

BITE THE APPLE, BEFORE YOU DISCUSS IT!

Teachers can teach 'A for apple', children can learn the letter, spell the word, and pronounce it well but is it the experience of the apple? When words replace the experience, we are no longer in the phenomenological world of direct experience and understanding. There is so much focus on learning the descriptions, the definitions, the formulas, and procedures that we have forgotten the importance of the experience itself and what it teaches us.

If we speak in terms of the curriculum, the first question people generally ask is what should children be learning? But the important related questions are: Who decides what a child should learn? Why are they learning this? How are they learning it?

To answer the question 'what' chil-

dren should be learning, I would begin with the 'Why' should a child learn any particular thing? Does this serve the child's interest? Does it have a purpose or meaning? I learned in grade 10 (Ok so that was some time ago!), to draw the digestive system of a frog. As I sometimes joke, I never really found a frog who had any digestive issues that I could help. And on a more serious note, I did not learn about my digestion or what I ought to be eating for a healthier gut.

Many current discourses in learner-centered and problem-based learning are drawn from John Dewey's ideas of a child-centered learning model. Often considered the main proponent of experiential learning, Dewey viewed the experience as the continuous interaction of the self with the environment in a dynamic evolving relationship. In brief, what Dewey



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appears to say is that we are not just adapting to our environments passively but are shaping them actively. This was contrary to the dominant discourse during Dewey's time in behaviorist psychology of the stimulus shaping the response.

The external environment consists of material objects, community, spaces, flora, and fauna with which the learner interacts and the internal conditions such as the powers and purposes of the learners need to be in harmony. According to Dewey, traditional education did not take into consideration the internal conditions without which the learning is accidental. So, in answer to the 'what', the curriculum should be emergent, flexible, and created according to the children's interests and context. Core competencies and age-appropriate concepts can be covered through real-life projects and experiences.

This leads us to the other question – 'Who frames the curriculum?' When it is centralized and top-down, it becomes divorced from the child's reality and irrelevant. Children are then forced to learn by rote contributing to what Prof Krishna Kumar termed the 'textbook culture.' For example, a textbook of English as a second language studied by children at Tribal schools who

could not speak a word of English included poems by Robert Frost. Such choices show the disconnect between the child's world and the centralized curriculum. There has to be some flexibility for schools and teachers to adopt and adapt according to what is relevant to the child's interests and passions.

Now we come to the 'How' of learning – the pedagogy. The current educational models often referred to as the prison model and the factory model are colonial legacies based on supervision and subjugation, structures of hierarchy, and an educational methodology that makes children passive. The result of such models is that there is low employability and high rates of mental stress due to academic pressure as reported in *The Lancet* (2016). Our students are forced to learn by rote and



have no understanding. India ranked 73 out of 75 nations in PISA in 2009!

With an acceleration in the pace of technological changes, climate change, scientific advances, political upheavals, and natural and man-made disasters, there are new professions that are needed. But, how can we prepare for a world of tomorrow, with a pedagogy of the day before yesterday?

Not survival, but thrival

It is in this context that we can argue for a change of paradigm. So far, education has been embedded in the paradigm of the survival of the fittest, a competitive model that leads to exclusion and violence. From the paradigm of survival of the fittest, we need to shift to a paradigm of 'thrival' for all. Such a model is based on cooperation and collaboration rather than competition and is hence, inclusive.

Educational paradigms have also encouraged fragmentation of knowledge and given value to the analytical and logical ways of knowing and largely ignored the creative, the imaginative, and the intuitive ways of knowing. The brain became divided into two with processes of the left hemisphere of the brain (more analytical and logical) dominating those of the right hemisphere (more intuitive



and imaginative). Thus, in education, it is time to go towards a more holistic development.

In 1997, my husband Pascal Chazot (a French educationalist) and I, started with an idea for different schooling where learning experiences are engaging, fruitful, and contribute to well-being. In 1999 we partnered with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and founded the Mahatma Gandhi International School (MGIS) with a teacher training center.

About the Generated Resource Learning pedagogy

Our philosophical value and a central tenet are non-violence based on Gandhian principles. The operational concept of GRL is that everything is a resource to learn. These resources include the outer material and human resources and the inner resources



Making Matka Fridges

such as our creativity, imagination, and intuition. Diversity in different forms is important, whether it be of people, materials, resources, or different modes of learning. Another concept is that the pedagogy must offer children choices in their learning process. Our aim is that children learn while being happy and ultimately learn to be autonomous. This is inspired by the idea of Gandhiji's notion of Swaraj where self-governance and choice take into account the well-being of others.

In the GRL, children actively co-construct their learning by doing real-life projects linked to their own needs and contexts. The projects must be meaningful and purposeful. Children thus enquire into issues faced by their group and their communities and in a problem-solving approach, reflect on solutions. The projects by their nature

are trans-disciplinary and the content is mapped into these projects that are democratically decided by children through discussions and votes. There is no prescribed textbooks and children source their information through a variety of sources both material and human, by researching, interviewing, observation, and surveys. Thus, the data is generated by the children.

Children also make their own rules and govern themselves resolving their conflicts through dialogue. Many successful projects have been running through the years such as the cafeteria project and the film-making project. In the past few years, children have bid for tenders and made films for the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and the Government of Gujarat. They also make films for voter awareness campaigns for the Election Commission of India, an ongoing proj-

ect for the last six years. Through such projects, children learn diverse subjects such as languages, sciences, mathematics, ethics, and social sciences. They learn to work in cooperation and collaboration to meet their real deadlines. They work with real data and with real professionals thus developing different soft skills and life skills.

In MGIS, there are no textbooks, no roll calls, no compulsory attendance, no forced morning assemblies, no school bells, no fixed subject-driven timetables, no homework, and no punishments. In such a model of schooling that was different from the conventional schools, we faced many challenges such as parental anxieties, pressures from different boards, and even from authorities to conform to existing processes and standards. In its initial years, we worked by first training our own teachers consistently and then



Who am i?
Am I a human?
Am I an animal?
Am I a soul?
Or just a body?

But though now I lie in this bed,
one day I will be on my own feet running and
all of my dreams will come true.

But I still have to find
who i am...

... Tara

Chazot

including parenting workshops and discussion groups to help them understand the pedagogy.

As an inclusive school, we decided not to give a grades-based report card based on normative assessment but a qualitative reporting that was portfolio based. Thus, students were not pitted against each other and in their own words 'there was no hierarchy since there was no 40% child and a 90% child.' So, they grew to respect and value each other's special gifts and differences because while managing a project, different abilities and competencies are required. We are proud that our principle of inclusion extended to our faculty with teachers from diverse socio-economic milieus, nationalities, and orientations including from the LGBTQ community.

Our results show that children loved coming to school, developed high levels of self-confidence, learned citizenship, and became critically aware and empathetic. They also shared that they learned to learn, to take risks, and had no fear of failure. Most importantly, they found their passion or life purpose and went to chart different paths, whether it meant becoming a musician, a mentalist, a lawyer, an engineer, or a human rights activist. Many even

became teachers because they loved learning. They went on to the top universities of the world but more importantly, went on to follow their hearts.

What now? What next?

The question is, what now? How can just one small successful school change anything? Many asked why not more schools? Some even offered means to create more such schools. We felt that the answer lies in upscaling the pedagogies of existing schools and guiding the new schools for the same. A body of research literature points out the need for teacher training methods that are experiential, and constructivist with teacher agency.

Our GRL teacher training has expanded to include schools of different boards in India. In 2017, we began to give conferences and workshops in Europe across different cities. Now we are exploring possibilities of a larger outreach through digitization. The challenge remains – how to transform a physical, visceral experience that is co-created with a group, through a virtual medium to reach a larger group?

To end on a different and more personal note, schooling never prepares us for the real challenges of life such as loss and grief or to answer questions

about life's purpose. In 2014, both Pascal and I lost our beloved daughter Tara who was then 12 years. We then discovered her short poems which became our guiding force. We went on a quest to search for answers to questions about life and death, the nature of reality, and the reason for existence. We attended workshops and seminars, read books, viewed documentaries, and became familiar with the works of scientific researchers who brought in a new paradigm of post-materialism. That is how we began to explore the sixth sense and new discoveries in quantum physics, epigenetics, intuition, and psychic abilities such as remote viewing. We brought these into our classrooms with students and teachers.

We found a new life mission which was to share our pedagogical knowledge and experiences so that we can touch more children and help them learn in joyful, meaningful, and enabling ways.

The purpose of education is to help us answer this ultimate question. It is to help us connect with our deepest selves so that what we do in life is in alignment with our sole purpose for the highest good and well-being of all. That is authentic empowerment.