

# Toppers, at what cost?

*Resistance to the spread of non-formal schools usually comes from parents themselves. They insist that their children be 'toppers', even if that means subjecting them to a stressful, irrelevant and competitive educational system*

Arthy Muthanna Singh

When I moved to Mumbai about two years ago, my primary concern was my son's schooling. Problem was, unlike most parents, I was looking for a non-formal school: a progressive one, if you like. In my naivete, I had actually imagined that I'd be spoilt for choice. After all, this was Mumbai, the big city, and I had come from a small town in Goa. I discovered soon enough that Mumbai had the dubious distinction of offering no choice at all in non-formal education, whereas practically every other metro in the country did.

During my quest for that elusive school, I spoke to many mothers. Strangely, most of them seemed quite satisfied with the schools their children attended. What was I making such a fuss about? I soon acquired the reputation of a paranoid mother asking for too much.

Paranoid, granted. But was I asking for too much? I don't think so. All I wanted was a school where my child would be treated as an individual. I wanted him to enjoy learning, and not have the fear of exams and homework looming above him constantly. Was it too much to want to extend his childhood a wee bit further? I wanted him to have a teacher who could relate to him as a person, not as one of 40 mindless zombies. I cannot seriously believe that most parents are actually happy with what their children have to go through every day in school.

What do I mean by 'non-formal', I am asked every other day. It is easier to spell out what I don't want. I do not want competition. I do not want fear. I do not want 'dark sarcasm in the classroom'. (Thank you, Pink Floyd). I want the child to be left alone; to retain his individuality. I do not want him to become 'just another brick in the wall'.

I attended a quasi-non-formal school in the Nilgiris, St. Hildas. By 'quasi' I mean that it was affiliated to the ICSE Board, but until we gave those final examinations, we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. A lot of music, theatre, sports, athletics. With the numbers in the class kept very low, individual attention from the teachers was possible, without becoming a strain. It helped to have most of the students (about 90 per cent) and most of the teachers living on campus. What are now viewed as hobby classes were very much part of the curriculum there. Maybe my memory is clouded by nostalgia for what my son cannot have, but the only time of stress I can remember was my final year at school: before the examinations.

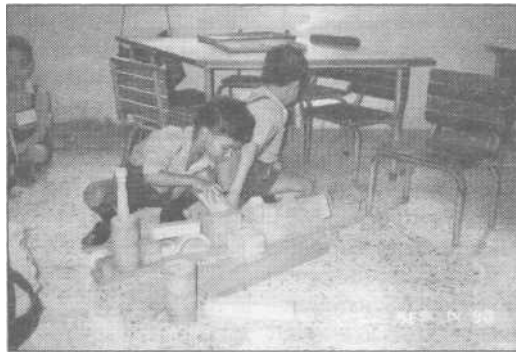
There's still a question mark in my mind about examinations and whether they should be abolished altogether, but

what I am quite sure about is that children should start getting used to the idea of exams only around the age of 14. Before that, they must be left to pursue anything that takes their fancy. After all, how much of the algebra you learnt in school is of any use to you today? Unless you happen to be a mathematician, what is the relevance of the subject?

My husband attended one of the first J Krishnamurti schools in Benaras. One can safely say that this institution was the forerunner of most non-formal schools in India. What he remembers most fondly about the Rajghat Besant school are the stress-free years of learning and the ample opportunities to pursue his own interest in Hindustani classical music.

Unfortunately, non-formal schools are seen as elitest, primarily because the number of students in each class is kept low. As a result, the fees have to be high. Or do they? At the Chamraj High School in the Nilgiris, fees are just Rs 40 per month. This has been possible because the tea company pumps a percentage of its profits into the school. This non-formal school was set up to give the children of the labourers who worked on the tea plantation a chance to benefit from a progressive school. The children in each class do not exceed 25, and wherever possible, there are two teachers to a class. Music and drama take up a large part of an average day. Every class brings out its own newspaper and topics like recycling and the geography of their immediate surroundings ensure that education has a relevance to their lives.

When we lived in Goa, my son went to a playgroup called Watoto (which means 'child' in Swahili). He was three and because I did not have the courage to send him on his own, I'd go along everyday. Before long, I was asked to train on the job, and got into teaching full-time. The teacher-student ratio was 1:8. My son was exposed to painting, pottery, tree houses, games, animals and much more. The school was till the fourth standard. As far as possible, children were taught through projects and hands-on experience. There were no tests or homework. The report card was like a statement of fact, about what had been done that academic year, and not how well or how badly it had been done. It was the kind of school that the children did not want to leave. It incorporated a bit of the Waldorf system, a bit of the Montessori system and a little of the J Krishnamurti system as well. We constantly had to reassure parents who had no yardstick to measure their child's progress by. Most of the parents' fears came from comparing their children with those from regular schools in areas like writing and numbers.



At the Saifee High School, every child is taught at an individual level

But coming back to my quest for a non-formal school in Bombay....At one point I even toyed with the idea of teaching him at home. But someone suggested the Saifee High School where the primary section was said to be non-formal. The crowded and grimy surroundings did not prepare me for the genuine feeling of warmth and sincerity inside the school building at Pydhonie. This was at the end of August, way past the season of admissions. There was no entrance test (in Mumbai?!); there was no request for a donation; the child could join the next day.

I have watched the work that is being done in the primary and pre-primary sections of the school for the past two years. Against all odds, they try and restrict the number of children in a class to 25, with one main teacher and one helper to each class.

Hasina Shabbir, the class teacher of Std II A, firmly believes that the child comes first. She teaches every child at his own level, without him being aware of it. Her rare mix of affection and firmness ensures that learning remains fun. Ida Roddrigues, the class teacher of the other section, is thoroughly convinced of the efficacy of the non-formal method. "We have to ensure that every child retains the joy of learning," she says. Ida and Hasina plan meticulously in advance. "But all our plans might go for a six," laughs Hasina. "It depends on what the children have in mind!"

Jana Mahadevan monitors the programme up to the primary section. She feels that "teachers need to be facilitators and nurturers who do not impose learning." According to her, the non-formal system of education works because it ensures 'active learning'. The important thing is to provide the child an environment in which he/she can explore and discover and thereby learn. Mahadevan is all for non-formal education because it caters to the all-round development of the child. "I see the child as an integrated individual, who has an intellectual self, an emotional self, a physical self and a social self. We can't let one 'self' be the star at the cost of the other selves," she elaborates. Since every child grows, learns and develops at his/her own pace, the environment should be flexible. Therefore, there is no fixed syllabus in her class, nor is there a fixed age for a particular class. She emphasises the child's mental age rather than the chronological one.

Mahadevan has been in the field of early child care and child education for 16 years. From being head of the department of the ECCE programme at Sophia's for four years, to teaching at the Saifee Burhain Silver Jubilee Teachers Training Institute, her mantra remains, "Learning is experiencing".

Experience has shown her that children learn best when experiencing anything with all their five senses. When sensory inputs are reduced, neuron connections are fewer. Most formal schools concentrate on hearing and seeing only.

In the non-formal system of education, the teacher's job is a tough one. Without really teaching, she should show the child how to learn. Without really testing, she should know what level each child in her class is at. All this is possible only if the teacher-to-student ratio is kept within manageable limits.

There are many non-formal schools across the country, but most of them prepare their students to integrate with the formal system by Std 8. Many others are non-formal only till Std 4. Several schools that want to stretch their non-formal classes further come up against resistance from parents, who fear that the longer their children stay cocooned in the soft folds of the non-formal system, the more difficult it becomes for them to re-orient themselves in the big, competitive world.

I wonder if some sort of balance is called for here? If I asked the average parents whether they wanted their child to be a topper or (it has to be 'or' because I can't see how one can be a topper *and* not lose out on a lot on the way) have a stress-free academic session, I wonder what they'd truthfully say.

And yet, does one want to protect a child to such an extent that a stray walk on the wild side of life ends up shattering him? I am constantly told horror stories of how so-and-so from a non-formal school had a nervous breakdown once he emerged from the security of his school. Or somebody else who ended up being a total 'failure'. But then of course, one has to examine the definition of 'failure' too. One man's failure could well be another man's success.

A group of parents, including me, are in the process of starting a non-formal school. The scepticism that we have had to deal with has not been encouraging. However, the school will be run primarily by parents, the premise being that no one can teach a child as well as a parent can. As one of the group members suggested, we are going to try and be 'professional parents', for a change. We want to run the school for children of all ages if we can, and take a line out of the Watoto school song, 'We learn while we play'. Whether we will be successful or not, time will tell. But my interaction with like-minded parents has given me hope.

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