

The ABCs of undoing knowledge

Everybody knows that the system of education in India is archaic, unimaginative, inadequate and corrupt. Not so well-known are the many exciting experiments in non-formal education that are springing up in little pockets away from the mainstream. In the first of a collection of articles on the subject, the author discusses the fundamentals of JKrishnamurti's concept of education and their application at the Centre For Learning

Kabir Jaithirtha

Religious teachers through the ages have questioned commonly held assumptions about the nature of the relationship between knowledge and the mind. They have suggested, in various ways, that mistaken notions about this relationship are at the very heart of

human conflict at a personal or societal level.

Amongst others, J Krishnamurti explored and talked about this relationship for over 60 years till his death in 1986. He also pointed out the relevance of such questions to education, and indeed was

directly responsible for starting several schools in India and abroad. He suggested, and I summarise, The undoing of knowledge is the fundamental revolution. Most of us approach life with knowledge — what we have learned, been taught or gathered in the incidents

There's a method in this anarchy

Geetha Rao visits Poorna, a Bangalore-based non-formal school which refuses to have a set syllabus and uses textbooks as little as possible

Five years ago, Indira Jaisimha finally decided to take her three children out of regular schools and teach them herself at home. At that time, her older daughter Sumathi, now 15, had said, "You've always talked about your own school. If you want to do something about it, do it now."

Indira and her children were fed up not so much with the school they were at, as with the whole system of education. "Learning has become synonymous with passing examinations. Every strategy is geared to the marking system. The formal education system does not necessarily increase children's knowledge, at least not real knowledge. It emphasises a narrow set of skills. There is very little room for creativity, or for developing moral, spiritual, ethical or aesthetic values. Generally, there are only token classes for art. And exams form the focal point of the exercise!"

Thus was born Poorna, or completeness.

"We do not say that our school is ideal. But we try to make learning holistic. We depend as little as possible on textbooks!" says Indira. "We base out lessons on topic webs. We select a topic and work on it for a month. It could be water, or soil... We look at it from different angles: they swim in a pool, we discuss condensation, molecular structure, pollution of water bodies; children write stories and poems, they enact plays on the subject. We try

to connect the topic through as many dimensions as possible, and through various avenues of expression." Just one topic web involves subjects such as language, chemistry, environment and dramatics.

"Moreover, if the class is interested in a particular aspect of the topic, we go along. Learning is easier then." There are four teachers at Poorna. While there is no particular syllabus, Indira clarifies, "we are not anarchists. We do not follow the prescribed state or ICSE or CBSE syllabus. Poorna draws its own syllabus for each year while being aware of the syllabus that other streams follow. At the end of the year, we discuss the syllabus with the children for their feedback. "At this time there is also a self-assessment based on observation, but no grading and marking and slotting. Children answer quizzes, and do dictation. "We don't mark them, but they can see where they stand. They do possess an inherent competitive spirit. But we don't make a big issue of it."

"Moral issues are dealt with, but not in the usual fashion. Conflicts are discussed at the assembly in a group setting. We do not punish — we would rather the discussion came from within them. If we punish, they will react with aggression — which will not solve the problem. Controversy is not suppressed, but talked about. If a child misbehaves, the other children ask him to go out of class. work off his energy, cool off and then be free to walk into

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and accidents of life. This knowledge becomes our conditioning, shapes our thoughts and makes us conform to the pattern of what has been. Only the mind that is undoing what it has gathered is capable of understanding. But for most of us, knowledge becomes the centre from which we judge, evaluate, accept or reject. Can the mind free itself of knowledge? Can that self which is essentially knowledge be dissolved so that the mind is really humble, innocent and therefore capable of perceiving truth?"

This is perhaps the most urgent challenge facing us — to understand, not the details of a particular influence and how it comes about, but the very essence of all influence and what it is to be free of it. The relationship between mind and knowledge then undergoes a transformation. Knowledge, then, isn't the framework through the limits of which the mind functions and therefore divides. It is merely an instrument unable to impose



There is no place for competition and comparison here

itself as a screen between the mind and reality.

The transformation of the mind is usually considered the domain of religion and tradition. Unfortunately, religious tradition rarely, if ever, approaches this question in a spirit of enquiry free of dogma. Instead, it seeks to impose a set of beliefs and patterns peculiar to that tradition and raises that to the status of unquestionable, absolute truth. Hence,

perhaps, the deep-rooted divisions that arise in the name of religion.

As a reaction to the dogmatism of religious tradition, science sees itself as a movement of free enquiry. This is, to an extent, true. Science seeks to construct models through which we can explain, predict and control the world around us. But science's capacity to explain seems to come at a price — an increasing sense of alienation and a feeling that the whole movement of life is explained (away) and is emptied of meaning.

I would like to suggest that religious tradition and science have one thing in common: both seek to create models with the help of which we hope to relate to reality and make sense of it. The models of the former are felt to be immutable and sacred, while the latter is prepared to be more humble, though less so now than in the past. But it may neither be possible nor necessary to relate

class."

There are 23 children now at Poorna, and some of the teachers happen to be parents of the students. Poorna has three large classrooms and a lot of unused area, leased out to it on rent. There are no regular classes, but children are grouped according to age between 5 and 7 years, 7 and 9 years, 9 and 11 years, 11 and 13 years, and 13 and 15 years. Each group is given a name: Ashwini, Rohini, Kritika, Mrijashira, Vishaka. This is to avoid the concept of hierarchy. (In-between age groups will be added on as and when required). There is vertical integration for art, theatre, puppetry and clay work.

The day begins with an assembly, where a child lights a candle. This is done in rotation every day so that each child gets a turn. The children say their prayers: it could be a shloka, a hymn or a rhyme. "The concept of god is neither denied nor vehemently asserted." Children do yoga every day.

Academic subjects are taught upto 1 o'clock in the afternoon. After lunch, it is time for art, craft, puppetry, clay work, lab classes and gardening. "Seasonal festivals of various faiths are celebrated to help children stay in tune with the rhythms of nature. The mythological or historical significance of the festival is explained with the help of stories or drama. Children often prepare special foods or sweets associated with a festival as part of their celebrations."

Children are taken on visits to Bandipura, Bisle Ghat and other places. They have even lived with tribals in Orissa and made leather puppets at the Khadi Rehabilitation Centre at Dharwad.

As regards joining the mainstream, Indira says, "At around 15, or whenever they are ready for it, students can take the National Open School (NOS) secondary level

examination, conducted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi. Students can sit for the exam after registration with the NOS at the Bangalore centre at Mathikere. This exam is recognised as equivalent to the tenth standard examination by various state boards of education, IITs and other institutions. Thus, after passing this exam, they can join a local college for PUC, or take the NOS Senior Secondary exam (12th std.) or take the British A level exam privately in case they wish to study abroad."

Thus, students from this school fit into the mainstream of education eventually. But do they fit in socially? They are aware that they go to a different kind of school. They know that no children will play with them in the month of March, as the others are busy with exams. Other kids tell them how lucky they are not to have exams or uniforms. These days, students themselves ask for more quizzes and homework.

When asked about the school's future plans, Indira says she is thinking of working with the underprivileged, perhaps children of construction workers nearby. Her daughter Sumathi plans to take a year off after her NOS exam, to start teaching the labourers' children.

Indira is content that the school is steadily working towards developing young children into complete human beings. She is not "in the game of making failures of children, which is what the formal system of education does. Schools generally take in the top layer based on merit, that's probably just 1 per cent. What about the rest who do not make it? They are branded failures. Everybody is valuable — whether a gardener or an artist."

But even as more schools like Poorna crop up across the country, they will remain more the exception than the rule for another few decades at least.

through models. Indeed, models may come in the way of relating, whether to people or to the world around us. They project a framework which itself becomes the barrier to a relationship. This is not to deny the functional value of models in technology and in science. It becomes important, therefore, not only to communicate models and the art of model-making, but also to help perceive completely and directly the intrinsic limitation, arbitrariness, and indeed the enormous danger of models in the field of relationships. The most enduring model which holds the brain in its grip is the sense of self. In seeking to escape the loneliness and incompleteness imposed by this model, we create the complications that haunt our lives and harm all that we touch.

Mankind has tried to wrestle with the conflict inherent in the sense of self — with its demands and desires — through subjugation, discipline, control and escape. There is a fundamental contradiction involved in this exercise. The self, which seeks to deny, to control, and to



Projects, experiments, lab work and field trips: at Centre for Learning the attempt is to keep things as concrete as possible

subdue, is not different from the self that is to be subdued. So control is an endless exercise in boxing with one's shadow. The very discipline imposes another pattern on the earlier one. Pattern, goal and achievement is the stuff from which the self is constructed and in which it finds continuity.

What then is the right action? Krishnamurti has pointed out that choiceless awareness is free of the contradiction involved in conflict. Is it possible for the brain to be choicelessly aware of the endless movement of pat-

terns, reactions, and conditioning, of belief, hope and desire, so that in the very awareness the brain begins to free itself of the limitations imposed by knowledge? Choiceless because any control, discrimination or suppression is the mechanism of the self in action again. Choiceless also because in being so the division between the controller and that which is controlled is cut at the very root.

This movement of choiceless awareness is also a movement of learning, qualitatively different from what we normally understand by that word. In this learning there is no accumulation of knowledge and skills to be then used in action. It is not a technique to be mastered, for that creates another pattern within the boundaries of which the brain seeks to function. There is no goal or achievement, only the awareness in which the reaction of memory is seen and dropped. This is indeed learning, because the mind is constantly freeing itself of patterns and prejudices and is therefore never static.

It would seem that to come upon this

Admission fee: one sapling

Vikasana is a gurukul of sorts, where students learn not just reading and writing but carpentry, tailoring, gardening, cooking, weaving and pottery.

Geetha Rao reports

If Poorna is oriented to urban, middle class children, Vikasana, at the other end of Bangalore city, is a school for the under-privileged. Situated at Doddakallasandra, it is off Kanakapura Road. The only way to get there is to follow your nose, and the sound of chattering children.

Malathi started Vikasana 20 years ago, after she was inspired by David Horsburgh's methods of teaching at Neelbagh school in Rayalpadu, Karnataka. His emphasis was on a small school with not more than 20 children.

an environment where a child can observe and learn at his own pace, in a free and flexible atmosphere, without any pressure, He/she is encouraged to solve problems on his own, to be himself, and not to cater to a teacher's expectations.

Malathi places all her cards on the table before the child joins. "I inform the parents that we do not give a certificate at the end of schooling."

However, students who wish to sit for the Std 7 or SSLC examinations are trained for them. Thus, those who wish to fit into the mainstream can do so. There is counselling for those who wish to pursue careers.

Another unusual aspect of this school is that children do not pay any donations or fees in cash. They do it in kind: the admission fee is a plant — so each admitted child brings a sapling, plants it, and nurtures it. The monthly fee is attendance. The children must come to school regu-

Which they do. Because they like it so much, Most of them are children of local rural landless farmers; some

movement of learning is central to any educational endeavour and describes the function of a school in the most significant way. It would have an impact on every aspect of education: the way we look at learning, the way we teach, our understanding of creativity, order, discipline and morality. The relationship between individual and individual, and between individual and society would undergo a profound transformation. Unfortunately, this is not so in practice. Educators seem to be wholly preoccupied with the transmission of knowledge. The increasingly utilitarian view of education, to gain skills for a career, is not a surprising result.

What then is the environment in which such learning can be nurtured? I will describe one attempt to create such an environment. Centre for Learning is a small school outside Bangalore. It was started in 1990 by a group of people interested in the educational philosophy of J Krishnamurti. Central to CFL's educational philosophy is the concern with the awakening of an awareness which lies beyond knowledge. There has been an attempt to bring this concern into every aspect of the school. I will outline some of these features:

The school is small. Keeping the numbers small takes away the need for standardised approaches in the imparting of skills. The teacher has a much better opportunity to understand the needs and difficulties of each student; his talents, capacities and interests, his particular ways of learning. The teacher also has a much better chance of responding to them. The small numbers also enable teachers and parents to engage in an ongoing dialogue about education, bringing up children and life in general. There is a sense of moving together. This participation by parents is a very important source of strength for a school which is attempting something new.

There are two other important reasons for keeping the school small. The teacher body is small enough to allow for a fully participatory style of functioning in the administration of the school. There is no hierarchy. All major decisions are taken by the entire body of teachers. There is a sense of shared responsibility which is necessary to create the right atmosphere for exploring something new. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in the classroom itself, when the teacher is interacting with a group as small as eight or ten children,

there is the possibility of an atmosphere of shared attention, a contact which lies beyond the task at hand. This attention is the very essence of learning and discipline: it has nothing whatsoever to do with acquiring a skill.

Key to creating the right environment is the relationship between the teacher and the student. It cannot be based on authority and fear because these are the very instruments of conformity and pattern. There has to be affection and trust in which the student feels cared for. Once again the size of the school becomes important. Not only do the teachers and students know each other well, but their relationship extends beyond the school. There is a spirit of shared enquiry and dialogue. Children are encouraged to raise questions and examine issues without bias. In such an environment, major problems of order and discipline rarely crop up.

Competition and comparison do not play a role in this educational programme. There are no examinations. Because of the close contact, the teacher has an understanding of the student's difficulties and abilities. Difficulties are resolved either in the course of teaching the subject itself or through specially



Vikasana, where tending the vegetable patch is as important as learning languages

have opted out of looking after cattle to learn to read and write.

Talking about a day at Vikasana, Malathi says, "The centre starts its activities at 8.30 a.m. All the children are entrusted with duties like caring for trees, cleaning the rooms and surroundings, providing drinking water. Then, the children assemble to sing songs in Kannada, English, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, French, German and Italian. This is followed by yogasanas specially designed for children."

Lessons in academic subjects follow. Everyone accepts cooking responsibilities for lunch. Lunch is free. Afternoon classes include pottery, carpentry, weaving, paper-folding, painting and gardening. Making handicrafts is

integrated into the daily process.

Two children at a time look after the vegetable patch. They adopt trees and look after them. Alongside, they make their own desks and chairs; build their own rooms; make their own clothes.

Malathi continues, "Children learn to read, write and speak three languages. The highest priority is given to the student-teacher relationship." Some students have now returned to the school as teachers.

Malathi seems to have achieved the school's aims and objectives: free, quality education to the rural poor, with an emphasis on self-learning, helping students to choose careers after their education, being a resource centre for non-formal education, imparting awareness on tree planting and the need to maintain ecological balance, education for peace and not for competition.

Some children have had training at the Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi, Akruiti, and Mritchakatika (a centre for pottery) in Bangalore, "thus underscoring the fact that one does not need to depend on certificates to choose careers."

Funds are a major problem at Vikasana. Catering to about 20-odd children, and providing them free lunch, books and other material, can be a juggler's act. Though the school receives some money from the Neelbagh Trust and other bodies, the funds are not sufficient. Vikasana needs funds and donations from philanthropists and institutions. That would go a long way in ensuring that the school continues to grow.

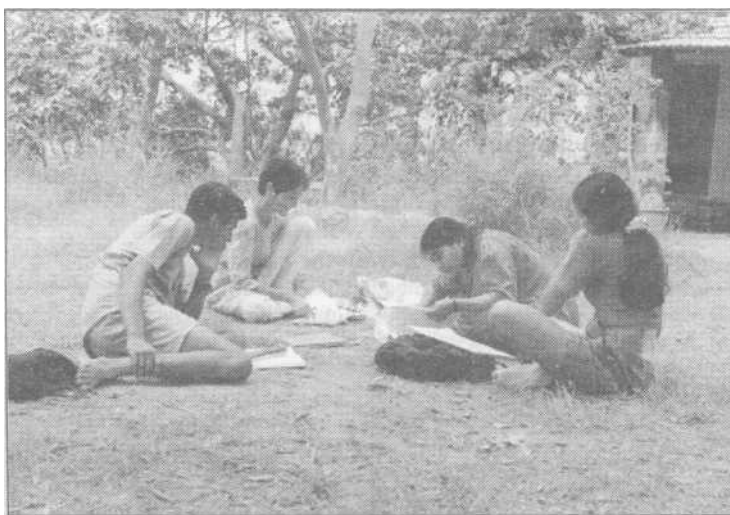
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designed programmes. Students are protected from the feeling that they are constantly being judged and compared with each other. Comparison and competition, perhaps, lie at the very heart of the process of psychological separation, and it is not surprising that they are so important in our society and our education. Society and the school reflect each other. We pride ourselves on being individuals and yet constantly compare ourselves with others. Being unsure of ourselves and our creative abilities, we depend on the opinion of others. Measurement and achievement become important to our sense of being. Conformity and acceptance of authority at the deepest levels of one's being are part of this movement. The need for authority — leaders, gurus, experts — and the need for affirmation through comparison lead to violence and irresponsibility. Thus, it is profoundly important to set aside conformity and authority which are expressed through evaluation and comparison. This will provide the space in which the child can discover his talents and capacities, not in opposition or comparison, but as an individual who can co-operate in freedom.

As I had mentioned earlier, our approach to the curriculum reflects our feeling that education should be concerned with the awakening of an awareness which lies beyond thought and knowledge. A natural starting point seems to be the world around us. So, especially at the younger ages, walks in the fields and groves nearby are a necessary part of the daily routine. Working with the hands is also important in nurturing this awareness. While the adult sense of order is rooted in time, the child's sense of order is rooted in space, and these two are radically different in character. The former is concerned with goals, achievement, plans and control. The latter is concerned with the space to look, to listen, to play with things and to express oneself. Perhaps the latter sense of order is the more fundamental. Therefore, it is important that, especially for the young, the programme is flexible and not too preoccupied with goals. Skills are, as far as possible, taught as part of other activities. Right through

the ages, the attempt is to keep things as concrete as possible. Projects, experiments, lab-work and field visits are important to the academic programme at every level.

From an early age the awareness that I have mentioned is encouraged both in its outward and inward aspect. By inward I mean the awareness of the patterns, reactions, opinions, beliefs and conclusions that become so much a part of us that we are blind to them. At every opportunity, in various ways, this inward movement is nurtured and encouraged. Dialogues form an important part of this attempt. The teacher and the student engage in looking together, not at particular beliefs and fears, for example, but also at the structure and nature of these



In touch with the world around them: it is alienation from nature that causes an excessive dependence on stimulation and entertainment

psychological movements. Rightly approached, dialogue brings about a learning together, without the sense of the teacher and the taught. Because in looking together there is only the movement of learning and there is no one who is accumulating this learning as knowledge. This is not a process of introspection or analysis but a movement of observation. There are also spaces to be alone and to be quiet. To say any more is to convert it into a technique.

If a school is to be concerned with the flowering of the individual, it must learn to create a flexible enough curriculum to respond to different needs. Perhaps there can be a common core in which certain necessary skills are taught and many opportunities provided for the child to explore, with support and guidance, areas that interest her. This might mean that the common curriculum plays only a small part in the child's day and

there are large chunks of time available for the child to explore other areas. Too many students going through school lose confidence in their own creative abilities and begin to depend almost exclusively on structures and certificates. No wonder success becomes such an important demand with its accompanying complications of ambitions, anxiety, frustration and pride.

Because of our increasing alienation from nature, it is important that the school exposes the students to a different way of life. A way of life in which sensitivity to the trees, the earth, living creatures, the changing seasons, space and silence are part of daily life. Perhaps then dependence on stimulation and entertainment will not be necessary. Instead, there is the joy of being in contact with all that is around.

I have tried to describe the broad features of an educational endeavour whose concerns go deeper than that of skills and knowledge. When human beings come together to co-operate in any venture, there is always the messiness of groping, questioning and learning. The most difficult and demanding of challenges for the adult is to learn the art of listening, the setting aside of opinion, prejudices and

fears. Co-operating together is an ongoing challenge requiring alertness, patience and tenacity. There is always the temptation to isolate oneself, move away or give up. The coming together of a group of adults who are exploring and learning about themselves as well as taking responsibility for the young is in itself a demanding and difficult achievement. The fact that the adults are interested in learning about themselves makes the environment right for the child. As Krishnamurti has said, 'A school is a place of learning, so it's sacred. The temples, churches and mosques are not sacred for they have stopped learning. They believe; they have faith; and that denies entirely the great art of learning....'

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