

Educating for a Sane Society

**Proceedings of the conference held at Centre For Learning,
Bangalore**

December 2006

Centre For Learning is grateful to Wipro Applying Thought in Schools for supporting our conference, Educating for A Sane Society

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Educating for a Sane Society

This document contains the talks, discussions and workshops shared during a unique five-day conference organized by Centre For Learning, Bangalore, in 2006. Our aim for the conference was to gather teachers and educators from all over India (and abroad) in order to dialogue about crucial areas of concern in education today. These areas included: curricula, dialogue, nature, assessment, school and teacher autonomy, and the emotional well-being of children. We felt that different voices and perspectives speaking together would generate a unique, inspirational energy. At the end of the entire process, thanks to the combined efforts of many, both within and outside CFL, we felt our dreams had been realized. Over 150 participants from schools both rural and urban, formal and non-formal, came together in a spirit of friendship and sustained enquiry.

The essential ideas that emerged from the conference can be organized into three widening circles of awareness: teacher growth, school environment and the social dimension. These, we feel, capture both the complexity and the promise of the change we desperately need in education. They emerged as we reflected upon the many insights that

arose during those five days, although the conference itself was not explicitly structured in this manner.

Thus the questions and observations presented below go well beyond specific contexts, into the broader field of education as a central element of personal and social change. As you read the rest of this document, we would like you to reflect upon these questions and ideas, considering their implications in your own contexts.

Teacher growth

- Teachers need opportunities and platforms to express themselves in many areas.
- They can question the educational systems they are a part of and become agents of change.
- They need to recognize that they are at the heart of educational work, and not merely ‘middlemen’ in educational transactions. They can move from feeling powerless to being powerful.
- Teachers from very different kinds of schools need to meet and realize the commonality of their purposes and intents.
- What is the scope of the possibilities when individual teachers change their approach and mindset?

School environment

- Schools can be cooperative ventures, allowing for non-hierarchical and consensual decision making, involving parents, teachers, administrators and students.
- Can this engender a feeling of community, from which responsible energy and action flow?
- In this way, the school becomes a vital centre of regeneration in society.

The social dimension

- What, if any, is the purpose of education in creating a 'sane' society?

- How do we view educational innovations within and outside the 'mainstream'? Upscaling can destroy quality, and yet 'islands of excellence' touch only a few.
- How can the State and private initiatives learn from and help each other?

The document consists of two parts. The first includes all invited talks, the subsequent question and answer sessions, and summaries of the small group discussions. The second part, titled 'From Philosophy to Practice', contains workshop material in several areas of practical teaching.



Part 1

Talks and Discussions



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CFL Presentation

Introductory remarks N Venu, CFL

We at Centre For Learning would like to introduce and explore some of the questions and themes that underpin our work. However, we will not present a history of CFL; nor will this be a detailed description of the work being done here. Where appropriate, those details will emerge in various discussions and workshops over the next few days.

We are aware that the educators who have come here do not all share the same background. Many work in contexts with unique constraints. I do not suggest that methods and structures from one context can be blindly cloned elsewhere. Still, there is much that can be fruitfully shared and talked about. This conference is an expression of the belief that such an interaction is vital; that in spite of differences, as educators, we share common ground and similar challenges.

I also wish to make clear that the issues and themes are being presented tentatively, in a spirit of dialogue, not as self-evident truths to be accepted without question.

The title of this conference indicates a concern with the social impact of education. Implicit in this is a criticism that much of what we

do in the name of educating is unsatisfactory. At one end of the spectrum large numbers of children have no access at all to quality education. At the other, even in the enclaves of the relatively privileged, learning has been reduced to a struggle for certification leading to a successful career.

The reference to a “sane society” may be puzzling or even provocative. Let me clarify. There is much unhappiness and incoherence at personal, social and global levels that seems resistant to long term solutions. CFL exists on the premise that these are all related; and that education can and must contribute to deeper understanding and change. I do not imply that this is easy or that the way forward is well-understood. Yet, we must begin and persist. This conference is an invitation for precisely that.

In exploring the possibilities of such an education, I would like to proceed by highlighting the following:

We must question both ends and means. Many of the goals of our education systems are implicit and unstated. They do exist as a background, all the same, and have powerful effects. Many of the methods and practices we adopt in our schools and classrooms flow from

these goals and have acquired a life of their own. Rigid school organization, excessive focus on rote, and examinations and curricula unresponsive to student needs are examples. We would like to question this focus on narrow goals and rigid methods.

Secondly, we need a vision of educating that is not merely schooling. Schooling as we know it is partly the result of history. It is too deeply entrenched in current social arrangements with their inequities and rigidity. There is pervasive bias in provision and access: gender, class and caste biases, for example.

In addition, schooling is increasingly seen merely as a passport to personal success. Surely, education must aim much beyond this and nurture a sense of responsible relationship to others. Thus we need to keep both the individual and the collective aspects of education firmly in mind. These are not in conflict. One without the other is limited.

Thirdly, such an education must contribute to individual and collective well-being. Well-being is a wider and richer notion than mere material success and personal accomplishment. It too has a collective dimension. An education that is socially aware needs to address both. A private heaven for the few is collective hell.

To summarise, I have outlined three strands in the re-examination of

our educational priorities. A willingness to question both goals and methods; exploring education as more than mere schooling; and a concern with well-being, personal and collective. These are not exclusive priorities. We will, hopefully, have the opportunity to explore these in some depth.

I now highlight three processes that support such an educational vision and nurture well-being. They have been at the core of CFL's work. For ease of presentation, we call them learning, co-operation and reflection. They are not arranged in a hierarchy. Nor are they isolated compartments.

Learning **Venkatesh Onkar, CFL**

I'll begin with what learning means in its broadest and most general terms.

At the outset, I'd like to make the obvious distinction between 'learning' on the one hand and 'educational structures' or 'curricula' on the other. 'Learning' is a vast field that potentially encompasses all aspects of human life: the psychological, the cultural and the social. We are learning beings, participating collectively in this activity that has infinite dimensions. Educational structures and curricula, on the other hand, are historically specific. They interpret this field of learning according to their own purposes. Current educational systems come with their own set of assumptions and goals. It is

important for us to keep in mind that these systems are not permanent or inevitable. They have changed in the past and will doubtless change again in the future. As educators, it is important that we keep this in mind, that we do not take curricula as absolutes, but constantly evaluate them against the broader background of learning and human well being.

In the process of questioning present frameworks of schooling and the learning they offer, several issues come up.

Education as it is commonly conceived seldom engages children in interactive processes in their own contexts. In what ways are children actively engaged with the learning processes in their own lives? Curricula seem concerned with abstract content and information rather than meaningful engagement.

On a similar note: is 'learning' in this context just a passive consumption of messages and information? In other words, are curricula authoritarian and power driven? Current educational frameworks tend not to encourage questioning; instead, they emphasize messages and concepts that seem beneficial but which are problematic if we examine them more closely. An example is the use of national curricula to build the concept of 'nationhood.'

A powerful prevailing feature of conventional curricula is the fact that

ideas are severely compartmentalized into watertight disciplines. It is not clear what the advantages of such watertight compartments are. We must question the relevance of these distinctions that serve to remove the discipline from the child's life rather than integrate the two.

At quite another level, we may ask, why does schooling emphasize external rewards, such as certification, marks and prizes, to such an extent? Is learning meaningful when driven almost entirely by external rewards, regardless of psychological impact and costs? Internal intrinsic motivation does play a tremendous role too.

Finally: are these educational models merely training the young to fit into society? Education offers the learning of a set of skills that will allow young people to earn a livelihood and support themselves, and obviously this is necessary and right. But does it allow a radical questioning of society and the reasons for social inequality, or does it perpetuate these inequalities?

If the questions and problems I have raised are valid, what are our options and alternatives? A lot of the work we do at CFL is our response to these doubts I have brought up.

It is clear to us that learning must begin with a quality of scepticism. The beauty and power of this approach lies in the fact that we can be sceptical and investigative about every area in our lives. A child can investigate the natural

world and the social world; she can equally investigate her own psyche and learn about her relationships in all their complexity. Such learning is open-ended and non-prescriptive. The emphasis is on learning, doubting and questioning, not on content to be mastered or skills to be acquired.

A central feature of such an approach is the creation of an atmosphere of non hierarchical learning. It is important that learning is not passive and that knowledge is not used as a means to power. Children can be encouraged to question, to doubt and to challenge. This kind of questioning cannot obviously be restricted to within a classroom; once the process of scepticism is unleashed, it must encompass many dimensions of life. However, creating and sustaining such an atmosphere can never be taken for granted. It will inevitably take a great deal of commitment from parents, teachers and children. We need collectively, as a society, to realize the potential of this approach.

Other features might emerge from these ideas. Observation and attention to natural processes and the beauty of the natural world is an important feature, right from a young age. Context-based academic learning is important, with an emphasis on understanding and analysis rather than mere rote and memorization. We need to encourage children to gain an

understanding of the incredible complexity of our social world and all the subtle forces at work in it. A balance between intellectual work and work with the hands, between text oriented study and studying the 'real' world first hand, is necessary. We must try to present the whole field of learning in an integrated rather than a fragmented manner.

We have observed over the years that it is possible for children to learn free from pressure and fear. External motivators are no longer the only driving forces; there can be space for children to learn and discover with a sense of freedom. Learning can and must happen with a great deal of space, leisure and enjoyment.

Our basic question is whether we, both adults and children, can learn about ourselves and our psychological lives. Without such a deep investigation and understanding of ourselves, any attempt to understand society and social issues seems pointless. Each of us is reflected in society and is a reflection of that society. To understand our complex world, the first inevitable step seems to be that we must begin to understand ourselves.

I would like to emphasize the fact that learning is never a private, isolated activity. Learning is an active process that happens through collective relationship and investigation. An investigative process focused both

inwardly and outwardly, offers the space for radical change. Similarly, change sustains the tremendous energy required for reflection and investigation. A mode that is in essence investigative and reflective, as I had mentioned earlier, is never a given. It has to be created through a huge commitment of energy.

Co-operation

Yasmin Jayathirtha, CFL

Learning is thus an attempt to understand the world, including ourselves. This is a very urgent task since society is trying to come to grips with huge material growth and a desire on the part of every one to have an affluent lifestyle. In the recent years, this is coupled with a growing realisation that this will have major impact on the earth leading to climate change and loss of diversity—besides just not being sustainable in the long run.

Studying global warming in a chemistry class, a student asked: what can we do cut down the amount of CO₂ released? I answered –consume less. His response was—no, no –I mean realistically! He is a fairly sensitive fifteen year old but he realises that it is difficult to consume less, that society's message is the opposite: success equals consumption.

Children who go to school spend the largest part of their lives there and this is where they learn to socialise,

adding to attitudes already learnt from home.

There is a terrible dichotomy between what value classes teach—sharing, compassion—and what is expected in the classroom: achievement and individualism.

It is clear that we have to learn to think of the world as being a part of us. Holistic education, educating the whole child not just a part, is talked of a lot. What phrase should one use for an education that teaches that you are a part of the whole and that your actions create the society you live in?

A classroom has to teach you to think about the effect of your actions. The structure of the classroom has to help us learn this and hence the need for co-operation. What do we mean by co-operation? It is a sharing, a partnership, not necessarily equal but one in which any authority comes not from position but by taking on responsibility.

We are talking about a classroom where students cooperate with each other and their teachers and vice versa. For this to occur we will see later how it will have to extend outwards. If we consider the classroom as a microcosm, we will have to work together to create an environment which will enable every student to participate and not be forced to drop back. This will be a place where individual success is not achieved at the cost of group

learning and students are not passive recipients. For this co-operation to exist there has to be a relationship based on mutual responsibility and dialogue. This will be hard for the teacher, since it means giving up a position and being vulnerable, but the gains are many. At a very surface level it constantly refreshes your teaching since each class/student will respond to a statement made by you differently. It can illuminate your teaching showing you why some methods work and others do not.

At a deeper level, this relationship allows you, an adult, something very valuable, an 'in' into your students' lives. You can share your concerns with them and they will listen, because you are a partner. Since you are not portraying yourself as an authority and they can question you, you get the same rights.

What are the difficulties? One real difficulty is that of assessment: how do you gauge students' understanding? In small groups, it is easily done, by throwing individual questions or observing them. In a more structured classroom, what will take the place of weekly tests? One school we know uses the tests in an ingenious manner: they give the tests but do not hand out the results, but instead use it to tailor homework to aid learning.

It raises questions of what is assessment, what are we assessing, why is a time frame for acquisition of knowledge important? All these are very disturbing questions for a society which administers as many entrance exams as ours does.

The second difficulty is motivation. Competition as a tool to get performance is lost from your hand in the classroom. Only the lazy and bright students will mourn its going since they depended on it to work and you with them will have to find other ways to keep them from getting bored. In a cooperative set up they can help the less able, deepening their own understanding in return. But in a society which measures success and failure in microseconds and fractions of centimetres and marks, can a student cope? Obviously, not alone – the structure in the classroom must be reflected in (or rather extended to) the school and home. So structures there have to become non hierarchical, based on dialogue and relationship rather than strictly defined roles – teachers have to constantly work with each other and the parents to allow dialogue and relationship to dictate events. This will shake our accepted ideas and can be very scary. Adults will have to question long held truths and be open to questioning both by others and by themselves. None of this will be possible without the third strand of our work – reflection.

Reflection

N. Venu, CFL

The inclusion of reflection as part of this trinity of processes arises from our feeling that an inward journey of questioning and attention is a necessary part of any learning environment, for adults and the young. However, we need to be cautious. These words can be interpreted in many ways, and could result in confusion.

Hence it is important to clarify in what sense we use this term. To us, reflection is an open-ended engagement with our inner world that reveals its connection with the external and vice versa. It is a dimension that is difficult to capture in the conventional ideas of curriculum and method. As a process, reflection is intimately related to both learning and co-operation. It is not a psychological technique or a training programme.

Why is reflection important? Much of the turmoil both in the personal and in the social realm has its origins in our flawed understanding of our own nature. Destructive emotions deployed to protect rigid personal and collective identities are a prime cause of unhappiness and violence in our lives. The pursuit of individualism with its excesses is increasingly being mistaken for freedom. Well-being then, is clearly a casualty. Attempts by statesmen and saints to offer us moral

advice have failed routinely. We do not need more advice. We need better understanding.

This understanding, that is both self-understanding and a sense of responsibility for the other, has to be an integral part of any educational environment. It opens our hearts to co-operation and learning. A just and peaceful society, a sane society, if it is possible at all, will need citizens educated in such environments.

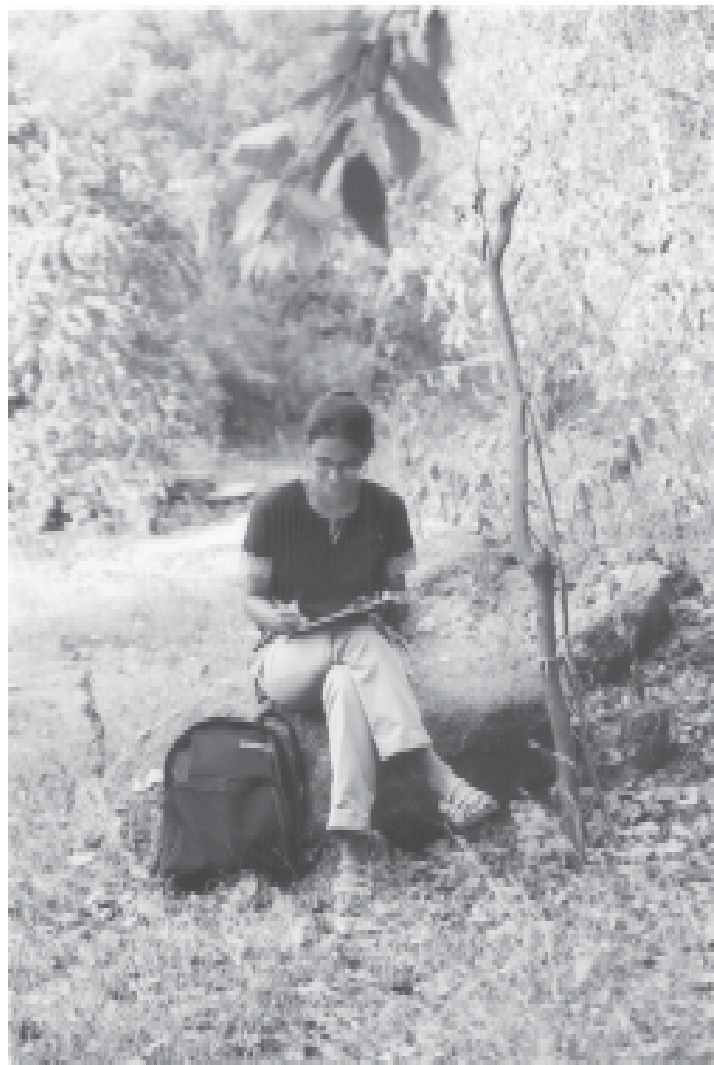
I would like to conclude with the following comments:

- We have outlined three paths in the exploration of a radically different education and mentioned three processes that support it. We believe that it is possible to explore these processes in many ways and in many settings.
- We do not claim to have given a complete and exhaustive picture of the possibilities open to us as educators. Nor is this an attempt to create a new theory of education. Our effort has been to highlight insights that will help us focus on many core issues over the coming four days.
- Our interaction here will include discussions, workshops and activities that emphasize one or the other of these aspects. We hope that at the end of it we will have gained an understanding that will enrich each one of us.

- Needless to say, we feel that these concerns with learning, co-operation and reflection are not merely for a privileged few. The challenges that we face as a society, and perhaps the unknown challenges of the

future, continue to need radical responses, not business as usual. And in one way or another, we are all in the same boat.

Thank you and a warm welcome, once again.



Invited Talks

In this section, we present the various invited talks given at the conference. The speakers presented on themes broadly related to the aims of the conference. We have tried to include verbatim talks where possible; in a few cases the talk has been reconstructed based on notes. We have tried to maintain the voice and tone of the original talks.

Comments at Centre For Learning

Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Bangalore 18 December 2006

Friends,

Tagore's *Gitanjali* written in 1912 won him the Nobel Prize. His lesser-known but hugely instructive little story called 'The Parrot's Training' written in 1918, won – and wins – him grateful readers. Many of you must know it. But if there is even one here who does not, it would be worth reading a brief excerpt from it for that person:

Once upon a time there was a bird. It was ignorant. It sang all right, but never recited scriptures. It hopped pretty frequently, but lacked manners.

Said the Raja to himself: Ignorance is costly in the long run. For fools consume as much food as their betters, and yet give nothing in return.'

He called his nephews to his presence and told them that the bird must have a sound schooling.

The pundits were summoned, and at once went to the root of the matter. They decided that

the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests. Therefore, according to the pundits, the first thing necessary for this bird's education was a suitable cage...

A golden cage was built with gorgeous decorations....

The Raja at length, being desirous of seeing with his own eyes how his Education Department busied itself with the little bird, made his appearance one day at the great Hall of Learning.

...The Raja was satisfied that there was no flaw in the arrangements. As for any complaint from the bird itself, that simply could not be expected. Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper.

Nevertheless, nature occasionally triumphed over training, and when the morning light peeped into the bird's cage it sometimes fluttered its wings in a reprehensible manner...

'What impertinence!' growled the kotwal.

The Raja's brothers-in-law looked blank, and shook their heads, saying: 'These birds not only lack good sense, but also gratitude!'

With text-books in one hand and baton in the other, the pundits gave the poor bird what may fitly be called lessons!

The kotwal was honoured with a title for his watchfulness, and the blacksmith for his skill in forging chains.

The bird died.

Nobody had the least notion how long ago this had happened. The fault-finder was the first man to spread the rumour.

The Raja called his nephews and asked them. 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?' The nephews said: 'Sire, the bird's education has been completed.'

'Does it hop?' the Raja enquired.

'Never!' said the nephews.

'Does it fly?'

'No.'

'Bring me the bird,' said the Raja.

The bird was brought to him, guarded by the kotwal and the sepoy and the sowars. The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled.

Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded asoka leaves made the April morning wistful.

That is Rabindranath Tagore at his imaginative, sensitive, creative best. As you know, Tagore started Santiniketan with a school.

Now, hallucinating for a moment, let us reverse the story.

In a tale of future horrors, most of the human race has become extinct

– perhaps no great regret. But let us assume it has – doubtless by the blowing up of cities – with a Bigger Bang than the one that brought it into being. But before that actually happens and a nuclear winter sets in, a little boat of brave humans launches out to sea in a new Ark, to reach some shore where they can perhaps become the nucleus for a new human family. After a long, long journey through increasingly unbearable privations the vessel reaches an unknown island, which has been missed by ancient navigators, medieval explorers, even by the most sharp-imaging of modern satellites. Sadly, by the time the little vessel nudges the soft shore of that island, every single one on it has succumbed except a little infant girl, who had only just begun to toddle before the brave team had set off.

This very strange island is bereft of human life but it has parrots, hundreds and thousands of them, inhabiting it like some ancient tribe of humans might have, unbeknownst to others. Each parrot is a living, throbbing bulb of green that glows yellow at dawn, subsides to its own emerald at dusk, catching the orange, pink and purple of the setting sun on its plumage before it sleeps. But when flying in a group, the parrots are a canopy of the brightest green, the chlorophyll brilliant against blue sky or white cloud, moving with a propulsion

that has rapture within its speed, a sense of discovery rather than of invention, and a great spirit of collectivity that is without uniformity.

On this parrot island, the human child toddles ashore. The boat itself goes gently down as if to say its attenuated purpose – depositing the child ashore – has been served. The child looks around to see the boat but finds no trace of it. And then, in her daze, she looks up to see what she has never seen before – parrots upon parrots, screeching, singing, laughing, chattering, flying, looping loops, in joyous abandon. Had it not been for this spectacle, she would have probably broken into a wail.

There are no other birds on the island nor indeed any other forms of life, only these parrots, bright green and yellow, swift of flight, smart as smart can be, tremendously confident, whether in flight or on the ground and totally in charge.

The island has trees in profusion, though – trees that flower, trees that fruit. They are the parrots' food-provider. And the parrots are the trees' propagators. These parrots have also, over centuries, acquired the characteristics of flightless birds. They can walk like fowl and when they do so, which is often, they resemble poultry.

They have developed for themselves something else as well: a

system of government with a King and a Prince.

When the great brood of parrots in its swift and musical flight, winging up and down, moving like light, rolling from side to side, joyously, sees this strange creature, wingless, beakless, no green or yellow on her, toddling, puzzled, on the edge of the island, it goes into collective shock. For these parrots have never seen something like this before. The fast-moving cloud of emerald stills mid-flight, like a paper-kite halted by a tug of the kite-flier's string. The leader of the parrots, with a greater intellectual capacity than the others, waves his right wing and says 'The God of Evil has sent a wingless Creature to destroy us, let us have nothing to do with it'. But another, gentler parrot, with a greater spiritual capacity than the others, waving her left wing says 'No, this thing is a gift to us from the God of Good, let us take it with us and give it to our Prince'.

All the parrots agree with the gentle parrot and come winging down, settle around the girl, and curling their wing-feathers around her hand, walk her lovingly down to the King's tree-home. The Prince is thrilled beyond screeching. 'We will feed this walking bird with our very best flowers', he says, 'We will leave her to wander where she likes, sing, dance'. And pointing to her hands, he says 'Those funny featherless things sticking out of

its sides with five digits at the end of each, will surely become wings in due time and it will then become a parrot just like us!

The King is pleased that his son has a new toy. 'Lavish love on it', he decrees, 'and lavish food – the nectar of the sweetest flowers, the buds of the most delicious flowers, but above all tenderest petals of the choicest flowers'. All these are brought. Soft petals, sweet petals, petals of different colours, varied textures, diverse feels. They are brought with the love of blessing, the care of an offering made in thanksgiving and hope.

The child loves the taste of nectar, of honey. It is pure. She does not, of course, know what 'pure' is or could be. But when she tastes the honey that is placed by a parrot beak gently into her tiny mouth, the tongue comes alive. The touch of this substance is fluid and yet not flowing, sweet yet not sugary. It has the essence of flowers and yet from somewhere deep inside the flower, where the flower is more than a flower. And she finds in her mind the meaning of the word 'nectar'. Then come the flower buds. She likes them too but not quite as much as the honey. They are tiny, soft and both fragrant and delicious. The petals of flowers, however, are a different matter. She takes them in only because they are brought with such bright-eyed

unblinking love. Petal after petal of freshness is sent into her until she can take no more. "It has had enough of beauty and of nature for one morning," the parrots say to each other and let it be.

And so it goes...this human infant who has had but the faintest beginnings of human memory begins to forget those images of her earlier life. She outwears the little dress she has on her ('Look, look, her old feathers are moulting' the gentle parrot says). The child forgets all mental conditionings, forgets repetitive habits of the human mind that had come down to her through the processes of genetic infusion over millennia. And she begins to live in her new freedom. She ceases – almost – to be a pre-conditioned human and becomes – almost – a free parrot. Only, she cannot fly.

As time moves on, a sadness begins slowly to come over her. She begins to sicken on the fruit. She begins to crave for something white and warm to drink, for something to cover her body with, something which can be slipped over her head and onto her tiny shoulders. And then her memory, dimming but not gone, shows her one picture, like a forgotten photograph, of faces which were flattish, beakless, but full of something she cannot name but knows – human expression.

The child is not just sullen, she is sad.

One day, when waters pour down from the skies in sharp sheets, the world of parrots, with the natural ease of its kind, finds ways into nest holes on trees, crevasses, hollows. The parrots do so without resentment, without resistance. That is Nature, they know. It is not just futile but wrong to resist Nature. We are Nature, they say, so is rain. We are the rain and the rain is us. With one quiver of the body, raindrops fall away from their plumes. With one flap of the wing, the wetness glides away.

But the child? Oh, she is wet through. The rain clings to her skin, cold and unfriendly. She scampers into a low bush that has some boughs growing out of it to make a kind of shelter and she cowers into it, whimpering, shivering, fearful.

And in that sanctuary, she recalls, dimly, another glowing image: the warmth of a lovely indoors. A rocking chair, a lap, the faint image of a window, a glass window, through which she as a baby is shown water coming down on the garden outside. And she remembers a sound, a human sound, a voice, a human voice, which says something to her like “r-a-i-n” - and urges her “Say with me, baby, ‘r-a-i-n’ - that is rain...” And then the child remembers for the first time a word she has not spoken for days ‘M-a-m-a’. And she loses consciousness.

The parrots are in consternation.

Now, the parrot world has, through the work of some subliminal collective memory over millennia, perhaps through a parrot that had travelled to the human world or escaped from some ship, learnt of two ‘humans’ – one with a single-syllabled name it can pronounce, ‘Blake’, and another many-syllabled it just cannot, who taught humans to walk, not wander, not march, but walk, wearing, while in a land called India (weather permitting) no heavy shoes or socks, being barefoot.

The parrot world has also learnt of an image. This image is outside of its experience and yet within its understanding; unfelt and yet tactile. It is the ultimate of all horrors, the omega of all nightmares. It is the hated possession of the parrot world’s genetic memory. It tells the parrot world that there is something altogether too dreadful, too unthinkable, too unacceptable and it is called ‘cage’. When the child goes into the bough to save herself from the rain some parrots in outrage and disbelief say, ‘Oh no – the Gift-Parrot has sought a cage!’

‘Cage!’ There is alarm in the King’s palace. ‘I told you’, the Prince says, ‘We have not given it enough freedom, we have denied it the opportunity to roam free, to fly unrestricted, to seek the beauty of the setting sun, the moon and the stars at night’.

One day, when the little one is barely able to sit up because of the packed density of the petals stuffed inside her, a gentle breeze plays around her. And there is a sound in the breeze's movement which is different from that of the flapping of parrot wings or the murmurings of leaves she had got so used to. It stirs something within her and that is the sound of a singing voice, not a chirping voice, but a singing one. And a human-singing voice. It sings softly, indistinctly, and makes her want to curl up and sleep. It is a lullaby.

The parrots, of course, have their own song, their anthem, which goes like this:

*We are sane, we are free
tu-wit, tu-wee
Our home is the leafy tree*

*We soar, we ski
tu-wit, tu-wee
We're so, oh so, hap-ee*

*'Beware of the cage'
Said Blake, the Sage
'That puts all Heaven in a Rage'*

*'Rid doors of locks'
Said another in his talks
Free feet from socks'*

*'Don't cram, just See'
Don't fret, just Be'
Said He*

*We are sane, we are free
Tu-wit, tu-wee
Our home is the leafy tree*

*We are free, we are sane.
We have no 'code', we use no cane
We kiss the cloud,
we sip the rain*

*We are sane, we are free
tu-wit, tu-wee
Our home is the leafy tree*

After the child comes to, the King sets up a small choir of parrots to teach her this song, softly, softly, without any compulsion on the poor little thing. There should be no forcing of the exercise on it, he says, whether on the accent or the pitch, the rhyme or the reason. But try as she does, the child cannot learn this parrot-song of freedom.

The child tries to lisp some notes, which come to her from some dim haze of memories, mixed up with the image of a woman's face, her mother's, and the sound of some rhymes and words like 'sleep' and 'hush-a-bye' in them. Tears well up in her eyes and choke her voice.

Friends, hallucinations must not extend. Parables must have a stricter word limit than 'speeches'. Mine does, and has ended. If I have offended anyone by my remarks about sanity and freedom, I apologise to them

most sincerely. My only purpose was to share the thought with all of you, teachers and students present here, that regimentation in schools or elsewhere – except in the uniformed services – is wrong. But the alternative to it has to come not from out of a book of antonyms but from a register of alternatives. The alternative has to relate to the individual, to the context, to the times. People who cage parrots do wrong. ‘Parrots’ who uncage people can also go wrong.

Whenever I visit a place of learning I genuflect - mentally, of course. And this has nothing to do with the kind of school that I am at. For these are all places where learners are being taught by other learners to learn that life, the biggest teacher of all, gives us of its lesson in unexpected ways. And the biggest of these has to be the lesson of balance.

Tagore and Krishnamurti had and shared with us, balance. They showed us that balance was not a Euclidean proposition, true for all time everywhere. They showed us that balance depends on two factors: the gradient of the challenge and the ability of the one facing the challenge, to take a stand on it.

If schools are to impart balance to students, they can do so only in terms of the recipient’s abilities, self-image and bhava, not the school’s own ability, self-image and bhava. If the

regimentations of the assembly-line are wrong, the regimes of no-line-at-all cannot be right either.

Tagore wanted his beautiful school-experiment in the Patha Bhavana at Santiniketan to meander, not proceed in some straight line like an excavated channel. He wanted, thereby, the meandering course of the pupils’ lives to find their natural bent. He sent his own son Rathindranath to that school when it began, in 1901, with five students and five teachers. The story of each of those students and teachers in that remarkable 1:1 ratio is worth studying. I will not take your time with that except to say – by way of an aside – that one of the teachers was astonishingly different from the other teachers (and from most people). He was, of course, a good teacher and was loved by his students but his best friends were - caterpillars! In his ashram home he bred hundreds of them and at the end of an exhausting day at work would go to sleep wrapped up - of all things - in newspapers with his pet caterpillars let loose to crawl on them. What the caterpillars thought of this freedom to saunter over world news we can never know, but Lawrence Teacher obviously slept the better for this procedure. It is no surprise that not long thereafter Tagore’s school requested Lawrence Teacher to shift to other forms of assisting Santiniketan.

Independence does not have to be

eccentric any more than self-discipline has to be regimental.

For freedom to be responsible, for experiments to be non-erratic and to lead to balance, Tagore and Krishnamurti have set standards and left examples. We must experiment but not become prisoners of tentativeness. If we do, we will become prisoners in unbarred cages.

Annie Besant broke with western convention, giving Theosophy new vigour. Krishnamurti and Rukmini Devi broke with Theosophy – and each other – leading to the founding of the ‘K’ schools and of Kalakshetra. The process continues. Every break is a new amalgamation, which is bound to break again. Life is like a sheet of postage stamps. Some look at its visuals. I am drawn to the serial perforations that dot it in intersecting lines. Is each perforation there important, or the jointure between each perforation? Do I say the line is meant for tearing or for holding? A society – the Theosophical – led to a great Exiting. The Exiting, with the Exiter’s name got Incorporated. The ‘Inc’ has led to the teaching of the Teaching, which has led to a Walkaway, if not a Walkout, and a Centre has been born. Do Centres ‘hold’? Do ‘falconers’ remote-control each ‘falcon’? There is in every one of us an anarchist and a systemiser. Buddhas walk away from palaces that are prison-like to

found or inspire Councils which have their own bars, systems, schisms. Schismatics become prophets, prophets generate schism. Life has given to each of us (or positioned in each one of us) a ‘zero’ and a ‘one’, engaged in endless play, the ‘zero’ prefixing the ‘one’ and saying “you are nothing” only to find the ‘one’ ahead of it and saying to it “We are ten”. We cannot teach non-teaching teacherlessly. We cannot – and should not – cage the parrot. We cannot – and should not – teach the unwinged to fly. We can and should uncage the parrot, teach the unwinged to stand, to walk, to run and to choose between being still or in motion according to what seems and perhaps is, right for that moment. Choose between the ‘zero’ and the ‘one’ in us to use those two values to differential effect. The ‘zero’ will tell us that life itself is perhaps a trap and the body a ‘cage’. The ‘one’ will tell us of the entrapments and cagings of circumstance from which others need to be released. The ‘zero’ is the ‘vita contemplativa’ we need for ourselves, the ‘one’ is the ‘vita activa’ we need as members of a social order.

If I may conclude with a non-thought or two from a non-teacher.

Schools must see themselves as working with today’s student in today’s classroom, in today’s multiple and mutually canceling realities. Who teaches those? Holders of B.Ed. and M.Ed.

degrees? No, those who have experienced these realities. Let schools bring in as Teachers Emeritus such persons, young or once-young, from the different theatres of our realities. Not itinerant Governors and fleeting experts but real people who have taken their share of knocks in life. And let students gather around them, in tune with their own aptitudes, and learn real lessons about real life from real people. A potter in my old school and an old Haryanvi mithaiwala in my college taught me as much about life as my teachers taught me about my subjects of study.

You will, you must, ask me what I mean by 'realities'. I have in mind, principally, the realities of India's contemporary contradictions and divides. Be assured, I am not going to deliver myself of a homily on the rich-poor, urban-rural, sectarian-secular story. There are, apart from those, certain old and certain new divides that comprise a daily, hourly reality. Paradoxically and tragically, we are witnessing what may be called attitudinal divides that are acquiring disturbing proportions. Those who want to protect the environment, save the forests, and its denizens stand categorized by some perfectly real people who stand on the edge of the destitution line, as 'elitist' and 'people-unfriendly'. How right is that dividing line? Those who want to protect animal rights are categorized by some

real people as the kutte-billi walas who accord the insân, a lower priority. Those who have an interest in khadi, in hand woven fabrics, in crafts, are typecast by those who out of practical necessity and low budgets, use synthetic material as fashion-walas. Examples can be multiplied. You know them better than I. There is, however, a reality within these realities of the Great Indian Divides – GIDs we can call them – which gets drowned in the din of agitations. This greater Indian reality – GIR we can call it (invoking the great lions of Gir for blessing) – is that, in the long run, conserving forests is people-friendly, protecting animal rights is about being civilized not sentimental, khadi and crafts help very, very poor people. The GIR needs to be redeemed from the GIDs, the greater from the great, the truer from the not-untrue. This requires a good grounding in both precept and in tactics. 'The road less travelled-by' is an unforgettable phrase of Robert Frost's. Schools such as CFL may help students choose – not between right and wrong, truth and untruth, non-violence and violence – that is easy. They must help students learn to choose by self-enquiry between two truths, between two paths both of which may be true in part. That is not easy.

Schools stand divided. Those that are 'standard' and 'assembly line' are self-described and self-defended in

terms as “after all, we have to be practical; we live in a world that competes, grades and employs according to grades unless of course you have ‘pull’ “. And those schools that ‘experiment’ like Tagore’s or Krishnamurti’s, howsoever unshod and unsocked their students may be, on the other hand, regarded as ‘elitist’.

Schools need to look upon students as individuals with distinct backgrounds, specific aptitudes. A parrot can be caged; a parrot can cage. The word ‘special’ is used now for students with ‘special needs’. Every student is, actually, ‘special’, for each has invisible deficits. But also because each has invisible strengths. That ‘thingness’ – negative or positive – in each student needs discovering and attention. Let no school say Tagore could do that because his school had five students and we have five thousand. That argument is not without force, but is often used as a matter of course. There are ways of discovering the ‘special’ in each student. And ways of telling that ‘special’ how to grow through and out of cages.

One balance that is needed is on the gradient of perceptions about what is ‘sane’ in a society. Extremism, in any cause, including and especially in the cause of learning is wrong and unwise. No one can claim a monopoly over sane living. We can only claim to have bits and pieces of sanity. We can

aspire to enlarge those segments by trying to understand why some feel comfortable caged and some not.

Schools that are located on ‘the road less travelled-by’ share something with the gurukulas of old. But we live in times that have gone beyond gurukulas (though gurus of a new kind sprout all over). Until not very long ago, leaders of Indian opinion from the so-called English-educated elite – the ‘upper crust’ – like Tagore in Bengal felt and spoke for gurukulas, handicrafts. There was an ideological compact between the two poles. As in the railways, the transition made by the most famous Indian of our times was straight from the train’s 1st Class to its 3rd Class. Today the IInd Class 2 tier and 3 tier – in other words, the middle class – is the dominant class. It is that class which characterizes the 1st as the elite and has virtually done away with the 3rd. But the railways, great and representative of India that they are, are still not the whole of India. An equivalent of the old 3rd Class does exist – in the shape of our deprived and marginalized, many of who are tribal. And in the shape of gender discrimination across all Classes. The GIR – the greater Indian reality – is also about them and their future. The GIDs are also about a reality and need attention but not at the expense of the GIR. Here are two competing truths. And choosing from them takes something.

Centres for learning, if they are aware of these realities, must prepare themselves to address the Great Indian Middle Class about its illusions and delusions. They must not luxuriate in the false dichotomy of 'standard education' and 'liberal education' but prepare students to address real-life, the razors' edge of the moment where situations in today's India call for

choices to be made, and for a balance. They must prepare students to rage against complacent calm and to be calm against incendiary rage. For we have both amidst us – calm where a creative rage is called for – as against injustice. And rage, real or simulated, which destroys. To achieving that balance, to achieve the skills of Right Choice, may your deliberations be addressed.



Reinventing Education for an Inclusive World¹

Prof Yash Pal

Modes of acquiring information have been changing very fast. We are so exposed that our own faculties of reasoning and model making are not used very often. Fashions have predominance, in thought as in dress. Yet in the middle of tremendous forces of uniformization the rebels and nonconformists need not be submerged or eliminated.

Means of acquiring information might have been transformed but education still needs teachers and fellow students. Libraries are necessary aids; they have existed for a long time but they have never been universities. Nor would they become so in the foreseeable future. But a radical transformation in the character and modes of learning is definitely indicated. In fact it is already happening. There are tremendous advantages to be derived through the emergence of the new - like digital libraries and the Internet. There are also some pitfalls and dangers that might destroy education and replace it with mere training for skills. This needs explanation.

My complaint against the present education system in our country is that it tends to be contextually disconnected.

Personal observation and experience do not change what is required to be learnt and the manner in which it is to be learnt. A defined collection of competences and well-listed pieces of information constitute education for everyone, with little or no room for personal variation. Not only the learner but also the teacher is bound by contours, in expanse and in depth. The interconnections with allied areas are normally frowned upon but when allowed they are restricted to examples that might not be relevant any more. The testing methods ensure that diversion from the well-defined path does not take place. Even the pathways for excursion are defined to the extent that they too form a part of the inorganic contour that contains the syllabus. This works reasonably well for restricted training but not for growing minds that might wander off into unexpected but often exciting new areas. We are not honed for creating new disciplines.

Why is this the way it is? We might argue about the reasons that made education as mere training for a world created by others.

Let me share my thoughts on what seems to me an important challenge

¹ UGC Golden Jubilee Lecture, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 26.11.03

Prof. Yash Pal was unable to deliver his lecture in person due to sudden illness. This talk was read to us by Prof. N. Mukunda.

before the present world. This concerns the need to combine **globality and intimacy**: for education, for social inclusiveness, and a sustainable future for humanity.

Over a quarter of a century ago I became enamoured of the possibility of quickly interacting with and reaching masses of our people living far from concentrations of infrastructure using space communication and space broadcasting. In addition there was also the element of forecasting weather and monitoring of resources. I felt that this technological possibility had been specially invented for a country like ours. This is how I got involved with the setting up of the Space Applications Centre at Ahmedabad and the first large-scale socio-technical experiment in communication using a satellite. The aim was to reach thousands of remote villages, and only villages, via direct reception TV. This was when television in India was confined to a couple of hours of transmission a day in Delhi and Bombay.

This experiment involved several thousand man-years of effort by technologists, social scientists and communication experts, in addition to the NASA satellite ATS-6. It did not radically change India but it did influence the life of a large number of people – some of them directly involved and many who were

influenced by the effort. A number of things became clear during our engagement with thousands of villages spread across the length and breadth of our country. Bridging the distance was a great advantage but giving voice and initiative to the enormous diversity therein was not so easy. I began to realize that intimacy is crucial. However, it is seriously violated when the physical and cultural distance of the source increases. Space communication is a marvellous gift of the present epoch, but by itself it can be best used for sermonizing, indoctrination or advertising. Even though a lot of information can be delivered, true education and development need greater contextual connection and participation. On the other hand without a long range connection, intimacy by itself would lead to parochialism and alienation from the world. The challenge is to find ways of addressing this dilemma.

I am convinced that many beautiful aspects of being human arise from closeness of a limited number of people. Crystals and gems arise from residual short-range forces. This is equally true of naturally existing elements and molecules. Leave everything else and think about the molecules like the DNA, so central to the happening of life. Language, humour, music, plastic arts and crafts, architecture of different places, even

science would not show their peaks unless some people were together and communicated through a language much beyond mere words. This is not something that happened only in the distant past. Great educational institutions would not become great unless people could infect each other at close range. That is why people strive to go to places where there are some outstanding teachers, researchers and gurus, notwithstanding the fact that books and papers written by the distinguished academics in these institutions can be accessed in print or over the net and in libraries all over the world. In our country we traditionally recognized that learning could not be transported as books or instructions uniformly applicable to all the learners. We believed that it comes through the chemistry of interaction between the teacher (guru) and the learner (shishya) – the tradition being known as the guru-shishya parampara.

Basic talent of humans is evenly spread across the world. Much of it is hard wired in our make up, thanks to our common evolutionary past. It is a pity that a large fraction of people cannot participate in the process of creating new knowledge and new things. Therefore we have come to a state where a few are in a position to condition the world and the rest are only conditioned. There is a small concentration of creators who might

be excused for believing that they are also the ones who have the right to create the world in their own image. This situation prevails all across the world – not only between countries, not only between the North and the South, but also between people separated by religion, race and caste, between men and women, and between the countryside and the metropolis.

In the field of education our country has always had some discrimination between those who could afford and most others who could not. Now this has been taken to a vulgar level. This is being done through various mechanisms, partly unintentionally but mostly with a purpose to keep the riff raff out. Exclusion is becoming extreme. I do not have to give examples of this phenomenon, but a few reminders might be appropriate:

- Private schools, usually called Public schools, some excellent, many pretty bad with their distinction being that they also want children to carry heavy bags and start with English at Nursery level itself.
- Municipal and Government schools
- Schools that have no buildings
- Schools that have no trained teachers
- No School in the neighbourhood
- The first category of schools might cost (per child) much more than the average per capita income of an Indian.

- The mismatch between the load on children and quality of teaching is such that a large fraction of the students need to join coaching classes. In metropolitan areas coaching expenses per child reach 5 to 10 thousand rupees per month in the last years of the school! This has become a fine mechanism of social exclusion. Sometimes I feel that many of the ills of our system arise from a huge conspiracy of coaching institutions. Indeed in many a case coaching has replaced education. How much lower can we get?

I may go on but even this small list makes it clear that our system is designed for excluding a large fraction of our population.

Academic reasons for the barrenness and non-inclusive nature of our education

If I were asked to name one major direction that could drastically change the nature of our education and research enterprise from kindergarten to the university level I would say:

- Build on individual competence and exploration and couple with the life around you.
- If this advice were taken seriously it would imply that:
- Learning is not delivered; it is created.

- The process of creation necessarily requires building on what the child already knows, what it observes and explores, the experiments it does while playing, studying and dealing with the world around.
- Since the experience of one child may be different from that of another, the syllabus for learning would also be different.

If that were so we would not insist on centralized examinations. We would examine each child the way a music or dance guru examines his/her shishyas, or an ustad or craftsman trains his/her apprentices. We would not make children run a competitive hurdle race to get that extra mark of distinction. There would be no need of education destroying coaching classes.

Learning would not be imprisoned within disciplines. Nothing would be out of course if it were comprehensible.

The system would require full freedom to teachers to learn, explore and grow with the children under their care. They would also form alliances with each other and others outside the school to pursue their learning into uncharted areas.

University level

What I have said above in respect of school education applies even more strongly at the college, university and research levels. If we engage with

society and couple with its arts, crafts and industry while learning and finding out, each of these sectors would gain. The fresh minds of young students along with their energy would lead to mutual transformation. Research students would not be waiting for their guide to hunt for a new problem for their dissertation. This would have emerged naturally through their engagement, with each other and the environment and industry around.

For our research areas this would be rejuvenating. For example, there would be a chance for physiologists and physicists to work together. If they both happen to be in a university and are also engaged with industry, they might get to a stage when some of the new marvellous technology for medical diagnosis would be invented in our country. This would be a way to correct the imbalance in which most resources are spent in national laboratories while most of our young persons are in colleges and universities.

There are many tricky areas where social sciences and physical sciences need to work together. This is required even for defining what would be a good society and furthermore the means to achieve it. A lot of new thinking is required in economic, political and social spheres. If this is done without including scientists and engineers, even the new would be copies of what obtains elsewhere, or impossible to achieve.

For all this to happen we need to break walls and couple. Couple and engage with our society. I am sure that if we design our education and research enterprises this way all the other problems would resolve themselves. The sheer excitement of such a free Manthan and mission would ensure that. The silly competitive exams on which we expend so much energy would acquire a diminished importance and then disappear. I do not know why we are afraid of going this route.

Foreign universities

I am not surprised that so many foreign colleges and universities want to set up shop in our country. The goods they come with are not different from those brought by sellers of TV, computers, cars, motor cycles and cosmetics. They will sell so long as there are buyers with money who can flaunt foreign degrees. We are already decoupled from our society. All they would do is to decouple us some more. We should not be too worried because the individuals they would capture in their net would be relatively mediocre (not being able to get into good institutions on the basis of their merit) besides the fact that they might have already decided that emigration is the most desirable step towards their future. I may not be too worried but that would change if we begin to

believe that this would lead to import of truly high-class education into our country. I do not think too many Nobel Laureates are going to be on the staff of these outside teaching shops who would be available for relaxed interaction with students here and consider their presence in these shops as significant steps for advancement of their own thought and exploration. As I said earlier, good education is not delivered; it is imbibed and created.

Information technology, the internet and the web

Let me first state that I agree with many people that coming in of this technology has had, and will in future have even more seminal impact on the way the world develops. But there is need to develop specificities and configurations suited to our needs and aspirations. As far as education is concerned I find it amazing that at my age, without travelling out to a library every day, and without the help of an office and stenographer, I can stay fairly active and in contact with the world. If spectacles had never been invented I would have stopped reading by the time I was fifty. I got another twenty-five years lease after I got my glasses. I was getting a bit hazy in vision, particularly at night, till I got a lens implant in both eyes and now I see as well as I did when I was forty

or younger and I am mobile twenty four hours a day. If I had been born fifty years earlier the world would have been saved from my meddling for the last 25 years. Poor world – now that I can exchange conversation and bother it with what I think might be useful ideas even now. Yes, it is good to have Internet and the Web. But Internet alone cannot provide you with education or wisdom. Internet works better for those who are already engaged with something. If you are not, then Internet is like having a dictionary with the hope that you would learn a language and become a great writer! Well, not quite, firstly because a dictionary does not have as much misinformation as the Net, and secondly because the dictionary is not as alive and changing as the Net. Internet is mostly full of rather superficial information and that is what you would encounter if you just surf. Indeed you could almost say that you have to wade through lot of noise and sometimes you can get fond of noise, much like you can get fond of loud unmusical music. There is a tendency to avoid depth and immersion. If you get addicted to that you might be moving away from the habit of independent thought. Downloading from the net and using the image making facility of your computer, you can easily use lot of eye-catching and colourful presentations

as substitutes for a well thought out argument. It is easy to fool people and sometimes, even yourself that what you have said is not without real content. It might appear that you have lot of information, that you have learnt a lot and it is easy to mistake it for understanding. Lot of dependence on Net surfing can encourage a culture of education in which information substitutes for understanding. Indeed it might be easy to forget what after all is 'understanding'. Such a thing would be fatal. In fact that is the main flaw of education now. We load children with enormous amounts of information to remember and pass examinations with 100 % marks but we do not give time for or value understanding. There is a danger that thoughtless use of the Web and other manifestations of IT like CD ROMs might encourage this tendency besides another of our present failings – we are already decoupled from our environment and might begin doing so even more enthusiastically.

My belief is that Internet should be used to increase the dimensionality of our education and not just its information content. This would demand that we begin treasuring diversity of learning and move away from standardized, industrial production of graduates tested on machines we call 'common examinations'. Such an education would also encourage respect for and inclusion of people who have acquired their capabilities and skills with

different or no certification.

Possible socio-political significance of the web

The most important feature of the Web is that people can communicate even if they have different voices and languages. They can communicate and access. No one is superior; no one is on top. No one has to give up his/her way of expression. No culture is inferior. The Web has a texture that is inclusive.

In my book, the basic philosophy of the Web should be to move the world away from the present manifestation of globalization that has a few innovators and creators and the rest consumers; a few influence and the rest are only influenced. If we do that we would benefit the whole world. We would benefit not only by increasing the variety of directions in which innovations would occur but also through sharing the joys and depths of wisdom developed under different environments. In addition there could be, in my view, a fundamental transformation that might lead to different concepts of equity, harmony and inclusiveness – indeed in the way we organize the world from now on. I will presently dilate on this assertion.

Let me step back a little. We all realize, I hope, that a propensity for closeness to a limited number and categories of humans comes naturally to us – evolution has ordained that. To

repeat what I have earlier indicated, intimacy is that precious thing that defines humanity. Without intimacy we would have no love, no literature, no ceremonies, no ways of dressing, no cuisine, no festivals, no dance, no ways of greeting, no compassion, no reverence, no nothing. Intimacy is a product of evolution and long memories of myth and fable situated in specific environments. We are designed to treasure it. We are built to care for those who are close. We seek closeness for assurance that we would be OK. We consider it essential for our survival. It defines for us what we are – it gives the contours of our social “self”. We tend to define this “self” variously in terms of our country, the nation, ethnicity, race, language, religion and ritual. However, we must recognize that this essential element of humanity has also produced our heroes, patriots, colonizers, conquerors, despots, dictators and now, in large numbers, our technically equipped terrorists. We are in a serious bind and we have to find some way out in the next few decades of this century. I put such a short time scale for doing something so radically different - firstly because the problems have accelerated but also because we have an inkling of the way we might go about it. Till very recently we did not.

The real issue of modern times

Let me, at the end, come to the

basic question impinging on the search for the architecture of an inclusive world. I will not spend too much time defending its desirability. There is no future for a civilized existence without that. That such an architecture would necessarily demand a change in the way of thinking goes without saying. But it might also need inventions suited to our present predicament. I will not demand that every one on this planet should become equally affluent. Inclusiveness should not be so much about equality. Nor should it include any element of charity. The driving force has to be an enlightened self-interest. Without meaning to sound pontifical I would summarize my exhortation to the world and to us - my formula - in the following words:

No individual, no human collectivity, no country, no professional, no corporation, indeed no one shall be only, or be made into only, a consumer.

As a young man I was much taken with the independence movement of India. Our supreme leader was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He had the pulse of the country and every one followed him. He was not a politician in the normal sense of the word. Even though some of the young people were on occasion a bit sceptical about several things he said and did, there was an instinctive appreciation of the fact that freedom he was seeking was not for the country

but for the lowliest of individuals in the land. Simultaneously he was also seeking an enhancement of those who governed us at that time! He was a religious man but the most valuable insights he provided were not that of a religious leader. Even when he talked of religion it was not any one religion. He picked thoughts from everywhere. In any case his important ideas about the essence of freedom and organization of a value-laden society were not based on moralistic teaching but as an insightful architect of an inclusive society. I do not think this was well understood by his followers or other charismatic leaders who later came to rule the country. This is understandable because at that time in human history his deep yet simple-looking ideas were not sustainable. So why am I bringing him into my talk today? I am doing so because I feel that Gandhi came too soon. Today he would be sustainable. A few implications of this statement are the following:

Gandhi talked about the concept of Gram Swaraj. This implied that no one should be controlled from a distance. This implied responsibility for independent thought and action. It also implied that if you wanted you could go your own way without being dominated by distant powers. He also emphasized that no one should be only a consumer. It was almost immoral to be so. He said he wanted production

by masses, not mass production. In the area of learning and education he firmly believed that lot of learning happens through physical involvement with your environment, designing and making what the community needs. When such activity is combined with book learning then you become a true scholar. Such an approach would introduce contextual elements into learning and make it more creative. He could be considered as the first environmentalist of the last century when one remembers his statement “there is enough in the world for every one’s need but not for every one’s greed”. Though it might be difficult to take each of his statements literally we cannot escape the discerning direction he was suggesting. There was clear understanding that distant control would usurp real freedom. That using goods and services provided by others without a similar thing being given in exchange would also lead to an enslavement and economic and cultural domination. That learning and creating have to be simultaneous. That lot of education can happen through fingers was an instruction we certainly needed in our colonial days and we still do. And all these ideas were soaked in an ambience of non-violence. In Gandhi’s days technology was massive and could not be easily decentralized without losing the advantages of scale. This is no longer true for most of modern technology. Not only software

but also hardware production can now be decentralized much more easily. Information can be accessed and shared. You do not have to travel out for information you need or want to give out. You have the option of living your own way and yet be connected. You can also change at your pace and change others with whom you interact. Gandhi's slogan "production by masses and not mass production" can now be realized. If the world needs a "jihad" then it should be to make people understand that this seems to be the only way of having decentralized integration, only way to preserve and enhance diversity, the only way to give fulfilment to individuals. Such an enterprise would need the best of technology. People would not live in their wells. They would be connected and yet in control. That needs a major upheaval. I do not know who would be equal to this challenge. Perhaps Gandhi did come a century too soon. Perhaps socially oriented technologists and their friends can make it happen.

To summarize, the basic challenge of today is the following: As the world globalizes at breakneck speed, the intimacies feel threatened. Intimacies are essential to being human. They have produced music, culture, values, language, art, literature, and even humour. A quick assault on these seems to human entities an assault on their existence. Much like the immune

response of a living system, the resistance is almost automatic and sometimes most virulent. Often it manifests itself as mindless terrorism. It is my view that modern terrorism cannot be combated only through military means. It has increased in parallel with the process of globalization, with superficial uniformisation of the world, with "Cola-nization", as a friend² has said. Besides the cultural assaults there are also economic consequences. All this seems to have been foreseen by Gandhi. Now it should be possible to have a different kind of globalization, without assaulting the economic and cultural autonomy of human collectivities. Globalization should be subsumed in a deeper global consciousness. On this substrate of global consciousness, call it new globalization if you like, human collectivities could live an autonomous existence, in control of themselves, not in a well any more but networked with the world and the universe. The techniques and technologies for doing this have now become possible. This is the architecture for a truly inclusive society that I would commend. It would be recognized that for this to happen we would need to develop the Web in dimensions that might not have been so far touched. We have to move in a direction where there would be a Web of people with all their diversities and not only of computers with their specific quirks.

Life Skills in the Curriculum

Dr Shekhar Seshadri, NIMHANS

When talking about education for a sane society, where do you pitch any educational programme? At the level of ideas and ideals, or at the level of the child's everyday reality? The cutting edge of this reality is the central fact of oppression. It is here that actual reflectiveness starts. We practitioners see this side of the Indian family every day – the violence, the conflict – and the ways in which the child copes with all of this.

The question raised by the Yashpal committee of 1985 (Learning without Burden) was this: education for what? It has been long recognized that education has a wider function than the transmission of subjects: Math, English and so on. For example, there have long been subjects such as 'moral science', 'family life education', and later 'socially useful productive work'. But actually there is a serious desync between school and out of school reality. There is the reality of day-to-day issues: how to negotiate with an autorickshaw driver who demands excess fare, a sub-registrar who demands a bribe. These are realities that one has to contend with. Does education have to do this, or does the family deal with it? This debate, of whose responsibility it is, is becoming tiresome.

There are also all kinds of images in the media, on the Net, about relationships, conflict, conflict resolution, about people, men and women – how are children responding to this? What are they imbibing, how are they constructing how they think, how they feel and so on? Take for example any Hindi, Kannada, Tamil film. If the woman is molested, she has only four options open to her: become a commercial sex worker, drink insecticide and die, marry the guy in question, or her father and brother must take revenge. What is the basis of the knowledge that virtue resides in one part of the female anatomy? How do children construct this knowledge? Krishna Kumar says in 'What is Worth Teaching' that schools must be counter socialisers to traditional images that the media depicts. When there is an absence of cultural discourse between adults and children, how will children construct knowledge?

Here is a list of contemporary concerns for children:

- Conflicts
- Risk behaviours
- Gender
- Peer pressure
- Sexuality
- Substance abuse

- Values
- Affiliation
- HIV-aids pandemic

Historically, we have never been free of conflict and we will never be free of conflict. We must accept this reality and work towards mechanisms of conflict resolution and that is where education plays a role.

The HIV crisis spawned a whole lot of educational programmes: sex education, values education; NGOs, national AIDS control organizations—and the teachers threw up their hands and said, excuse me, how can I do this within the regular school curriculum?! There is too much load particularly on government school teachers who have many other duties. One way to approach this problem is from a Life Skills perspective, which is a series of ten paired skills:

- Decision making – Problem solving
- Critical thinking – Creative thinking
- Effective communication – I/P relationship
- Self awareness – Empathy
- Coping with stress – Coping with emotions

Decision making spans a variety of contexts, from the innocuous to the serious. There are many examples: the dress we choose to wear or the need to relocate for a new job. One life skill can operate in many contexts: conflict contexts, gender contexts, sexual contexts, peer pressure contexts.

Conversely, many life skills can operate in a single context. In a street fight, you have to decide: do I hit him, do I withdraw? You are trying to cope with stress. More than one skill operates.

While running a Life Skills programme in a school, there is a distinction between the skill or the content, and the context in which it is applied. For example, gender is the context; gender violence is the content. Gender violence is the context; impact on women is the content. Impact is the context; interventions are the content.

This interplay between the content and context is important for the teacher or facilitator to recognize because it is anxiety alleviating for a teacher. It gives you the scope to focus on interventions without straying into areas you are not prepared for. Actually the student or individual just wants a specific piece of information to clarify an idea, and not the kind of detail you might imagine.

The triangulation between life skills and the context in which they are applied is completed by methodology. There is a need to shift from traditional didactic methodologies to experiential ones. We need to move from outcome to process. We need to shift from transmission of information to the relational mode. Traditionally education has been conceptual and we need to shift to the performative, so that we approximate the truth that children are looking for. The shift to experiential

and relational modes has a tremendous impact in education.

When the child enters the school gates, how do we know what she may have experienced at home that morning? Conflict, violence, hunger? She is trying to concentrate and the teacher says “Do your work properly.” The mind is disturbed. “You get out of class.” Teachers can and do relate differently and more compassionately with students, and this has tremendous and often lasting impact on the student.

The classroom is a collaborative community with purposeful activity involving whole persons for the joint construction of knowledge. Activities are both situated and unique; the curriculum is a means, not an end. Outcomes are both aimed for and emergent.

Theatre is a good example of a performance art which we use as an experiential pedagogy in schools for life skills. Theatre in education can be used to teach subjects, but it can also be used differently, for Life Skills education.

(Two brief demonstrations of the role playing technique to explore life skills followed).

If you want to introduce content like gender, sexuality or conflict, what is the teacher’s location with regard to the larger contexts in which these operate? Is it based on personal experience? It could be denial: no, sexual abuse doesn’t happen. Or

withdrawal: I know it happens but I don’t want to deal with it.

Or on an action dimension: what is the personal location of the teacher? What can be her response if she herself is a victim of violence? Many adults have unresolved issues, including their own biases about the construction of the difficult contexts that children have to contend with: for example, with regard to homosexuality. Is it a disease, an adversity? What therefore are the conceptual categories that a teacher must prepare for? With gender, for example, the conceptual categories may be biological sources of differences, the socialization of gender, what are gender roles, what are gender stereotypes etc.

When we do a programme in school, what is the reach and scope? Do we do one programme a year, going skill by skill? Session one, decision making; session two, problem solving? Do we go context by context: gender, sexuality? Or do we keep it open and flowing? So the school is merely a discursive space, an enabling environment for enquiry and reflection and activity?

How do you calibrate the programme for age? Here is where we use the window method. If your content is conflict resolution, session one is disagreements. Session two is bullying. Then you can come into conflict. This process gives the

possibility of building windows across age groups.

Any programme can start with generic experiences to open out discourse. My last holiday, what I like, what I dislike. Or with specific experiences, like arguments, examination. There are the contexts in which these experiences take place such as the home, school and neighbourhood. Institutions within these contexts such as friendships and marriage. Experiences and feelings within these institutions such as love and attraction. Then your program focus, which can be gender, sexuality and so on. This builds in comfort level both for the preceptor and the student.

What kind of support will such a programme have within school systems? Is it considered as important as math or science? Or is it extra curricular? It has to be institutionalized so that it doesn't depend on individuals, however wonderful they may be.

Questions and discussion

Q: I'm an old teacher. I have come to see that all things are connected when it comes to learning. You can move from one situation into any direction, into any subject. Including learning about yourself.

Q: Thank you for that; it was fascinating. A Life Skills teacher has to have both confidence and competence.

The quality of the programme will depend entirely on the freedom and clarity with which the teacher can talk about things like relationship. Technique, even role play which you demonstrated so powerfully, can only succeed in the hands of a confident teacher. That's the major bottleneck I see in translating what you're saying. Also, I am concerned about the separation of "subjects" and "life skills." For example, physics has a connection with my daily decision making. My second concern is, when we talk of "this" versus "that," there is the question of swing, and therefore of balance. When we swing from didactic to experiential learning, let us not forget that the didactic has a place as well. Both sides have to be looked into.

S: Yes, I agree that creating an either/or situation is problematic. Just a brief response about comfort levels. We also have had to struggle; gender and sexuality were not even part of the medical curriculum. I think the relegation of sexuality outside the mainstream discourse, and its constructions as an abnormal extension of ourselves, like a pimple or a wart, is a problem. There is also a language problem: the language of gender and sexuality is so technical that it is incomprehensible, or so colloquial that it's embarrassing. We have to build our own skills in creating a lexicon of dignity. It's trainable. Will every teacher

be able to do it? No, just as every doctor will not be able to do it.

Q: Yes, it is difficult and embarrassing but if it is important, we will have to learn how to do it. That is what we mean by “the adult as learner.”

Q: Some of us work with slum children and girl children in very disadvantaged communities. When we have to help them with their problems, we can come home very depressed. What would your suggestions to us be?

S: There is a concept of “care-giving stress,” especially for people who work with trauma. Every three months, care givers need a meeting to discuss their problems. This is recommended to take time off for

reflection. It’s absolutely necessary. You can set these up within your group or with a professional who listens and gives you a perspective so you grow from strength to strength.

Q: Thank you for this fascinating and very insightful lecture. You have broadened life skills education to encompass the whole of education. Initially, life skills began with communication, personality development, health etc. When there was a pressure that this was too narrow an area, it moved into decision making and critical thinking and other more serious things. Then the ends of broader education became synonymous with those of life skills education.



Some Questions Raised by Modern Life

Jayashree Nambiar, The School, KFI

The aim of this paper is to look at questions raised by modern life for children and educators - in the growing up of children, and in their learning. This is in many ways 'work in progress' and I draw from my experiences at the school I teach in, from the stories of my friends and fellow teachers from other schools, from children I observe and from my reading. While most of what I say applies directly to children from the middle and upper classes of society, I hope that what I say will find the value of application in the varied grounds of education that the people here represent.

While examining the questions that modern life poses for us, it is difficult to speak of change without communicating inadvertently that the past was better than the present. This is a fallacy, and I do not wish to fall into this trap. The present is different from and poses challenges that are different from those of the past.

There are three areas in which modern life has impacted the lives and learning of children that I wish to look at:

- technology, entertainment and pleasure
- a culture of homogeneity and conformity

- relationship, aloneness, silence

The crisis facing our children today is a crisis of self absorption, of insecurity and of a lack of resourcefulness.

I look at what appears and is often regarded as trivial and a passing phase in children's lives - the first area - under a magnifying glass, as it were, and view it through many facets. The other two areas I will work with briefly.

One critical aspect of technology-driven entertainment is passivity. The viewer's imagination is not actively engaged. The entertainment is a finished product which requires no effort from the viewer except the click of a button or mouse. The other aspect is that of content: the aim of the game, the manner of the resolution of conflict, the creation of an enemy and the violence in dealing with the enemy.

If these two aspects were put aside there are other aspects of technology-driven gadgets and entertainment that can be looked at. As more and more games, toys and gadgets fill the market, there is a desire to possess things and a need for immediate gratification that the child experiences. Often one sees in relationships among peers that a child's self esteem is linked with the gadgets

he possesses. The reverse is true, too. Children who do not play with such gadgets feel a sense of denial, a fear of not being equal with peers. The second is the danger of addiction. Much of the new forms of entertainment and play are designed to keep the viewer/player 'hooked' – to acquire the next version, to climb to the next level. The third is a sense of alienation from reality. The pace of the game is fast. While the background of a game may mimic real situations, the actions and resolutions are quite untenable in real life. Quite practically, time spent with the game in front of the computer is time taken away from making friends, from growing and learning through play, from becoming sensitive to others and taking responsibility.

Three quick instances might help understand these points better. Two students entirely absorbed with a particular on-line computer game could only relate with each other and others remotely interested in the game. They found little meaning in their activities at school and derived little enjoyment from any of the activities. Within a week of having the game stopped at home, the children were back to football, to smiling and talking with their parents and at school, and even interested in their subjects. In another instance a child had taken a decision to abstain from school for a year because

he found himself unchallenged at school. His parents supported this. However, when it emerged that the child was at his computer playing over twelve hours a day, the situation at home seemed both negative and very grave. In another instance a parent spoke of how her child enjoyed his time in the village – playing outside, making things, and running around. The same child within hours from the city on his return would call his friends to find out how far they had proceeded in the game so that as soon as he got home he could join in the game. And that is what he did. This was almost compulsive. Instances are plenty and there are, as always, as many instances to prove the contrary. However, what needs to be understood here is the compulsive nature of technological entertainment, the artificial atmosphere it creates that parades as true to life, and the peer pressure and sense of superiority that it generates.

Teachers and schools occupied with delivering efficient academics and student examination performance do not often concern themselves with questions of this kind. Parents find themselves in troubled spots with difficult thoughts and questions:

- My parents could not afford to buy me things so why should I not buy what I can afford for my children?
- If my child does not get what he

wants would he feel left out among his peers?

- A large number of the games that are available in the market, and television programmes have educational value and are useful.
- My child will understand if I tell him and when it becomes a problem I will deal with it.
- Is removal of the television and the computer from the house the only way out?
- My child might rebel and I might lose my communication with him if I do not do what other parents do.

Perhaps it is teachers and parents who are in crisis. And the children are the victims. I have often wondered what would give parents of children today the strength to work through these issues and take action. In cases where the parents have taken a stand, what might give the child the ability to take his position among his peers without feeling denied and lesser than them? Finally, at what age do children need access to the internet, to play games on the computer, possess an iPod or a mobile phone? As long as the child does not experience sufficient choice of activity, the passive and the accessible will be the most sought after. And as long as children do not have use for the gadget, it can only be a plaything.

As an educator I have other questions. How do we teach our

children the value of money when we want to give them expensive things every time they want them? And what about the responsibility that goes with the use of such gadgets? How do we help children be strong and creative despite the peer dynamics that this excessive consumerism generates? How do we understand the increasing anger, greed, desire for control and frustration that children feel? How do we explain to these young people that happiness does not lie in possessions or what can be bought? How do we communicate that the pace, the solutions, the sense of community that one feels online with fellow players may not be real at all?

There are some ways of addressing these issues:

- not giving children what they want immediately - delaying gratification
- offering children the experience of activities that have the capacity to delight
- creating for them an experience of the slower natural rhythms of life – teaching them to observe, watch and wait . . .

There is another area that I have been thinking about. I have been increasingly concerned with the tendency among young people to cling to the familiar. This in turn inspires conformity. Understanding that one's experience of reality is limited is very important. Another important thing is to learn to relate with differences. I

have found that these two things are very necessary and are going to be very difficult in a world that is growing increasingly intolerant, insecure and distrustful. A conscious study of the news, visits within the city and to villages, and participation in meaningful work are fertile areas for consideration.

I feel strongly that in schools children must be able to experience good relationships with their teachers and peers. Children need to learn to work together with responsibility and care for each other. They need to grow sensitively. I think children also need to experience being alone and to enjoy being silent. It is ironic that both being

alone and being silent are most often used as punishments. Children need to experience self-discovery, find creative forms of expression, and learn to be reflective.

Schools need not do more. Through their structure, schools can support active engagement and relationship with what children study and see around them. This comes from observation, listening and conversing. Can schools in the experiences they offer children help inculcate a sense of delight? A sense of delight: separate from pleasure, not self-serving – the joy of the simple and the beautiful?



Dialogue in the Primary School

Anjali Noronha, Ekalavya

It is very nice to be with so many people who are thinking about education and conversing about education. The themes of the conference have also given a lot of opportunity for reflection on our own experiences. Since I was also asked to keep this in mind to explore about the themes of the conference, I thought of talking about dialogue. I had a chance to reflect on our own experiences in primary education where oral discourse with children in exploring concepts and understanding concepts was a definite priority. But then, the quality of verbal engagement with children can be of various kinds – it can be a dialogue, it can be a discussion, it can be an argument, it can be didactic. I looked at our own experiences in this field and in the past two days and also in Jayashree's presentation. She ends with the issue of conversation – conversing on various issues. I think that it is a good moment to start looking into this issue of dialogue. Yesterday's discussions we had in small groups and the workshop on dialogue have also helped me clarify ideas.

One of the concerns from an adult perspective, as to why an engagement with dialogue, has been bothering me for quite some time. That with the best of intentions, even among like-minded

people, somehow conversations and dialogues end up being very frustrating. There is often a feeling that you are not being understood or that you don't understand the other person. I have been wondering about why that happens or what you don't mean to say. Because, any sentence can have a large number of interpretations. But, you may be interpreted very differently from what you want to say and you may be doing the same. Why don't we explore what the other person is trying to say rather than respond to what we think the other person is trying to say? This has been a constant feeling which is why this opportunity has been good for me. I will start very briefly so that we are on common ground and define the terms that we will all be using. I will be using the terms 'dialogue' and sometimes 'conversation' too in lighter strain. I will also use 'dialogue' in a more serious strain, as something in which one is exploring new understanding which gives rise to new meanings. Rather than looking for something which is already there, this would give rise to a new collective understanding. This is different from a discourse where we are trying to get to a fixed position and where we try to convince one another of our position.

Dialogue is a process in which each

participant opens himself to the other so that he understands and accepts the other point of view as worthy of consideration whether or not he agrees with that point of view. This is important in that we often reject the other point of view itself. We don't consider it worthy of exploration and that is often where dialogues and conversations stop. It is also a kind of social relationship that engages its participants in widening their horizons. Each of us has our horizons coming from where we are. We have our biases and prejudices. In trying to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, we try to see the horizon from their perspective, from another point of view. In that sense, we perhaps widen our horizons and we also construct new horizons and new meanings. So, this is the sense in which I will be exploring the idea of dialogue and then also come to the issues of what is necessary for a dialogue to happen. I will then share with you some of the experiences, even at an early stage, which are perhaps possible even in on-going curriculum rather than making new spaces or creating new spaces for dialogue.

It is quite obvious that today conversations and dialogues are not taking place very effectively. Dialogue is one powerful, yet non-violent way to resolve a lot of conflicts we see around us. It is an essential component

of democracy and if we want to continue with democracy and extend its meanings and extend it to new areas, I think dialogue is one of the most important and essential ways of extending reasoned response and to extend therefore reasonableness in society.

In dialogue, whenever we assert a belief, we are also prepared to offer reasons behind that belief if asked. You may not ask, but whenever we assert in a dialogue-like situation, whenever we assert a statement, the inherent assumptions are being offered for enquiry and if asked, we have to be open about sharing those assumptions.

So, if these are the kinds of things which are necessary, then if we have to have a dialogue with two people or in a larger group, there are certain things which are in a sense pre-requisite for a dialogue to take place:

- The concern for the other and for the viewpoints of others.
- Then, there is trust. We have to trust to take others at face value and not if we think that there is a risk involved. It may not be the way you are, but you have to assume that trust – that the person is making those statements with all genuineness. We have to have respect for the other person. Just because they differ in their opinions, it does not mean that we do not respect that opinion. We need to

appreciate, we need to value – we have to have some kind of value and affection for the other person as a whole. But importantly, we engage in a dialogue when there is a hope or possibility of something new. Often we feel that we are repeating ourselves and not getting across and if there is no hope of a new understanding emerging, we don't feel like having a dialogue.

For a dialogue to happen, the participants must suspend their assumptions for a while. This does not mean that they have to give up their assumptions. Rather they may be open, offering their assumptions for enquiry. Therefore, the assumptions are held up to scrutiny. Participants must view each other as colleagues and peers. It is essentially a conversation between equals. This is a very important aspect and perhaps a kind of subversive form of dialogue in a situation where we are in a very unequal kind of society.

In order to cultivate the spirit of dialogue, a facilitator is needed, initially. Otherwise, you can easily get into arguments and an opinionated kind of discussion. A facilitator may look at the stands of the dialogue and offer ways in which dialogues can continue, but not intervene with points of view.

There is a need for dialogue to start happening very early because in some kinds of communication, there may be a lot of talk, but little

communication. Does this happen because we do not have a wider understanding of what is required for a dialogue to take place? Or is it a lack of commitment to the process of dialogue, a feeling that it is unnecessary? We can do it on our own. Why should we keep entering into a dialogue? It is a waste. Can dialogue help in education? Can it begin in primary school?

Often people say that in primary school children are too young and dialogue is something serious and needs to come in later. But, I think that in very many ways in terms of very simple issues that concern children of that age, the practice of dialogue can begin in simple ways at the primary school level. I will be sharing some of the examples that I am putting forward as initiations of dialogue. You all could give your responses as to whether you feel these are kinds of dialogue or not and we can have discussions on that.

In the Primary School curriculum, there is immense opportunity in all subjects for cultivating dialogue. You can use pictures as initiators, you can discuss stories and poems in terms of what the child liked in some of these contexts and why he/she asked certain questions, exploring creative relationships. For example, giving them an idea of what are the uses of paper, try and think of unusual issues – unusual

relationships between say, paper and chair, why do you think that relationship is there. So, thinking out in different ways initiates various aspects of dialogues. Now, in the national curriculum as well, there is another aspect where we will probably be constrained by subjects in terms of coming to some conceptual understanding in the subjects. Perhaps, the space for dialogue gets limited and that is the reason why yesterday in the dialogue workshop what Shekhar Seshadri talked about in terms of life skills, we are looking for other spaces as if there is no scope for dialogue in general education. We must have a separate space for dialogue whether in terms of life skills or personal dialogue, sessions or cultural classes..

I would like to say that there is immense possibility in different aspects of the curriculum – Language, EVS and Social Sciences. It depends on the manner of initiating the dialogue – the perspective by which you initiate a dialogue rather than the subject per se. But, I would perhaps conclude that if the subjects are very water-tight, then perhaps the limits of exploration come very fast and therefore the free-flowing nature of a dialogue is restricted which is why we look at other spaces. Yesterday when we were looking at the child's own views and things which are important and the child's relationship with peers, friends, relatives

and so on, that is perhaps something which needs a separate space. Then I was looking at the national curriculum. The EVS curriculum at the primary school level is interesting. I think people should look at the syllabus that has been made. Many of these aspects have come in. The first theme is to understand oneself and relationships around oneself. I think that offers a lot of scope for dialogue in what is traditionally called EVS. We could also debate on whether putting that formality constricts the dialogue and whether we still need to have a separate space.

In this, the teacher is the initial facilitator and needs to have a special role. This is a big challenge. I will end with some of these issues which will concern the teachers later on. Accepting each child as equal which is an essential for dialogue is something which comes with great difficulty to teachers because of the way education has been earlier. The teacher also needs to open out opportunities for dialogue and look for them, instead of closing conversation and dialogues. The teacher and the student both need to participate in reason-responses. The teacher may not be able or ready to offer reasons, but would ask for reasons from younger children. This requires a relationship change between the teacher and the taught, so to say that they become part of one community. This is the major

challenge in developing dialogue.

Here are some examples that we have tried to introduce right from Class I. (Slide shown.) These are children's drawings and if you notice, we have selected ones which particularly offer themselves for open-ended discussions and for various kinds of interpretations. They are not static. If it is a clear picture of a girl or a boy, or a cat or a fish, then conversation tends to end there. This first page from the Class I book gives a place for children's own drawings. It gives an importance, it sends a message that the child is important, their drawings are important and things which may not be real-looking in that sense are still important to converse on.

These are some of the instructions that we have given teachers along with the book. Here, we ask the teacher not to expect only one answer in response to the question 'What is this?' A figure may be called a cat, a girl or something else for another child. Encourage children to articulate why they feel it is what they are saying it is. Encourage children to make their own pictures. Don't direct them into making what you think is a good picture. Rather, talk to them about what they have made and appreciate it. These are initiations at a very simple level and there are familiar examples. With this picture of a fish, there is a suggestion to make one's own story or ask the

children to tell their own story. One may stop at a point and tell the children to take the story forward, letting their imagination run and then extend the dialogue to the habitat and nature of a cat and a fish, of land and water animals. So, initiate to a point and as the children go along, flow along with them rather than constrict them.

This is a picture which is again taken in a way which provides a lot of opportunity for various kinds of interpretations, dialogues. You can keep coming back to it. What might the parrot be saying, where are they sitting? Understanding pictures is also important. This was in rural areas and two-dimensional pictures were a new world which these children were getting used to. So, things which might be obvious to us – parrots sitting on a tree because we see the branches may not be as obvious to someone else.

If this is what dialogues and conversations are all about, then in a typical government school situation where we have children from all kinds of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds – is it really possible? Is it a political question that we need to address? In Madhya Pradesh, a large number of teachers are from upper classes and this may vary from state to state though the situation may be similar in many states. So, taking a Dalit child's world or a female Dalit child's world on an equal footing or at par

with other children, is that at all possible in this? The other question which comes to mind is whenever we include any aspect of education in the formal sphere (because in our country, formal education system is very assessment or evaluation – driven), then it starts getting under the pressure of assessment. If we are spending so much time on this, how do we assess what is happening? What are the levels of development of dialogue? Are there other ways of assessment, should it be assessed? Are there problems in assessing some of these things? And how open-ended should the process be because education is a purposeful kind of activity, you expect something to happen out of it. So, how open-ended can dialogue be? What is the balance between open-endedness and purposefulness that we might need to keep developing in a dialogue? And on the basis of the confession that we were having in the earlier session in informal spaces, a lot of us felt that today there are a large number of middle class, poor middle class and even upper class families where both parents are working and children are alone at home because of single shift kind of schools. At least 3-4 hours at home alone and particularly in smaller towns and cities, there are no opportunities for other things. So, I think whether it is the school or the community, we need to start exploring

the informal out-of-school spaces for both sports, libraries and activity centres which run for two hours, in which children have an opportunity for dialogues and conversations to develop. We are doing some of this work in a city like Bhopal, in smaller towns like Hoshangabad and Shahpur, of running these community-based libraries where the volunteer is from the community. We train the volunteer in some of these facilitative aspects. Books are very interesting initiating points around which a lot of discussion and other activities happen. Recently, a school working for the school transformation project has opened its doors in the afternoon for children who come to school for this activity. So, the community volunteers are running it. Informal but social spaces are very necessary for engaging both younger and older children. I am talking in the context of primary schools, but youth are also included in this activity.

Questions and discussion

Q: With regard to dialogue as a life skill, what is at least one important factor to be successful in training the teacher as a facilitator? It would be nice to know what you have done in this area to train teachers. And a related question: How do we extend this to parents?

A: With regard to training teachers, the aspect of taking the child's world as

worthy of consideration and including it in the discourse is something in teacher's training that one really has to struggle with. There is a tendency, due to the teacher's own perception, of the teacher telling and leading children into something. So, opening out that space for children (and when it happens, it is differentiated), some children and their opinions will be valued more and it is the greatest struggle to get to the value of the perceptions of the oppressed or under privileged child. But, we do have such sessions with library facilitators or with the teachers and there are also tangential sessions of exploring one's own childhood or experience.

When you have a dialogue or assume that you have a dialogue especially with younger children, as it is there are too many adults —aunts, uncles, relatives, teachers and everybody else telling them what to. You are already sitting there trying to make them talk or rather attempting to have a two-way conversation. There are times when you try to do that. All these kids are really true in what they say and what they do, and they come up with something that paralyzes you sometimes. When you go with an agenda of having some conversation, or have something to flow, that does not happen in many ways and all these children are just saying 'you told me to share', 'I am not interested in sitting

with you just now', 'I want to go and break that wall' or 'I want to go and scrap something there', or, 'I just don't want to sit and talk about this'.

Q: This is more of a sharing. Separate space for a dialogue class and how relevant is it? It just occurred to me that it is absolutely important for a dialogue to happen even in subject classes so to speak, where there is a content and it is much better to convey it through dialogue rather than something else. But for me, I think from experience, I can say that having a separate dialogue class which is meant just for us to be together, the adult and the children, and share our thoughts or expressions or whatever it is, it is a 'space' that seems to create its own strong bonding between the adult and the children because when you have a dialogue in a subject class, however you put it, there is a purpose to it – that the content needs to be given to the child or the child has to learn something out of it. So, there is an aim or end in view, whereas in this kind of setting, it is more open-ended. It seems to relax certain constraints and it creates its own special atmosphere. For me, it feels very valuable.

A : Open-ended and purposeful to me seemed very important. I think 'open-ended' and 'purposeful' go together. The question would be how would you guard against certain opinions? How are we not kind of

subtly guiding it towards a certain direction? Or moving it with a certain agenda actually? How would one really guard against that seems to be the key question. I think the very definition of a dialogue is implicit in that.

Q: If you put dialogue at the same level as conversation and discussion, I feel that may be we should define these things differently. When you say 'dialogue', I think you are talking about something else rather than when you are talking about discussion or about conversation. I think dialogue is a different kind of opportunity and when we talk about dialogue between child and child and between adult and child, we need to be cautious about its purpose. If we look at the perceptions of school teachers, 'Have I been able to draw out their curiosity?', there is an importance in the statement itself about the purpose of an adult-child dialogue and therefore, we need to perhaps separate 'conversation', 'discussion' and 'dialogue' in a more careful manner. Whether we want to create a space for 'dialogue' and what kind of issues can be brought up in the sessions in 'dialogue' and whether 'dialogue' in the subject class is the same as 'dialogue' period separately. I think these are important questions.

A: In the beginning, I did try to distinguish between 'dialogue' and 'discussion' particularly. 'Dialogue' and 'Conversation' differ in terms of rigour

and seriousness. Also, according to Frere, they differ by one more aspect in that a dialogue also leads to critical action. For this discourse, I have used 'dialogue' and 'conversation' interchangeably and what I am talking of at the primary level is more akin to conversation. But, even in conversation, it needs to be open-ended and exploratory. It needs to have all the other elements of concern, trust, putting forth one's assumptions for scrutiny and enquiry is necessary. Perhaps, what we can talk about is developing conversations in primary schools and leading to dialogue; and more serious dialogue including critical action at the middle school level.

So, these are the concerns that you face when you are speaking with children who have these emotions, who have those feelings at that point of time. So, when you go with this agenda of an open-ended dialogue, the challenge is how to face that kind of a situation and what to do. When you let that flow, it is interesting to see what happens.

In levels 1-4, dialogue is an important aim as classroom competency in subject classes. We need to understand better the distinction between communicative skills and dialogue. Are we talking of the same thing? We need to unpack it a little more and may be in smaller groups. Some group will take up this issue,

because I do not think it is the same thing. The exploration in dialogue is what is important, not your speaking skills or comprehension of a cassette which you are evaluating. That is a deeper issue that we really need to understand. If dialogue is initiated in conversation development in the larger system, there is a possibility of simplification and therefore the whole spirit behind dialogue and conversation development gets vitiated. I think we need to be a little careful about that and then may be it would be useful to discuss and understand. Since we have tried to develop this kind of a child's world and it connects with your question that whenever a child wants to raise an issue, ask a question, it may be related to anything. It is basically changing the nature of the classroom and teacher-student and peer-peer engagement within the classroom which one is talking about. So, whether a

maths session is going on and they are doing an activity and something strikes a child, the space to explore the issue is always there and sensitive teachers may explore issues to an extent. They have to make a decision at that point. But, they do start exploring those issues. We do not have experiences of separate, just dialogue classes. But, we do have experiences of children saying 'I don't want to do this', and there have been both successful and not-so-successful ways of dealing with it. One has to either allow the child the space or let the child go depending on whether the child wants to speak about the issue a little more. Those are the kinds of things one has to play by ear with the situation. But, I do see those kinds of situations coming up whenever a classroom is made an open space or when you have a separate space for dialogue.

NCF 2005: Vision and Perplexities

Rohit Dhankar, Digantar

I feel privileged to talk to this audience about education, because in the last few days, I have seen their passion and concern for education.

In the last two days, I have been getting signals. The first charge is that I often talk about something which has no relation to reality and therefore is abstract and obscure. I admit I do that. The second charge is that wherever I go, I talk about the aims of education. Again true. The third charge is that I often talk about curriculum and framework. Again true.

I have a tendency of rambling. I hope you will help me make sense of what I say and also construct some meaning out of what I say.

I am going to talk about the National Curriculum 2005 and some of its critiques. There is often confusion between a curriculum and a curriculum framework. Whenever we talk about curriculum, we talk about curriculum framework and vice versa. Therefore, I would like to explain in what sense I am using these terms. These terms are by no means fixed. They are quite flexible and people use them in different discourses in different manner. So, I have to explain how I am using these terms in this discourse.

Curriculum, to me, is a plan to achieve educational aims. If we go by

what Ralph Taylor said and there are many critics of Ralph Taylor who say - perhaps I am going back about half a century - curriculum seeks to answer at least four questions:

1. What educational purpose should the school seek to achieve? One example would be to make all people loyal to the state or the King. That is a very good aim of education. Or make all people believe in God. They may sound very strange today. But, both have been the educational aims of significant systems in the past. This is still an aim of many educational systems even today in many parts of the world. It could also be to make all people socially useful productive units. This has been one of the most significant aims right in 1991, when we saw the document MLLs (Minimum Levels of Learning). You can also have an aim of making all people independent thinkers and actors which is an aim of the present national curriculum framework. So, this is one question the curriculum should answer.

2. The second question is what educational experiences should be provided to children to achieve these purposes? This simply means what should be the syllabus? What kind of subjects, what is the scope of those subjects and what kind of exploratory

experiences we should give to children?

3. The third question is how can these educational experiences be meaningfully organized in a school? This is pedagogy. What kind of pedagogy do we use?

4. How do we ensure that these educational purposes are indeed achieving the objectives we set in the beginning, that is, the educational aims?

So, according to this definition of curriculum, it should seek answers to at least four questions; about the aims, syllabus, pedagogy and evaluation. Evaluation, in this definition, is tied to the aims and not either to the content or the pedagogy. That is one way of looking at the curriculum. Now, if this is curriculum, what is curriculum framework?

A broad framework of basic principles, defined broadly which helps teachers and planners to formulate answers to these questions - that is the document which could probably be called a curriculum framework. Curriculum framework is not supposed to give detailed answers to each of these questions, but rather to give a framework of principles within which people can seek answers to these questions in their own contextual situations. So, these are the ways in which I will be using these two terms. I have taken a lot of time to avoid certain kinds of misunderstanding.

Importance of a National Curriculum Framework

In India, as we all know, states can have their own curriculum framework, they can have their own syllabus, their own textbooks etc. There is a lot of freedom to the states in this sense. So, what is the significance of having a national curriculum framework in India? This is not the same as the NCF in the UK. In the UK, NCF is a legal document which is binding on the schools and the people who are running the schools. Our NCF seems to be slightly different, of a different order. If we look at the New Education Policy 1986, it says that the NCF should be seen as a means to evolve a national system of education capable of responding to India's diversity of geographical and cultural milieus, while ensuring a common code of values along with academic components. So, it seems that it has a twin purpose. One is having something common which we can all call 'national', and therefore binds us together and the second purpose is that it should be open enough to give space to the cultural and geographical diversity.

It has a two-pronged aim which is pulling away from each other. I think that is the source of many of the debates on our NCF in the past as well as in the present.

Therefore, what we should expect from a NCF are broad principles which connect education with our polity, with our socio-cultural reality, with our economy, give direction to it and underline the concerns of the times. This is the kind of area with which this kind of documents deals.

What we should not expect from our NCF is an answer to what do I do in my classroom to teach fractions. But, if the curriculum framework does not have any principle or any allusion to how and where we can find answers to these questions, then perhaps this CF is not doing its job. Otherwise it is doing more than what is expected of it. So, this is the kind of framework in which we are talking.

This new NCF has been loved by some and hated by some others. There are lots of debating points. I would like to mention only three; they are rather commonplace. Perhaps you have heard of them. Still, I think it is worth opening a debate on them.

1. This is an enabling, rather than a prescriptive document – partly this is inherent in the definition of a curriculum framework. But then, this document emphasises this a little bit more. So, it is worthwhile to dwell on this issue more. What is it to be an enabling document rather than a prescriptive one?

2. The second thing I would like to say is that it takes a broad view of

human knowledge and to some people perhaps a more updated view of knowledge and more encompassing. But, there are also people who do not agree with this.

3. The third one is that it takes a very serious view of learning, pedagogy and its connection with the school. We will focus on these three.

Enabling rather than a prescriptive document

A curriculum framework and more particularly, a curriculum, could actually be set for the whole nation and give answers to the four questions I raised in the beginning, for the whole nation. There have been attempts like this in India. Though people say that MLLs were not curriculum documents, it was more like a standards document and for achievement testing etc.; but since nothing else was there with MLLs, it acted like a curriculum document in isolation. Therefore, one could say that it was one document which tried to prescribe everything for the whole nation. If you go back further, there was another document called MLC – Minimum Learning Continuum. This was in 1978. The MLC was more rational than the MLLs and was more open and answered the four questions for the whole nation. So, that could be a prescriptive document. Enabling document, as I have told you, would give some basic principles. But, if you

actually formulate and look at these two documents, an enabling document has two aspects to it. One is, giving people the freedom to choose, stating in black and white that you can formulate your own CF for your curriculum, syllabi and textbook. Stating that in print alone is not going to give people the ability to formulate their own syllabi, textbooks etc.

Therefore, the second part of enabling is capacity building or making resources available. So, in this framework if we look at the given NCF 2005, then it seeks rather than to prescribe, to enable teachers and administrators and their agencies involved in the design of 1) syllabus, 2) textbooks, 3) examination reforms to make rational choices and decisions. This means that this is a document which tries to give some sort of available knowledge base and rational basis to make these choices.

A quote from the same document reads: “We expect that it will strengthen the on-going process of reforms such as the devolution of decision-making to teachers and elected local bodies”, while it also identifies new areas for attention such as the need for plurality of textbooks, urgent improvement in the examination system. Now, textbooks and examination systems in our country are old and many documents have talked about this. To put what is in this quote into

context, I have to go back to the Kothari Commission. The Kothari Commission admits that a curriculum framework can only give principles and all other things should be worked out at the ground level.

But after about 100 pages, when it talks about textbooks, it seems to get scared of its own prescription and asks: How shall we maintain the national standards? Then, Rajasthan, Kerala and Karnataka might have different standards of learning mathematics. They also talk of biases creeping into the textbooks and no authentic knowledge in the textbook. Therefore, they say this problem could be solved through very well written, centrally written textbooks for the whole nation.

Therefore, the prescription or recommendation made at one point is undone at another point. That is why I am bringing in the issue of the plurality of these textbooks. If someone is allowed to formulate their own syllabi, their own curriculum in their own states etc, then plurality of textbooks would be a useful thing. In actual debates and particularly at least in my paper, which is also part of the whole literature, there was a very lively debate on whether districts could be allowed to formulate their own curriculum, whether it is possible to have different syllabi for different districts depending on their own geographical cultural

contexts. There were two views and it seems the document favours the view that given the adherence to certain principles which are same throughout the nation, given the adherence to certain kinds of standards of achievement which again could be more or less same through out the nation, every district could perhaps be given and should be given the freedom to formulate its own curriculum, syllabi and there should be a multiplicity of textbooks.

Now, this reason comes from the idea that schools should be autonomous in their decision-making, in their pedagogy. At the moment, schools are given autonomy in pedagogy – that is how to teach in the classroom. Schools are supposed to decide on their own what kind of methodologies they use to teach Mathematics, History, EVS etc. But, beyond that, textbooks are prescribed in the government schools at least and syllabi are definitely prescribed.

Therefore, there is a move in this particular document which argues for greater autonomy for the teacher and for the school. In this sense, it is not a document to be followed in total, but a framework to be debated, understood, and adjusted according to one's needs, used with responsibility and freedom; responsibility to adhere and to understand the common principle and the freedom to choose

what you like after that. That is why NCF 2005 is not a single document.

In the exercise of developing NCF 2005 document, there were also 21 focus groups which had different kinds of subjects ranging from pedagogy of different subjects to systemic reforms to various kinds of issues – education of girls, dalits and tribal children, handicrafts, art and so on. Many materials will go together with the NCF document. So, the total package is supposed to be an enabling package in the sense that it provides basic principles as well as reference material from which one can source ideas. Now, the beautiful thing about these focus group papers is that if you read them, you will find many contradictions in them. One paper may be contradicting the other and a single paper may be contradicting itself.

People who know me know that it irritates me a lot in its inconsistency. This process has made me understand that if you have a very consistent document throughout the nation, then you are likely to leave most people out. So, if you want to have something that reflects the concerns and all the strains of thinking and ideas in education, then you have to build in some sort of inconsistency in that. I am from Mathematics and this reminds me of Godel's theorem – who said that in a finite system, you can either have consistency or completeness. This

means, suppose in a system like Geometry - you have your axioms, you have your rules of inference and you can prove certain theorems. So, completeness means being able to prove all theorems which are true in this system. If you want to try to do that, your system becomes inconsistent and if you want to remain consistent, then some of your theorems remain left out. So, that seems to be applying to the curriculum document. If you want a very consistent document, it leaves a lot of strains and people out. If you want to bring every legitimate concern in, then it has to do with a certain amount of inconsistency. That is one character of this document.

Broader view of knowledge

This is the second important issue and this document actually takes a significant departure from our earlier document in defining knowledge. I know that some highly respected intellectuals have noticed and are extremely angry and we will share the source of that anger also sometime.

Let us look at the characterisation of knowledge which goes into this document. Knowledge can be conceived of as experience organized through language into patterns of thought or structures of concepts, thus creating meaning which in turn helps understand the world we live in. I might be here reading this definition to

an audience which has already bought into it. But this definition might be very unsettling for people who think of knowledge in a different sense.

The second part is that knowledge can also be conceived of as patterns of activity or physical dexterity interwoven with thought, contributing to acting in the world, creating and making things. This unsettles people even more. Let us see what these definitions imply. The first one is the characterisation of knowledge and less of a definition. But, knowledge might be trying to articulate a notion of knowledge. It says that this is based on experience. Then, it says that there is a significant role that language plays in organizing this experience, integrating this experience with one's earlier experiences. As soon as the bee stings you, you may connect these things with high disturbance, flying of bees, sting, pain, swelling and other experiences and language plays a very important part in connecting these various concepts. So, there is experience organized through language in systems that are governed by some principles and not heaped haphazardly.

Learning and its connection with the school

The third thing is that it has an intimate relationship of connection between understanding, how we look at the world, how we make sense of

the world, how we interpret the experiences. This kind of characterisation of knowledge allows us to include activity and creativity in it.

Therefore, a significant departure which is noted in the document as something new, which does not occur in any other curriculum document, is practice. Though it is available in our knowledge discourse, our curriculum documents so far do not talk about what it means to say knowledge in practice. Let us take one example. Usually pottery, weaving and carpentry are seen as crafts, based on narrow skills that can be applied through repeated practice and not involving much of intellectual understanding. Therefore, in a way, the knowledge which we seek to impart to children in the classroom is more the knowledge which could be formulated in the language which philosophers sometimes call propositional knowledge and which our subjects are composed of and often we create this dichotomy between theory and practice. We call that knowledge theory and we call these things practice and we feel that these practices are themselves not less, though they may have a knowledge base and that is the kind of ideas in which these kinds of things are analyzed.

But if we take a different notion of knowledge, experiences organized into thoughts, into concepts and structures, then it becomes possible for

us to look at knowledge in a slightly different manner and bring the knowledge of practice also in the gamut of learning.

Just for a quick inventory of things which will give an indication of this, to be a carpenter in a small community, what are the kinds of things a person needs to practice the craft of carpentry?

In the morning, when I was thinking, I listed down a few things – understanding of wood, suitability of wood, where do you get it, how do you treat it. Then, understanding of geometrical forms – table, chair, plough, charpai or household implements; ability to shape wood into those kinds of forms – cut, bore holes, fit together. You require a lot of dexterity and imagination of geometrical shapes and how they will fit together. So far, we are in the realm of a general kind of understanding of things. But, if we go slightly further, then for a carpenter to be a successful craftsman or a successful tradesman in that society, he also needs to understand the socio-cultural significance of the objects in that society. For example, a craftsman in Rajasthan may be making charpais and ploughs more and a carpenter in Karnataka may be making something else more.

Then, there are certain kinds of things which are made for special occasions such as festivals, as religious significance or made during marriages.

Therefore, the whole lot of connecting one's own craft to the social and cultural aspects of the community and economic viability of course is the central issue in this.

When we look at these crafts in a situated manner in this way, then certainly the trade of carpentry means situating the practitioner in the way of social relationships, his or her ways of contributing to the society and then it becomes a rich enough source to derive a feeling of self worth. This becomes a way of my connection as a carpenter with the society. That is the second aspect of the view of knowledge that NCF 2005 takes.

Another important aspect which was there in our educational discourse, but not much attention was paid to it was about the basis for different school subjects and disciplines. There is an intuitive understanding, there are people who understand it very well and have certain theories. But in formulating our curriculum documents, use of this knowledge has either been absent or minimal. We have been taking subjects as something God-given. This document tries to scratch the surface. It does not do justice to the issue, but goes slightly ahead.

To emphasize the point, let me give you an example here. We are all perhaps familiar with this debate between integrated curriculum v/s a subject-based curriculum. Then, there

are certain others who are votaries of the integrated curriculum which says that the child sees the world as a unified whole and does not distinguish and that these distinctions are artificial.

There are certain other people who would say that human knowledge has grown so much that without having some sort of organizing principle, you cannot handle it and you are not going to go too far. But, there is no serious attempt in the curriculum document to hint what kind of reasons can come to bear upon this kind of debate.

Therefore, curriculum framework tries to bring in some aspects of how one can think about these issues. One can call it one-sided because a curriculum document has limited space and therefore it takes only one example which is the form of understanding. That is, you start thinking about what the difference is between historical and mathematical knowledge and ways of creating and ways of validation and whether our investigation into these things give sufficient grounds to see the similarities, inter-connections as well as the special significance of each subject in the total curriculum.

The approach taken by the curriculum document is to explore forms of understanding and it gives about 7 or 8 forms of understanding which are assumed to be enlightening our pedagogy as well as choice of various kinds of subjects. Also, the document looks at the relative

importance which should be given to the subjects and the choice of specific content within each subject. So, that is another important aspect in terms of knowledge which this curriculum framework talks about.

There is another debate in which this curriculum document is attacked: that it makes too sharp a distinction between information and knowledge. Now, I know most of the people sitting here would be happy to make this distinction. But, there are also problems with this distinction, because if you take one of the traditional definitions of knowledge as justified true belief, then perhaps the distinction between information and knowledge disappears. So, any particular piece of belief which is true, which is justified and which you believe in, becomes your knowledge and therefore the kind of distinctions we make in day-to-day information and knowledge do not look very sound in that perspective.

From the pedagogical point of view, the distinction between information and knowledge is extremely important. A philosopher can live happily without making this distinction. But a teacher will find life very difficult. Though there is a slight danger of going over a very well known thing, I would like to give a small example of how this can make some difference to us and how NCF 2005 looks at it.

Let us take a sentence like “Hospet is a district in Karnataka”. Now, this could just be a string of words responded on queue. If you ask the child to name a district of Karnataka, then he will say “Hospet” and may not attach any meaning, may not have the notions of the district, but is very practiced. Many of our children learn at that level. At the information level perhaps you can say that the child can produce other relevant strings of similar kinds of things and also has a notion of what a district might be.

For a teacher to get it to the level of knowledge, you have to integrate this piece of information into the larger body of the child’s knowledge where it could be utilized either to learn something new or decision-making or new information about the district Hospet or derive new conclusions. For example, if anyone understands the state, the district and governance, then makes an intelligent guess about the language spoken there, size of Hospet, that there may be a collector there, a police chief there and several other structures. So, this alertness to connect all these things together to make a total picture and which could be utilized in decision-making, can perhaps be called knowledge. The information alone perhaps may not serve the purpose of the child. This point is made so many times in the document and with such force that this has almost become

clichéd. It is repeated too many times. I think there is justification for that also. The justification is that this is one of the biggest problems in our education system.

The last thing about the theme of knowledge that I would like to talk about is engagement with local knowledge. That is another issue widely debated. What is this local knowledge the document is talking about? We should look at this issue in a little detail. In one of the seminars, I heard a friend claiming that Dalit and tribal mathematics has different epistemology. That is perhaps taking too far the idea of local knowledge. Then, you are saying that there would be different ways of generating knowledge, different definitions for knowledge and different ways of validating knowledge. By validating, I mean when do you say that something is true knowledge? For example, water boils at 100°C or that the three angles of a triangle are 180° . How do we support that claim? So, to claim that tribal or dalit or any community has a different way of producing justification for this kind of claims, perhaps is too far and extreme a view of local knowledge and this document is not taking that view.

Another view is that could there be something called knowledge of local validity. Some knowledge which is valid here may not be valid somewhere else. The local ways of people, their validation systems might be the same.

But, people may look at themselves and have a specific knowledge in a way which is useful in that local context. For example before we go in the sun, it is good to eat onions. This information may be very useful in Bikaner in Rajasthan. There could be information and knowledge which is very important in dealing with the local geographical situations. Similarly, there could be information and ways of understanding which could be very important in dealing with the socio-cultural situations.

The document says that one has to engage with this knowledge. It does not say that one has to take that into the curriculum. It says that it is a necessary condition of learning to engages with this knowledge and to see the connection between the universally respected scientific knowledge and local knowledge and how this connection could be worked out. Also, this means that we all perhaps would agree at some point that learning is nothing but connecting and therefore, if you want a child to learn something, then you have to connect that to the child's present mental state and structure. Therefore, you have no option but to start from where the child is and all that the child brings to class is his local understanding and local knowledge. If you discard it, scorn it, think that it is wrong and comes in the way of scientific knowledge and this is inferior, then you are cutting the basis on which the child

can learn. Therefore, engagement in the curriculum, in the class, in the school with local knowledge is extremely important. This point is made quite forcefully here.

Pedagogy

Two things the document recommends are:

1. Constructivist and critical pedagogies. They are not the same and they are hotly contested issues.

2. It recommends a school where the child comes wholeheartedly, a school which is well-organized and warm and a school which gives protection and a feeling of being wanted to the child. The importance given to the school as a learning place in this document is far greater than in our earlier documents.

Academic and intellectual debates are important and people who are raising these debates are doing a significant service to the nation and educational knowledge. Sahmat has published a small document called 'Debating Education'. In that, Shamim Akhtar tells us that native wisdom of a child comes from his home. If a child is from a rich home there may be scorn for the poor and lowly. Gender bias may also be present. The function of the school is not to help the child create his own knowledge, but to divest him of the social prejudices, beliefs and superstitions.

Now, that criticism to my mind is unwarranted. It may be true that children come with a lot of biases and prejudices. But children also come with a lot of knowledge – sense of language, making sense of the world and also a lot of warmth and love. So, the child is not a one-sided entity. The child brings both and the job of the school is to divest the child of these notions forcibly and through indoctrination or through a general engagement of the mind so that the child moves slowly from one situation to another with full understanding and joy. That is the question and perhaps the critic does not see that question. He just attacks child's knowledge.

Second thing is, knowledge can be seen as experience organized through language. This notion is also very hotly debated and contested. Prof. Irfan Habib pores through the whole document, heaps a lot of scorn on it, produces no argument but pronounces his mighty wrath that this notion is not acceptable. In the end, he gives us a one-liner that if feelings were knowledge, then prejudices would also be knowledge. Now, where the curriculum document mentions feelings is that human beings in the last several centuries have developed a whole repertoire of knowledge, ways of feeling, ways of expressing, and several things. The way we feel today is learnt and developed through a repertoire

over centuries. Prejudices are also part of our repertoire which we have collected to deal with the world outside. So, this is true in this sense and again the issue is not of accepting this. The issue is engaging with them and in that sense, perhaps this is also true.

The third thing is very important. It expresses a certain kind of notion about people's knowledge. So, there are two kinds of people. Both are good. There are serious people who have a concern for India's children and their well being. So, let us not doubt intentions on either side. But, this is very important to know how people's knowledge can be seen. Again, Prof. Habib tells us that a great danger lurks behind the glorification of primitive views contrasted to scientific concepts. So, by indulging in it, one would open the gates to all kinds of superstition, infiltrating school education. So, if you bring in people's views, ideas, values, knowledge and discussing in the school, then you will be opening the gates of school to prejudices and superstition. Now, this reminds me of a very famous writer who has written a book called *Introduction to Logic*. In one of the chapters, he deals with the use of emotive language in arguments and he gives the example "that if I don't change my opinion, I am firm in my beliefs. If you don't change your opinion, you are stubborn."

"If he, who is not present here,

does not change his opinion, he is pig-headed. I think my beliefs and knowledge are no less and your beliefs are superstition." That is what I read in this. But, there is also a bigger problem. I am not going through the whole analysis. We seem to be taking a fixed view of knowledge which is in the hands of a few intellectuals and we seem to be looking at the masses in a certain manner that they need to be bulldozed out of their own understanding and should be brought to our understanding. This curriculum document opposes this.

Is this document perfect? Far from it. It is not clear, it is inconsistent, it is actually cliché-ridden. Sections of this are very weak and need to be rewritten. Language throughout the document is very bad. But, substance-wise, perhaps, this is by far the most advanced curriculum framework we have in India. If you want a better document, then perhaps we should have more time to formulate it. Perhaps January 2007 is the time to start working on the revision of NCF for 2010. So, those who want that it should be done, should raise a voice for that.

The last thing I would say may sound as if I am trying to defend the document and it is very difficult at the tail-end of my talk to convince you that I have not been defending the document. But I would still like to

share with you that I have been trying to defend certain ideas and not the document.

My purpose is not at all that. The document may be thrown out tomorrow. The purpose is the idea of an enabling document, the idea of a wider perspective of knowledge, the idea of a pedagogy which is both constructivist and critical in spite of all the controversies. The idea of people's knowledge and people's ways of understanding should have a place in the school. These are the ideas I have been trying to defend.

Questions and discussion

Q: Coming from a Krishnamurti background, in this document I hear a lot about knowledge but not about learning, 'learning' as we call it in our environs. For example, in considering the problem of local knowledge vs. mainstream/official knowledge/ science, I see there can be limitations and biases in both. But, when I think of learning as a process where we question knowledge, where we look at things afresh, where we learn to figure out our own assumptions, our own biases which seem to me as something essential that we have to learn to do and that we have to help children to do, then it would not raise this kind of a problem.

R: What Lorenzo calls learning, I call 'critical thinking', where you are questioning the available knowledge,

and ways of looking at the world and may be arriving at a different, deeper or more complete understanding of the world. Learning, definitely, Krishnamurti explains in a very rich different sense than most people, either philosophers or psychologists would use. Psychologists would use learning as a process which would culminate in some kind of knowledge or understanding or abilities. Philosophers would also use learning as making sense of the world and various kinds of ways for doing it. But then, this also has to culminate into some sort of improved understanding of the world, even if not complete, even if this is a constant process which goes on. And in that sense, I did not talk about learning, but the document talks a lot about learning, especially the whole chapter devoted to knowledge and learning is perhaps the longest chapter in this. I deliberately chose "knowledge" because, that was more contested and learning was less contested and I also did not have time to come to that, in terms of connecting it with pedagogy. Learning has been taken into account, has been talked about, but not in Krishnamurti's sense. Critical thinking and critical pedagogy have been given a lot of place in the document.

Q: Often times, we find that in terms of ideology or in practice for a large scale educational curriculum or a group of large scale educators, there is

no conflict about the things that have been spoken about being clear about aims and working out a pedagogy. The constraint comes when the whole notion of evaluation and assessment comes and how we have delivered, in terms of the other end. So, can you also share some of your insights about evaluation and assessment?

R: About evaluation and assessment, this is interesting that together with the development of this document, there was a constant debate and engagement with the CBSE because it seems the CBSE influences the assessment and evaluation patterns in India a lot and the Director of CBSE was part of the steering committee and there was a constant debate on that. You might have come to know that CBSE has been trying to make some changes giving a little bit more time to the students for papers or for training different kinds of questions which do not seek facts, but some kind of thinking on the child's part. One might find it trivial. But, there was a debate about evaluation and assessment and these people were acutely aware and the document is also aware that at least in the Indian education system, unless and until you change the evaluation system, all other things are more or less going to be the same.

That reminds me of David Horsburgh, who wrote in 1977-78 I believe, that if you want to name the

single thing that has destroyed our education system, that is "evaluation" and the more and more evil ways these theoretical evaluators keep on devising for it. So, evaluation has played havoc with our education. There is no doubt about it. At this very moment, NCERT is engaged in an exercise of developing a source book for teachers on assessment. So, how to assess which is in line with this changed definition or changed kind of pedagogy and in a different manner? One does not know how successful this book is going to be. But an attempt is being made.

There is also a lot of pressure on CBSE to change its own ways of assessment. So, the issue of assessment is alive. Solutions so far are not very effective.

Q: The value of this document will only get realized when many schools and educators get to engage with it and understand what it means and then interpret what it means for them. Has any work happened in taking this document to schools and educators? Has the NCERT done something? Has the government done anything?

R: I think we should all worry about it, whether in this document or any other document. because this is a constant issue. We are working in a district and if we want 50 people from that district to get together and think

about curriculum, then you will be surprised that there aren't any people who can connect the classroom pedagogy and curriculum and the larger perspective on education and who can formulate syllabi. So, it seems that the division of labour in our education system has become too tight and this is detrimental to further development. There are some people who will think theory. They do not know how classrooms are run, because they will formulate the curriculum framework and curricula. There are certain other people who know their subjects, they will come from the university and they will tell you the syllabi for Physics, Chemistry and History and will go back to their universities. Then, there are certain people who will be left to write the textbooks and these are again a different set of people and some of these syllabus writers are invited and then, there is the last set of teachers who are left with these textbooks.

By this time, the curriculum, the syllabus and every document has gone somewhere else. All that the teacher has in his hands is the textbook and he is supposed to be teaching. Anand's question to my mind is very pertinent. If we take any kind of curricular document, not only this, any other document, the earlier 1988 document, to the teachers, then at least a perspective on education would be

built and that is extremely important. But we all should be doing it and who should be doing it? Is it MHRD, is it the NCERT, is it the state government? Is it people like us? Who should be taking it to the people? I think it is all those who are concerned with it. At the same time, I do not think I want to get into whether MHRD or NCERT is doing enough. But, I can share with you what they are trying to do. One, they have put the whole document on the net and therefore interested people can download it. Two, they had given some money to each state to hold workshops on it and formulate their own curriculum. So, they are not saying you follow it. They are saying you formulate your own curriculum and syllabi.

Thirdly, they are having regional workshops. At one time, there were also talks of constituting a committee which will try to take responsibility to take it to various schools and teachers. But, I haven't heard anything about that lately. So, these are some of the attempts.

Q: You suggest that there is conflict between people who see discipline as integrated vs. people who see knowledge organized into various disciplines. I could not quite see the conflict because, at one level, when children are learning, knowledge is sort of integrated. But, as they achieve more depth in understanding, they do

become separate. So, where is the conflict between the two? Proficiency in terms of exploration in knowledge would necessarily lead to different disciplines. Because, each one by nature is different.

R: Regarding Vishnu's question about the integrated vs. subject-wise curriculum, you seem to have resolved the issue for yourself. You are saying initially everything is integrated and as the child grows, different subjects arise. But, there are further questions. What are those subjects? For example, in the national focus group on social sciences, the paper was no threat and for quite some time, there were a set of historians who said that history has its specific methodology and history is a specific discipline of knowledge which cannot be subsumed under social sciences and social scientists were saying what is history, but social science? There was a heated debate and in that debate arose the issue of whether in middle school you should have a separate history textbook or syllabus or should it be part of social studies.

So, this issue is very much alive and this may not look very important at this level. The second thing is that there are many people who without going into the disciplines and their nature, would simply say that this is totally artificial. This is a relevant debate. If solutions are available, it is very good.

Q: What was the involvement of

students who are currently in the system and, teachers from different schools including alternate schools? You all sat in Delhi and did this, so was there any involvement and what kind of involvement?

Q: You did talk about getting a person to be independent. Does the framework have any vision for the Indian society at all? In that context, have things like alternative models of education such as home-schooling for example, find any space at all? What about non-examination recognition in society? Have the focus groups really gone into any of these? Or has that been left to a certain amount of vagueness?

R: I will tell you the process. There were about 400 people involved in this. There were 21 focus groups. Each group had 12 to 23 members. These focus groups were on aims of education, language teaching, mathematics, science and social science teaching, education for disabled and differently-abled children, education for tribal children, systemic reforms etc. Now, heads of these focus groups interacted very frequently with a steering committee which had about 35 people. Apart from that, there were 4-5 regional workshops done by NCERT at different places. State governments were invited to hold their own workshops, generate ideas and to send their recommendations. Ideas and draft

chapters were put on the net and people were invited to give recommendations or their ideas on that.

But, I still feel that the kind of awareness and wide ranging discussions that should have been there perhaps not there. This was perhaps better than our earlier documents. But, to my mind, this was not satisfactory. And it is a very serious question. Because, in a democracy, who has the right to set the agenda for education? This is not a legally binding document. Let us understand that this is a MHRD and NCERT document and states can say we do not want to do anything with this and they have said this. Rajasthan has said that already that we do not agree with some parts and we do agree with some parts. So, you can do it. But, coming from MHRD and NCERT, it has a certain kind of justified aura. So, who has the right to set the agenda for education in a democracy? Perhaps, everyone should be counted in that. There were representatives from alternate schools, NGOs, private schools, 2 to 3 teachers in the national steering committee and many more in each sub-group, bureaucrats and people from educational institutions like DIT, DSERT and NCERT. There were discussions with students, but not direct involvement with students. For example, my focus group held 4 to 5 discussions with students. But, let me tell you that

when you discuss with students in a short time the answers students give are those of their teachers and parents. We tried it again and again. Being a teacher, I know when a student starts being himself or herself. That is why I am recommending that the next process should start in January 2007. Because it takes a bit of time to get into discussion.

This document is very strong on the vision for the society. After the Mudaliyar Commission, this is perhaps the first document that relates education to deliberative democracy directly. Earlier, we had this inkling, but we had our preoccupation either with globalisation or with economy. This document squarely situates education for a deliberative democracy in which each citizen is worthwhile in her self, each citizen is capable of defining a life for himself and pursuing it, each citizen has the right and capability. That is the job of education, to develop that capacity to participate in policy decisions.

I can read a few things for you from the document itself.

Concern about inequality in the society. This is addressed when it talks about the guiding principles of connecting education and people being effective in their local bodies. The guiding principles discussed earlier provide a landscape of social value within which we locate our educational

aims. The first aim of education is a commitment to democracy, and to the values of equality, justice, freedom, concern for others' well being, secularism, respect for human dignity and rights. This itself is a strong vision. Perhaps, if you look at the preamble of our constitution, you will find that all these words are taken from there.

If you look at other aims, the next aim of education is independence of thought and actions. The third aim is learning independently. This also defines a certain kind of society. Then comes the ability to contribute to economic processes and social change. Then follows the appreciation of beauty. The weakness of this document is that it does not define explicitly how these relate to the areas of studies which could be done very well, but it is not done full justice.

Q: What we heard Dr. Seshadri talk about is the human dimension. I think it is common to all of us. Skills pertaining to that such as how do I respond to situations like that where I am very angry so that I am not involving others in risky behaviour or about health or guarding against sexual abuse or a range of things like that which help children wherever they are and may be even adults to handle the world in a very human dimension, does that find any place in the curriculum?

R: Regarding human dynamics and

people and children guarding themselves, the document is aware of different kinds of situations children face. But, to my mind, I might be wrong there, the document does not put the onus on children to guard themselves. Imagine a school and society which is protective, it does not mean that children should not have capability. But then, it emphasises more on what kind of school and what kind of society we are that we cannot protect our children well. So, it pays more attention to that and it takes a view that the ability of independent thinking and judgment, when it comes slowly to children, guarding themselves against abuse and disadvantages become part of it. I tell you this approach works.

But I know many schools which do not pay particular attention to this kind of thing. But, when it comes to children being faced with this kind of a situation, they negotiate their space. If the schools are open enough, they allow questioning, let children be themselves and support them in forming their own image as persons who are worthwhile and can think for themselves. Then children can actually start acting on these things. So, this is a pedagogical issue also.

Q: Does the document share enough about children with physical disabilities or in that sense, children who are in special situations? Since we are

talking about integration so much these days, does it talk about teachers who teach with different groups – with physical disabilities and teachers who teach children who are normal physically?

Q: My question is about primary education. After 1990, we see a lot of organizations getting into primary education, be it the international agencies or different NGOs or different groups with different agendas. I see that in the district where I am working, there are 6-7 agencies working. Some of these agencies do not work in coherence with each other and there seem to be a lot of contradictions. Ultimately, it boils down to affecting the teachers who are really stressed out. What is the stand of NCF on such issues? Are we really strengthening the system or creating a sort of systemic pollution?

R: Physical and differently-abled children are both mentioned in the document. There is an attention to children who need special care as well as there is a separate paper on special needs children. It runs into 40 pages or so. But the document also mentions and talks of integration, rather inclusive education as far as possible. But it does not take it to the level where it becomes a disservice, a disadvantage to

the child who has certain problems. Therefore, it is also being sensitive to the child in that sense.

In a democracy, I believe that everyone, including the corporate and whatever kind of bodies we form, has a right to come into education. They have a right to work for education or use their own imagination. Let us try to understand that if we stop the corporates by law, then immediately CFL and Digantar will be closed. Because, in the eyes of the Constitution, you are no different from a corporate who wants to run its own school. So, openness is an essential part of a democratic society. But then, we all have to work towards certain kinds of goals and within a framework. Our goals, again, could be different. I can have a school where I will say that I will train leaders for the society and I will take only the highest cream and constitutionally you may not agree with me. The document states strongly that education should be of equally good quality to all and that it should reach every child in the nation. That is the focus. But, at the same time, if someone wants to run a school of that kind, I don't think this document can say that don't allow such schools. No document in a democracy can say don't allow such schools.

Vikasana

M C Malathi

(loosely translated from Kannada)

Vikasana is located outside Bangalore in a rural area. There are thirty four children between the ages of four and eighteen. At Vikasana, there is no comparison or competition; no one-upmanship. But there is the facility to learn together. Children are the best facilitators. They help us to run the school more than we teach them to learn.

I won't describe here how Vikasana started; there is published material available about that, and about David Horsburgh, my 'guru'. We started building our own houses and classrooms, we even made our own bricks. As we helped the children build their homes, so they helped us make our homes. We have turned our challenges into opportunities. For example, we make our own educational materials. We have learned how to do it – to depend on ourselves and to be self-reliant. We look for what we want from elsewhere, and come back here and create it ourselves.

We don't label children as having 'learning difficulties', because we make materials to aid each child. When a child 'can't learn' we don't give up; we think about how to help this child to learn.

In all these situations, the children

and adults both learn while doing things together. We never feel there is something we cannot do. We don't need to talk about co-operation and helping, since it comes naturally. The words don't arise. It's not that life is always peaceful; it is the way it is.

Since most of these children are first generation learners, there is no help from parents who are passive. The positive aspect is that they leave the child completely to me; I am like a single parent. So there is no need to compromise, and I can correct any faults immediately by myself. However, it is a great responsibility, since the child would otherwise be working and supporting the family. This is the fee the parent pays.

What do the children get out of their Vikasana education? Beauty, love of nature and a sense of equality in school. David used to say, "Teach what is difficult". So I have the opportunity to be a continuing learner in Vikasana. I must challenge myself in my teaching, by taking on subjects I need to work hard at.

Since the children can see that I manage the place alone, they take up many responsibilities. This is a form of freedom for them. We don't need to talk about responsibility; it comes with the freedom.

Whatever is positive or negative in us, it all expresses itself. There is no place to hide for any of us. Sometimes, we can handle it – then we say, not bad, we are capable of this. Sometimes we cannot – then we say, well, these are our limitations. Everything that happens at Vikasana is a result of partnership. Vikasana is 70% from the students and 30% from me.

We don't need to make vertical groups formally. Since the younger and older children share the same space, the younger ones know what to expect as they grow older. Everything is visible to them; they see what they have to do and can do it, and so they move forward. My job lessens, since in areas where I am limited, the opportunity for the children increases. It is their life, they have to talk, they have to ask, they have to do. Vertical groups in this way help the teacher and student a lot.

If there is a yardstick for success, it is that Vikasana is the children's space. They have had freedom and space, and

they are independent and capable of sharing. Not one child comes back to their parents or to the system after graduating from the 10th std. – they go out there and find their living.

You may ask, can I also do this? Can everyone create a place like Vikasana? People would say to David Horsburgh, what you are saying is only theory, not practice. So David started Neelbagh to show that “I am doing it; everybody can do it.” Then people would say, you can do it because you are a foreigner, or you are interested, but others cannot do it. So he trained ordinary people like us to be teachers. He taught that teachers have a responsibility to give generously. In fact everybody, be he a software engineer or a plumber, can teach ten children from around his neighbourhood. You need not be a teacher. You can do this even for selfish reasons – for your own growth and learning. The children are like organic material whose energy is all around us, who are not separate from us.

The Kanavu Experience

Shirley Joseph

It is very reassuring to be here talking with people who you are sure will listen and who share your concern. In this session, I am going to deal only with my experiences with Kanavu, and conclusions and possibilities of application should open up during our discussions. So, I am just sharing my experiences and as you all know, experiences need not make a person an expert. In my case, it has rendered me more prone to hesitation, so I am sharing my hesitations.

Here, I present three aspects of my Kanavu experience. One is the lack of dichotomy between learning and living. Second, living in nature. Of course, you cannot live anywhere else. Three, handling conflict and treating change as an organic process.

As to learning and living, we follow a very non-formal, not too academically intensive way of learning. Academics are not a very central part. That is very funny to say about what you call a 'school'. We would like to learn languages and science, we would like to do higher math, geography whatever. But then, priorities – like we have to finish paddy planting, we have to do the thatching, look after the cows, maybe give a helping hand to parents when they repair the house or when there is some problem in the

community. We do some programmes for fund-raising, gather firewood. So, when we prioritize this, there is less time for academics. Therefore it is not that we don't value academics. We do. The thing is as far as academics is concerned, we have to balance between learning with living, and learning during living. So, there is a long list of things we have to do along with academics. It feels good most of the time. But sometimes, especially during very tired days and dark days, you have this hesitation. Is it okay to make children do so much physical work, planting paddy the whole day, gathering firewood in the sun? But, all I know is, in retrospect, all the days I have worked on the land and in construction, those days look like they have been really lived out.

Another aspect is, all this learning happens in nature. How do you classify nature? We have been lucky to live near a forest, near a river, we have open spaces. So, most of the time you can find Kanavu staff, dogs, adults on the meadows and the river. That has been a very fortunate thing and it is not like you have to go for a nature walk. You are walking everyday and learning happens, not by design. It is evening and the cow has not come home and the youngster has to go in search of

that and he or she has to learn a few things about the forest at night in the dark. Maybe a little about the neighbour whose banana plantation has been nibbled by the cow. Both kinds of learning happen. Wild elephants, boars – you feel lucky about it. Since you are a commune, quite a few adults live on the campus - grandparents, one or two families – so both birth and death happens right in the campus. So, these are things you can learn and face. But in such situations, maybe because people come from close-knit communities, there seems to be an intuitive understanding of how to proceed. Even 5-year-olds can take care of their siblings for short intervals of time. Grandfathers and grandmothers are taken care of. But people in the in-between age group have conflicts, wars, pacts, silences, understandings and misunderstandings. During all these years, some kind of a conflict management has been worked out, though it is very far from perfect. People do understand each other because they do not have a choice. Most days, we have a circle time for some meditation, yoga, singing and dancing. It really helps in conflict management.

The basic question is to balance change with stability. Changes are inevitable, overpowering actually. The pace of the change is over-powering. So, how do we deal with it? Most of

my children are tribal. So, change is coming to them very fast, within one generation. So, how do we deal with it? One incident I would like to share is initially when we had folk dance programmes, I would say to the children, wear your traditional dress. But when it came to wearing it actually for the performance, there would be some excuse that “I haven’t brought the right blouse.” They would not say that they would rather not wear this dress. The non-tribal girls in the group would be eager to wear the traditional dress. For them, it was a costume and they were very happy to wear it. Last year, when the older ones were arranging a programme on their own, they had gone to Coimbatore and the organizers said that the students should design their costumes. So, they had to choose, and they opted for the traditional dress. When it was voluntary, identity was not an embarrassment.

What is one’s own role in all this? It is rather problematic. That is another hesitation I share with you. All these years, mood swings – dark days, bright days, but somehow the pendulum does not swing too far away from the centre. It is like I have a lunar calendar and the cycle has to come around. But, the trick is to know the seasons, anticipate it coming and to be able to predict it. So, somewhere that rhythm is coming. That is where the question of the future comes. What would be

our future? Competition would not be an alternative for us. It would be a waste of energy, and also when you are playing a game with self-made rules, who do you compete with? Nobody is following your rules. All we can opt for is co-operation. But, we have been very fortunate. Right from the beginning, we have had lots of friends. People, groups who want to support are many. One need not gather all resources in one place. One cannot anyway. All one has to do is to be strong enough, bold and honest with oneself to seek that help, to grow with it. That is what I am doing right now.

But still, you meet one of the parents and they share with you – people in the village ask me that my son or daughter is in Kanavu for so many years. He or she dances, sings, they speak English, know kalaripayattu, they travel all around. But, as a parent, what good does it do to me? That is one question we are dealing with right now.

What does a Kanavu-educated young man or woman do for his or her family? We had a session on that with older children and many of them felt a little helpless about not being able to support the family financially. They do contribute in small measures. Whenever there is something to be done at home, the whole community helps – thatching, repair, illness, death. But they are not the bread winners of

the family, not yet. In recent days, older ones have taken to selling a portion of their products – like bamboo works, terra cotta etc and sharing it with their family. I would not call the future insecure, but it is not insured. That is the case of most humanity.

Questions and discussion

Q: inaudible

S: We have 39 students out of which 20 have travelled to urban places and were exposed to the complexities of city life. But, most of them have come back even when they had the option to stay there, get a job and continue. But, whether this is due to the sense of inadequacy in the city or a love for their place, it is very complex, and I cannot say right now. Most of them have come back and have wanted to come back. But, one boy was very comfortable in the city. So, both cases are there.

The crafts training centre at Bidadi had a campus interview and some Kanavu students were offered jobs, and when they said no, they did not even consult us. But, this cannot be taken as a generalization. If other people could survive in a city, they can.

Q: Society being what it is, and its dictates, the students who study in your school, do they get any certificates? What is the kind of social viability they have? What kind of skills do they pick up? Is there a conscious training

towards some skill? What kind of avenues for livelihood do they have? Are they also placed in mainstream social activity?

M: Yes, they do get certificates after SSLC. They appear as private candidates for the state board. If they want to, they study further. They go to colleges. So, we do have one auditor, one engineer, GTTC, nursing. But most of them have skills for becoming plumbers, electricians, supplying building material etc. They are very self-sufficient. They do not come back and say: “akka, what am I going to do now.” They say that ‘we have to try out our mettle everywhere and test it.’ We do not have certificates and examinations, consciously we don’t. We say it is also alright. Like I haven’t used my certificates and my qualification. Our children are very excited to write exams. It is like cultural programmes. “When are the exams akka?” they ask me. They dress up, borrow clothes from their neighbours. Exam is like a festival. Sweets are prepared. Payasam is made because my daughter is going for exams. I cannot recognize my daughter when she is dressed in jazzy clothes to write the exams.

While preparing for exams, I used to tell them to get up early and not do anything else other than studying. When I was directly involved with children, they did excellently well in exams. In 7th and 10th exams, when

these children appeared for the exams in the mainstream, the teachers there asked them, “where are you all from? How do you manage?” The children were very excited, they used to learn well, solve problems, managed their time well while writing for the exams. When they suffered, I was with them. So, we spent a lot of time with each other. Employment has never been a problem for these children.

Q: It is more of an observation. These are two beautiful experiments in human capacities and sensitivity. But, this also brings out the dehumanising forces in the world today. It seems to me that these beautiful experiments and the possibility of creating more such are under threat today. So, perhaps this is a question to the larger education, development of society and the model of development we have adopted and the steady market and other forces. Can we keep the world safe for such creativity and this kind of experiments? Can the larger education do something so that this becomes possible, because experiments like this develop ideas which enrich and flow into the larger education? That seems to be the question in my mind.

Q: When parents are passive (in a positive sense), how do you cope with the burden of being the only dreamer for the children when the parents are not dreaming?

M: It is a past for me. I have left

the burden now. I am light. I also appreciate the innocence of the parents. They want their children to come to our school which does not give any certificates to their children. I even told them that I won't give back their children. I want them all for myself. They are my treasures. Because I want everything of that child's dreams, the work and everything to go on the way I want it to be. After some time, when the children grow up, they have been able to use the skills children have acquired for their benefit. In a family, as they could not read and write, they signed a lot of papers and lost their property. So just after three years of schooling, when a girl in the family started reading those papers, they had a lot of respect for us, giving full scope to me. I can do whatever I like with them. Taking the benefit of that, they are using it. They are not violent. Their way of changing is reflected in their tradition, belief, family, changing the dress patterns, thinking pattern, girls postponing their marriage etc. When there were child marriages, I used to hide the girls under the table, cover them and tell them that nobody was there.

The parents do dream. The city is coming closer. The daughters-in-law are from different communities. Their dream is sort of taken away now. I do not know if it is because of David or my ability to handle all 30

differently, I know that every leaf in the tree is not the same. So, what does the child want to be? What sort of plumber is he going to be? What values, how much he has taken from the society? Even if the parents don't dream, they give a lot of respect. They will say, 'Akka said. So it must be alright.' So, there is a co-operation for my dreams for their children.

Q: What has been your work with special children?

M: All children are special to me. There are 5-6 children with disabilities – physical and learning disabilities. Parents are not able to recognise it in their children and they argue that they are normal. I am also not an expert on it and if I want to find out what is wrong with this one child, the other 29 will suffer. So, I have to cope with special children also. I do not attend to those things. I would say that he is not disabled. There was a girl with polio. The mother always carried her to the school. So, I told her that the best way she could pay the fees would be not to carry the child, but to let her walk on her own. She did and the girl used to drag her feet. We were not so much at it to help her. Because of the physical exercise of walking 3 kilometers both ways everyday, she became a good dancer and now, she is a nurse – a very empathetic, special nurse and a superb dancer.

There was another child who used

to stammer. The whole community waited for him to say a sentence. He is an auditor today. The process was amazing. We told him that stammering was there, but that we were all with him.

There was another mentally challenged, deaf and dumb child. In 10 years of my work, he came to the third level. After that, it became too much for me. I gave the hint to the mother and she also could not cope with the child at all. I firmly believe that inclusive education has happened quite naturally.

S: As to children with disabilities, our experience is so similar. We too

have children with disabilities. Because we are also living together, at some point, it grows almost invisible. We had one child whose twin died at birth. After a few years, he had closed up and would not talk. Now he is 15. This year, he has started to read and write. He is with a group of children who have started learning Hindi and his Hindi is as good as anybody else's, though he did not learn Malayalam so well with another group. So, right now there has been a leap. His father used to play the pipe for Kanavu folk programmes and now, he plays the pipe. So, where learning is not step by step or gradual, somewhere it happens if the eco system is around us.



The Forest and the City: The Urgency of Change

Suprabha Seshan, Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary

Although I am city born and city bred, I have lived for 13 years in the forest and I've had a lifetime of love for the natural world so I hope you will excuse me if my examples and metaphors are drawn from this store. My metaphor for a good life (one that is healthy, balanced and connected) comes mostly from the forest. This is where I learn many lessons, many possibilities. You see, the forest is also a city of sorts, also a bustling centre of action, also dazzling and colourful. But it functions on entirely different principles. Let me explain.....

The forest is just there. And you are just there, a mere strand in it, intertwined with a zillion others. The forest neither threatens nor promises. No one wishes to hurt you, so you can relax. Your defences are activated briefly and appropriately, when necessary. Snakes are good teachers, as are elephants and leeches. Most of the time the forest has a mild soothing effect on your system and it does things usually beyond your sway: the work of leaves, the swell of a cloud, things growing old and dying. These are the realities of this domain and when you live here you face them regardless of how you feel about them. And when you live here day after day, year after year, you find that you

cannot fend off such realities with words, machetes and contrivances. They will come at you in their own wordless way and then, in a moment between here and there, when you pause between chores to catch the swoop of the black eagle over your sky, then you will understand what is meant by the eternal cycle of birth, growth and death. Understanding this you will be filled with calm. Resting in this calm you may come upon joy.

There is a sort of etiquette amongst all these creatures, one that you learn when you've been around them awhile. The first is the principle of awareness, which is really quite simple. Everything is aware, and everything functions as if every other thing is aware. Nobody is stupid in these parts, not even the tiniest slug. There is an acceptance that all things are equal, even if all things are not the same. There is never an indulgence in hate; in fact there is never ever any hate. You may kill, but you do not hate and you will not wantonly destroy. Your life is lived without asking another for anything, and yet you give, give, give. There are no expectations in the woods, no personal demands. You may die any moment anyway. You learn to be direct. Falsehood brings death after all. Beating around the bush might cost

you your life. Truth is not a virtue, it simply is: swift, simple, straight. You learn alertness, whence before you had armour of words, fears and attitudes. You become grateful: arrogance becomes you no more. You start to nod at grass stalks on the hill, at snails gliding upon a rock. You start to feel for things, for others, for yourself, without being sentimental.

So you start to align yourself with awareness, not with this project or that, this possession or that, this person or that, this belief or that. Life is not about projects, missions or plans. It is about relationships, awarenesses and multitudinous beings inhabiting countless worlds. The sure way to folly is to cement your creativity by becoming particular too quickly, by forging specific and narrow alliances too rigidly. The funny thing about awareness is that it brings the necessary partnerships anyway. You might find yourself in partnership with trees for instance, or with frogs and beetles. You may count upon plants as your best allies. You may tread upon dirt in full knowledge of its capacity. You may take counsel with air, or water or stone, and you may grow a garden, nay a forest, or better still a wilderness all together.

Nevertheless I am still very familiar with the city. My city experience still runs in my veins: once a street rat always a street rat! But I've been here in the woods so long that I am able

to isolate it as pure memory and view it with some detachment, like you do a movie, with a kind of fascination. Frankly, the city still intrigues me in a perverse sort of way. I find myself puzzling over it often. Some of my memories are so clear, so full of a certain buzz: the buzz of downtown, the buzz of crowds of people, and specially, the buzz of having so many friends. I remember feeling as if I was at the centre of the universe, at the point where the most wonderful and important things were going on. I remember the gay celebrations, the carnivals, the colour and dazzle of human beings. I remember the music! Oh! The music! I remember the movies, the theatres, and the endless bright lights. I remember the excitement of ideas, the heated discussions in street side cafes, the nightlife at 2:00 a.m. I loved the fact that the city never slept. I remember I was always busy, always part of a glittering web of humanity.

But I also wonder now about other aspects of the city. Like: how does the city come into being and how does it sustain? How can so many creatures live together without any one really caring? Without any one really relating to another? How do five million people function as a single biological community without any kind of natural coherence, any deeply supportive social structure? How do

people manage to live in a perpetual state of havoc, at the edge of imminent collapse? In the city, ruination is not always obvious: it is very well hidden. I now view the kind of overcrowding that happens in a city as bizarre. I also find it highly instructive. The fact that it is as lethal as it is and still so desirable. So many bodies all together in one space must lead to severe stresses. They must go insane. Then they create elaborate structures to manage this madness, to control and contain all these eruptive, disruptive forces. Have you not felt the malevolence of a city when you visit? It is so artificial, it can only survive with some kind of violent ordering. There's a strange kind of struggle for existence there brought about by this extreme estrangement, this removal from anything simple, natural, life-loving. In fact the city to me now represents a terrible and desperate struggle for existence. You die as you live. You cannot even breathe, your eyes smart as you enter, and your senses shut down and oh! the unspeakable filth! My stomach turns when I think of those sewers and the obscene amounts of waste! The shops, the malls, the advertisements mesmerize you and before you know it you are enslaved: to soulless things, to machines, to despots, to addictions and fears. So much choice, so much suffering, so much injustice. Hurts that

never heal, wounds that grow deeper and wider. Then you have laws. How many laws have healed these pains? How many have made life happier, kinder, and easier? And what about the hands that wield the law? Do they not create another order of malevolence? And all that vulgar display of money...hmm...I won't go into that, I have a lot to say! So this is what I also think about the city nowadays.

Thank you for listening to that.

The Sanctuary's main concern

I have, over the years attempted, along with many friends, to generate an exploration into sense-based learning and nature-based enquiry. I do not know what it means to run a school or to be accountable to parents' concerns about exams or to address the numerous skills a child must have for the exigencies of livelihood. But, from my own life, and that of others, I have known the great joy and relevance of physical health, the fun of direct observation, the confidence from widening and exploring multiple ways of functioning, the warm feeling of responsibility for other life forms and the incredible sense (physical, tangible and active) of being alive, which for me has originated from close contact with wildness and then spread to other places and situations. The beauty of nature cannot be replicated by human contrivance or ingenuity and it would

be a great pity if a whole lifetime were to pass by missing this.

When I look at the crux of our concern and of our work at the Sanctuary (and here I include the wider field of adults and children who have been part of the School in the Forest) the thing is really about: unfolding the beauty in creation and allowing that to act in the life of a person. Are there techniques or methodologies to this?

I now have a series of confusing and contradictory things to say, because I do not yet have any well formulated concepts. I find it difficult to speak coherently about the role of nature as surely the intrinsic meaning and beauty of the natural world has a fresh living quality to it, it is very immediate and direct. A discourse on whether it has meaning or not, or its "role" appears to be self defeating. In fact the title of the conference is a problematic one for me because we have two subjects: we have nature on the one side, and education on the other and we are being asked to find a link between the two and all this in the context of bringing about a sane society.

To me this is as absurd as asking, what is the role of air in my health, or the working of my heart in my body, or water in my cells: I really have only one thing to say about this: without this I die.

Or another way to say the same thing: I am nothing without the rest of creation.

If we are calling for discussion on this subject: is it because it is not obvious? Is it that our place in the natural world, in creation, is hidden from our awareness somehow?

Or are we calling for reflection because we are slowly becoming aware of something else: we are becoming aware that our species has broken its pact with the rest of creation.

One of the things you learn when you work with living things is the degree to which awareness is not held by one of another only; it is as if there is a collective field of awareness and that all organisms function in awareness of other forms. While you and I can sit here and be unaware of each other or a passing bird, it is highly unlikely that that bird is unaware of you. Human beings who have grown up in natural areas also have this high degree of alertness but they are also becoming a rare species.

I would say this awareness, this mutual recognition of each other as living entities is part of the pact of life: an exquisite attunement of one organism to the life of another. And when this is dulled or broken, the price is brutal: in the animal world the price is death. Now of course we have it in some degree in crowded city streets, that through these moving multitudes of human beings we can find our way and we can only do this if some part of us is aware.

But how many of us have eye to eye contact with another species? Our amazing eyes that have evolved in connection with the life and movement of other creatures are now regulated by the vibrations on a computer screen. Once used to scanning the far horizon we now look at the glaring lights on advertisement hoardings. Once swift and precise now blurred by words and videos. Once reflected in the eyes of monkeys, tigers, snakes and mantises we now are reflected only in each other's eyes.

And then again, what about a true miracle of creation: the human body, the human mind, human sensibilities, any discussion that is not inclusive of this, tacitly or otherwise, becomes counterproductive, and especially in a discussion on education, and in the context of a sane society.

Because all these are in peril, as are the rainforests, the coral reefs and the fresh mountain water. Not only are our wildernesses in danger but also our eyes, our ears, our noses, our sensitive skins, our expansive lungs, our elegant and upright bodies, our wiry and supple strengths - the profoundly embodied intelligence which gives rise to an awakesness and a beauty that is uniquely ours, our capacity for joy and love and our own vital living energy....this humanness that is closest to us, that is us: this is in great danger.

Our lack of awareness is reflected

in our language. The things we speak about and talk to each other about and share are almost completely about each other, rarely about the koel on the gulmohar tree or the gulmohar tree itself. The only other living things we have real contact with are cockroaches and rats and pests of all kinds! Talking about natural history is the domain of specialist science. It is not everybody's business, like it was once. The knowledge base for all members of our species was significantly composed of the lives and habits and places of all other living things.

Our species in my opinion has broken the pact with creation, not so much by conscious choice but rather by falling too much in love with itself, its own richness and beauty, its astonishing powers. Its orchestration with the cosmos. With artefacts of its own making. With words, images and technology. With symbols.

And this has become an obsession with itself to the degree that it shuts out the rest of creation, and then still further it divides and splinters within itself. And then by turning so sharply inwards, harm and havoc are inflicted upon the earth, upon all.

This turning inwards has enormous and very far reaching consequences. We even seem to be able to operate outside of nature's laws with our technological developments. We seem unique as a species to be capable of

stewing in our own filth. We seem to like poisoning ourselves and our environment. We seem to like killing each other. We seem to want imprisonment. We seem to have a very high tolerance of disease and unhappiness and disturbance.

I have just come from a meeting in Chennai where a gathering of fifty senior forest officers and fifty scientists and environmentalists spent a day together, confronting the colossal crisis on our hands. There is only 3% of the Western Ghats forests left for instance. 92% of all wood harvested in south Asia is for fuel.

So my questions in the face of all this are:

- What is our actual and living relationship with nature? How do we conceive of our place in the natural world? Do we exist in relationship?
- What worldviews are we holding? I suspect that the ones that inform our thinking minds (such as – all is one, or everything is interconnected) may not be the same as the ones that we act from (e.g. I am more important than anyone else...) Or, “Nature must be protected” on the one hand and, “My desires must be fulfilled at all cost...” on the other.
- What is our understanding of the way our lives have changed with the successive waves of technological improvements? How do they alter

our experience of daily life? And how does it change our concepts of self, community, nature, time and distance? How does technology affect the way we learn, what we know and what we are capable of knowing?

One of the most interesting puzzles of our times is that we “willingly sleepwalk through the process for reconstituting the conditions of human existence...In the technical realm we repeatedly enter into a series of social contracts, the terms of which are revealed only after the signing...” I am profoundly struck by the truth of this. We never really question the huge changes that are occurring in the world, not enough anyway. Willy-nilly, things catch up with us. Why do we allow this to happen?

With respect to education (many of my closest friends are the best of educators), I am uneasy with just about all forms of schooling, and I feel that the educational system is directly responsible for the destruction of our world. And I wanted to ask this yesterday, can I make an appeal to the national schools’ authority, to close all schools down unless they were nature schools or music schools, nothing else in between. Our world is burning, and why is it that we don’t see this? We need every single one of your students to go and do something.

So is this sense of urgency shared? Can we afford to lose our world in our own lifetimes, or is this something that we just accept as a fact and get on with it, get on with our math and our computers. I'd like to end with that.

Questions and discussion

Q: inaudible

S: Venu is asking me to describe a typical educational programme. A lot of people come to the sanctuary, so the educational mission is quite large in terms of the numbers of people we deal with. On a daily basis we have people from Wynad, North Malabar, coming in, schools, fourth std, seventh std., nature clubs, all first year botany students in North Kerala will come to us once a year. All NGOs would have come to us at some point or another, people who work with Adivasis, organic farming...the garden is open to the public which means that anyone between 8 and 5 on any day will be given a guided tour of the native biodiversity. Depending on the level of interest of the group one or the other of us will engage with them. Sometimes it is the local marriage party who decide that they want to visit, then we will just give them a quick tour. But sometimes it will be a school that wants to show children some of Wynad's native plants, so then we will explain that to them, show them this used to be here, we used to see it in your land, what's happened in the last

5-10 years to nature in Wynad. And all this is done in Malayalam.

The educational programmes that we've been interested in developing but are constrained by facilities and also the nature of the experience itself cannot be done on a large basis, I feel, is with schools like Kanavu, Vikasana, CFL, all the Krishnamurti schools and some other schools that come. Children come and stay with us and the idea is that they have a sense of what it is like to live in such a place. So the things that we all do have become part of our educational programmes. Between us we have various interests and we live in this place with our interests, so we share that with the children. It seems that this is actually quite a nice mix of things because we're people who like to do things with the body, we all have some form of interest of concern with either plants or animals, we're working on trying to understand natural history, there's the community life, the kitchen, the farm, all these moments in the forest and how do you take children into the forest in a way that they have a significant experience that touches them. So the day is then all these things put together.

CFL kids stay with us for up to five weeks, we've done long term nature study projects with them, so the picture of the children with the poster – 11 year olds spent five weeks with us – at that time they knew nothing

about birds – and in this one month they found 138 species of birds, and knew every single habitat and diversity of species.

Q: I don't think I understand. It seems that obviously a very important work is going on and our disconnect with nature and the natural world and unconcern, our dependence on the ecological balance are very important issues and well underlined. But I do not know whether it is possible to eulogize nature as utopia and pristine heaven. I do not know whether we were happier when our eyes were gazing at the horizon which we did not know. Horizon is very much a concept which humans evolved, and we feel proud looking at; it is specifically a human concept. Similarly I do not know whether nature is less cruel. Nature may not know the difference between cruelty and not cruelty. But humans, once they become conscious of cruelty, perhaps nature, outside in the jungle, is much more cruel than the cities. Let's not close our eyes to that side. Bringing concern and sensitivity to nature into education is extremely important. But when we go overboard in eulogizing some natural justice, then perhaps there is a problem. I do not know whether I understood you correctly.

S: This is an FAQ. I know I'm gravely in danger of romanticizing something. But I don't think the cruelty

in nature is the same as the cruelty in the human species. When you've seen something killed in the wild, it's very swift, it's finished and everything goes back to normal. It's not a sustained hatred. So it seems that there's a sustained hatred in humanity, which is what I'm concerned about. It just goes on and on. There's a kind of relentlessness to it. As a species, we're doing it to ourselves, let alone to other creatures. So in very few of the social animals do you find that, like the bonobo chimpanzees.

Q: You want education to go back to nature. So I want you to stress on that a little more: how only nature is going to help in the complete upbringing of a child rather than depending on these educational institutions for their lives or their security.

S: Let me try and use the example of a plant. For a plant to grow well, it has to have good roots in the ground but it also needs light. And for me nature is the ground. If we're not grounded in a place, in relationship with other living things then what kind of a life is that. At the same time to me the question of light for a human being is really education. So that's how I see the two working together. You cannot have a plant just growing on light, there are plants that have adapted to those conditions but even they are rooted in a matrix. So I'm not at all

saying that a life in nature is about sanity. I'm a perfect example of how it hasn't achieved that! My mother will say that I'm not an example of someone who has lived for 13 years in the forest, which means the nature of awareness is that it's actually immediate for that moment, and how can you translate that awareness into another moment in time when you are dealing with something else? So there seem to be other things that kick into place. Nature itself does not create a sane human being, I do not believe in that equation. But there are things that happen in nature that are just good in itself. You do yoga because it's good for your body. You listen to music – why? In that same way nature is something in itself that is important and if there is an educational support where adults consciously engage with this then there is a possibility that some of these things like alertness, sensitivity can also be transferred or broadened to a human context.

The other thing is that I don't think we can have true material security without ecological security. That's the crisis we're in right now; we're all going to be in the soup. And that's because we've lost our connection with nature. So, true material wellbeing has to have some kind of ecological health around it. Previously, when a civilization or community has destroyed or eaten its resource base, they've had

the chance to move somewhere else. We don't have that chance anymore. We cannot think of some other place where we can get our resources from.

Q: Thank you for that presentation. It was really quite wonderful and very moving I felt. I wonder if we realize when we bring in criteria like cruelty what pitch we're at and what the state of the world is. I don't think we have a great deal of choice. The point you're making I think which I would agree with entirely is that there's a balance in nature. Things kill each other but then it's over. They don't store hatred, they don't store resentments, or wounds, or deep ideological divisions. There is in a way no ecological problem. Nature takes care of itself. There is however an enormous problem with human consciousness. And it's human consciousness and its impingement on the environment and its sundry workings which I'm afraid are much too complex to go into in just the remaining time that we have. Although we've touched on it in some of our groups I believe. This consciousness, its divisiveness, its entrenchment, and its deep conflict is really the issue as I see it. I think it could be a paradise actually, and human beings have often dreamed of the paradise, or thought that Man was born in paradise. But he fell from it in some sense. He became shut off from it and that sense of being shut

off, being alienated seems to have gone on exponentially. So the longer the time, the greater the alienation, which is also a point that you've made. So I would like to see in schools in particular, because I don't think schools are going to go away, nor should they – I would like to see a much more thoroughgoing examination, as soon as young people are ready and as soon as we're ready, of those mechanisms in consciousness which have brought about these divisions. It's a long topic, a deep topic, a lifelong topic, and takes a lot of investigation and enquiry. But I think that's where the difficulty lies; nature itself is in almost all instances beautiful and self regulating. It does not create a problem and it would not destroy the planet, but human consciousness in its interaction with that nature, and its interaction with other human consciousnesses, has indeed brought us to this pass. And as you say the house is burning. Thank you.

Q: I'm speaking as someone who is running a school and trying to develop an education and I want to look at two phrases: nature in education - which we quite thoughtlessly gave you as the title for your talk, and education in nature. And I just want to share with you all, that I think both for the sanctuary and for us, this is not an end point or a formula that we've hit upon. The balance between nature in education and

education in nature. And Supi's been challenging us and we've been working with how do we put those two together for the right formula? Formula is not a good word. Because when they go to the sanctuary there is education in nature, they do math and English and stuff like that in the forest and when we're here we try and put the appreciation and awareness of nature into their education. But it has to be a seamless whole and we're just working together towards that.

Q: I think there are two truths. The truth of nature and the truth of our lives in and outside nature and somehow we have to live compatibly. Because nature has its relentlessness too, the annual floods, the tsunamis, the other natural disasters that totally devastate life without any reason if you wish. And our own consciousness to be with that nature and accept it as part of nature. I think we have to think about both truths.

Q: Thank you very much for the moving presentation. This habit of looking at everything from a human centric perspective - What do you think is the ecological niche of human beings?

S: It's that of a pest. Vermin. I think all ecologists are looking at that question now. How do we as a species fit in with the rest of the living matrix. We're not separate from that, all biological drives are going full force in

the human species as well. And all this is an outcome of the living force, it's not actually separate from that. But here we are with our various sensibilities, our concerns, and we have to ask whether we need to go this way that we're heading. My question is: I would prefer a tsunami to this endless disaster that I'm seeing which is going on and on and on for the next god knows how many millennia. The forces that we have unleashed are going to be like a cancer. So we have actually no time and that's my concern also. We do not have time to sit and figure these things out. We can't be Nero playing the fiddle while the world burns. So the question of whether the world is cruel or whether we are compassionate, all these two truths, I think they are ongoing enquiries and I'm trying to narrate something of what I experience in the forest, which I think is important, but I also feel that we have to engage with this question of this time that we're in.

Q: It seems that our very existence itself is of great significance. The purpose oriented life, the accumulative process, seems to be coming in the way of that. What's your take on this?

S: You mean, are we just doing too much? Striving too hard to achieve something that is actually simple and just here? I would agree with that. So much of happiness is just here. We do so much to achieve it at some other stage.

Q: Sorry for speaking again. I would not like to open a debate but I would like to point out two philosophies coming into play here. In a lighter vein, if human beings are pests, then we should not worry. The sooner they are extinct the better and nature will be in its pristine purity again. The second thing is, I think when we are asking whether nature is that cruel or nature can have this sustained hatred, perpetuating atrocities etc, I don't think we are asking a fair question. Because human consciousness comes with a price. When we start speaking language we start expressing ourselves but we also get a means to hide our motives – we can tell lies. Similarly when you get compassion, and animal compassion is qualitatively different from human compassion, then simultaneously you get hatred and if you want to absolutely do away with hatred, you will get a 'sthith pragya' who will be devoid of compassion as well. What I am trying to say is we are imposing human consciousness categories on nature and then trying to compare which one is better – this is methodologically and conceptually wrong.

Let's also recognize that this concern for nature is basically for continuance of human species. This is very self-centred. If we remove human beings from the world then you wouldn't know the difference between

the desert and the rainforest. Because how a place which is teeming with life is better than a place with no life, simply when you look with human eyes the difference comes. So let's recognize the centrality of the human being. I'm being very arrogant.

Let's try to see what you said, very validly I believe, that ecological balance and certain harmony is not only for sustenance but also for ourselves being happy and remaining sane. And I think if we move towards that without creating a philosophy where we say that nature is the original pristine 'swarg' etc, then perhaps it would be better.

Another thing I would like to point out is the first idea of heaven in man's mind was the first seed of alienation from nature.

S: Very briefly, no earthworm, or elephant or fern, no living thing, lives in an earthworm lives in an earthworm centric world. So I am not proposing at all that we don't live in an anthropocentric world. I'm saying actually to be truly human we need everyone else. And so since the topic of this conference was the sane society, I feel that for us to have a good society one of the key factors that we have to bring into our world is nature. I feel that we cannot have a healthy human world without the rest of the world. So it is entirely anthropocentric, but it may not be selfish. It may be

that we recognize our inter-linkage with other species and we recognize our mutual benefit, and we recognize the cruelties and violences as well, but we try to move forward together.

Q: I want to face some reality here myself because I'm thoroughly moved by what you said. There are some spaces – living spaces beyond nature – really ugly buildings and deserts and so many things that you are part of. So I can't kill myself today and say that nature is going to be there, nor can I go ahead and destroy schools because I believe they need to exist. I'm just putting myself as a responsible person for this. If I am sensitive to that, just as much as people who are not sensitive to nature need to take an account and need to put some effort, I also feel that people within the nature context who are highly sensitive and sensitized to that need to put in that much of responsibility as well into action. Why I'm saying it is, it's beyond a feeling. Right now it's two ways. I wish there were more programmes.

S: But there are 600 million people in this country today who are living in the world of nature, bearing the burden for the rest of us. So I don't see myself as an environmental educator – the only person in the world bearing the brunt of things. But there are so many people and there is the land. And there are the forests that are actually bearing the weight of

human excess. There are fantastic things about human society and I think those we need to nurture. But then again that's part of the problem, we start to say they are the people who need to do that work etc.

Q: Just to clarify, I am not talking from the background of compartmentalization, I'm talking from the background that some of us are just less sensitive than the others, and therefore we just expect that some things are laid out to us clearly.



The Small Group Dialogues

In our experience, when discussions take place in a non-hierarchical group of about 15 to 20 individuals, a different quality of engagement and seriousness becomes possible. Small numbers ensure that each person has a chance to participate, even those who are intimidated by 'public speaking'. There is a greater chance of the group focusing and going deeply into questions, and the flow of meaning is enhanced.

At the conference, there were ten small groups of about 15 members each, who met over three sessions following the morning talks. Each group had a moderator, an experienced educator whose role was to facilitate coherent and open dialogue. The idea of a dialogue is that ideas and opinions are put forward in a tentative manner. The point is not to arrive at a consensus, nor to persuade

others, but simply to listen and explore. This process is by no means easy; the participants came together from very different backgrounds and with different assumptions. It was inspiring to see how the flow of communication sustained itself despite these differences.

The dialogues often followed the themes of the morning's talks. Our moderators took notes and summarized the main threads of discussion. We are immensely grateful to them for the energy and commitment they invested in the process as a whole.

Groups three and four consisted of teachers from government schools in rural Karnataka. Their dialogues took place in Kannada, were extremely energetic and impassioned, and often went on late into the night.

GROUP 1

Several important questions were raised by the participants.

- How do we understand education?
- What is the role of the teacher?
- What is the place of “autonomy” in learning (in different areas: for the school, for the teacher and for the student?)
- Looking at the social problems around us, how can schools be organized and function differently?
- Are teachers fundamentally differently located from students?
- Can education help to uncover what a child’s “intrinsic” purpose is?
- Can schools enable children to really “live” their lives?
- Is dialogue completely open ended or does it need to reach an end?

Strand 1:

“Education happens in and outside of school.” How are the two to have coherence?

Teachers need to get to know a child, his/her background and social context before engaging him/her in a curriculum. Relationship with the child is crucial for meaningful learning to happen.

The teacher also needs to be aware of his/her biases and assumptions about children, and to be aware of the tendency to judge and categorize.

Can a teacher have “unconditional love” for a child—that is, accept him/her just as he/she is? The realities and difficulties of this were explored in detail. Parents have set expectations from education and schooling. Their love too is not unconditional.

Can teachers and parents work together in the education of the child?

Strand 2:

Teachers also need to be critically aware of the problems and issues in the child’s social context [gender disparities, media and peer driven consumer attitudes etc] and to draw the children’s attention to these in an appropriate manner. Teachers need to help children to think and take a more considered decision.

Strand 3:

The teacher’s actual work with children is always in a specific context or situation. Though this may be affected by prior ideas and thinking, it is how the “brain and heart” respond in the moment of doing that matters most. Are we then in touch with what is happening in relationship with each child and in taking decisions in the live context of, say, a classroom?

Strand 4:

There is a need for teacher training

and a listing of the qualities of a good teacher (wide capacities and deep human qualities). Can these be trained, learnt by teachers? Is it necessary to have a BEd to be a good teacher?

How can what is being attempted in smaller, “free” schools find its relevance in mainstream and government aided schools, which work under so many constraints? Can we see this in terms of “degrees of autonomy” and “degrees of constraint?” Can teachers not make some difference, whatever situation they are in? There also needs to be pressure built up for reform, for greater autonomy in the system as a whole. Education needs a revolution; but since it is something so deeply embedded in our psycho-social landscape, it may be a slow process on a larger scale. Can we begin wherever we are, create spaces and a synergy of deeper understanding and purpose?

Turning to the NCF, the discussion moved to the following issues:

- There is a need for teacher autonomy in making choices about teaching/learning material: Which books should I use? Or should I use books at all?
- Teachers in mainstream schools function under many constraints: prescribed books, syllabus coverage,

inspectors’ reports, management attitudes, government funding criteria, parental expectations etc. There is a need for reasoned dialogue or fighting for appropriate autonomy, perhaps using NCF as a support.

- As teachers, we also have our own inner constraints: our anxieties, our confusions. These may be operating even if there are few outer constraints (in so called free schools). We need to be aware of our inward responses too.
- Can we be aware of our own biases as we convey messages or values to our students? When students begin questioning cultural givens, or take decisions contrary to expected norms, can we respond with a sensitive engagement, neither suppression nor a laissez-faire attitude? Only then would we be working towards one of the aims of education: helping students become independent in thought and action and responsible for themselves.
- Lastly, fundamentally, are we really different from our students at a human level? We too have our confusions, uncertainties etc. Awareness of this would make for greater sensitivity and humility in our dealings.

GROUP 2

The discussion began with the purpose and role of a life-skills curriculum for schools. Two participants described their experiences: one of a life-skills course taught by 'experts' without involving the school teachers, and the other of life-skills taught as a subject with a text book. From both situations it emerged that a fragmented response, disengaged from reality, was undesirable. If the very aim of education involved finding a way to live, negotiating social space, learning not to trample on others' lives, then would a course in life-skills be at all necessary?

On the second day, the discussion revolved around the role of technology in children's lives. Technology for information dissemination and as an equalizer in society is separate from technology-driven entertainment. In the latter case, the power of technology is linked to its user-friendly nature, the globalised market economy, its capacity to function as a hideout such that children may not have to relate with real people in situations.

An interesting insight was that technological gadgets are learnt at the child's pace and therefore she experiences an 'I can do it' positive reinforcement.

On the final day, the discussion was on issues raised by NCF 2005. The group examined

- its efficacy, given that it's not a legal document
- the basis on which it's constructed
- responses at the grassroots level
- its approach to sensitive areas such as comparison, punishment and prejudice

A significant question that emerged was the involvement of local knowledge, resources and people in the school's curriculum. The difficulties of involving a local into the vision of the school and that an artisan may not be a good teacher were examined.

The third area of discussion was around teacher training and teacher growth. The following points were brought up:

- The role of an outside agency in bringing change
- Ways of sustaining processes once initiated
- Teachers as multifaceted individuals with a certain pride in the profession
- Teachers working collectively, free to act and choose
- Remuneration

GROUP 3

(Karnataka rural school teachers)

The group considered the State system of education. There were many criticisms.

- Too much importance is given to position and authority, promotions and salary increments
- There is corruption
- Transfers are arbitrary
- The system treats teachers very badly

Others felt the system shows good intentions in the laws that it has made. When questioned about functioning within the system, many people said they could do what was necessary even from within, working with responsibility and enthusiasm. Overall there was surprise that one could evaluate the system.

On the second day, the group started with three statements.

- Teachers should understand what their responsibility is and act accordingly. It is up to the teacher to fulfill these responsibilities on his/her own. The group discussed the relationship between community and teacher/school, and talked about what makes the community support or not support a teacher. A teacher who works hard will obviously be supported by parents.
- They shouldn't be cruel to children. One participant commented that a young child hears "no" more often than "yes." This led to a discussion: "Can we leave a child free?" There

should be a relationship beyond the formal one in the classroom, and many examples were shared from the teachers' experiences.

- They must recognise that parents are like teachers and involve them in the education of their children. Maybe we should conduct parenting workshops.

Discussion on the third day focused on the National Curriculum. Teachers felt that education should be decentralized to the district level, and that they should have freedom to create the curriculum at this level. This means that teachers cannot limit themselves, and have to be learning all the time. Two questions that came up were: How do you evaluate if you don't teach from textbooks? How can we help a teacher who has the baggage of his or her ideology?

The topic shifted to "Educating for a Sane Society." How can we be sane when there is corruption and violence? How can we say that society has spoiled us when we are pessimistic, anxious and unsure about how to bring up our children? To deal with all this, I need to be sane. There is no question of being a "good citizen"; that is ideological.

Education should be more than reading, writing and arithmetic, otherwise school is no different from a factory. There should be a link between the individual and society, and reflection is the link between the two.

GROUP 4

(Karnataka rural school teachers)

The session opened with an exploration of the objectives of such a discussion. They are: to express oneself, to clarify and discuss ideas raised by speakers, and to have a dialogue with each other.

The group spoke on the effect of the media on rural children. It was felt that among the rural poor, only television has made inroads. In fact, some teachers from the most remote villages felt that it was important that children view some television programs, since it is the only source of information. Instead of censoring television watching, we should have courses on media literacy and discriminating viewership.

It was also recognized that this virtual experience is a very poor representation of 'real' experience.

The group then took up the topic of dialogue with children. Is it conversation and the skill of talking? In time, the concept of dialogue developed further, and it was interesting to note that when people spoke about dialogue, they were referring to their experience as parents and not as teachers.

The group concluded by saying that children's habits depend mainly on the lifestyle and attitudes of the parents. Hence, the starting point in this problem of media has to be the parent and the home. Also, a connection between the question of media and dialogue was articulated very clearly: dialogue is one effective way of handling the media problem, or for that matter any problem.

The discussion ended with the feeling that as teachers and parents, we have to be aware of issues and respond immediately and continuously.

On the third day, the teachers wanted to understand more about the NCF and the concept of autonomy. There was a feeling that the NCF will definitely help the school and the teacher to experiment with original ideas. The group also felt that we do not participate actively enough in the democratic process. We should read the NCF and share its contents with others. Thus the group saw the connection between the basic principles of NCF and democracy in practice.

GROUP 5

The group touched upon the following questions and points:

- How do we educate for an open mind? How much time can we afford and are we willing to give to this?
 - How do we deal with our own conditioning and problems, and then the child's conditioning and problems?
 - The 'teacher' and the 'school' position has some arrogance to it. Rather than posit a goal and impose it, we should learn how to respond to situations in context.
 - On the second day, the topic of how to handle the 'threat' of technological gadgets came up spontaneously. Some points touched upon were:
 - There is more work needed to make the young sensitive to the way TV and other technologies impact us.
 - Not buying a TV is a proactive decision, but rather than controlling the exposure of the child, can we make her able to make sense of what she receives?
 - We create a society and lifestyle where the only thing for children to do is watch TV, and then we try to solve that problem in itself, rather than looking at its root.
 - A quality of balance and discrimination is often poor, even in adults. Can discrimination be nurtured?
 - There must be a balance between protection and exposure, and if protection comes as an external imposition, it will be resisted.
 - We treat the young at times as if they cannot and do not want to understand. Is this 'wanting to protect' an arbitrary adult agenda?
 - We may also need patience to let the young go through a certain phase, but we may need to keep engaging them in this time. There is the danger of 'damage done,' and it is too late after several years to go back.
 - The aim of education may be to learn together how to find an intelligent balance.
- On the third day, a local teacher from a rural school asked that we consider his plight: to have to push some 100 students through an English exam with no resources. He asked for practical suggestions. There was the case of two children who dropped out of local schools and the question was raised of how the NCF 2005 can be made to reach the grassroots level.
- Fear is probably the greatest obstacle in learning; it is important,

- both in rural and urban settings, to remove fear from the atmosphere.
- Some practical suggestions were given to the local teacher: teaching after hours, teaching other subjects in English, asking for the co-operation of the management, discussing the issue with the children themselves.
 - The teacher pointed out many practical difficulties and the pressure and lack of support he feels. He described the rigidity of the structure and timetable imposed by the government. Thus it was recognized that it can be 'easy' to give solutions from a secure background.



GROUP 6

Day One

Understandably enough, Dr Shekhar Seshadri's talk earlier in the morning gave the 'ammunition' for our discussion. In the main, we talked about conflict and violence. In the addressing of conflict either at the personal, social or political level, we may reasonably surmise that conflict may survive into the distant future, but we as educators can not build our efforts on such an assumption. Several participants pointed out that conflict may well have been there since the beginning, but there is no inevitability about it. The question is: how do we explore violence and conflict in ourselves and thereby educate ourselves and our children as to resolving it as and when it arises. The question of how to understand the nature of conflict as such was raised but was not pursued.

Other areas that seemed to bother teacher participants were success, ego, identity and sensitivity. While we can not 'teach' sensitivity but only live it perhaps, the other two are even more contentious. What do we mean by 'success' and is 'identity' (and ego!) a good thing or a bad thing?

After agonizing about what exactly should we do with the children, there

was a happy summing up towards the end. Among the things that we need to do are to show them what life is, how to grapple with problems as they arise and make choices and leave it to them to face life. We cannot live their lives for them, neither should we attempt to arrange it for them nor to direct their lives. Also, children make their own emotional landscape and perhaps we as adults need to keep it authentic and not disturb it but be builders, as it were.

Day Two

Two questions that turned out to be the focus of this day's discussions were:

- How do parents come into the whole process of education? and
- What do parents want for their children?

Various questions were raised that reflected the anxiety and the agony that parents and teachers go through during the educational process, which is all the time!

Manipulation of young minds by the media and the crude commercialization of not only entertainment but even education, came in for examination. The obsession with use of electronic gadgetry, and television as sources of constant

entertainment in a kind of mindless monoculture, as it were, came in for some analysis. Two faces of parental responses were mentioned in this regard. Thoughtful parents find it hard put to restrain their children from getting into this 'pleasure dome'. Most parents indulge. While the former would need and do get support from the school to work with the children, the latter themselves need educating. (All this was suggested not with any self-righteousness, as though teachers were know-alls, but in a spirit of open exploration.)

The question of parental skills was raised. It was noted that traditionally the parents had a fairly good sense of what children need. Do adults need to be taught parental skills?

An interesting interlude related to the responses of a couple of teachers who briefly responded to the question of what their school did for them. (They had been educated in schools connected with the Krishnamurti Foundation.) Did they feel deprived of the good times that their friends were having? While some resentment may have been there at that time, they came to understand what the school was attempting. Their experience certainly made them not only ponder over such issues but even talk to the others about it when they went out.

While we do not know exactly what happens to our children after they

leave school as to their life choices, our role is to point out that problems exist and how they may be examined. This is a lesson that needs to go on while they are in school, as well as when they leave.

Day Three

The question that emerged at the beginning was: Do we see ourselves as learning beings (not only social, sexual beings, for instance)? At one level we have certainly "learnt" – we have succeeded in overcoming the low survival rates for animals over thousands of years. We have changed the natural environment to our advantage. This was questioned and debated at some length.

It was pointed out that while there has been a measure of success as stated, there also seems to be a disconnect between our achievements and our tendency to alienate ourselves from the environment and from each other— as witness the appalling wars and conflicts going on for millennia. It was suggested that our capacity for self-awareness, a quality that clearly distinguishes us from other animals – is not yet well developed.

Another strand that carried the discussion along was the question of the "wisdom" of our emotions and how they seem to determine our action, even when we seem to arrive at a 'rational' decision. Can we trust our

emotions? The danger here would be that emotions become their own justification, the rational side of our brain merely trailing the emotional side.

All that we can do is to watch these processes and allow action to take place in the light of our understanding of such processes.

