

The Promises of Schooling: Dreams and Reality

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I would like to share my own experience of working in a small non-formal school and the relationship with the local convent school. Our school is situated on the outskirts of Bangalore and was started in 1975. Some of the questions that I have thought about as part of this work may touch on a number of the wider issues of change and resistance to change in schooling. I wonder if there has ever been a period in history when we have become so self-conscious about the implications of learning and teaching. Nevertheless I think that in the ideas surrounding schooling there is an uneven mixture of dreams, and fantasies. Un-interpreted dreams have been compared to unopened letters so this is an attempt to reflect on some of these dreams as a way towards a deeper understanding.

Twenty-five years ago when the school was started most people in the villages of that area were still working within the village either as agricultural labourers or as construction workers. Many children at that time were not going to school. The school was started in part as an a response to remedy that situation by trying to address the reasons why school was considered irrelevant. The causes seemed clear. Firstly there were economic factors that meant that children were needed to support the family both by working at home and in the fields. Further, the parents did not find the local schools appealing, as there was a rather tenuous link between home and school and the work in the community, and formal schooling seemed an unlikely route to improved possibilities of work. Thirdly the school itself was a rather joyless affair and had nothing to attract the children themselves. In addition there was a history of discrimination against Dalit children, and the community in at least one village felt alienated from the management of the local convent school.

In starting the school there was a deliberate effort to draw on some of the positive elements of life in the village such as the sense of space and open-ended time for children to grow up in and explore, the interdependence and cooperation within the families between those of different ages and abilities, and the resilience and independence of the children themselves. There was a conscious attempt to build a link on what the

children knew by focusing the learning around the familiar environment and language. Also from quite early on screen printing work was introduced on a small scale to go some way towards reducing the financial burden on the family of sending children to school.

Twenty five years later the situation looks considerably more complicated, with changing, more articulate and higher expectations of schooling. Most significantly, the local convent school has become central rather than peripheral in the eyes of people and the several villages that the school serves and is seen as a way forward and means towards social and economic advancement. An important shift that has raised the status of the convent school is the fact that the school does not only cater to the local children but also to the more affluent from further afield. In contrast, the non-formal school where I work is largely looked upon as a second class option for children from families with difficulties of one kind or another.

Some months ago we asked our children to describe the kind of school they would like. It was rather unnerving to find that with the exception of a few older children, most of the children actually dreamt of something very like the nearby convent school—including the size, timings, the uniforms, the games etc. The fact that many children drop out of the school, are unjustly punished or quite often humiliated by the teachers at the convent school seemed irrelevant compared to the advantages of formal schooling. When asked why so many children drop out or fail in the convent school the children almost unanimously said that the children themselves were to blame, and not the school authorities or system. Misbehaviour, fear of being beaten, bad habits and dislike of study were all cited as reasons for discontinuing school. However this is not the whole story, as on other occasions the children have written of their own unhappy experiences of formal schools, and their relief at coming to a school where they were not beaten or rejected as failures.

It is clear that the mainstream school has not failed in the sense that it works and is understood by the immediate community, and at a wider level formal schooling fulfills its functions of providing the society—albeit an unequal society—with the right balance of skilled and unskilled labour and management personnel. Understanding the content of the textbook is unimportant compared to identifying the power of institution and in turn with the powerful of society, however vicariously.

Someone once compared the mainstream educational system to a marriage celebration where the majority of people assemble as mere guests or spectators to felicitate the happy couple. Similarly the majority are simply present to witness and applaud the tiny minority who achieve success in school and so become the stars of the occasion. But this analogy has an important dimension-- namely that it is preferable to be at the wedding rather than toiling in the fields, better to be invited and included than uninvited and ignored. Despite the fact that so many fail, the children feel that some credit and status is achieved even by celebrating success indirectly.

It is important to understand how and why the convent school which serves as an example of an efficient mainstream educational system does fulfil the aspirations of the community even for those who are on the edges and merely look to it as an ideal-- as a dream. Objectively in many ways the school and the underlying system that supports it seem to betray the children's trust in that the majority not only leave but fall out with a sense of failure.

The school makes little attempt to accommodate or adjust to the particular needs or lives of rural children. School is offered not as a continuation from home but as something fundamentally and necessarily different from home. I have heard the local dialect of Kannada described by teachers as "dirty Kannada". The language, ways of learning, the games the children play, the history and geography they learn the work they do or look forward to doing bears little or no relation to the actual lives and experience of the children. Images of home and family encountered in the textbook are often at variance with reality. The village if represented at all is not the village the children know and live in but an idyllic place of leisure in contrast to the real life of the city where progress is to be made. Ten years ago at the annual function of the convent school the Chief Guest made a strong impression on the audience by commenting that the programme was so well arranged and presented that he had forgotten he was in a village at all and thought he was in the city.

The important point is that there is little desire on the part of the children to see the school as the place to strengthen or preserve their culture and life style as it is lived, for this has become oppressive and a handicap to succeeding in another way. Formal school-learning is not expected to relate to the children's or to the community's history nor to the local environment. Instead the convent school is understood as a desirable point of departure from the known world and an initiation into another culture and way of life

that promises dignity and the power of choice. Increasingly the Convent School not only links itself to the city but to the Western world, which is English-speaking, computer literate and is rich enough to have access to global media and a market full of possibilities. It is the element of choice and autonomy that the Convent School offers which cannot be underestimated.

Possibly on account of the very rapid changes and instability in the family that modernization and urbanization has brought about there is a need for areas where order and hierarchy are clear. In some ways the authority of the parents is being eroded because they are no longer “the knowers” as the skills of the fathers are not valued by the larger society. Parents who feel their authority is increasingly being undermined by forces outside their authority frequently appeal to the teachers to discipline children not only in the school but also in the home. They complain that the children no longer listen to them or respect them. The parents often blame TV for the breakdown of order. School is looked to as a place where discipline will be enforced. Contrary to so many theories about raising children’s self esteem and building confidence, parents comment that children should feel fear and on occasions children themselves will say that without beating they will become useless.

An image that comes to my mind that somehow expresses this longing for order, authority and clarity is a familiar picture of the morning assembly often to be found in the school text book. The picture shows ordered lines of identical, uniformed boys on the one side, and girls on the other facing a line of teachers, all saluting the flag in the middle. The ground is spotless and the school building pristine. It is the contrast with an otherwise somewhat chaotic life of home and the village that is striking.

The image the school presents is as a serious part of the adult world with no concession to the playful world of the child. Children intuit and respond precisely to this element of seriousness. The school and the society must have a common aim. Otherwise the school lacks meaning for the child; and to isolate a child from the serious activities of the significant adults in their lives is to take away a powerful incentive to growth and achievement.

Scepticism about “joyful learning” and learning through play and fun is not surprising as school going is expected to make earnest demands on children. School is looked to as the way of initiation into the shared world of

rules, roles, responsibilities and duties of the adult world where indulgence towards children is considered inappropriate if not harmful. In different ways in different societies the period between 8-14 years has been used as a period for training in self restraint where to varying degrees mind and body submit to the larger interest and the needs of the community. Erik Erikson describes this period of the community. Erik Erikson describes this period of the school going child as the time of tension between industry and competence as against inferiority and incompetence. He writes: "The school child makes methods his own, he also permits accepted methods to make him their own . . . to manage and be managed."

The school then promises to be and is understood as a place of order, authority and discipline which will enable children as adults to be less vulnerable less open to exploitation and marginalization. It will in some ways help to counter a history and tradition of being backward.

Dreams are a vital part our lives in that they give energy and direction to our action and strengthen us by enabling a vision of the world that encompasses not only our past and present but also looks to the future. The negative side of dreams is when they become an escape, mere wish-fulfilling fantasies that prevent us from taking control of our lives. There is an element of enchantment that surrounds mainstream schooling which actually paralyses rather than energizes.

There is a fairy tale called: "The Spirit and the Bottle" which touches on the need for a reflective quality in relationship to our dreams There was a poor farmer's son who was unable to continue his studies for lack of funds. Wandering one day in the forest he chanced on an old tree. He was surprised to hear a shrill, insistent voice shouting, "Let me out! Let me out!" The young man, on investigation found among the roots of the tree an agitated spirit trapped within a bottle. Out of pity the young man without further ado opened the lid. The tiny spirit leapt out and in no time at all towered menacingly above the terrified boy, declaring that he was no other than the god of imagination and was destined to break the neck of the very person who released him from captivity.

The young man was blessed with the power of quick thinking and promptly retorted that he could not believe such a mighty spirit had such power that he could change his shape and size at will. The spirit anxious to show his power returned to the bottle, and the boy without a moment's

hesitation secured the lid to imprison him once more. Then the young man thought to bargain and finally an agreement was made whereby the spirit would be released on condition that he rewarded the boy with a magic cloth. The spirit was freed once more and the boy, aided by the cloth changed his axe to silver and used his new found wealth and wisdom to complete his studies and become a man of healing as a doctor

This story reveals the ambiguity of imagination's power and the need to combine a kind of cleverness in order to use the creative power of the unconscious.

In what ways is the dream that the mainstream school evokes false and even dangerous? The child and indeed the parents often experience a sense of powerlessness and passivity within the structure of the school and all that it represents. There is an aspect of enchantment because the child and the family have very little control over the situation, whether for the child learning in the classroom to make meaning of the subject being taught or for parents and children to participate or intervene in decision making and the management of the school.

There seems to be a suspension of critical judgement about the effectiveness or meaningfulness of schooling. This may not be indicative of what I am calling enchantment but in part may be a strategy to survive in a hostile or unsympathetic environment because in balance it is worthwhile to surrender in some areas in order to gain in others. For example the parents whose sensibilities may be affronted if not outraged by seeing a mockery made of their religious stories through drama in one situation are silenced if the mockery is done in the context of a Convent School culture programme.. As mentioned earlier, any failure is generally blamed not on the system but on the individual's inability to meet the legitimate and just demands of the school.

Another aspect of enchantment could be seen in the disconnection from reality Firstly the learning itself is not even expected to relate to the child's own experience or environment and secondly there is often little connection between skills learnt with possible future work. The qualifications and process of certification could be described as symbolic and abstract like the monetary system where money is of no value in itself but nevertheless gives purchasing power. Further there is a lack of realism in actually coming to terms with the limited possibilities that school may

actually be offering in an unjust situation where a small minority are actually able to use certification as a means of securing employment or increasing social mobility.

Formal schooling seems to demand a ritualised participation detached from other forms of experience, ways of learning, systems of knowledge where control or any kind of constructive intervention is minimal because the society has evolved a unified educational system which is totally consistent within itself. It is therefore difficult to penetrate, break or even grasp and is perpetuated because it relies on a sense of powerlessness and lack of autonomy, not only of the students but the teachers themselves.

Efforts to change or modify the system are very often frustrated because the very dream that drives the action is also a mixture of fantasy and vision. My own experience of involvement in a non-formal school began with a measure of romanticism and naivete which while perhaps important as a starting point is not sustainable in the face of everyday reality.

Reform has many shapes and sizes from the World Bank's DPEP agenda to the single non-formal school. Effective change is obviously only possible when there are areas of congruence between expectations of what schooling is about and the school's capacity to meet those demands. Sometimes simultaneously there are shared aspirations and a disjunction when the aims and objectives of the school overlap in some areas with needs in the community but not in others. For example the children coming to a non-formal school maybe coming for financial reasons and not out of a deliberate choice for a different way of learning. Similarly there may be only some areas of convergence in the three agendas behind the DPEP: firstly the Government's intentions when adopting the DPEP; secondly the World Bank's reasons for investment in it and; lastly the beneficiaries' response to it.

As mentioned earlier the school where I work is in close proximity to a large Convent School.. This building is new and substantial to a large Convent School. This building is new and substantial and there are extensive grounds round it.. Classes are large with 110 in a single classroom. The teaching staff are regular and hard working. For example, there are times when the tenth standard children are encouraged to stay all night to study.

Our non-formal school is in many ways at opposite poles to the Convent School. For example, the setting and building of our school is

deliberately simple. However, it would be true to say that in both schools the staff believe in what they are doing. The divide between people involved with mainstream schooling and those outside the formal system is partly on account of a mutual lack of recognition not only of the other's vision but also a dismissal—sometimes quite justifiably—of the other's false assumptions and unrealistic promises that overshadow a more truthful appraisal of what is hoped for. On the one hand there is a rejection of the formal school as a place of mindless ritual that is unconsciously part of a larger conspiracy to perpetuate inequalities and an accusation that the school serves as a training ground for the uncritical consumer in the market place. On the other hand there is a dismissal of the alternative school as a fanciful vacuum or playground which relates neither to the community's deeper aspirations nor to the harsh realities of work and responsible adulthood.

Such comments as “Their children only play with mud” or “The children don't know how to behave” or, “Those children aren't even afraid of the teacher” would be typical remarks of some of the teachers who may not have even visited the school. It seems as though there are two languages being spoken with very little understanding between them.

The conflict between the two is just an image of a much wider tension between mainstream schooling and alternative efforts towards meaningful change. The question that needs to be asked is: what are the elements of fantasy that undermine an authentic search for change?

A school outside the mainstream appears sometimes to others as a kind of laboratory in a backwater where children can be cut off from the evils of a corrupt society and a pernicious school system in order that they can learn in a meaningful way about themselves and nature around them. The school is thought of as a sanctuary or a game park where children can be protected from the dangers of a violent society and where the innocence of childhood can be preserved from the harmful effects of the media and crude materialism.

Ideas of school as paradise have taken different forms but include a more recent notion of a decentralized citizen who is flexible, enlightened and rational; who is active, self-motivated and acts as a problem solver. There is an idealized image of a hybrid person who is beyond the local culture and narrowness of communal identity and constraints of gender. Alternatively there is a model of the loyal and patriotic citizen. There is an

underlying assumption that it is possible to re-make the person both in terms of cognitive and moral capabilities. There is also a stress in discussions on reform about the individual and personal development through the cultivation of a greater sense of self esteem, self reflection, critical thinking and so on.

Further but there is a hope that the children might be encouraged to be responsible enough to act as catalysts in the transformation of the whole society. Education is seen as a potential instrument to eliminate poverty, prejudice, racism and violence but in fact this is wishful thinking because school is only a fraction of the children's lives and is only one component in a much larger society and a prey to forces outside its control. John Holt remarked that you cannot make a good school in a bad society which is a reminder that the school geared to the few who might achieve social mobility, through compensating for insufficiencies at home beneficial at some levels is of limited significance.

Oscar Wilde defined sentimentality as "emotion without paying the cost". Exaggerated claims of what a school can do are based on an unreal optimism that has not taken into account the cost change nor the need for modesty. Reformers whether religious or secular often take on the language of the missionary assumes the right to know what is good for others and imagines a moral superiority which effectively cuts off any kind of dialogue or exchange. The World Bank in India is housed in the so-called 'mission'; but more significantly it is the dangerous assumption that there is a universal model of how a child should think, behave and live. The World Bank study of Primary Education speaks of gaps between the ideal educated person and the disadvantaged tribal, dalit, or girl child. Reform to fill the gaps is then discussed as a management problem which can be rectified by new techniques, greater expenditure and an increase in inputs. The difficulty in this approach which is a common problem to most kinds of reform is that it imagines radical change without challenging the political, economic and social structure that make the present system work so well.

There is a salutary story that tells of how a bird filled with concern tried to save a fish from drowning in the rising waters of a flood. The bird's only solution was to remove the fish from danger by swooping down to rescue the defenceless fish and carrying it off in his beak. The fish happily saved himself by biting the bird only to be scolded as an ungrateful wretch.

Blake's insightful remark that "the topic of the common good readily becomes the theme of the scoundrel, the hypocrite and the flatterer" and that theme of the scoundrel, the hypocrite and the flatterer" and that to do any

good is to actually work “in the minutest particulars” is important when considering the sources and implication of some of the methods that are being so talked about to improve the curriculum. There is for example emerging a common language when talking about educational reform – joyful learning, multiple intelligence, the multi-grade classroom, interactive learning, hands on activities etc it could be argued that these aspects of learning are not at all new but were built into many traditional ways of children’s learning but the important difference is, that in the past such values as freedom closeness to nature, the acceptance of such values as freedom, closeness to nature, the acceptance of different abilities, and learning through exploration, were totally integrated into a clear understanding of work, responsibility and necessity within the community.

The present situation is the growing reality of a workerless world where even the ever expanding opportunities of work as security personal maybe soon closed as electronic devices are introduced. The first to be eliminated in this situation are the already marginalized. This begins to feel not like a dream but a nightmare.

To return to the earlier discussion of the place of dreams and their part in making meaning of learning for the children and their families in the school where I work I would identify several things families in the school where I work I would identify several things that need to be taken much more seriously in any discussion about change in ways of learning and teaching – a hope for order and discipline, the need for clarity and authority, the seriousness of school, the desire to make choices and the legitimate struggle to challenge include a sentimentality that is unwilling to acknowledge the powers of structure in the society and the difficulties involved in disrespectful of people’s own understanding, and redemption that is disrespectful of people’s own understanding, and also to be attentive to “the minutest particulars” so that we don’t become scoundrels or hyponcrites. Any vision of reform and change whether at a personal or institutional level has to listen to these dreams and has a responsibility to respond to them not by fostering illusions but by a commitment to a continuing process of dialogue in grounding a vision.