

Idea of Education

Epistemic Tensions and Educational Reform

Educational systems, implicitly or explicitly, reflect a philosophical vision. Interpretations of the self mind and world based on such vision influence socio-cultural norms and relations. It also leads to theorisation, which when formulated into principles of action to understand the world become ideologies. All educational systems carry the germ of some ideology. This paper suggests that there are two broad epistemological premises that determine the structure of knowledge, meaning and truth. One that believes that reality is material and governed by laws that the human mind can understand; the other premise asserts the inherent creative principle of the human mind and that knowledge itself is in part constructed of sensory data and perception. Since it is never completely possible to move behind an epistemic frame, reform initiatives, especially in education, should question whether processes of reform will really ensure transformation of relationships on more equal terms or will they reinforce dependency and hierarchy.

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I Introduction

This paper is an attempt to indicate some of the epistemic tensions that underlie educational reform. It is based on experience in working with programmes for primary education and literacy in Madhya Pradesh. Many of these initiatives like the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) for primary education, the use of alternative pedagogies have created debates.¹ The absence of a shared understanding or a shared vision on education has been at the root of much of what has been said for or against these initiatives. This leads us to explore the roots of these divergent views as originating from different epistemic grounds. There cannot be a shared understanding unless we first lay out differences as the key to evolving a more meaningful framework for debate.

This paper is based on the belief that educational systems explicitly or implicitly reflect a philosophical vision.² This vision interprets the self, mind, and the world and these interpretations - ontological and epistemological - influence socio-cultural forms and relations. The word 'episteme' is used here to imply a composite of philosophical and cultural interpretations leading to conscious theorisation. Education expresses these philosophical postulates. Formulated into principles of action to guide and control the world, its relationships and its resources, these philosophical postulates become ideologies. This is why educational systems, no matter how apparently neutral, carry the germ of some ideology. This is why an educational system that allows for a contestation of ideas is preferable to one that inherently discourages critiques.

II Two Approaches to Education

The Colonial-Positivistic Approach

It is suggested here that there are two broad epistemological premises which determine the structure of knowledge, meaning and truth. One, which believes that reality is material and

governed by laws which can be known by the human mind. Reason is based on sensory data and the mind is a complex of neurological functioning. Facts are what can be known and empirically verified. What cannot be empirically verified or stated as a universal truth is neither truth nor a fact. Development and growth are dependent on the effect of environment and material conditions. This view can broadly be described as being positivistic. This view has a validity for certain kinds of studies, mainly, those dealing with the world of nature. The problem lies in generalising it into an absolute epistemological condition. It discards all unverifiable concepts as reifications and so not real. This can create a series of distortions. It rejects subjectivity and experiential insights as insufficient ground for truth. Often in trying to extend its methods to all areas of study it seeks to substitute objective grounds for subjective perceptions in the effort to present facts. Thus, even subjects concerning human behaviour and relationships are treated as objects of nature about which laws can be formulated, or on the basis of sufficient data theorisation is possible. Such theorisation then has the paradoxical effect of creating absolutist ideas on subjects deemed to be relative or unverifiable and by the very nature of such epistemological postulates incapable of ever being in the category of truth. Such absolutisation may be deliberate and guided by definite motives or it may be a genuine belief that human behaviour can be treated like natural objects and laws can be propounded about them. This has some very interesting politico-cultural manifestations. Control of material conditions and resources becomes the most important goal. Good tends to get defined in material terms. This encourages a drive towards conquest of space and natural resources and the reduction of human life to human resources and the control therefore also of human resources. Colonialism is the inevitable expression of such an epistemology. This may be of territory or of mind (human resource). Even those who oppose political colonisation may actually be colonisers of the mind insofar as they absolutise an idea into a rule or law or even a generally desirable behaviour in order to allow some to control and subordinate others.

school is perceived primarily as a physical entity. The school is a sum of a teacher and some materials. This physical understanding of a school has a number of implications. One, specialisation of identity; two, temporal sequentialisation in thinking; three, metonymic signification; four, exclusion. By specialisation of identity is implied the perception of the school as a physical site. It leads to a perception of educational processes as properties of a physical site (the character of the site is also usually predetermined) and therefore necessarily contained within it. Education is a function of that site. The identity of the school gets created by the kind of physical space it occupies and its aggregate of physical attributes. The physical site, in fact, becomes an enclosure synonymous with education. This leads to a sequentialisation in the conceptualisation of the school. The school is allowed to exist as a physical construct. Its educational outcomes are deferred as quality issues that will emerge only later in time. School and education get distanced in time. While it may be admitted that qualitative growth takes time, the problem lies in a view that holds that a physical configuration can be deemed complete in itself without a reference to whether its objectives have been met and yet strange as this may sound this sequentialisation in its most exaggerated and distorting manner has marked post-independent planning for education in India. The whole thinking on education, at its foundational level, has been sequentialised into access, retention and achievement, as if these are three chronologically progressive stages of history. The physical understanding of school is reflected in this spacing between access and retention and achievement. Can there be a school without children and can there be a school without learning? Yet we claim a large education system based on an implicit equation of school with its physical site actually conceding to the amazing contradiction of schools without learning being still called schools. This is the pernicious effect of spatial identity and sequential thinking. If one of the definitions of empowerment is access to resources then in a discussion of education, resources have to mean ideas that make for learning not just their material signs and that is the other point. Education and the school get reduced to a metonymic status. The school becomes a metonymy of education and something much less than a school, a metonymy of the school. The physical attributes of the school stand in for a school. Economic Survey 1999-2000 of the government of India identifies as major elements of social policy "A thrust to female literacy and primary education. Building of primary school buildings in all unserved habitations" (Government of India, The Economic Survey 1999-2000, 1.80) The spatial identity of the school dominates the understanding of education. This is what marks the school as site of exclusion. This exclusion is social, cultural, epistemological. As a physical site, the school invariably gets mapped on an axis of social domination, because the socially privileged have visibility and determine the material contours of social identity and public action. The physical grid that delineates access comes to express the way power is understood and exercised in a society. The school borrows its cultural paradigms from the socially dominant groups, either rejecting or seeking to modify on its own terms all other forms of cultural expressions. Forms of knowledge derive from influential cultural forms. The physical closure of the school becomes complete.

The internal structure of the school reflects the same physical enclosure model carrying the limitations of the enclosure to the educational processes. Educational processes are arranged into

fixed segments of time and space. The school has a linear organisation into formal grades, with each grade corresponding to one standardised year with children moving annually from one to the other grade. The length of a Christian calendar measures for us the time a child needs to learn. The graded system assumes that a child's capacity to learn different subjects is more or less equal and that the child learns at an even continually progressive pace. Learners are deemed to constitute a fairly homogeneous group. It is also assumed that differences among children in school can be moderated through standardised practices.

The children move up if they are good in all subjects or are held back for not being even in one, i e, their movement is always vertical or they are static. Often, they are promoted even if they do not know enough. Some children might make reasonable progress in some subjects and relatively slower in some others. Even within a subject a child's academic responses to different issues may vary is contingent on many factors. Insensitivity to the pace and quality of the child's responses can create a cumulative fault in the child's academic base. A standardised graded approach does not normally allow addressing these individual gaps or fluctuations which tend to get submerged in a congregated average.

Such an organisational method promotes the more advantageously placed child and ignores the others. It is naturally designed to encouraging a dropout, if not physically, definitely intellectually and emotionally of children unable to cope with a system whose pressures are created by very arbitrary and rigid divisions of time and space as categories for organising academic processes.

Alarmed at the drop-out problem, additional structures are created outside the school structure to mop-up the drop outs. Either they fail since they model themselves on the school structure which created the problem, or if they succeed they do not know how to relate to the mainstream school system. At one level, the great anxiety about dropouts, mainstream/supplementary systems will continue either in an impasse or with short-term success re-create the problems unless the physical understanding of the school expressed in its rigid formalistic character is not reviewed. The apparent equal graded segments conceal the most unequal learnings and continue to aggravate these inequalities, since there is no relief from the regimentation of the structure. The child is an element of the structure. Since the structure is fixed the structure subsumes the child. The rigid formalism of the school decentres the child. This decentring of the child is the real dropping out of the child even if she is physically present in the school. This dropping-out is not visible in school. Some forms of its manifestation are persistent low performance, inhibition, fear, reluctance to go to school but only some of these forms get acknowledged and that too, not as schooling problems but as social or individual problems.

Diffusing the Physical Construct: Creating an Alternative Definition

In contrast the alternative system diffuses the 'physical' construct of the school. This would be reflected in the way the school is organised and its educational processes. These reject the deterministic framework of physical structures. Structures here reflect learning processes and have their fluidity and dynamism. This is difficult to illustrate because there cannot be a single set

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pattern to an organisational method that seeks to reflect the dynamic process of ideas, and not a pre-designed, static physical form. An illustrative reference is being made to a non-graded schooling system, exemplified in certain alternative schools, the best example being of Digantar, an NGO working in Rajasthan.³ The non-graded school is organised on the belief that children have different learning paces. These differences are not only between children, but also within children. A child may have different aptitudes for different subjects, even within a subject she may not acquire all competencies with the same facility. Moreover a child's pace of learning may also vary from time to time, contingent on various factors. While the teacher's effort should be to improve the learning capacity of each child and to reduce the disparities among them, it is believed that this would be possible by a method that is sensitive to differences and individual pace. Therefore, the structure of the school is non-graded. Instead of grades, there are groups. The groups are subjectwise. The groups are not static. The number of groups is determined by the prevalent average learning levels and so may keep changing. Further, the child changes groups according to her learning attainments moving up into another group or a lower level group till relevant learning levels are mastered. The group does not move as a collective unit, individual children move. Thus, groups are formed by the changes in the academic levels of learners. In such a school, structure connotes an academic process sensitive to the child's learning pace. The school is an interactive process between the teacher and the child. In such an understanding, there is no sequentialisation between access and quality.

IV Teaching-Learning Process:

Theory of Meaning, Text, Creativity

This initial difference in the understanding of structure reflects itself in the teaching-learning process. The nature of teaching-learning process derives from the theory of meaning held. In a positivistic system the teaching-learning process is based on the idea that meanings are objectively given and are universally equally accessible. Therefore, under ideal conditions a complete and perfect communication of meaning is possible. Consequently, there is an emphasis on the continuous improvement of the material conditions of learning and on a continuous improvement in the empirical basis of knowledge. The belief is that everything can be studied like an object with scientific precision. And even those who are studying can themselves be objectively studied so that their behaviour can be calibrated to the desired levels. Since things are clearly defined and can be controlled, it is therefore logical to believe that truths can be taught in an almost input-output mode.

The way text and creativity are conceptualised and relate to each other gives an idea of how knowledge is constructed and legitimised. In the generally prevalent understanding of the text the very rationale of the text is to circumscribe meaning within its own domain. This has the effect of giving primacy to textbooks. It also makes the text intransigent to opening up. It also has the effect of dismissing alternative sources of knowledge, other than what the text enshrines. It reduces the importance of learning by doing. A sprinkling of activities annotate the margins of texts. Mostly the activities have a textual character

rather than as interventions in a living context. It even marginalises the importance of oral skills and privileges the writing skills. The text is best assimilated when perfectly reproducible in writing.⁴

Joyless Joy of Learning

Finally, the thought process that guides the making of such text has a particular notion of creativity. Creativity in the context of the natural phenomena implies a discovery of yet unknown facts and their relations. In all other contexts it is an extension of already known meanings - adding to understanding but not essential to it. This relationship between text and creativity can be illustrated by the way a very current term seeking to describe desirable qualities in education has been differently interpreted. The term is joy of learning. In most cases, evident in most government primary schools in Madhya Pradesh, the way joy of learning has been understood is somewhat tragi-comic. It emerges from a belief that serious learning is not joyful. Joy somehow has to be added on to mainframe learning mainly to attract the child in a way beguiling her into believing that one is really playing. The teacher and the child's belief in such an interaction is anecdotally captured in the child's triumphant refusal to play along when she discovers that the teacher was really trying to teach mathematics under the garb of game. Ingrained with such scepticism about the joy of learning the teachers' responses are both interesting and amusing. Teachers usually transcribe joy as a set repertoire of song and dances and pantomime.- Such a version of joy of learning initially creates a sense of excitement and relief since it breaks away from the customary tedium of the teacher's passive teaching. But this itself soon diminishes into tedium. This is because of three main reasons. One, the forms of joyful expression are not those of the teachers or the children. They are decided and transmitted from some other source of wisdom - as text. It is difficult to go on finding joy in some one else's idea of joy unless it joins with an individually felt inward process. And that is the second problem. The usually dominantly physical form given these joyful activities. The problem is not in their physical character. It is in the disjunction between the physical and the mental (this disjunction is pervasive in this educational system) born out of a conviction that most of these physical activities and most definitely, the joyful variety engage very little, if not actually demand a suspension of the sophisticated mental abilities. Therefore, and that is the third reason, lack of conviction in any valid alternative to the existing text-centred methods of teaching. Most of the teachers faithfully take the class through joyful singing and dancing but are not very convinced about them because they do not know why they are doing it. Most teachers having perfunctorily performed these get back to the serious business of teaching. Often if a 'creative' supervision agency is spotted, the class switches over from text reading to swaying to songs and poems to demonstrate joyful learning.

The pedagogic principle behind this is that the assimilation of text is aided by a certain dramatisation. This can be an aid to simple functions of memory and recall. Thus, the memorisation of text is supplemented by a memorisation of mimetic song and dance a perfect sample of text plus creativity. But even here its efficacy is limited to very young learner groups. It drops off suddenly for more complex mental processes. Its limited applicability is due to its limited interpretation of creativity as an

indulgence of sensory impulses that produce the effects of pleasure and beauty. Pleasure has a strong physical connotation here and beauty a decorative function.

This is also evident in the curricular structure which ascribes a peripheral place to aesthetic disciplines like music, painting, dancing and mathematics, language, sciences the core place. The elements of joy then are derived from these peripheral areas as trimmings to the core. This compartmentalisation of joy misses out a critical issue. That joy inheres in every form of learning if the mode of teaching is one that encourages curiosity and critical reasoning, that imagination is integral to such questioning and that without stimulating these responses, even the so-called joyful enterprises are soulless. This notion of creativity comes closer to a classical reading of aesthetics - to make something well and the pleasure that comes in a process where the task is not something outside, given, but assimilated as a medium for self-expression.

The cultural ethos of the school also has a major effect on determining the understanding of joy of learning. The school modelled on hierarchy and impersonal authority constructs the child as a passive subject. There is a high premium on subordination making a set of desirable values like discipline, obedience. More than that the notion of what a child ought to aspire to be, the child gets constructed in a way that makes it natural and desirable to acquiesce to the authority of the school. Some common forms of such school discipline are - no talking in classrooms, no copying from the others' work, no questions. Thus, at the pragmatic level, the forms of joyful learning clash with a tendency towards a hierarchical delivery of what is considered as right from one who knows to one who does not. With such values, creativity in any form of joy of learning, ranging from uninhibited, fearless expression to independent thinking is just not possible. There is thus a tension between a belief in creativity that shapes the idea of joy of learning and a given frame-work of prescription in which it is to be transacted. The tragedy is the non-realisation of this tension and the complacent practice and display of the most puerile mimetic forms of expressions as creativity in which joy either evanesces or moves to the margin of learning. The joy of learning can emerge only if freedom is an essential mode of learning.

A deterministic structure of the text lends to a colonial construction of knowledge. A good example is the way history is taught. A hegemonic, positivistic culture will present history as a record of facts. The study of history aims at a cause and effect analysis of a sequence of events supported by evidence in a way that eliminates impressionistic and subjective responses. This insistence on facts is not naive. As a chronicle of past events history loses much of its relevance except as archives. It is in its contemporaneity that its interest lies. But this contemporaneity has been sought to be established by contemporary ideologies. History becomes a scaffolding for justifying theories that bolster up a present configuration of interests. Historical time tends to be linear tracking the forward progressive movement of humanity, progress itself being defined by an ideology. Facts get created by a current ideology selectively presenting 'material' evidence. Children are made to memorise facts not just out of belief in the epistemological function of memory, but out of the confidence that what children internalise is a view of life. The fact of history represents a truth of life.

All debates as to what constitutes a historical fact, ironically enough, express the same instinct to use history as an empirical phenomena to justify and impose a particular ideology on

contemporary times. The participants to such debates seek to use forms of state power to legitimise particular set of perceptions and hypotheses as forms of knowledge. Schools are the most potent medium for an epistemic tutelage, mainly because of their complete faith in objectivity. The emphasis is on facts and their objectivity because to suggest that they can be critically inquired into is symptomatically subservient of authority. At another level, objectivity can become a dangerous argument for maintaining a particular kind of regime in motion. For ensuring that the forces in power continue to be so. All education that seeks to entrap in particular socio-political forms rather than induce a critical inquiry into them finds an implicit ally in positivistic philosophies that turn the human mind into an object as neutral as nature to be controlled according to some given laws: the social laws being as self-evident as the natural scientific ones.

Meaning as Creative Interpretation

The alternative theory of meaning believes meaning is always constructed. Creativity is the condition of knowing. So communication is a creative transaction. What is said is constantly interpreted and the spontaneous mediation of interpretation recreates meaning. Therefore, there is an inherent problematic of communication. Meaning is created not by a simple transfer but by participation in a process constituted by plural subjectivities responding to each other and to an established common referent world. This position can run into the extremist one of alternative meanings and the dynamic construction of the world in terms of changing functions and relationships. On the other hand, it is possible to maintain an epistemic balance in discriminating between valid experiential values and insights and transient personal impressions and to seek to arrive through a continuous evaluation of experience towards a ground of rational judgments which hold together core shared values and differential alternative perceptions as well. There is space for individual freedom and consensus. This is a difficult balance to arrive at, requiring high degrees of tolerance, whether viewed as an epistemological issue or an issue of organising social behaviour. And in a discussion of education it has significance in both these aspects because education addresses the mind, the self and the world. It necessarily tends towards pluralism, seeking to formulate a shared ground between the subjective and the objective.

The negotiation of meaning is then essentially a creative act - a continuous interplay of interpretations. The school becomes a medium for education if it can make the child conscious of this situation, a situation she already is in, and develop skills to enable her to deal with it, i.e., the capacity to interpret, choose and understand the nature of freedom. The joy of learning lies in an education that emerges from this belief and uses the text as an opportunity for critical questioning.

Using the example of history teaching from an rationalist-liberal frame, some very different questions get asked. What is the history children learn? How will a child conceptualise a time span of a hundred, thousand years and a cultural space so far-flung as to be almost amorphous. Children really remember stories. It is the extent to which their imagination is stimulated that they internalise history.⁵ Again what they internalise is not a 'fact' but an experience recreated in their imagination. Imagination is deemed to be the ground for cognition, the basis for

intellectual and social action. The narrative of history becomes an occasion for critical reasoning. Such an approach acknowledges that the meaning ascribed to a past (or even to a present) is not given, that even past and present are not given, but are inevitable constructions of agency which is 'always already' there, complexly constituted by phenomenological and cultural variants, capable of plural, expressive forms. The divisions of time and space themselves, basic categories for periodising the experience of history in a positivistic frame, here get opened up for critical questioning. With this approach, accepting the construction-deconstruction condition in which the very concept of history is located, the understanding and study of history gets redefined.

The construction of a historical narrative from this point of view aims not at a 'pseudo fact' representation but at stimulating a capacity to critically inquire into what appears as 'fact' so as to be able independently to establish relationships and to induce a self-critical examination of one's own point of view.

An interesting method of teaching history which some non-government agencies are engaging is of beginning with asking the child to construct her own family history and the neighbourhood history and so on, slowly expanding time, space and deepening concepts. An interesting feedback from one such initiatives in a very backward village in Madhya Pradesh was the difficulty children had in making their family trees because while the male names were easily available, the names of mothers and the female family members were vaguely remembered, if not completely forgotten. The women were missing in history. Such methods of inquiry do not just seek to piece together facts as parts of jigsaw puzzle but to stimulate an experiential understanding and a critical reflection of the experiential process. The effort is to develop the child's historical consciousness as an integral part her critical response to her self and to her environment. History not as a fact, but history as a facet of human consciousness -inquiry being not just the unearthing of empirical evidence but the extent to which it deepens the understanding of the human condition and creates the capability to sift life-denying and life-giving values. If education is perceived as developing a critical consciousness of life then the methods of interaction at the basic schooling levels have to transform from their current colonial-positivistic character to what has been described here as rationalist-liberal. It is this approach that transforms the school text into a medium for critical inquiry of life and enables the development of individual freedom and responsive action.

The text has to be opened up. This opening up of the text may be deemed to be a creative subversion, which signifies the emergence of an independent consciousness. The text succeeds to the extent to which a text provokes its own 'annihilation'.

V

Evaluation: Testing Memory or Competency

The two epistemic frames also determine the nature of evaluation.

Tests as Traps to Trip the Learner: The positivistic influence on education is the most strongly evident in the desire to reduce education into predefined measurable outcomes. This is fine for basic literacy and numeracy skills. But for more complex intellectual processes and in-depth comprehension while a process of development can be observed and recorded, a measurement

approach becomes inadequate. There has been an effort to break away from this approach by focusing on competency. Evaluations are intended to assess competencies rather than function as measurement tests. Competency can be understood as a mastery of concepts that can be evidenced through independent thinking, logical reasoning, capacity to relate to different contexts, particularly to relate textual knowledge to life contexts, etc. Competency assessment would actually aim at evaluating capacities to use diverse materials/context/situations as media for critical thinking.

However, a dominantly positivistic orientation has created some strange distortions in the understanding of competency. One, is its reduction to a rigid inventory of activities usually physical demonstrating some skill. The skill usually gets to be identified as information of a rule, and the capacity to act accordingly. Rules of writing, arithmetic and speech. Even rules of behaviour. Second, a confusion about the content has emerged. In most cases teachers actually remain confused as to what is 'competency' and what is 'fact'. This emerges from the misconception that competencies are to be taught disregarding the fact that competencies are developed from the way the child is taught and so can only be assessed from a child's responses, not be the direct subject matter of a text, or even of a ready-made answer which a text can yield for a set of questions. Yet, a number of physically manifest skills get listed as 'competencies' in books and teachers tick off competencies 'done'. Children cram up these listed competencies either as lessons or as activity drill. Take an example observed in a training session of primary school teachers in Madhya Pradesh. Great pain was taken to explain in a 'child' like (more childish) manner how time is told on a clock using a wall-clock as an 'activity'. All the competency confusions are typically evident here. Here competency was seen as something which could be taught. The difference between 'competency' teaching and text-teaching was that the latter was through a practical activity so that telling time from a clock as a useful skill became clear to the children. There was no effort to deal with the concept of time. Activities help in creating a conceptual understanding but only through the effort to stimulate an analysis of relationships. In this case there was no effort to use the activity to create an understanding of time using the wall-clock activity and relating it to the many ways a child may experience time and then linking that up to a deeper sensitisation of the concept of time. As a result there was a complete failure to use the activity of reading time from a wall-clock to create a critical inquiry into the rich experience of time. Time as experiential and time as measurement, time as seasons and ecology, time as social and historical - these are some ways in which human beings intuitively understand time, particularly in the rural areas where most of the schools are located. Had the teacher trainers sought to grapple with the concept of time, particularly with an anticipated clientele of rural children they would have used the children's familiar context rather than being stuck with a wall-clock as an 'activity' to be used in a context where they may be neither walls nor clocks. Instead the stereotype of the wall-clock would serve to exclude whatever insight and experience the child may have and this would thwart the development of conceptual understanding and so of competencies. The concept of competency has been reduced to a mechanical activity done for its own sake rather than for understanding and discussion. The need for emphasising conceptual knowledge has not

developed. The conceptual gets reduced to the verifiable. The verifiable to very arbitrary set of activities which are mostly a mixture of physical skills and some basic literacy/numeracy skills and some facts (again a mix of social and scientific facts). The means becoming the end. As such the competency evaluation methods remain quite similar to the text based ones - the ones they hoped to replace.

Much emphasis has thus gone into designing objective, impersonally administered tests and most efforts at evaluation run against scepticism about the test-designs and conduct of tests. To obtain true results considerable pains are taken at maintaining the secret nature of tests so as to prevent premature leaking out running to the extreme case of public examinations where maintaining the secrecy of the questions is the dominant concern and making security arrangements for conducting exams acquires the appearance of a major law and order situation. Nowhere is the colonial- positivistic culture more terrifying by present than in the evaluation system. It is designed to eliminate, knock-off and exclude, till a small core survives for an elite business. Even as a testing method it fails. It does not test knowledge. It deliberately seeks to expose ignorance. In a way, it is still designed to identify good 'Babu' material - speed in writing, speed in recalling and calculating. This kind of examination rests very well on a 'facts' base. Evaluating knowledge gets to be a checking of facts known and not known, remembered or forgotten. While such evaluation ought to be appropriate for certain forms of employment requiring competitive selection, they violate the very concept of education.

Even if we set up schools on a massive scale but do not reflect critically on what is it that we wish to evaluate and continue to derive our evaluation concepts from a historical system designed to privilege a few and deny the majority and draft that system on to a hard drive for facts as 'objective' indicators of knowledge, we would not be able to do justice to the learning aspirations and potential of most of the children. They compel one to think what are we evaluating and is it really worth it? After all, if evaluations mainly test memory and that too in a threatening environment, what notions do we really have of learning? And is that learning at all? Such reflections compel a rethinking on evaluation in a way that evaluation moves away from being a secret weapon to annihilate those who cannot cope with it. Instead, it becomes a way of understanding for the learner and for the teacher of what they have really learnt and to trigger off curiosity about more things.

Evaluation as Prior Condition of Knowledge: Evaluation is not about failing and passing. It is inherent in the process of teaching-learning. The inhering of evaluation in a teaching-learning process is most often understood to mean physical integration of testing methods in the teaching system. Though this is referred to as 'integration', it really remains, both by its concept and function, external: information unit plus test. Or to put in another way, evaluation comes after the transfer of knowledge. Looked at epistemologically, evaluation comes before knowledge because it is presupposed in the construction of knowledge. There can be no knowledge without a prior necessary evaluation. The designation of some processes/ ideas/sensations/ perceptions as knowledge is dependent upon and consequent to evaluation. Teaching-learning therefore is essentially an evaluative process in this sense. At the practical level, what this implies is a shift in emphasis from teaching to learning. This inverts the normal relationship between teaching-

learning. It is the concern for learning and the simultaneous desire to know whether learning is happening that can be the only rationale for teaching. Teaching derives its meaning from learning. And so has a dependent relationship with it. To turn this around to give teaching a dominating, original and autonomous existence renders the word teaching meaningless. Without learning there is no teaching. Therefore, the nature of teaching is essentially evaluative. Without this inherent evaluation, there can only be a spatial transference of perceptions - the effectiveness of such transfer being tested by evidence of its successful repetition. (Characteristic of all prevalent examination.)

If the teaching-learning process is a process of continuous re-interpretation marked by a consciousness to negotiate plural subjectivities or the experience of subjectivity and the sense of a given objectivity or between the individual and the social, the public and the private, then one expression of effective learning would be the deepening and widening of such consciousness to become a critical self-consciousness which alone can be the basis of a rational critique of the world. Perhaps this would be evident in the increasing ground of shared understanding. Only a dialogic process can create this.⁶ Evaluation as a conscious methodology can be effective only if it seeks to understand how to create this space, how to make it clearer, larger, richer for the teacher and the learner. It would enable both to assess what they know and do not know but in a positive way, as an aspiration for learning, not as failing for what is not known.

VI

Conceptualising the Community

Since what happens in a school is shaped by an episteme, the community absent or present determines the schooling process. The term 'community' more than any other term is the key to understanding education as a process, as a system, and as it is organised in specific institutions. The word community almost like all ontological terms is difficult to define because the very act of definition emerges from an inevitable and necessary mediation of the defining agency. The community gets articulated in the breach between the self and the other. Different epistemic frames negotiate this wedge as different constructs of community. The way community is conceptualised determines the way education is understood and determines much of what happens in a school.

Colonial Construction of Community

A colonial construction of community can comfortably accommodate two polar views. The first view defines the community through negation, as that which is not, outside what is seen as the centre. It is seen as being on the periphery because it is uninitiated, non-expert, diffused and invisible and so outside the locus of power. It can be consulted in matters that concern it but such consultation should be with the representatives of certain groups whose views are deemed enlightened by the coloniser. Because of the non-existence of a real community except as groups with common interests not often in harmony with each other, the centre becomes the only entity that can think on issues of common interest. The second view tends to romanticise the community as an unspoilt, Rousseauesque child

of nature whose existence is bonded by a clear sense of common good and consensual values.

Both these polar views get subsumed under a single colonising frame. Both conceive of the community as a legitimate consensual framework. One denies the possibility of such a framework except in the form of a small privileged agency and therefore denies a coherent community outside itself except as a nebulous mass dispersed voices. The other affirms it but the affirmation is mediated by its own understanding. The outsider validates the insider's voice. In both cases the consensual framework is legitimised by an agency which is evidently not describing itself but another on its own terms.

A colonial perspective of the community as the other will create a school where a distantly placed (physically, socially and ideationally distant) authority decides what is to be taught and how. What is taught is likely to have very little bearing on the needs and aspirations of most of the people who have to be taught. There are two broad impulses behind creating such a knowledge corpus: as habitual- perceptual and as hegemonic. An elite group already has a certain kind of knowledge acquired to fit it for jobs modelled on an erstwhile colonial government's requirements. This it universalises as knowledge. Since this kind of knowledge is relevant only for a very limited purpose, it does not enhance opportunities on par. Validated as universal knowledge and exclusive in its function it actually serves to pressure inequalities. In fact by casting inequalities into a mythic frame it reifies the attributes, values and interests of a particular class as facts of knowledge; what is contingent or rational acquires the semblance of the universal, the objective, of truth and value. Inequalities become acceptable, because the apotheosis of certain cultural forms as knowledge only creates a sense of inadequacy in a vast body of people. The text remains a mystique not to be questioned by the community. The community denies to itself the right to express and demand what it feels or desires to learn, even starts demanding just the education designed to keep it less equal than the designer of that education. A disjunction takes place between life and learning. Large-scale unemployment of educated people, inevitable attrition of knowledge laboured at, consequent frustration, mismatch between the knowledge the education system has sought to validate and aptitudes and skills of living needed to understand an imperfect, heterogeneous, inequitable world. This failure of the system is getting to be obliquely acknowledged but poorly addressed. This is visible in the failure to make the curriculum relevant to life. A pre-defined structure of knowledge ignores the experiences and insights of a major part of the people and with that ends up by negating practical skills and alternative 'unstructured' source of learning from 'life' contexts. Not surprising, it has created a culture wedged between theory and practice, privileging the former. This de-values basic life-skills. It also creates a theory, alienated from its own context making it model itself on cultures who dominated it historically and seeking validation from their absent authority. This is one of the major reasons for India's failure to develop its own discourse in the modern world, and the self-congratulatory settling down of its intelligentsia and academics with one that is mimetic, repetitive and alien. The ultimate colonisation is to seek to become like one's oppressor. And this begins in the school.

The community and the government become each others other. Education becomes state packaged welfarism rather than an opportunity for the community to learn. The school in a sovereign

world, perpetuating a colonial culture, becomes a site for status quoism and the child a stereotype. Such a construct of community makes the educational system worry about involving the community and contextualising curriculum and interventions for equity. That these are major problems is inevitable because these are not seen as integral to the concept of education but outside it. But unless the authority structure of the school opens up to re-make the school as a community institution, the quality of learning in school will have serious limitations.

There is also a strong element of the physical aggregation in this notion of community as a collectivity, a spatio-temporal identity. The specific spatio-temporal context creates a sense of bonding, a homogeneity and a common identity which are perceived as necessary to define community. An idea of community-based on bonding has to reckon with the possibility that such bonding in a visible and tangible form tends to be of interests. Such interests will be shifting and so communities can never be stable, will be inherently stratified and protean in character, therefore eluding definition and naming, because the choice of any one name will deliberately exclude others. If this is a conscious choice then the idea of community will have a functional relevance in a particular context. It would be better to refer to this as an interest group. The idea of community has to be larger than this. For this it has to move beyond the demands of homogeneity.

Community as Equal Communication

A more rational-liberal construction of community is possible. In this, community participation moves beyond just its apparent form of physical collectivity where a socio-physical representative sample is its expression to meaning the individual capacity of rational perception and freedom of choice. Homogeneity - spatio-temporal or cultural - is no longer the condition for consensus. A shared understanding can develop despite differences because of the growing capacity of individuals to interpret, choose and relate public and private worlds. The concept of interest is not adequate to explain community. The concept of value is necessary for this.⁷ The capacity to negotiate the particular and the general, the individual and the collective, the subjective and the non-subjective is what constitutes the ground for the consciousness of value expressed in the ability to be able to treat the other as self. This is constitutive of community. This is also the meaning of education.

The concept of community thus moves from commune suggesting a collective to communication. Community is the capacity to communicate equally. This can emerge only with equal opportunity to allow capacities to develop equally. In the final analysis community is about creating, or trying to create, equal capability and equal freedom. Therefore, the word community would imply not just consensus on a defined agenda but more than that the capacity to accept different agendas on rational grounds. The concept of rational ground implies a broad consensus of human values such as freedom, justice, equality, and capacity to sift differences at the empirical level, to connect and differentiate. Community implies equity, not homogeneity or commonality.⁸

Equity permits differences to coexist on a strata of shared capabilities. This equality is not to be confused with a materialistic, distributive equality. Material resources may affect it. But they would have an instrumental value. It is the capacity

understood both as freedom and ability of an individual to make informed choices. The idea of a community is grounded in this. Such an idea of community includes tensions and conflicts as inevitable and even necessary as part of inter-agency interaction. In fact the relation between a subject and an object would be devoid of tension but that would not constitute a community. This can be the only meaning of community in a democratic society. The idea of education, community, equality and freedom become reciprocal and education that sees these other concepts as desirable attributes but outside it to supplement its own core is not education. Therefore, it is not surprising that schools where children have a sense of learning become pivots of community identity and aspirations.

VII Instrumental versus Intrinsic Value

The real debate is not whether education is desirable in itself as an acculturation process or as promoting certain perceived benefits. Both are equally valid if education is perceived as the development of the capacity to think critically. An artificial debate arises if a positivistic view alone holds sway, because such a view would limit the notion of value mostly to material advantages. This would tend to create an instrumental notion of education. Such a notion should really lead to a conscientious search for a practically useful curriculum. It has not been able to do this. 'Useful' information bits are lodged in the text. They remain utterly useless because they are taught as 'facts' and their relevance and application to life is not established. Facts have to come alive as functional processes in a child's imagination, to be felt to have any value or use. Stimulating processes of inquiry and experiences that relate the self and the world develops consciousness of value.

The debate whether education is instrumental or an end in itself also depends on epistemic interpretations. In the rationalist-liberal frame without attempting an a priori universal determination of specific form of values, it seeks to develop the capacity for rational discrimination between values, the capacity to make choices informed by an attempt to balance the sense of individual and general good. This consciousness about the need to strive towards a greater understanding of values defines human existence.

Again not just what is taught but how it is taught creates this value-consciousness. This is evident from the modern paradox of heavy self-conscious 'value' loading on texts and the general anxiety about the decay of value systems. Values are not created by categorical dictates of what is good and what is not. Values are created by developing critical capabilities, which are a combination of faculties of imagination and analysis. Imagination enables the self to perceive and experience the other as self, to create a sense of universal empathy without which values would remain particularistic and relativistic to lose significance as value. Analysis enables discrimination, judgment and inferential thinking. The field of values is constituted by consciousness of freedom and evaluative choice, not by repetitive reflex action. Unfortunately, the entire discourse of values has been defeated by dogmatism by those who demand 'value education' and sceptical pluralism (equally dogmatic) by those who would reduce value into contextual preferences. The former in its defence of values reduces value

consciousness into dictates of aphorisms and modes of behaviour discouraging discussion on them; the latter into desires and interests. Values express human ideals. At the ideational level they may have forms that appear universally acceptable like liberty, equality and fraternity. At the empirical level, their specific historical expressions may be diverse because of differing interpretations of concepts that at an abstract level involve consensus. That is why consciousness demands the unhindered growth of critical faculties understood as a synthesis of imagination and reason.

It is in the context of a discussion of values that much of the debate on arts and science as curricular components could be seen. The debate has behind it a very exaggerated positivistic bias. Arts are assigned a subordinate position because they do not deal with verifiable facts. Their very presence in the curriculum needs justification. Literature and the social studies (social sciences, in fact!) are made to look as 'scientific' as possible. What is forgotten is that both science and arts aim at stimulating critical faculties. Their medium and their fields are different but covalent. The sciences address the world of physical nature, training the human mind to observe and deal with it. The arts address the human world not to draw 'laws' about human behaviour but to instil an awareness of human values - to enable the mind to ask basic questions. What is the meaning of human life? What is good? It is the sensitivity to these questions that creates an ethical dimension in human consciousness that alone makes possible the negotiation between the self and the world, and determines the use of scientific tools and material resources. A crisis in the consciousness about selfhood, its outright denial in the postmodernist, deconstructionist discourse has caused a crisis even in the understanding of the physical world. All ecological issues are essentially ethical issues because how man relates to nature depends on how man relates to man, which depends on how man sees man.

Conclusion

The path of reform can only be through exercising the freedom to think alternatively. Thinking alternatively here does not imply something outside a mainstream, but is the effort to move beyond historically given dichotomies by allowing space for critical inquiry, innovation and plural forms of action. All debates on reform agendas, however, tend to caught in an impasse of binary dichotomies: formal-nonformal, government-community mainstream-alternative, standardisation-innovation, legal rights-social covenants, freedom-control. Consequently, instead of a dialogue, there is either an uncritical rejection or uncritical borrowing from concepts or practices ranged in binary columns which, with an uncritical mix-up of epistemic terms, only create a new set of binaries or, and this is more often, represent the original dichotomies in a new language.

Since it is never completely possible to move quite outside an epistemic frame, reform initiatives should be critiqued not by the imposition of theoretical norms that derive from some other premises, but from the perspective of whether the processes even if they are characterised by tensions, are concerned about the transformation of relationships on more equal terms or reinforce debilitating dependencies. Put more specifically in the field of education, acknowledging epistemic tensions is whether

a reform initiative leads to a more equitable construction of knowledge.

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Notes

- 1 The Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative pedagogies are initiatives of the government of Madhya Pradesh in the last three years, seeking to address the twin questions of rapid school provisioning specially for the historically marginalised group and appropriate academic processes, endeavouring at the same time to open up schooling processes for local management and participatory learning. Under EGS, a primary school is guaranteed and opened by the government on community demand within 90 days. The Guruji is chosen by the local community. 26,000 EGS schools are in operation, more than 50 per cent in tribal areas with 70 per cent of its enrolled children from ST and SC groups. The search for suitable alternative pedagogies in the state is through the work of multiple agencies, government and non-government, investigating different hypotheses about learning. These multiple learning packages are currently under evaluation with the objective of revitalising and restructuring the academic processes for government schools. The Madhya Pradesh EGS is now accepted as a national scheme referred to as EGS and Alternative and Innovative scheme. Since EGS and Alternative pedagogies are innovations, they have both generated and contributed significantly to discussions on rethinking school. EGS and Alternative pedagogies in Madhya Pradesh have been documented in 'From your school to my school', Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission, 2000.
- 2 Dieter Misgeld, 'Education and Cultural Invasion: Critical Social Theory, Education as Instruction and the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'' in the *Critical Theory and Public Life* edited by John Forester, pp 77-118, (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985).
- 3 'Digantar' an NGO running its own school in Jaipur, is headed by Rohit

Dhankar, a key spokesperson of the 'liberal rational approach'.

- 4 The case study for this could be any government-run formal primary school. A formal school is often limited to legitimising its text. The alternative school seeks to liberate the text. Efforts to cite the formal primary school as the model for evaluating alternative schools miss out this critical difference.
- 5 'Shram Niketan' an NGO based in Madhya Pradesh, district Shahdol headed by Shayam Bahadur Namra runs a project of 10 schools known as 'Apna School' and works on the belief that the text is derived from the context. Namra develops his teaching learning material through local participatory action involving teachers and the community. His materials and his instructional methodologies are deeply informed by a concern for creating conditions of critical consciousness.
- 6 Jan Visser, 'Overcoming the Underdevelopment of Learning: A Transdisciplinary View - Introduction to the, 'Symposium on overcoming the Underdevelopment of Learning'', The American Educational Research Association Montreal, Canada, 1999.
- 7 John Forester, *The Deliberative Practitioner Encouraging Participatory Planning Process*, (MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England, 1999). Forester's discussions on how multiple agencies can have a meaningful dialogue and how a facilitating agency can successfully create conditions of equal communication is relevant. Specially noteworthy is Forester's recognition of the way in which the planning agencies grow and change themselves in a meaningful development process, this change being a critical indicator of a democratic dialogue.
- 8 Tery Eagleton, *The Ideology of Aesthetic*, (Blackwell, 1996, pp 22-23). Eagleton comments on 'The merely notional community of abstractly symmetrical subjects, too rarefied and theoretic to provide a rich experience of consensuality'. Where does one locate a sense of unity? Eventually, in the self-determining subject. While Eagleton elaborates on the function of the aesthetic discourse in a bourgeois state as creating self-determining particulars in harmony with the political ends of the state, it can be argued that 'deep subjectivity' also implies critical consciousness individually or collectively which leads to liberative action. All processes that stimulate critical consciousness constitute education. A community of multiple perspectives can become a condition of critical self-determination.