

New Visions from Ancient Traditions

“The Relationship between the Teacher and the Taught”

Speech given by Mrs Mary Thomajan at The State of the World Forum,
San Francisco, USA, November 6th, 1997:

It has been said that if you want to change the world you must start with education. Developed and developing nations alike admit that their educational systems are not keeping pace with a changing world. Many of them are engaged in sweeping reforms: national policies which mostly address structure, method, and content. But will transformation occur by simply modifying the forms of education, or are we called to re-examine our fundamental approach to children?

There is a school in south India that recognizes the dignity of children – a place where heart and mind combine, where happiness is the central aim of learning, and where the relationship between the teacher and the taught is the key to natural development.

Sri Atmananda Memorial School in Kerala, India, was named for a great Indian Sage. He was a family man, a poet, a teacher, a lawyer, and a superintendent of police. His teachings are carried on today by his son, Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon), who is the inspiration for the school and its unique teaching approach, [the KPM Approach to Children]. This inspiration is expressed in the following paragraph by Sri Adwayananda:

“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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While Sri Atmananda Memorial School is inspired by a Sage, it is an independent, non-sectarian, private institution. It has served for ten years as a model to the world for its revolutionary teaching approach [the KPM Approach to Children] – an approach based on the relationship between the teacher and the taught. This relationship has a sacred origin, and it has lived at the centre of

Indian culture and tradition since ancient times. In this school, that relationship comes alive in a modern setting.

Why is this relationship important? For this reason: When we give regard to children, when we value their thoughts and feelings, they respond with their trust, they gain a sense of security, they are able to relax, and they enthusiastically express their individual interests and show us how they are prepared to learn. Our deep regard for them makes it possible to hold their interest.

But how do the teachers at Sri Atmananda Memorial School create this special relationship? How do we engage the heart of a child?

The key elements in this relationship are:

Entering the child's world
The expression of a child's interest
Encouragement
Security
Relaxation
Guidance
Constructive Development

The teachers demonstrate their regard for the children in several ways.

One way is through careful attention to the feelings of the child, particularly very young children. Young children are wide open, and any experience, positive or negative, goes deep within them and can remain with them for a lifetime. What happens to them at this young age is their future, because it affects their whole being. As their feelings are regarded, children will naturally develop regard for the feelings of others.

The teachers use positive reinforcement and encouragement. For example, if a child learning to read is struggling with a word, they will give him the word, not say to him, "Now, sound it out...." Forcing him to "sound out" puts the child on the spot; his feelings will be hurt if he cannot measure up to the expectations of his teacher or parent. By ensuring the child's sense of security and self-esteem first, the correction will come from him automatically.

This attention to feelings is evident in the following example from the classroom:

A five-year old child in the first grade was writing a word on the blackboard. He asked the teacher to write it too. The child wrote the letters, all backwards. Observing his and his teacher's efforts, he said, "Let's do it again." They did, and this time both teacher and student wrote the word correctly.

The student then looked at all the words on the blackboard and pointed to his initial, incorrect effort. "Who wrote that one?", he asked. The teacher replied, "I don't know." Satisfied that he was in the right, he mastered the correct spelling of the word and repeated it thereafter.

The child, of course, knew that he was the one who had made the mistake, and the teacher was well aware of this. But by her response she allowed him to forget his mistake and enjoy his success, thereby helping him towards confidence and mastery.

Trained teachers are essential to the success of [the KPM Approach to Children]. Our teachers show regard to the children by valuing their opinions. Children need a stake in their education, an education built on their interests. As their capacity for logical thinking develops, they need to have their opinions taken seriously. Their opinions emerge from the influences around them: from their parents, their friends, and what they have gleaned from television and other media. Whatever their source, each child has an outlook.

That child will not separate his ideas from himself. When his thoughts and opinions are valued, the child internalizes that value and develops self-esteem and confidence. When a child is happy and secure, he cannot be stopped from learning. With that inner confidence, he will be able to prosper in a diverse world. This demands humility, patience, enthusiasm, and keen attention on the part of the teachers. The quality of that attention is the central focus of the teaching training programme at Sri Atmananda Memorial School. Often, by "unlearning" traditional concepts of classroom management and control, a teacher can create a safe place for feelings to emerge, or allow a silence in which a young voice can be heard. The teachers here learn to recede, to observe, to protect the child's feelings and to guide the children in positive directions.

Parker Palmer, author and educator, has said: "Transformation of teaching begins with the transformed heart of the teacher." In this method, when the child is approached properly, what he gives back touches and transforms the heart of the teacher.

To quote one teacher's observation:

“Before I came here, I worked in two other schools. Working here has totally changed me. The natural drive for perfection in a child is not hindered here, and I have learned how not to be in the child's way.”

Transformation does not stop with students and teachers; it also extends to the family. For students to fully benefit from this special atmosphere for learning, the parents must wholeheartedly support their efforts at school. As the parents align themselves with the values and approach used in the school, the child becomes an active agent of change in family life.

Several parents have spoken to the transformation in family life. A mother from the Austin school commented:

“Eric attended public school, as well as day care. When he first started at this school, I was very concerned. A lot of negative and withdrawn behaviours I had never seen before came out of him, and it was a real challenge for my husband and me to manage them. But as his teachers have him the freedom to express his negative behaviours and to help him see his way separate from them, to be who he was, and to feel his feelings, those behaviours began to subside. It only took a few months for his entire attitude to turn around.

I would encourage other parents to be patient with this method. My son has never been happier than at this school. He begged me never to send him to a different school again, and to be allowed to stay here throughout high school. I have seen many transformations in my son. There is no question in my mind that this approach is the way to educate children.”

At the school in India:

A father was transferred to another village for his job, and moved his family accordingly. As a result his daughter was forced to leave the model school. She was so inconsolable that she cried constantly and refused to go to her new school. Her father, deciding that his daughter's future was more important than his convenience, moved the family back to Malakara and returned her to the school she loved. He now commutes the 20 kilometres to work each day. His younger daughter, not quite five, exclaimed: “Don't ever think of moving away again, because I am going to that school too!”

The teachers at Sri Atmananda Memorial School train for one year with children ages four through nine. They learn to enter the world of the child, where they come to understand how each child is prepared to learn. Through the child's interest, the teachers can expand her knowledge and guide her learning in constructive and positive directions. Her learning is effortless and permanent, because it is relevant to her. In this seamless and experiential way of learning, individual expressions and learning styles are accommodated. A high teacher-to-student ratio ensures that every child's needs are met.

The resulting environment is alive with happy children. They tumble off the school bus and go about selecting their own activities from the abundant choices, or making up their own games and fun. The younger children (ages four through nine) are not assigned to rooms. The entire school is a classroom, particularly the playground, which might have a science experiment going on in one area and geography lesson or ball game in another.

In a typical example from the model school, Mahatma Gandhi's famous salt march was reenacted in the lower primary section to acquaint the children with Indian history. The students spontaneously seized on the idea and dressed up in saris and dhotis. One boy, dressed as Mahatma Gandhi with walking stick and spectacles, led the march. They marched to the playground where the teachers were waiting in a sunny spot with trays of salt water. They spooned the water onto black paper and allowed it to evaporate in the sun. The children got salt just like Gandhiji did, and in the process, combined science, history and drama.

In an example from the Austin school:

A student saw a great blue heron by the creek on the campus. The children were excited to find the bird back the next day. They piled into the library to look up the heron in the encyclopedia. Flurries of research and writing followed: What kind of nest does a heron build? Where does he migrate when he is not by our creek?

Their interest in animals continues to this day. Several children made books about the bird, and collected newspaper accounts of all heron sightings. A study of animal habitats began that moved from encyclopedia pictures to students making clay models of animal homes. One student, who watches 'Kratts' Creatures' on television, dictated a nine-page report on animals to his classmates. For him, there was no division between what he learned at home, and what he learned at school.

The motivation behind their joy in learning is the children's sense of freedom, the feeling that they are making their own choices and that their interests count. This "sense of freedom" is not license. Though the teacher is following the child, she will maintain the adult perspective and provide appropriate guidance to ensure the children's safety and happiness. She is also responsible for a carefully prepared environment with fun and stimulating activities that bring the syllabus alive. The curriculum is presented in innovative ways, with weekly themes, and special events that are interdisciplinary and multi-sensory.

As the children structure their own school day, they learn to make decisions and solve problems from an early age and to develop inner discipline. As they participate in their own and the other's education, they rely on one another for learning and discernment. As they observe the teachers handling different situations, they learn how to resolve conflicts and develop tolerance and compassion.

In the safety of this open yet carefully guided environment, the children will naturally express any negative influences they have absorbed. Teachers are trained, without labeling the child as "bad", to separate negative behaviour from the child. They then guide that expression through attraction or distraction in a positive direction. This replaces negative feelings with positive ones that can remain with the child for life. Following this example, the child will in time be able to do this for himself. The bond between teachers and students here is not only logic, but also love.

By the age of ten, their focus shifts from autonomy to social relationships and community. For these children, working out their problems in their mock "town meetings" may be a more important exercise than maths class. At this age (10-12), because of their social interests, they learn the interpersonal skills that will help them to communicate and apply their knowledge to a larger society.

As they move through junior high and high school, the students have settled down to longer attention spans and more sustained activities; they have learned to work together and have freed themselves of many of the personality problems that would impair their learning.

At the high-school level, one sees a strong academic focus, as well as a sense of purpose, leadership and inner strength. These children are undaunted. They will emerge ready to assume responsibility for themselves, their communities and their world.

Atma Vidya Educational Foundation is committed to making the [KPM Approach to Children] widely available to children, through its teacher training programmes and its publications. The [KPM Approach to Children] is disseminated in two ways: The first way is through the total replication of this system in the form of a branch school. The second is through enrichment and training programs while enable teachers from around the world to enjoy and fresh and powerful experience with children.

The [KPM Approach to Children] is useful beyond the classroom; it is a parenting model, and it has value for community and social agencies. Recently, a Mumbai attorney studied this school as a model for an Indian rehabilitation program for rescued child labourers.

Because the [KPM Approach to Children] is teacher-child centered, with the emphasis on individual needs and learning capacities, it is applicable across cultures. In 1995, the first branch school outside of India opened in Austin, Texas, after the entire teaching staff came to India for training. The Austin school, now in its third year of operation, has doubled its enrollment each year and demonstrates the effectiveness of the [KPM Approach to Children] in a Western culture.

Atma Vidya Educational Foundation has many on-going initiatives. The Indian Government, with funding from the European Union, has acknowledged that value of the [KPM Approach to Children] for reforming India's primary education systems by short-listing our school as a training institution for their trainers.

Innovative games and activities designed by the teachers have been made available in a series of resource books published by Orient Longman Ltd.

We are commissioning a study which will evaluate the [KPM Approach to Children] and its outcomes.

In closing, I would ask you, what is the real aim of education? Is it not to awaken knowledge? But knowledge is greater than mere intellectual mastery – real knowledge is born in the heart as well as the mind; it is wisdom and compassion and the capacity for connection that is the basis of an ethical life. We must give our children a whole education if they are to develop the resources of character that will allow them to meet their destinies in an ever-changing world.

In that spirit, I call you to action. Atma Vidya Educational Foundation welcomes your support for Sri Atmananda Memorial School and its expanding programmes both here and abroad. We invite an active dialogue with educators, policy makes and all of you who are interested in a better way of education. Together we can work to prepare our children to meet the claims of community upon their lives, and to give shape to the future of their world.