

2.1

POSITION PAPER

NATIONAL FOCUS GROUP

ON

AIMS OF EDUCATION



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राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
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OFFICES OF THE PUBLICATION DEPARTMENT, NCERT

NCERT Campus
Sri Aurobindo Marg
New Delhi 110 016

108, 100 Feet Road
Hosdakere Halli Extension
Banashankari III Stage
Bangalore 560 085

Navjivan Trust Building
P.O.Navjivan
Ahmedabad 380 014

CWC Campus
Opp. Dhankal Bus Stop
Panihati
Kolkata 700 114

CWC Complex
Maligaon
Guwahati 781 021

Publication Team

Head, Publication Department : *P. Rajakumar*

Chief Production Officer : *Shiv Kumar*

Chief Editor : *Shveta Uppal*

Chief Business Manager : *Gautam Ganguly*

Editor : *Bijnan Sutar*

Production Assistant : *Arun Chitkara*

Cover and Layout

Shveta Rao

MEMBERS OF NATIONAL FOCUS GROUP ON AIMS OF EDUCATION

Prof. Mrinal Miri (Chairperson)

Vice Chancellor
North Eastern Hill University
P.O. NEHU, Mawkyntroh Umshing
Shillong – 793 022, Meghalaya

Dr. Sharada Jain

Director, Sandhan (Society of
Education & Development)
C-196, Baan Marg, Tilak Nagar
Jaipur – 302 004, Rajasthan

Prof. C. Seshadri

1391, C&D Block
Poorna Dristhi Road, 1st Cross
Kuvempunager
Mysore – 570023
Karnataka

Prof. P.R. Nair

152 - I Stage, I Block
Koramangala
Bangalore – 560 034, Karnataka

Prof. Roop Rekha Verma

Hon. Director
Institute of Women Studies
Lucknow University
Lucknow – 226 007
Uttar Pradesh

Dr. Jayshree Mathur

Central Institute of Education (CIE)
33, Chhatra Marg
Delhi University
Delhi – 110 007

Prof. Sebak Tripathy

Principal
Dr. P.M. Institute of Advanced Studies
in Education (IASE)
Sambalpur
Orissa – 768 001

Dr. Gurveen Kaur

Principal & Secretary, Centre for Learning
C-128, AWHO-Ved Vihar
Subhashnagar, Secunderabad – 500 015
Andhra Pradesh

Prof. Satya P. Gautam

Professor & Chairperson
Centre for Philosophy
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Mehrauli Road
New Delhi – 110 067

Dr. P. Kilem Sungla

Principal
Nagaland College of Teacher Education
Post Box No. 108
Kohima – 797 001, Nagaland

Dr. Aarti Srivastava

Faculty of Education
Banaras Hindu University
Kamachha, Varanasi
Uttar Pradesh

Dr. R.K. Mujoo

Department of Education
Assam University
Dargakoua, Silchar – 788 011
Assam

Dr. Utpala Konwar (Member Secretary)

OSD, NERIE (NCERT)
Laitumukhra, Shillong – 793 003
Meghalaya

Invitees**Prof. C.S. Nagaraju**

Head
Department of Educational Research and Policy
Perspectives (DERPP)
NCERT, New Delhi – 110 016

Dr. S. Yadav

Reader in English
North-East Regional Institute of Education
(NERIE)
Shillong – 793 003
Meghalaya

CONTENTS

Members of National Focus Group on Aims of Education ...v

1. INTRODUCTION ...1

2. THE BACKGROUND ...1

3. AIMS OF EDUCATION ...2

4. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY AND EVALUATION ...5

Annexure: Language, Tradition and Rationality...7

1. INTRODUCTION

For a fairly long time now, we have been engaged in the great task of educating the children of India, an independent *nation* with a rich variegated history, extraordinarily complex cultural diversity, and commitment to democratic values and general well-being. Given the enormity and importance of this task, it is necessary that we create occasions from time to time to sit back collectively and ask ourselves, ‘What are we doing in our engagement with this task? Is there a need to ask ourselves afresh some of the basic questions such as what ought to be the purpose of education?’ The constitution of the Focus Group on the Aims of Education is perhaps meant to provide such an occasion.

If we look at what the school education system has done in the last decades, perhaps we have much to be satisfied with. Products of this system have gone on to make their mark in diverse fields of national and international life. But there is also a deep disquiet about several aspects of our educational system, particularly the school system. The disquiet springs from a variety of factors, such as:

- (a) the school system has come to be characterized with a kind of inflexibility that makes it very difficult to breathe fresh life into it;
- (b) learning for children seems to have become a sort of isolated and perfunctory activity which they are unable to connect in any organic or vital way with the rest of their life;
- (c) education has come to be perceived more and more as a *means* of ensuring the future ‘well-being’ of students (i.e., their place in society and their economic status which guarantees this place)—this has led to a neglect of children’s *present* abilities and difficulties,

which could deprive them of a quality of life much richer in content than that the education system prepares them for;

- (d) what is presented and transmitted as knowledge in schools leaves out vital constituents of man’s epistemic enterprise; and
- (e) schools promote a regime of thought which discourages thinking and precludes new and surprising insights.

2. THE BACKGROUND

Education, of course, is *not* a modern practice, although it may be claimed that there is a modern way of practising it. So far as we assume it to be a system of teaching and learning, all traditional communities have devised both formal and informal ways of learning and teaching. The aim of such learning and teaching has primarily been to induct the child and the adolescent into the way of life of the community.

The most amazing bit of learning that takes place in very early childhood is learning to wield the language of the community, i.e., the native language of the child. One important aspect of this process is that there is not much of deliberate, organized teaching here. It is more a process of fairly unselfconscious entry into a specific world, the world of the community. St. Augustine said a long time ago that language lights up the world for us. And we might add that every language lights up the world in its own specific way. For a child, the process of learning its native language is almost like a particular world gradually taking a distinctive shape within its ‘field of vision’. Learning one’s native language also involves learning to distinguish between the right and the wrong, the truth and the untruth, of one’s native community. [In view of the great importance of language for education, we have appended a separate

note on language to this report.]

One main educational concern of traditional communities was the transmission of various skills, especially those related to the economic life of the community: agriculture, hunting, fishing, and caring for its environment—its trees, animals, birds, water bodies, etc. But great emphasis was also placed on transmitting skills related to the pursuit of the community's specific desires and aspirations—broadly and perhaps misleadingly classified as 'aesthetic' and 'spiritual'—which have to do with giving expression to what might be called the community's 'inner' life. These skills include music, crafts, painting or drawing pictures, carving, pottery, creating various artefacts, which may be useful, but, very importantly, have this other expressive aspect.

A community traditionally assumes a degree of continuity for itself—continuity of its constituent structures of human relationships, which give it, to a large extent, its identity and meaning. Given this assumption, the aims of education within what might, somewhat misleadingly, be called a communitarian framework, have primarily to do with the community's idea of its well-being and flourishing. The highest value that education within such a framework was expected to promote and foster was, perhaps, 'allegiance to the community'.

However, even though community continues to be a powerful presence in our own times, and despite proliferation of deliberately constructed communities, the world has for a long time been moving away from a community-centric view of human existence in two widely divergent directions: the direction of the individual and the direction of the universal or the global. The well-being of the individual is seen to be more important than the well-being of the community. This perhaps is the genesis of the idea of human rights as of many other central concepts of the modern world.

Humanity is sometimes conceived as the 'community' of all individual human beings. But this is a serious misconstrual of the idea of a community. Our attachment to the notion of community is profound and persistent. In equating humanity to a community, we not only give expression to this attachment but also invest it with a meaning it does not have.

Given the radical change of perspective that has taken place, education must now be seen as fostering values which constitute the well-being of the individual on the one hand and the well-being of humanity on the other.

But the difficulty here, of course, is to be clear about the notion of the individual independent of the complex matrix of relationships in which an individual is inevitably located? And what is this all-inclusive humanity, as distinct from this or that specific variety of humanity?

The lack of clarity about the idea of an individual and humanity as such is bound to create difficulties for us in thinking about the aims of education in our times. Thus, for instance, we have to find a way out of a seeming contradiction such as: We must encourage children to cultivate the 'scientific temper' (that is, the tendency to follow their reason beyond the dictates of culture, tradition, and community) and also teach them the unassailable values of humanity. Also, we must find a stable room for the nation between the individual and the humanity.

3. AIMS OF EDUCATION

There are, however, issues relating to education about which we have a fairly clear idea and about which there ought to be general agreement to a large extent. It would be helpful to seek an answer to the question 'what ought to be the aims of education?' by way of our

engagement with these issues:

- (i) School education is a deliberate and more-or-less external intervention in the life of a child. Although much learning and teaching takes place at home, in the neighbourhood community, and in actual living communities in rural and tribal India, the school introduces the child to an environment of teaching and learning that, quite by design, marks itself off from the rest of the child's environment. Tagore's experience of his first day at school is repeated with greater or less intensity in most children's first encounter with school: "...all of a sudden I found my world vanishing from around me, giving place to wooden benches and straight walls staring at me with the blank stare of the blind."* While the school must perhaps have boundaries of its own—as the life of the school cannot just be merged with the life of the community around it—these boundaries must not become barriers. They must, on the other hand, facilitate the creation of vital links between children's experiences at home and in the community and what the school offers them.
- (ii) Self-knowledge is diametrically opposed to self-ignorance and self-deception. To be deceived by others is bad but to be deceived by oneself is even worse. However, unfortunately, we deceive ourselves much of the time. The big fat ego, which most of us have, can remain fat only on a daily diet of self-deception. Self-knowledge can be achieved only through the knowledge of the other, and one cannot know the other without

being just to the other. Education must be a continuous process of self-discovery, of learning the truth about oneself. This is a life long process; but the school, through insightful teaching and learning situations of various kinds, can bring home to the child the great importance of this process.

- (iii) There is need to convince the child or the adolescent of the superiority of a life of virtues to a life of vice and wickedness. The only way to do this is to effectively demonstrate that genuine human happiness can spring only from a life lived in accordance with virtues. But, how is this to be done? How is one to counter the opposite belief that it is not the virtues but power and wealth that are constitutive of true happiness? In a world where the latter belief is pre-dominant, it may be impossible to teach the value of virtues to our children. We need, therefore, to create the possibility of profound questioning of our social structure, and show in various ways the deep connection between human discontent and a life devoid of virtues.

In this connection, and in the light of so much of breast-beating about the need of 'value education', the following points need to be made about a virtuous or moral life: First, a virtuous man is not simply one who happens to possess the virtues, say, courage, intelligence, temperance, and so on. In isolation, virtues may not have anything to do with moral life at all. Thus, e.g., courage by itself can be put to incredibly evil use; think of the courage of Nathuram Godse. The same thing

* Tagore, Rabindranath 1996. *My School*. In *Sisir Kumar Das (Ed.) English Writings of Tagore, vol. II. Sahitya Akademi*.

can be said of intelligence. As to temperance, if it is not tempered with the vital unity of a moral life, it is in perpetual danger of degenerating into soulless, ritualistic disciplining of oneself.

What is it that breathes morality into the virtues? It is—we must have the courage to acknowledge—truth and love, or, in terms of our own powerful tradition of moral thought, *ahimsa*. Truth means freedom from self-deception; here it is never enough to speak the truth occasionally. As Wittgenstein puts it, “The truth can be spoken by someone who is already *at home* in it; not by someone who still lives in falsehood and reaches out from falsehood towards truth on just one occasion.”* Courage, temperance, intelligence, and so on cannot come together in the vital unity of a virtuous life unless they are profoundly mediated by the love of truth. And the love of truth—when we are talking of a moral life—can flourish only in the supreme and active presence of *ahimsa*.

Secondly, in the context of a moral life, the means and the end must form a continuum such that, as it were, the means and the end make a wholesome unity. The distinction between the means and the end in this context, if there is one at all, is not the same as the distinction where the means is merely instrumental in producing the end, e.g., playing football as a means of keeping physically fit. Morality is not external to a virtuous life in the way football is external to physical fitness. (The position taken here is distinct from the

utilitarian position epitomized in the dictum ‘honesty is the best policy’.) In the moral sphere, the process is integral to the product and the product is inalienable from the process. Here, there can be no such thing as finding the most efficient means of achieving a predetermined goal (as in, say, matters of management), for the means in the pursuit of a moral end is not replaceable.

An important corollary of this is that if value education must be a part of the education system, values or virtues must be integral to the whole process of education. Value education cannot be imparted as a separate bit of education; the whole of education has to be value education. Here, we need powerful reminders, in a variety of ways, of the Gandhian ideas of *ahimsa*, peace, and harmony.

- (iv) Cultural diversity is one of our greatest gifts. To respect and do justice to others is also to respect and do justice to their respective cultures or communities. We, therefore, need to radically change the centre versus periphery perspective on intercultural relationships in our country. Cultures on the so-called periphery must receive as much attention as cultures in the centre. As for education, its implication is that ways of life other than one’s own must be imaginatively and effectively presented as deserving of as much respect as one’s own.
- (v) Individual differences are as important as cultural differences. Individual children frequently have capacities and skills which do not find adequate recognition in the school

* Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1973. *Culture and Value*. Blackwell.

environment. Development and flourishing of these skills and capacities would not only enhance the individual's life but also enrich the life of the community. Education must therefore promote and nourish as wide a range of capacities and skills in our children as possible. The gamut of such skills include the performing arts (music, dance, drama, , and so on), painting and crafts, and literary abilities (weaving stories, wielding language to portray different aspects of life, a flair for metaphorical and poetic expression, etc.). Also, skills as diverse as some children's special capacity to bond with nature—with trees, birds, and animals— need to be nurtured.

- (vi) Knowledge is not a unitary concept. There are different kinds of knowledge as well as different ways of knowing. The idea that objectivity, which is a necessary constituent of knowledge, can be achieved only if knowledge is free from emotions (care, concern, and love) must be abandoned. One implication of this for education is that literary and artistic creativity is as much part man's epistemic enterprise as is seeking knowledge through laboratory experiments or deductive reasoning. The former frequently enables us to see the truth in a way that the paradigmatic scientific quest cannot.
- (vii) Education must be seen as a liberating process; otherwise, all that has been said so far will be rendered pointless. The process of education must therefore free itself from the shackles of all kinds of exploitation and injustice (e.g., poverty, gender discrimination, caste and communal bias), which prevent our children from being part of the process.

(viii) It is very important that school teaching and learning takes place in an environment that is aesthetically pleasing. It is also essential that children take an active part in creating such an environment for themselves.

- (ix) It ought to be possible for every child to be proud of his or her nation. But, one can be proud of something only if it is an achievement of one's own or if one is very intimately connected with those whose achievement it is. We can be proud of our own achievements, or the achievements of our children or friends. If we feel an intimacy with God or nature, we can be proud of even the skies and the whole universe. It is therefore very important that education fosters within the child an intimacy with people who are directly connected with achievements which are part of our national heritage. It is of course equally important to see that children's pride in their own nation does not negate their pride in the great achievements of humanity as a whole.

4. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY AND EVALUATION

It may be useful to consider some of the implications of what has been said so far for pedagogy and evaluation. The strangeness of the school environment can be mitigated by imaginatively linking the experience of school with the child's experience outside it in the community. While school might have many new and exciting experiences for the child, it must not appear as rejecting or even ignoring the child's experience in the community. Pedagogy will gain by incorporating children's experience of what the Greeks used to call *oikeos*, and likewise it can teach them fresh ways of experiencing the world outside the school. For

example, if a child has grown up in intimate contact with the nature around him, as most children in tribal communities do, school can enrich and enhance this intimacy by sharpening the child's awareness of his own natural environment—something that sadly does not happen in most of our schools. The role of the teacher here is absolutely crucial. One is reminded of the nineteen-year-old teacher who came to help Tagore with the teaching in his school:

With him boys never felt that they were confined in the limit of a teaching class; they seemed to have their access to everywhere. They would go with him to the forest when in the spring the *sal* trees were in full blossom and he would recite to them his favourite poems, frenzied with excitement... He never had the feeling of distrust for the boys' capacity of understanding... He knew that it was not at all necessary for the boys to understand literally and accurately, but that their minds should be roused, and in this he was always successful. He was not like other teachers, a mere vehicle of textbooks. He made his teaching personal, he himself was the source of it, and therefore it was made of life stuff, easily assimilable by the living human nature.*

Pedagogy must draw upon resources of creativity and exploration, such as literature in its various forms and history in its uncovering modes, e.g., unmasking the mind of the colonizer as well as that of the colonized. It is important to establish connections between apparently discrete events and things, between things and events close to one and those distant in time and space—connections which can bring sudden light to the workings of the child's own mind.

If the whole of education is, in a sense, moral

education, and if means and ends in moral matters are organically or internally connected, then the teacher, who is the primary vehicle of education, must be seen substantially as an embodiment of virtues in his role as a teacher.

Teaching should be in the conversational mode rather than in the mode of authoritarian monologue. It is in the conversational mode that the child is likely to grow in self-confidence and self-awareness and will more easily establish connections between the teachings and his own experience. Similarly, while learning discipline is an important part of education, externally imposed discipline should merge into the orderliness that children perceive as an essential part of their well-being. Enforced accountability should also therefore gradually give way to a sense of responsibility, which means that there should be more emphasis on self-assessment and shared accountability.

Intelligence is diverse, and pedagogy and evaluation should aim at making it possible for this diversity to bloom. Excellence in diverse areas should be recognized and rewarded. And it is children's responsiveness to what is taught rather than just their capacity to retain it that should be the focus of evaluation. Such responsiveness includes their ability to connect their learning to various other experiences in their life, their capacity to frame questions about the content of their learning in novel ways, and, particularly, their capacity to see deviations in their 'lessons' from the idea of the right and the good that the school might be trying to inculcate in them.

* Tagore, Rabindranath 1996. *My School*. In Sisir Kumar Das (Ed.) English Writings of Tagore, vol. II. *Sahitya Akademi*.

ANNEXURE: LANGUAGE, TRADITION AND RATIONALITY

We begin to learn as a part of growing up in our families. While learning to speak in our native tongue, we learn many things. We are inducted into the moral order/perspective of our family and community through language. We learn to name, identify, classify, evaluate, and define our experiences in our daily life. While growing up in our respective communities, we inherit concepts that consolidate our sense of self-identity. It is not necessary that we agree with all such views and perceptions, yet in some way we remain tied to them, e.g., it is possible to speak of originality or innovation only within the context of a practice and its traditions. Our practice of speaking a language becomes intelligible with the help of cognitive and evaluative notions such as ‘grasping the meaning’, ‘seeing the point’, ‘understanding’, ‘recognizing as correct’, ‘recognizing the mistake’, ‘responding appropriately’, etc.

In learning to speak a language, we develop, what Meinong called, knowledge-feelings and value-feelings. Knowledge-feelings refer to cognitive attitudes as these are expressed in judgment of knowledge and conviction, and value-feelings are expressed through valuing oneself and valuing other persons and things. In learning a language, we learn to think and recognize the significance of communicating our thoughts to others. In our interactions with others, we experience and become aware of patterns and structures of hierarchy, power and authority, subordination and oppression. We also learn to cope with these structures by finding ways to survive either by escaping them, accepting them, or confronting and resisting them. The easy way is not to resist or challenge but to accept

them. However, this acceptance becomes possible only by discouraging independent thinking.

The systematic structuring or ordering of our beliefs constitutes a theory, and a practice is developed through the consistency of our efforts. Practical knowledge serves as the bedrock of all knowledge. All theoretical knowledge is an articulation of what we have learnt through participation in the practices of our communities. In different communities, the practices and traditions vary widely.

The term ‘tradition’ may be interpreted in many ways. In its barest sense, it means that which is handed down or transmitted from generation to generation in a community because it consists of devices and principles that have helped the community to make sense of its experiences and activities. Perhaps, it was for this reason that Wittgenstein had rightly remarked, ‘Tradition is not.... A thread he (man) can pick up when he feels like it any more than a man can choose his own ancestors.’*

Education, as a planned endeavour, at a personal level on a small scale or institutional level on a large scale, aims at making children capable of becoming active, responsible, productive, and caring members of society. They are made familiar with the various practices of the community by imparting the relevant of skills and ideas. Ideally, education is supposed to encourage the students to analyse and evaluate their experiences, to doubt, to question, to investigate—in other words, to be inquisitive and to think independently.

As we grow, we face new and unfamiliar experiences which question our old ways of thinking as these experiences are either inconsistent with or at a considerable variance from what we had gradually learnt

* Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1973. *Culture and Value*. Blackwell. p. 76.

to take for granted. Such experiences are critical and challenging as they involve or require formulation of new concepts, revision of preconceived notions, and new ways of looking at and dealing with the world. It is this unique human ability that is called rationality, which is manifested in human behaviour in a wide variety of ways.

Our attempts to make sense of our experiences, to comprehend the world that we live in, require that we recognize patterns, structures, and order in the world. Without such recognition, we would not be able to make any judgments, we would not be in a

position to be certain about anything. This quest for certainty, taken to its extreme, may become a demand for a monistic and absolute criterion by which it would be possible to draw sharp lines between the rational and the irrational, knowledge and a lack of it. In becoming captives of such a restricting vision, we forget that there are numerous ways in which we learnt to know and to reason about the world. This forgetting leads us to reduce rationality to mere formulas of deductive reasoning, placing greater value on theory over practice, natural sciences over art, and information over knowledge.