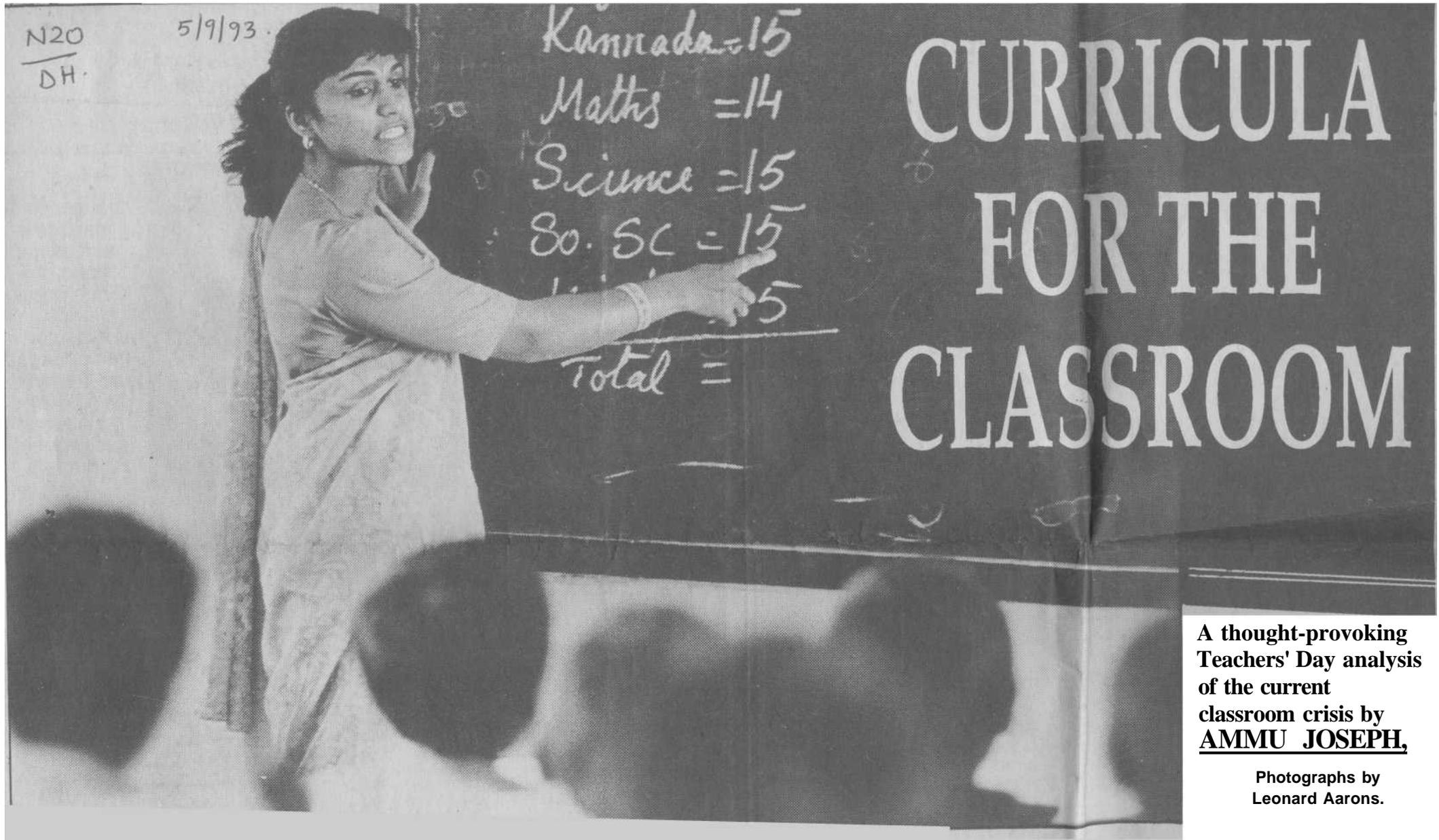


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# CURRICULA FOR THE CLASSROOM

A thought-provoking  
Teachers' Day analysis  
of the current  
classroom crisis by  
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**I**N SEPTEMBER 1862, in the ninth edition of his educational magazine, *Yasnaya Polyana*, Leo Tolstoy published an article entitled, *Should we teach the peasant children to write or should they teach us?*

According to Michael Armstrong, writing on *The Role of the Teacher* in the book, *Education Without Schools*, Tolstoy's article is one of the most astonishing essays ever written about education.

In it, the literary titan describes in passionate detail how he "inadvertently hit upon the right method" of teaching children to write, after suggesting that his students might write a story about the proverb, "*He feeds you with a spoon and pokes you in the eye with the handle.*" One of them responded by saying, "Write it yourself." And so he did.

As he wrote, the children began to come up, look over his shoulder and criticise his writing. Before long, he was no longer writing his own story, but acting as the scribe for the story they told him to write. Two boys, in particular, took over the work and, in the end, it really became their story.

Tolstoy was overwhelmed: "The next day, I could still not believe what I had experienced the day before. It seemed to me so strange that a semi-literate peasant boy should suddenly evince such a conscious artistic power as Goethe, on his sublime summit of development, could not attain.

"It seemed so strange and insulting that I, the author of *Childhood*, which had earned a certain success and recognition for artistic talent from the educated Russian public; that I, in a matter of art, not only could not instruct or help the 11-year-old Syomka and Fyedka, but only just — and then only in a happy moment of inspiration — was I able to follow and understand them."

According to Armstrong, every teacher who wishes to respect the autonomy of his or her students must, perforce, take Tolstoy's question, and his confession, seriously. At the same time, he admits: "To contemplate, rigorously and without sentimentality, the proposition that, in the pursuit of knowledge and truth, the roles of teacher and pupil are often reversible, requires a degree of radicalism that even the most committed amongst them find hard to practise."

To the average Indian teacher, the above paragraph will, no doubt, appear stranger than fiction.

Where is the question of respecting the autonomy of students, when teachers themselves are hardly autonomous and, what's more, when autonomy by and large eludes most educational institutions?

Where is the question of pursuing knowledge and truth when education is no longer seen as a process of understanding the world and of acquiring the confidence to explore its workings; when it is, instead, equated with little more than training young people to memorise and reproduce vast quantities of 'certifiable knowledge,' whose relevance to their lives is, more often than not, completely mysterious?

Where is the question of radicalism when teachers themselves are virtual slaves of prescribed textbooks and rigid, overloaded curricula, in whose design they play little part, but which they must faithfully and unquestioningly impose on captive students?

Where is the question of reversing roles in overcrowded and ill-equipped classrooms, where teachers are fully engaged in policing and dictating notes, so that the twin objectives of maintaining 'discipline' and 'covering' the syllabus can be achieved, if nothing else?

Where is the question of commitment when teaching is no longer seen as a noble and vital vocation, on which depends — to a large extent — the future of humankind; when it has, instead, degenerated into a grossly undervalued and underpaid avenue for white-collar employment, offering few attractions other than shorter working days and more holidays than most other jobs?

Is it any wonder that, as frankly stated in *Challenge of Education*, the 1985 government document that preceded the then New Education Policy, we have a situation where "progressively more indifferent teachers" occupy the classrooms of the vast majority of our schools?

As Peter Buckman says in his editorial introduction to *Education Without Schools*, "It is the easiest thing in the world to declare a crisis in education: the condition is practically endemic. But when education is taken to mean *schooling*, which in turn is a microcosm of the society it serves, in talking of crisis, we mean a crisis in society at large."

In his recent collection of four lectures on education, titled *What is Worth Teaching?*, educationist Krishna Kumar discusses some of the fatal flaws of the Indian educa-

tional system in the context of the political and economic conditions under which the system functions.

In his preface, he explains the purpose of the lectures: "Dialogue on education in our country mostly takes place in a fractured discourse. On one side of the fracture is the language used by the planner, the economist, and the sociologist of education. On the other side is the language of the psychologist, the pedagogue, and the teacher. Neither of the two languages is capable of capturing the tension that every Indian child must cope with in order to be educated.

"The tension has its origins in history, and it lives on because of poorly informed planning, but it cannot be diagnosed if we study history or planning in isolation from classroom pedagogy. It is in the curriculum and in teacher-pupil relations that the tension finds its sharpest expression. And this is where educational research and its popular terminologies reveal their stunted, straggling development. Only a fusion of the two languages...can help." This, he admits, is a tall agenda; the lectures represent his own "small, individual preparation for popularising the agenda."

A recurring theme in the lectures is the disastrous effect of the continuing devaluation of the teacher's role in education. Although the book, naturally, goes beyond this issue in its analysis of our educational system, the fact that Kumar returns to it again and again is significant.

For example, the first lecture, from which the book derives its title, deals with what he refers to as the "problem of curriculum." He attributes the inadequacy and narrowness of curriculum deliberation in India to the fact that it has not, in fact, been treated as an act of deliberation and, further, that it has, by and large, excluded teachers from the process.

According to him, "Curriculum deliberation is a social dialogue — the wider its reach, the stronger its grasp of the social conditions in which education is to function. The only way to expand the reach of curriculum deliberation is to include teachers in it, and this is where the problem of curriculum encounters its greatest challenge in the culture of education in India.

"In this culture, the teacher is a subordinate officer. He is not ex-

pected to have a voice, only expertise. What little curriculum deliberation does take place in the higher circles of educational power remains extremely poor on account of the absence of the teacher's voice."

As a result of the prevailing, limited view of curriculum deliberation, he says, "The issues that our society is grappling with find no reflection or trace in the school's daily curriculum. The knowledge imparted in the classroom transcends all living concerns that children as members of the society might have, as well as all other concerns that the adult members of society have and which will affect children.

"This kind of transcendental curriculum is not just wasteful, for it does not use the opportunity the school provides for imparting useful knowledge; it is destructive, too, for it promotes a kind of schizophrenia. The educated man produced by a transcendental curriculum sees and seeks to establish no relation between his education and his personal life and conduct."

Debunking the oft-heard justification for the absurdly overloaded school curriculum, which generates a fatal sense of helplessness and frustration in teachers, students and parents alike, Kumar states clearly that "the problem of volume of content at any grade level does not originate in the so-called 'explosion of knowledge'...It originates in the archaic notion of curriculum as a bag of facts and in the equally archaic view of teaching as a successful delivery of known facts."

"Unless we shed these notions and accept more modern, humanist concepts of curriculum and teaching," he warns, "we are going to remain stuck as teachers with impossibly large syllabi and fat textbooks to cover..."

"This process of mistaken action and legitimisation of action can stop only if we recognise that curriculum planning involves a selection of knowledge, and teaching involves the process of creating a classroom ethos in which children want to pursue inquiry. We hardly need to add that a curriculum based on this view of teaching can be prepared, and implemented, only after the teacher's right to participate in the organisation of knowledge and the child's right to autonomy in learning are accepted."

In his second lecture, *Textbooks and Educational Culture*, he highlights the plight of teachers in educational systems such as ours, where the teacher is tied to the prescribed textbook. Here, a textbook is not just one of the many educational aids available for a teacher to choose from. Instead, in the ordinary Indian school, the textbook dominates the curriculum and the teacher's primary role is to simplify or interpret the textbook, and familiarise students with its content to the point where it can be easily memorised.

According to Kumar, "The textbook symbolises the authority under which the teacher must accept to work. It also symbolises the teacher's subservient status in the educational culture."

The textbook culture is intimately linked to the tyranny of the examination system, which sets the agenda for education in India today. As Kumar puts it, "When the main concern of both the teacher and student (is) to prevent failure at the examination, the best possible use of classroom teaching (can) only be to prepare students as meticulously as possible for the examination and this (is) done by confining teaching to the contents of the prescribed textbook..."

Nearly half a century ago, Mahatma Gandhi had said: "If textbooks are treated as a vehicle for education, the living word of the teacher has very little value. A teacher who teaches from textbooks does not impart originality to his pupils. He himself becomes a slave of textbooks and has no opportunity to be original. It therefore seems that the less textbooks there are, the better it is for the teacher and his pupils."

This is in tune with current thinking on education as a process not just of imparting basic skills, but of assisting in the development of the total personality of the child through the use of child-centred methods of teaching and decreased reliance on prescribed textbooks.

However, such a view of education calls for greater autonomy for teachers which, in turn, implies greater professional self-reliance, as well as demands for higher status and local control over education.

And, according to Kumar, "The fear of such demands continues to force the educational system to reject the option of truly professionalising its teachers.

"Professionalising the school teacher would not just mean superior academic training; it would also mean conceding to the teacher the right to autonomy in matters pertaining to the choice of materials for teaching and in the construction of the daily curriculum. It would also mean some chance of thinning the textbook culture."

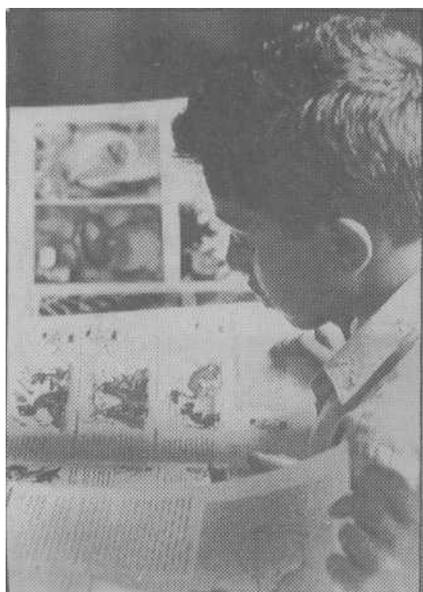
At present, with school teaching regarded as a low-status profession, teacher training remains a poorly rated academic field.

According to Kumar, "The training of elementary level teachers in particular, and all school teachers in general, remains largely untouched by an academic grounding in modern, child-centred pedagogy. Such grounding could possibly dilute the patterns of teacher-

pupil interaction associated with

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- Mahatma Gandhi



the textbook culture..."

As he says in the last lecture, titled *Reading in Primary School*, "(The) situation is exacerbated by the bleak pre-service training available for primary teachers. What academic content it has is largely obsolete, and its skill-related component lacks practical value for actual classroom settings... What puts the icing on this sad situation is the old belief that teachers need only skills, not theory...(But) the teacher who is ignorant of the theory behind ideas, such as building

a classroom ethos conducive to individual interpretation and intelligent guessing, is unlikely to be able to build such an ethos."

It is important, this Teachers' Day, to reflect on the systemic roots of the current crisis in education and to understand the obvious shortcomings of the teaching profession today in this context.

It is clear that there can be no significant improvement in the situation unless sincere efforts are made to remove some of the currently insurmountable hurdles in

the path of creative teaching — such as overloaded and inflexible curricula delinked from social realities, the textbook culture, the tyranny of examinations, the impossible student-teacher ratio, the paucity of educational materials other than textbooks, the neglect of libraries, inadequate and ineffectual teacher education (pre and in-service), and so on.

Similarly, it is futile to expect the brightest and the best to turn to teaching as long as the profession remains undervalued, in terms

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of both salaries and status (not only within the educational system, but in society at large).

It is obvious that unless teachers are taken more seriously by the educational hierarchy responsible for policy and planning, by school authorities, as well as by students and parents, they are unlikely to take their own role as educators seriously.

At the same time, Teachers' Day provides an opportunity for teachers to do some introspection about their understanding of education, their reasons for becoming teachers, their attitude to their work and the value they themselves attach to their profession, their relationship with children, their sense of responsibility and accountability.

Most serious and effective teachers admit that there has been a sharp fall in the quality of both teachers and teaching over the past decade or so.

While the deterioration can be blamed on the system to a considerable extent, they admit that teachers are also at fault. Many enter the profession for reasons which have little to do with a commitment to education. As a result, they are unwilling to go the extra mile to make education as meaningful as possible under the prevailing circumstances.

For instance, although teachers in most major cities today have access to excellent enrichment workshops — on teaching methodology, as well as child psychology, learning disability, etc.— interested school authorities are often hard put to find volunteers to attend these. Likewise, even though there is at least one indigenous and affordable publication entirely devoted to the teaching profession, not all teachers take advantage of the exchange of ideas possible through it.

As one principal with 22 years of teaching experience behind her put it, there is no point continually bemoaning the state of affairs and pleading helplessness in the face of the general crisis in education.

According to her, the question is: Given the overwhelming numbers, given the heavy syllabi and given the tight schedules, what are we going to do to ensure that our children have the best education we can possibly give them?

The priority, clearly, has to be the best interests of the child. •