

Alternative Schools of Thought

The present education system came out of the transition from the agrarian society to the industrial society. We tell ourselves a story about how education helps children to become successful adults.

Everyone is made to believe that if you leave the farm and go to the city, there are jobs and relative comforts when compared to life on a farm. To some extent, this seems to be true and parents with good intentions, persuade their children into going through a mechanical process of schooling with the hope that they will find a well-paying job afterwards. The modern education system, like the economy, is set up to create a product. And, the product is a worker in an industry.

“The system of modern schooling,” said Rabindranath Tagore, “forcibly snatches away children from a world full of the mystery of God’s own handiwork, full of the suggestiveness of personality. It is a mere method of discipline that refuses to take into account the individual. It is a manufactory specially designed for grinding out uniform results.” In the process of preparing young people for their role in society, are we missing the deeper meaning and higher purpose of learning?

Even if we accept the idea that education should shape children into economically productive citizens, we have to face the fact that the industrial economy is creating problems at a scale that is undermining human existence. Multiple crises have emerged in many sectors such as resource use, climate change, food security and human values. **Our present education policy continues to be geared towards developing 20th century skills — skills for commercial innovation, further industrialisation of society, economic growth, international competitiveness and financial prosperity.**

Indeed, we can say that education has succeeded to a great extent and led to these rapid changes. However, given that we may be reaching the limits of growth as conceived of in the previous century, we need to rethink education and see how it can be directed towards sustainability. Sustainability refers to ways of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Such an education needs to emphasise on a different set of values and attitudes than the existing system of mass education.

However, it is not enough to point out the problems with our education system. We need to experiment with alternate kinds of education in order to meet our aspirations for holistic well-being. Such an education should ideally lead to an individual’s development in the physical, intellectual, moral-spiritual and creative dimensions.

Many great thinkers have thought deeply about how we can make education holistic and a source of happiness for both the individual and society. The individual and society are intimately connected and the well-being of one cannot be separated from the well-being of the other. All around us, we can see how modern industrial societies have produced great economic wealth at the cost of individual health and happiness.

Surely, we need a different kind of education to pull ourselves out of this mess. How can financial success compensate for the loss of individual freedom and spiritual growth? **Tagore wrote eloquently about a vision of education that addresses the kind of freedom sought by the human spirit. He also saw education as a vehicle that allows one to appreciate other cultures, while maintaining one’s own. This was the vision that led him to create Santiniketan.**

Holistic growth

Alternative education tries to address some of the problems with conventional education and there are several ongoing efforts. They do not claim to offer perfect solutions for the problems that beset society, but are engaged in 'lighting lamps instead of cursing the darkness'. Many alternate schools and other experiments in education are trying to answer the question, 'What would an enlightening, deeply enriching, and rigorous education – one that would be interesting to children – look like?'

Inquiry into education has shown us how we can engage and educate students without forcing them or threatening them with punishment. **In alternative education, a child is seen as a tender plant that will grow to its potential given the right nourishment.** Hence, alternative educators provide the right conditions for every child's holistic growth.

Mainstream schools measure their success in terms of students' performance in tests and examinations. The examination results serve as an indices to the future acquisition of wealth, status and fame by alumni of these schools. **On the other hand, alternative schools question these commonly held definitions of success and many of them believe that children need to be educated in order to develop mutual understanding, respect and cooperation. They do not believe in training individuals to become selfishly competitive.**

In alternative education, the process of education is given as much importance as the aims of education. Learning is fostered in an atmosphere of freedom and joy and the natural curiosity of children is kindled. It does not advocate any particular model of teaching, but there are some broad ideals on which such an education is built. **One such ideal is respect for the individual student, irrespective of socio-economic status and abilities.**

Different approaches

Teachers in alternative education are interested in students as individuals as:

- They work hard to inspire them, have high expectations, use personal experiences and the interests of students as starting points for teaching, and value their strengths.
- They aim at developing the 'whole' human being.
- Experiential learning and creative skills are nurtured, and often the approach is inclusive.

Alternatives to the mainstream educational systems began to emerge as early as the late 19th century and reformers like Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati and Syed Ahmad Khan promoted education as a force for social regeneration.

Thinkers like Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, J Krishnamurti, Gijubhai Badheka and Aurobindo have also created a number of vibrant models of alternative education.

- Both Gandhi and Tagore were opposed to bookish teaching and examinations that required rote learning. Gandhi developed Nai Talim or Basic Education — where students devoted some time to academic learning and spent the rest of their time working with their hands on productive crafts.
- Krishnamurti thought of education in connection with the whole of life — not something isolated.
- In Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother developed 'integral education' in which every child is understood to be a unique being, who should be provided the space and means to develop and flower in spontaneous, inwardly centred and self-directed process.

Thinkers from other parts of the world, such as Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner have also been influential. There is a renewed interest in alternative education today and initiatives have created different kinds of alternative schools, learning centers, educational programmes and experiments. As Deepti Priya Mehrotra, an independent thinker and activist, writes, “Like so many pieces in a jigsaw, if we look at a number of these alternatives, we find a picture of hope emerging out of the chaotic present.”

This is an original article published in Deccan Herald:

<http://www.deccanherald.com/content/563561/alternative-schools-thought.html>

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