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EDUCATION FROM WITHIN THE CHILD'S WORLD

National seminar

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Today in India, educators are searching for alternative methods to make education meaningful in the twenty-first century. This includes not only the more obvious goals of lightening the book bag and introducing activity-based learning, but reaches deeper into the fundamental needs of human beings and their development. These new alternative methods for which we are searching must incorporate contemporary educational research—including theories such as Dr. Howard Gardner’s “multiple intelligences”—but also build on the solid work of past thinkers such as John Dewey and Maria Montessori and the best of the holistic, humanistic, and progressive educational movements.

However, unless we address the inner world of the child so that his education is relevant to his own experience, all our theories, methods, and alternatives will only touch the surface. A fundamental change is also needed in how we think about education and how we think about ourselves in that process. We need to change our self-concept as teachers and adult caregivers from authorities in knowledge to facilitators for the child to discover knowledge. Our main focus needs to change from the subject matter to the child’s interest. This may sound like a drastic step, but the teacher or adult has to be involved and happy for meaningful education to take place.

The KPM Approach to Children is an innovation being put into practice for the past eighteen years in a school in Malakkara, near Chengannur. This approach is based on the following paragraph written by its founder, Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon):

“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.”

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Inspired by this paragraph, the KPM Approach to Children is based on the relationship between the teacher and the child. What makes this different from other innovations is that the child is valued unconditionally by the adult and, therefore, cannot fail.

Picture this: two small children are playing on the playground. One becomes frustrated and hits the other, causing her to cry. Typically, the teacher automatically looks to the feelings of the victim and, accordingly, scolds the aggressor for hurting another. But valuing each child unconditionally means not only looking to the feelings of the victim, which are fear and pain, but also looking to the feelings of the

aggressor that may be anger, revenge or frustration. These feelings must also be acknowledged and soothed and, if possible, the source found. Is he hungry? Was he beaten before he came to school that morning? Did the child he hit, hit him yesterday? Contrary to conventional wisdom, this aggressive child probably needs even more help at that particular moment. And, this is the vital point: this child must not feel that the teacher thinks that he himself is anger and aggression. He has those feelings, but punishment without help will only cement them to the character of the child. The teacher is the key to keeping the child separate from the negative, and the teacher's unconditional acceptance of him, the core of who he is, makes all the difference in the life habits he forms. If he is rejected at this point, he will be learning that he himself is a failure. Failure is a state of mind that can colour people's actions and personalities. If children can feel confident to take risks and to find results, failure does not enter the picture.

Feelings in small children cannot be taken for granted or ignored. Before logic is fully developed in a child, he cannot separate his feelings from his being. That is why early experiences stay with us into adulthood and form our habits and character. These feelings even help to determine brain development, as has been well documented by psychologists studying the relationship between emotion and intellect. In Daniel Goleman's (1995) pioneer work, Emotional Intelligence, he has said that,

“The human brain continues to shape itself through life, with the most intense growth occurring during childhood.... This makes childhood a crucial window of opportunity for shaping lifelong emotional propensities” (p. 257).

If young children see the world through feelings and if their feelings are helping to shape their brains, then how could we reform our educational systems to take that into account? First, the role of the teacher and the way a teacher looks at a child will have to be rethought. As John Gatto, the celebrated New York teacher, said, “We resist teaching but nobody resists learning” (Gatto, 1999, p. 157). Learning is always interesting for children, but teaching can be insensitive. In most schools, a child quickly learns from his teacher that his own thoughts and feelings do not matter very much. The teacher has an idea of what is needed for him, and the child must enter into the teacher’s world. If the child wants to be recognized as an individual he must excel in the teacher’s world or rebel against it and, as so often happens, seek his individual recognition elsewhere because school is irrelevant to his interests. If a teacher approaches education from the child’s point of view, he will redefine his own role. He will see that the work of a teacher is to establish a relationship with the child. That means he will have to gain the trust of the child in order to enter his world and become a resource for the child. In the ordinary line of education the role of a teacher is to

acquire a body of knowledge and to “pass on” that knowledge to students. But as Professor Gary Borich has said, “If you only learn from your teacher, you are limited, and this is not learning; it is only remembering” (Borich, 2000). A child should have a chance to go beyond his teacher’s knowledge to his own experience.

Not only the role of the teacher but also the role of the school should be redefined. To keep a child’s interest, to compete with popular culture for children’s attention, schools add all sorts of rewards such as marks, grades, prizes, and scholarships. But the rewards are not succeeding, as we know from statistics on student suicides and psychological cases. As educators, we have to rethink the way in which we offer education to make it more in tune with the modern world and more in tune with our children.

You may ask, why should we look at school through a child’s eyes? One may feel that a child’s real interests are in cinema or pop music or cartoons, not in “serious” subjects. But starting exactly where their interests are, even if they are totally unrelated to school work, will gain the child’s attention; then through association, the teacher can introduce the syllabus.

If, from the very beginning, that child can get the fundamental guarantee that his thoughts and feelings are important, he gains a sense of security,

relaxes and expresses his interests. Then he will feel that anything is possible for him. He is open to the help of the teacher as a resource.

If we look at school through a child's eyes, we see it differently. A young child placed in a school setting may feel, how does this place relate to me? Who is this adult, and what does he think of me? Does he recognize me and who I am? The child has no reason to trust the teacher. Depending on his early childhood experiences he may expect criticism or indulgence from adults, but he has no reason to think that this particular teacher cares about him.

If we bring the relationship between the teacher and the child to the forefront of education, we have to go further and create a more dynamic model of school and curriculum based on this new perspective. This model naturally opens up many possibilities: we begin with the child's interests to guarantee learning; we promote experiential learning; we integrate life activities and academics; and more. Today, recognizing the interconnectedness of people, cultures, and the environment, we are rethinking the way we organize curriculum to fit the modern age of global information in which learning never stops throughout life. For example, for primary school children, creating their own bank, disbursing funds, writing cheques, giving loans, and keeping records, gives an opportunity to develop mathematical, managerial, language, and social skills in a fun and therefore memorable way.

Teachers and administrators would need to recognize the importance of these changes and become successful promoters of a new model to the parents and community. If schools offer innovative education and the parents do not understand or support it, the children will not benefit.

The following is an example of an actual case involving a seven-year-old boy and his parents. Raju was attending a KPM school in the second standard. Textbooks are only one resource for the children in the school and not even the best resource but, probably at the insistence of his father, this child always took his books home. At home, his father would take a book and ask the boy to read from it or answer questions from the text. The child didn't want to do it, which his father assumed meant that the boy couldn't read. He came to talk with the teachers to complain that Raju was not learning anything at school and was just playing. Meanwhile, the teachers had become concerned because Raju had begun to disrupt the other children's activities and was not willing to participate as he had done previously. Since there was no obvious cause for this at school, the teachers wanted to consult the parents and find out if they had any idea why. When they met, the teachers assured the parents that their son could read but, as he didn't want to read when the father asked him to, maybe he wasn't willing to read with this kind of pressure. The teachers asked the father to stop trying to make his son read for him and

start encouraging him in the things he enjoyed doing at school. The father was willing to try and very soon, the mischievous behavior at school stopped and two weeks later the father heard Raju reading aloud without being asked. He and came back and told the teachers, “You were right, he can read.” Raju was happy to read for his father once the pressure was off. The reason Raju’s behavior had changed for the worse at school was because he had felt he was not getting from the school what he needed to please his father. It is true that he was not getting from the school the skill to read and answer questions from a textbook, but he was learning to read as an extension of his interest, because he enjoyed it. From the school’s point of view, answering questions from a textbook will come in its own time when the love for reading and learning is established. So, caught between conflicting assumptions, Raju had been wasting his day and hadn’t participated in the many activities available for him at school. He needed his father’s approval of his efforts at school in order that he could progress. His father finally understood this, and it changed Raju dramatically.

As school administrators and teachers make successful partnerships with parents and the community, it is to the advantage of the corporate sector to join this effort. If we want the business community to join in educational reform, we have to demonstrate that it is an investment in growth opportunities for both the corporations themselves and the

markets they operate in. This is especially true in developing countries. Education is as much, if not more, of a market imperative as transportation or communication. The information technology industry focus now is on creating the technological infrastructure and systems for the transmission of vast amounts of data in incredibly short time spans. But knowledge is not merely the accumulation of facts. The users—company employees, customers, and indeed all stakeholders--need to be able to assimilate that information and make proper judgments. Corporations need the enlightened manpower that better schools will produce. Today more than ever they need focused individuals who will be efficient, respectful of multiculturalism and also responsible with the world's resources.

To achieve a new model of education, teachers need to be trained properly. Funds can be allocated to training good teachers—not people who merely know their subjects, but people who are attracted to the development of children. If resources are applied to early education further resources will not be needed for youth rehabilitation programmes, remedial classes, or retraining programmes, which will become obsolete. If we understand a child when he is three and educate him accordingly, he will save us money when he is sixteen. The large potential of volunteers can be developed and used to educate our children in this new model. It is possible that people without college degrees can become effective

teachers when they are trained to understand how children grow and think. As John Gatto also has pointed out, “A million family schools over the past decade have demonstrated that uncertified parents, many of them in modest circumstances and lacking benefit of college themselves, have out-performed the best factory-model schools, public or private” (Gatto, 1999, p. 55). Activism and volunteerism at the local level often can produce better learners than a conventional school. Also, children are the best teachers. Children love to learn from other children, and that is a valuable resource to be developed, a resource that should not be wasted.

The reforms suggested in this paper—looking at education through the eyes of the child, bringing the teacher-child relationship to the forefront of education, reallocating resources for teachers’ salaries and training, use of volunteers and peer teaching—these reforms are urgently needed in a world where the very meaning of the word “educated” is changing. One way or another, today’s graduate will be required to interact with people around the world. Even as he tries to stay true to his own culture, he will be required to interact with others who are vastly different from him. It will not be enough if this graduate is “qualified.” He or she must be educated: a person who can weigh facts, find solutions, and apply them to his life or job and, in other words, to use them to make a better world. To produce this kind of educated world citizen, the heart of our reform effort has to center around child development. Professor

James P. Comer, Yale School of Medicine, has said, “Even people in education who are sensitive to child development focus on ... instruction /assessment first, and I argue that it should be development first and that development should guide everything else” (Goldberg, 1997, p. 559).

According to the KPM Approach to Children, the most important principles of child development are the following:

1. Children need to feel they are valued.
2. Children need a sense of freedom.
3. Children process experience through their feelings.
4. Children are constantly learning.
5. Children adopt the behavior of adults close to them.

This approach to children is being practiced in two schools and studied in a training program offered to teachers from around the world. The KPM Approach to Children has taken the best of the holistic, humanistic and progressive strands in education and gone beyond them in its emphasis on valuing the child unconditionally.

One may think this will never work in real life. It is working, and it has been working for the past eighteen years. The model school was established in 1987 to follow the KPM Approach to Children, the principles of which have just been outlined. In 1995, a school following this approach was established in Austin, Texas USA, demonstrating that this approach works in any culture, any socioeconomic group. These

schools are following these reforms. In addition to valuing the child and making his or her perspective the center of the organization of the school, these two institutions also invest in teacher training, encourage volunteers, and approach the private sector for support.

At both schools the teachers start at the child's own level and really understand how he is—is he hungry? Is he scared? Is he happy? Right from the kindergarten, children decide what to do, how to spend their school day, what activities to attend, and how to use the facilities, including the teachers, to pursue their own interests and ideas. The children have a sense of freedom, which is not license. The teachers are attentive and interested and guide the child. These children will not need to take supplemental lessons in life management because they are living it every day from a young age— learning, with the help of a teacher, to get what they want without hurting or disturbing anyone else, problem-solving, and making decisions.

All of us have the same ultimate aims for our children. We want them to be mentally and physically developed, disciplined, with a sense of self-confidence, compassion, and self-worth. We also want them to have a love of learning that lasts throughout life. We can achieve this by giving regard to our children when they are very young.

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