments designed to attract the children to the syllabus. Once they were attracted to the subject, they began to learn on their own. One boy went home and memorized the entire periodic table of elements, just for fun. And the rate of their learning, once they were interested and motivated, was so rapid that the class went far ahead in the vast syllabus. For our annual science fair, some of the parents remarked that the experiments demonstrated by the students were what they themselves had studied in university.

No child in the school is ever forced to attend an activity or do a particular work, yet they enthusiastically and willingly participate fully of their own accord. Because they must decide for themselves how to use the school resources and structure their own school day in the early years, they experience problem-solving from a very early age. Thus, problem solving is part of the curriculum. It becomes second nature to the child. By the secondary level, the children show a remarkable ability to meet any situation, and parents tell us that their children are facing social stresses with confidence and poise. Yesterday it was mentioned in the feedback on the group discussion the problems our children will have to face in the 21st century. Listing the problems and finding individual solutions may feel overwhelming, but if children are brought up in this way, they themselves will find the answers.

To bring up children in this way requires the teacher to "unlearn" old habits and old ways of relating to children. These old methods, most of which are aimed at disciplinary measures, often bring about a negative reaction in children and turn them against the learning process. It is not easy to change old habits and to look at learning in a new way. Sometimes it takes a thorough self-assessment. However, when the change does occur, the rewards are immeasurable. The teachers begin to experience the joy of seeing children actively pursuing knowledge, and a relationship of enthusiasm and mutual appreciation is established between the teacher and the taught.

Not only must the teacher change her attitudes towards her own role, she also needs a better understanding of how children develop. The child is a person in his own right and, like the

budding flower or tree, has in him what is needed to develop and learn to the extent of his own capability. All the education commission reports pay lip service to the need for developing the child's faculties, but *how* that should be done is left out.

How can the child's inherent interest in the world around the child be brought out and enhance? How can her capabilities be developed to their fullest?

For children, a sense of security is the basis for learning. If a child is secure and confident in her relationship with the teacher, she will feel free to indicate the learning she needs. This point was brought home by our experience with a student in the lower primary section. He joined us from another school where he had earned good marks. One day he came to the mathematics activity and asked the teacher to draw some geometric angles for him to measure. While the teacher drew the angles, the boy said he had studied angles in his previous school. He did not want any help. But after thinking for a minute, he asked, "Teacher, can you tell me the difference between an angle and a line? I'm totally confused about that." The teacher talked to him about his own straight arm and how it hinges at the elbow to form an angle, about the angles we see in our school, such as the playground slide and the slope of the roof, and about the difference between an angle and a line. The boy was very happy and said that although he had memorized how to measure them, he had never understood the difference between angles and lines and thought that they were both the same. He asked for more angles and happily measured them, understanding exactly what he was measuring. Through the teacher's encouragement, the child was relaxed and confident enough to reveal his own learning need. And he will retain the new knowledge because it is grounded in his own experience.

Once the child feels secure, he is free to indicate his interest. One boy in the eighth standard history class always used to make jokes and ask the teacher if she would allow him to sleep through the class. One day she asked him straight out, "Is history really that boring?" He looked surprised and said, "No."

While they were talking, the boy began sketching out a word game on the French Revolution, which was the topic for that day. When the other children came, the teacher departed from her own lesson plan and suggested that the students work the boy's puzzle together. The boy was very pleased that his history game was valued, and he has become one of the most enthusiastic members of the class.

In searching for way to release the growing and learning capability of the child, we are certainly finding that the methods of regimentation and force memorization do not work. In fact, these methods can bring the opposite result - the child who learns to obey but cannot think on her own; the child whose fear and suppressed anger stunt her development; the child who is top-heavy, bristling with facts, but utterly ignorant about compassion for her fellow man.

If a child is given regard and encouragement for his thoughts and feelings, he will automatically develop regard for the feelings of others. You may feel, "These results are not extraordinary. Our children also do these things." But remember, in this school the children have never been forced to study or learn. They have only been encouraged to explore according to their main interests which were expanded and nourished by the teachers in a stimulating academic environment. Whatever they do in our school, they choose to do.

When the distinguished Chief Executive and Secretary, Mr. Francis Fanthome, invited the I.C.S.E. principals of Kerala to a meeting in our school we told the children that the principals were coming and that if the children liked, at the end of the meeting they could come in and sing the national anthem. "Is it compulsory?" one boy asked. We said, "No only if you wish."

The meeting took place and was drawing to a close and one of the teachers went out to the playing field where a lively game of cricket was taking place. "The meeting is almost over," she told them. "If you wish, you may come and sing." All the children ran from the field, entered the meeting and sang the national anthem with feeling. It was a moving moment for us. The boys and girls came there because they chose to come, because they love school. Because they wanted to come, the feeling was genuine.

Long after the final examinations have been passed, these children will have an enthusiasm and openness to learning and to life in general. They will be confident and secure within themselves and fearless to face a changing world. This benefits not only them, but the world in which they live."