

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS IN INDIA: NEED, STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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Educational scenario in the country

In India, traditional places of learning such as gurukuls and madarsas, and small village schools provided a grounded education over the centuries. Gradually, these were replaced by schools based on a derivative model. Borrowed from the already-industrialized Western world, the new English-education schools were set up to produce standardized individuals who would fit into industrial society and its values.

Remnants of the British educational system, totally irrelevant to the emergence of the genius of Indian nation, still hold the Indian education in its vice-like grip. As a result Indian educational system still remains teacher-centered and syllabus and examination oriented. Examinations are conducted based on textbook lessons and marks or grades given for the right answers become the basis for assessing the learning of the student. The entire educational administrative setup, from top to bottom, is geared towards this end.

In this process somewhere, perhaps from the beginning, the learner's real learning gets lost. Eagerness and enthusiasm to learn new things, with which the student enters the school, disappear. The students become just a unit in this monolithic structure and their real learning needs are never taken into consideration. By the time the students complete their formal education, they are drained of all the freshness, curiosity, creativity and imagination with which they started their education. They are unable to apply the knowledge attained and lack practical knowledge, problem solving ability and skills required to lead a successful life. Under such circumstances their contribution to the nation is not of much significance when they enter the mainstream of national life. This is a major problem which reckons our education system today.

Thus an urgent need was felt to bring about a fundamental shift in the approach to the process of learning. The learner should be treated as a unique person, who has a will, temperament, and way of development, of his/her own. Hence the education should aim at bringing out the innate knowledge and potentials of the child. In short, the education system should become learner-centered. The role of the teacher should be that of a facilitator in such a learning

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process. Learning should be given more importance than teaching. The curriculum, the classroom environment, classroom management, the learning materials and method, review of the learning, organizing the learning time, administration, all these should focus on the learning level of the individual. Creation of such an educational environment is the need of the hour.

Alternative Education

The alternative education movement began as a creative reaction to this mass-production approach that dominated education across the world by the beginning of the 20th century. Alternative schools, by definition, usually serve students requiring very intensive and individualized instruction. These schools are designed for students who fail classes, are behind in credits, have a history of inappropriate classroom behaviors, are often emotionally fragile, and in need of additional social and academic tools to function constructively in school (Aron, 2003; Wald and Martinez, 2003).

In India, from the early 20th century, some educational theorists discussed and implemented radically different forms of education. Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University, and Sri Aurobindo's Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education are prime examples. "The aim of education", said Sri Aurobindo, "is to help the child to develop his intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, moral, spiritual being and his communal life and impulses out of his own temperament."

The alternative school movement believes that each child is special, and deserves special attention. The whole person must be addressed, not fragmented parts. Fantasy and imagination should be allowed to ripen in a child, and independent thinking filled with idealism in the adolescent. As these children grow into adulthood they will create new ways and visions not only for themselves, but for the entire human race. To summarize the alternative schools believe in the philosophy that "If we can have one billion people who are healthy, truly rejuvenated, inspired and focused, what they can achieve, no technology can ever achieve. They can do absolute miracles".

In recent years many new alternative schools have formed. They are of various types: The ones addressing children with disability; inclusive education schools; open schools; non-formal schools; and schools following different teaching-learning strategies.

Teaching Strategies Used

Alternative schools often utilize unusual strategies to engage students. They balance accountability standards with needs for basic remediation, personal

engagement, project-oriented learning, and real-world job-oriented content. Some of the strategies are discussed below:

- Tagore set up his own alternative to the prevailing system: Vishva Bharati, in Shantiniketan, located in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. Classes here were—and still are—held in the lap of nature.
- Mahatma Gandhi developed Nai Taleem or New Education: In Gandhian schools, a few hours a day are devoted to reading and writing, and another few to the performance of 'bread labor'—crafts-work, agriculture, cooking, cleaning. In words of Gandhiji “Educating children should normally be the easiest of things; but somehow it has become, or been made, the most difficult.”
- Gujrat-based Gijubhai Badheka set up Dakshinamurti Bhavan, a school in Gujarat, India. Gijubhai worked with children in the village context, teaching them history, geography and other subjects in a way that would appeal and be relevant. His book *Divasvapna* is a fascinating account of how an inspired teacher can introduce meaningful education even in an ordinary school.
- For J. Krishnamurti, the real issue in education was to see that when the child leaves the school, he is well established in goodness, both outwardly and inwardly. The child should be made open, aware and fearless by means of education.
- Sri Aurobindo and the Mother developed their idea of education for the whole person. The Mother worked closely with children, evolving a philosophy of 'Free Progress'—each child developing and flowering in an absolutely spontaneous, inwardly centered and self-directed, process.
- The Rishi valley school established by J. Krishnamurti focuses on learning the subject fully at one's own pace and acquiring a capacity for self-learning. Some 500 cards for English, Environmental Science and Maths are prepared and stacked in a graded manner. The children study the cards one by one and learn the subject matter by themselves. Joyous learning as well as group activities is in-built in these study cards.
- Thematic project work method: The student does project works on a particular theme and in that process learns the subject matter. The subject matter is learnt in a comprehensive, holistic manner. This learning involves group activities, critical and creative thinking skills, organizing skills,

cooperation and coordination etc.

- Spiritual methods: Real knowledge is knowledge through identity with the object of knowledge, the Divine being the supreme object of knowledge. Meditation, concentration, consecration, and prayer are some examples of the spiritual methods used to achieve this aim.

Education at the alternative schools is based on certain basic principles:

- Learning never ends for anyone. The first learner is the teacher and teachers are constantly involved in discovering themselves and in innovations.
- Students and their Parents are encouraged to give feedback from time to time. Honest feedbacks and healthy criticism help these schools to improve.
- Each child enjoys total freedom to learn at his/her pace and that it is important to expose them to a variety of learning experiences: art, craft, the natural environment and social issues for example. This is true for all children, but especially important for children with special learning needs.
- Children are encouraged to participate in discussions, to build their own opinion on various social, environmental and other current issues. They learn to present their perspective and respect other's perspectives.
- Children are exposed to interact with various communities (tribal schools, agricultural farms, fine arts centres) to get hands-on learning experiences in a wide range of skills and vocations.
- Each individual learns differently and there are diverse abilities among the students and teachers.
- Children are allowed to work in mixed age groups and develop their interests. Children across ages help each other in developing skills, discovering and understanding concepts.
- Student teacher ratio is kept low.

Major Challenges Faced

Like any other learning organization, the teachers of alternative schools may confront a host of problems beyond those common to most public schools. These range from financial resources to time constraints to partnering with people

who have similar ideas, ideals and passion. Some of these challenges have been discussed here.

- Dealing with the emotional state of the learning disabled child: Dealing with any person's emotional state is quite challenging. A child with special learning needs has more challenges to face if s/he has not found an alternative way to express her/his creativity. The emotional state of the child with special learning needs gets more complex with the onset of adolescence. By now s/he has noticed being different from peers (in terms of academic ability), and the changes of adolescence are compounded with this realization.
- Heterogeneity in the abilities/learning needs of children in a group- While some students work at the factual level of comprehension, there would be others at the inferential and some at the critical thinking levels of comprehension. Students work with concrete teaching materials/manipulatives wherever possible for conceptual understanding.
- Low self-esteem in some children: Students with special needs know that they are different from the majority in academic achievements. A few of them develop other talents and enjoy a high self-esteem; sadly, some children and their parents feel quite disheartened and cannot accept that one can develop other strengths (sports, performing arts) and excel in a chosen field. In them, the desire and the accompanying pressure to perform well in academics is tremendous.
- Denial or unreal expectations of parents: Parents sometimes find it very difficult to come to terms with the fact that their child is differently abled. Often, they accept the fact intellectually but at an emotional level it is very painful and they could be in denial for many years.
- In availability of Special educators: Special educators are few in number and it takes a while to replace one who leaves.
- Inadequate funds, mechanism to streamline identification procedures
- Lack of good educators: Some alternative schools pay their teachers a very low salary (probably due to lack of funds), so some good teachers are forced to leave, despite their commitment to teaching and education.
- Parents often wonder if alternative education will mar their children's capability to adjust to the 'real' world-taking up jobs, coping with the pressures of life.

These challenges can be addressed in the following ways:

- **Interacting with the child at an informal level:** Children feel free to discuss the joys and sorrows they are going through and this sharing helps classroom interactions.
- **Providing opportunities for the child to succeed:** Involving the child in activities of his/her interest: for example, theatre, other arts, gardening, cooking and stitching.
- **Exposing the child to a variety of skills:** Success in this area helps gain self-confidence and self-esteem. The school should invite persons from diverse fields - artists, craft-persons, film makers, scientists, biologists, doctors, engineers, theatre persons and musicians to interact with the children and work with them on projects; Researches have proved that the students make 'connections', making it possible to discover an area for self-expression.
- **Establishing dialogue with parents** and help them see that there are opportunities for their children in their chosen fields, given the passion for what they choose to do.
- Regular discussions and talks should be held with the children to sensitize those without special learning needs about the challenges and difficulties faced by their peers with such needs.
- Holding regular Parents meet preferably once in two months, to share the progress and the challenges that the child is facing.

Conclusion

Although mainstream formal schools are more popular in India, the alternative schools seem to nurture latent capabilities and inculcate love for learning in an individual. Those with such a background are usually more versatile, and capable of seeing the whole picture. They are independent in their approach and better fitted to take decisions and introduce changes. They manage to cope and do surprisingly well in the outer world. Mainstream schools may be more in consonance with the world of today but the alternative education is more in consonance with the world of tomorrow.

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