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With Respect to Children

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The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 developed by NCERT has for one of its guiding principles the connecting of knowledge to life outside the school. Consequently, the post-2005 textbooks brought out by NCERT followed this principle, with the happy result that pedagogically speaking, the textbooks were more user-friendly and encouraged critical thinking. One of the textbooks in English published by NCERT has a short piece on the *tsunami* of 2004. As is well-known, the South Asian tsunami, also called Boxing Day tsunami, occurred on Sunday, 26 December 2004. It had a devastating effect along the coasts of most landmasses bordering the Indian Ocean, killing over 2,30,000 people in 14 countries. It was one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. The excerpt in the Class VIII textbook (English) narrates how the Smith family from South-East England were celebrating Christmas at a beach resort in Phuket, Thailand. Tilly Smith, a ten-year old school girl, along with her younger sister and parents, was on the beach on 26 December 2004. Tilly saw the sea slowly rise, and start to foam, bubble and form whirlpools. She sensed that something was wrong. The excerpt reads: 'Tilly started to scream at her family to get off the beach. "She talked about an earthquake under the sea. She got more and more hysterical," said her mother Penny. "I didn't know what a tsunami was." The family went back to the hotel. Other tourists also left the beach with them. The family took refuge in the third floor of the hotel. The building withstood the surge of three tsunami waves.' The excerpt goes on to say that thanks to Tilly and her geography lesson, they were saved.

While this was one of the more obvious examples of connecting knowledge to life outside the school, a recurring albeit hypothetical question kept niggling in my mind — if it had been an Indian child, what might have been the reaction of the Indian parents? Would they have got up immediately and left the beach? Would they have taken her words seriously? Or would they have dismissed it as

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"just one of those things you learn in school"? My suspicion is, that even if they had left the beach, it would have been due to their own growing alarm at the unnatural waves, and not respect for the child's ability to make sense of things.

I asked this question to several school children—if, God forbid, it had been their own family at the beach, would their parents have taken their child's words seriously? The answer was, without exception, 'No'. Indian parents watch indulgently as their young child parrots 'A for apple' or spouts nursery rhymes; they showcase the child's ability to reel off names of capital cities of the world; they beam all over when their child is the winner of a spelling bee; but if the child suggests something based on his learning at school, it may not meet with the same approbation. Parents—indeed most elders in India— feel that they know better because they are older, and therefore wiser. On the whole, scant respect is paid to the utterances of the young.

The NCF states that education is meant to give children "a taste of understanding, following which they would be able to learn, as they go out to meet the world... Fertile and robust education is always created, rooted in the physical and cultural soil of the child, and nourished through interaction with parents, teachers, fellow students and the community." Yet the way most adults interact with children leaves much to be desired. For instance, I happened to be near the display rack in the Sales Section of the NCERT, when I saw a little child approaching the counter. With oiled hair and a face scrubbed clean, unaccompanied by any elder, his eyes were shining in the anticipation of buying textbooks all by himself. To the sales clerk behind the counter, the child's head slowly looming up would seem like the sun rising over the hills—I thought fleetingly.

'Three English textbooks, Class V' he said importantly.

'Got the money?' came the surly response of the person at the counter.

'Yes', said the child excitedly, reaching up to hand over the money.

But the man had turned away, to serve an adult customer. The child waited. No doubt he was used to being passed over for his elders and betters. A few minutes later, the salesclerk returned. The child repeated the order. 'Why three textbooks?' the salesclerk wanted to know. 'You planning to sell them at a profit?' At which the other salespersons sniggered. 'Pay at the next counter,' he continued, 'and then move on to collect the books at the last counter. That is the procedure. I don't know why parents can't buy these things instead of sending a child to do it,' he added parenthetically. Eventually the child got his three textbooks, but the brightness of his face had considerably dimmed by then.

Much too often we show disrespect to the young child. For instance, little children are invited to sing welcome

songs at functions; once the song is over, they are generally bundled off the dais to stand—not sit—in a corner. Again children from primary schools are made to stand in long rows in the hot sun, to cheer and wave flags for VIPs.

The disrespect permeates the very atmosphere in schools. As the noted columnist Jayashree Ramadoss points out, there is often a "fatalistic attitude towards the performance of students who come from poor families, have no guidance and are sometimes suspected of having low intelligence. The baselessness of such beliefs has been demonstrated repeatedly... By lack of commitment we fail to draw the best out of the vast pool of talent which stagnates in our villages." One main reason is that the concept of *tabula rasa* is still part of the mindset of many teachers. The Latin term refers to the Roman tabula or wax tablet on which letters were inscribed. Some prefer the metaphor of moulding putty, or giving shape to clay. A research study conducted by the University of Ediaburh records a statement made by Charan Singh, a teacher in a school near Bijnor, "As the potter gives shape to the clay pots, so does the teacher shape his own students the way he wants them to be. But each soil is not the same. The potter cannot make pots out of every kind of soil. Some soil may be sandy and water does not stay in it, and so pots cannot be made from it. Some soil is powdery... " He extends the metaphor that to indicate several things have a hand in the making of a child. "Let us suppose the potter has given the soil shape, and made a pot. But suddenly there is rain. Having become wet, the pot is spoiled. In this there is no fault of the potter. Along with good soil, it is necessary to have favourable conditions." Notions such as 'mould' or 'shape' are applied in a figurative way: if a person is to develop in knowledge and understanding he must in some way be brought to learn and understand. Moreover, "the metaphor of 'shaping' carries with its implications about how learners are to be treated, to which there are grave moral objections, for the human mind is not composed of material that can be shaped like clay. It suggests that the learner's point of view and dignity as a human being are to be disregarded and that little value is to be placed on his freedom. An authoritarian method of teaching is suggested, and the desirable form of response is unquestionable acceptance of doctrines."

The stereotype regarding girls encourages the belief that they are not interested in mathematics and science. "In India, this phenomenon is striking in rural classrooms, where sometimes girls seem to be accepted more by sufferance than by choice. The passive role of girls is actually reinforced by teachers, when for example, they intervene and complete a task for a girl who needs help, but a boy in a similar situation gets extended instructions on how to do the thing for himself."

The phenomenon is not confined to the rural sector alone. An article in *Frontline* on a 'whipping ceremony' described the flogging of Vanita, student from Erumapalti. "She received two powerful lashes from the priest that left her hand severely lacerated. She had fared badly in her monthly exams, and her parents, both primary school teachers, brought her for the flogging to get her interested in studies again. More than the trauma of the experience however, it was the thought of what her school friends and neighbours would say that worried her. The ritual, she said, was known to be meant for curing mental disorders. 'Now I have to face a stigma back at my school', she said."

What is most disturbing is that the flogging has been carried out to 'help' the child regain her interest in studies. Education is expected to remedy the perpetuation of superstitious practices, but in this case the act was carried out in the name of education. The flogging was conducted with the active support and approval of the parents, who are themselves primary school teachers. What would be their attitude to corporal punishment? How would they dispel blind beliefs, when they themselves uphold them? How would they socialise girl children under their care?

Children's curiosity is boundless. They have questions on everything under the sun, and also about the sun. But adults, most of whom have forgotten the joy of questioning and discovery, usually respond to them with a discouraging silence. Curiosity may or may not have killed the cat, but the adult world certainly attempts to kill curiosity.

To quote Professor Yash Pal, "Over the years, I have been asked several questions that have been 'discovered' by children. These questions are seldom of a kind to which straight answers can be found in textbooks. Often, they are considered 'non-school questions' and are not addressed by teachers driven by the need to finish the course. Many of these discovered questions require more than one academic discipline to understand. Over a period of time, a consensus develops that there are two distinct categories of knowledge—one that is acquired in school and the other that is imbibed and internalised through the act of living. Furthermore, a feeling is engendered that these two categories are almost orthogonal, in the sense, that they do not and need not interfere with each other."

Children are more discerning than we think. For instance, they observe, even if they don't always understand, the perfunctoriness of most school rituals. The following extract would make it more clear of how marvellously unaware we adults are of language in the classroom/school. Though the extract is one relating to the American flag, the underlying principle would apply to the Indian situation as well :

I asked my 4-year-old son, 'What do you guys do at school?'

One day he said, 'We line up, we go to the flag, and we talk to it.'

'What do you say to the flag?'

'How do I know? They are talking to it.' You could see he wasn't bothered by it. For the kindergarten didn't require him to talk to the flag himself. All that it required of him was that he stand up and look as if he knew what was going on. That wasn't hard, and it didn't take very long, so he didn't mind doing it.

The daily chanting of the oath of allegiance to the flag, or a prayer that they don't know the meaning of, or lip service paid to photos of national leaders on certain days, characterises much of the language environment of the child, which, in effect, 'disconnects' him for short durations. 'It is extremely important that textbook writers and teachers realise that children learn as much outside as in the classroom, particularly in the case of language.' On the other hand, "every experience that leads the child to conclude that the teacher is talking some other language, when situations are presented to him/her such that he disconnects himself, is in effect teaching him that listening is unnecessary and is imposing a restriction upon the range of situations in which he will be willing to trust words. The real danger is that we may so condition him that he learns to accept his incomprehension."

The child will begin to view schooling, and by extension education itself, as being only form and not connected to life. That surely is the greatest disrespect accorded to the child. Fortunately, though, it did not happen to Tilly Smith.

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