

SCHOOLING, IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Education is first and foremost concerned with the human subject. It is the goal of education, as an idea, and as practice, through educational processes, to fashion, mould, and train the human subject. Such training involves the teaching of skills and techniques, how to read and write, numbers, theories, all of which constitute 'knowledge' in one form or another. What constitutes legitimate knowledge and how this knowledge is transacted and communicated through the curriculum is an entire area of study in the sociology of education. In this process, the school (both elementary and secondary) is a significant physical and intellectual space within which knowledge is disseminated and received. The school however is not merely a building where information and technical skills are learnt, some social skills inculcated, examinations conducted, students assessed and evaluated and eventually certified. It is also that moral and symbolic space where socialization takes place, where identities are constructed, and differentiated on the basis of gender, caste, class, race and ethnicity, among others, where young minds follow well-trodden paths of learning, memorizing as well as challenging the given limits of knowledge, where peer cultures are formed, exist and tend to shape everything that takes place in school. Peer cultures also define students' relations with the world outside school. Social networks, career aspirations, 'individual' goals, 'personal' ambitions, and behavioural modes are all influenced by these peer cultures which are heterogeneous and amorphous in nature, changing with time, interests and age cohorts.

The aspect of education that involves the socialization of the young into the norms and values of society is referred to quite simply as education for socialization. The implications of this process are far reaching and have consequences for the growth and development not only of individuals but also of society as a whole. Education as socialization is actually about how the 'self' is constituted in relation to the world, and how school reproduces society through the organization and content of the curriculum and through discursive

modes of interaction and communication. This is the central motif of the idea of education: the processes in educational practice that result in the constitution of the self. The study of education provides us with an understanding of the manifold processes at work within the space of the school, the peer group and the community that are all engaged in the process of constructing the self. The school therefore is an institution not only for different kinds of activity but also a space where relationships of different kinds are constructed, constituted, maintained, contested or celebrated. There is first, a relationship to knowledge, to the written text, to ideas and their limits, to peers, teachers and other school personnel, and to the entire assemblage of activities, events and emotions that constitute the daily life of the school.

At the same time, it is important to point out that although the individual self is constituted always in relation to the social, this does not happen only as an arbitrary imposition or inculcation; it is always a simultaneous creation and engagement albeit informed always by the limiting, constraining and restraining aspects of such an engagement. It is in this sense that sociology ultimately views schools as sites for the evolution of power through the various nerve centers that constitute the school whether these are spatial or intellectual, moral or material, academic or social, personal or public. In this process, how does the human subject find space for articulation, voice and resistance? And how indeed is the self constructed in the school vis-à-vis the 'pedagogic encounter'¹? There are undoubtedly elements of negotiation, challenge and acceptance as well as ambiguities, conflicts and tensions that reflect the multiplicity and complexity within which selves are constructed and reconstructed. This multiplicity of perspectives, of voice and subjectivities, is critical to the pedagogic encounter and suggests that there is no single ideal community; rather, there are webs that create and recreate the possibilities of engagement among different subjectivities.

This paper thus seeks to examine the relationship between schooling, citizenship and identity in the complex, multi-layered and pluri-vocal processes and settings that characterize schooling in contemporary, urban India. I am however not concerned with discovering the most authentic component of citizenship education for

¹ By 'pedagogic encounter' I mean that engagement that takes place with persons, textbooks, the media, in diverse domains and situations in which learning takes place whether this happens in relation to the teacher, the peer group, the family, or society in general.

democracy in government schools in the urban cities of India, nor to understand its outcome for purposes of social change. My work seeks to understand the ‘idea’ of citizenship that is sought to be inculcated through citizenship education in our schools, the manner in which classroom encounters take place, and processes of communication within them. I view citizenship not as a legal status but as a social process that leads to the production of values concerning autonomy, as well as those that construct students’ perceptions of their relationship to society. In this sense, I am concerned with how citizenship ideals are formulated, evolve, are negotiated and expressed in the everyday lives of schools.

I would like to emphasise that my concern is not with textbooks of civics or history as they have been ably studied by Krishna Kumar (2001), among others, but with schooling processes and practices and the experience of children as they seek to make sense of their sometimes turbulent and chaotic world. I begin by trying to understand the relationship between schooling, identity and citizenship before I move on to ethnography of secondary school experience in an urban government school located in north Delhi.

Citizenship and Identity

The relationship between understandings of identity and citizenship is fraught with tensions and uncertainties as there are conflicting expressions and understandings of citizenship based not just on the varying backgrounds of students that endow them with different forms of capital but, most importantly, on the images and understandings of citizenship given out in the classroom and beyond. This complex situation plays itself out in the lives of students who experience identity and subjecthood in vastly different ways.

On the basis of research among children of middle income business families residing in the locality of Daryaganj in Delhi, Latika Gupta (2008) arrives at the startling conclusion that children as young as four years of age form and experience Hindu and Muslim religious identities as different and conflictual. Through an analysis of certain ‘tasks’ she sets for the children and her interaction and conversations with them, she emphasizes “the family’s role in imprinting cultural identity” and argues for appropriate teacher training to enable teachers “to recognize children’s socialization” and thereby to “develop a balanced, secular identity” among children (Gupta 2008: 41). In her focus on the family as the main source of socialization into a religious identity, she appears disregard the role of the elementary school run by

the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), where these children spend their school day. While the role of the family in the inculcation of specific identities is indisputable, elementary and secondary schools in India play a crucial role in the reproduction of divisive identities. Scholars addressing this aspect of schooling in India have focused on schools run by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) that seek to indoctrinate the Hindu children in their midst with an ideology that laments the decline of morals and values in Indian society, propagates an excessive pride in the being Hindu and in the Hindu *rashtra* and hatred for other communities and people.² I contend however that it is not only in such schools that we find expressions of such ideologies and schools in India are often sites for the inculcation of particular kinds of religious and politically motivated values. The linkages between political goals and the education of young minds is particularly evident in government schools which are controlled by the state but are more vulnerable to the influence of teachers and administrators in their daily functioning.

A recent ethnography (Benei 2009) focuses on the relationship between 'ideas' and schooling in the context of developing an emotional and visceral bonding to 'the nation' and thereby building a form of 'banal nationalism' among young children. Focusing on schools in western Maharashtra, Benei locates her argument in a framework that celebrates the "*emotional and embodied* production of the political" (*ibid.*: 5). Through finely nuanced ethnography, and a focus on the multitude of practices that constitute everyday experience of school life, whether it is drawing, singing, play and school work, Benei constructs an engaging and engrossing world of how students are transformed into citizens through school life, teacher utterances, and familial beliefs and values. In Benei's work, replete with students' voices, and detailed description of school activities, in the historical context of Maratha imagination about self and the Muslim other, there is a sense in which the student emerges as a citizen who is constructed by others.

In this entire exercise, it is assumed by scholars who are looking at the problem of indoctrination from the point of view of the school and

² An early paper by Tanika Sarkar (1996) sets the frame for analyses by several scholars that were to follow. See for example Bakaya (2004), Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi (2004), Sundar (2005). Mukherjee et. al. (2008) provides a chilling analysis of the textbooks used in the RSS schools that distort history and in an apparent commitment to nationalism, distort 'the history of the national movement itself' (2008: 43).

a particular ideology alone, that children are mindlessly accepting the ideological prescriptions that are being provided through pedagogic practices and other school activities. While adhering to school norms and practices, students do not necessarily subscribe to the values espoused by different kinds of schools. They are primarily in school to get an education with a view to upward mobility, to help them learn a language, preferably English, gain some knowledge that will ostensibly help them find employment. Peggy Froerer's work (2008) on the Saraswati Shishu Mandir Primary School in Chattisgarh is focused on precisely this unexplored dimension of school life.

Civics and Citizenship Education

Citizenship education is not necessarily taught in specific classes using particular texts. It is happening all the time in the school and outside. However, formal citizenship education takes place through the teaching of subjects such as history and civics. Apart from providing information about the government, the study of civics generates knowledge about students' rights, duties and privileges. Knowledge about how the government works, the various structural institutions, constitutional frameworks, and other details about government education are considered essential to develop a critical approach to how government functions. It therefore appears as an essential component of the curriculum and the focus of most schools engaged in citizenship education through the curriculum is thus on government education and on inculcating civility in a deferential context in largely subordinate relationships. Citizenship education rarely encourages questioning or challenging authority or taking issue with the practices of the state and in that sense is far removed from critical pedagogy as we understand it.

The idea of the 'good' citizen serves to dwell on and reproduce ideas about the 'practice' of good citizenship through developing certain socially desirable behavioural traits and practices. This is done through developing a respect for authority, the rule, the law, socially constituted and legitimised norms for good behaviour that are rewarded and reproduced, and through rituals and ceremonies in school, a reiteration of national ideals, a celebration of collective life and the value of an ideal community.³ The obedience that is sought to

³ It is suggested that there is a tendency to collapse 'character education' into 'citizenship education' although the former is clearly concerned with the moral upliftment of the individual in and beyond the school. Citizenship education, on the

be inculcated reflects a concern with developing a particular kind of subjectivity that recognizes the necessity of compliance and agrees to submit, rather than question, in view of the complexities that prevail among the school lives of children. Apart from this limitation, the more damaging omission is the complete lack of actively developing a concern and empathy for others regardless of their caste, class, religion, or gender.

The School under Study

There are variations among schools and these are sharply marked in private schools and in government schools that cater to children from the lower socio-economic strata. The Directorate of Education (DOE), under the aegis of the Govt. of NCT of Delhi, offers the following goal as part of its 'vision': "To make students responsible citizens who may meaningfully participate in national effort" (DOE website). None of this is however explained in the document which later elaborates, "Education holds key to economic and social growth. Quality of life of an individual is also governed by the education. Accordingly, high priority has been accorded to education by the Government. Sufficient funds are allocated to education sector in annual plans" (*ibid.*). This kind of a good intentioned but vague beginning, with poor articulation of real objectives, and an emphasis on 'national effort' seen in terms of only 'economic and social growth', can perhaps lead to a lack of understanding and complete confusion, among school pedagogues, of the components of citizenship education in schools in a rapidly growing and changing society like India.

There are 1040 government schools in Delhi alone run by the DOE. The schools are divided into different districts, and within those, there are zones, and each zone has a given number of schools. For example, there are two zones in the north district of Delhi with approximately 30-35 schools in each zone. In some re-settlement colonies, there are 4000 students in one school with very large numbers of students in each class.⁴ The Govt. Boys Senior Secondary

other hand, is concerned with 'the exploration and search for and abuses of moral thinking and conduct principally as it emerges from, and relates to, social and political frameworks' (Davies, Gorard and McGuinn 2005: 347).

⁴ In December 2007, the total number of students was 1022, of whom there are 102 students belonging to the category of Scheduled Caste and 77 in the category of 'Minority' which includes Muslims (72), Sikh (3), Christians (2).

School (GBSSS) is located in one of the two zones in the north district, in a crowded part of north Delhi, close to the inter-state bus stand, in the vicinity of a cinema hall, narrow alleys and petty shops. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of two months. A series of classroom observations were conducted in the 9th standard classroom, interviews were conducted with teachers and the Principal, 45 students responded to a questionnaire, group discussions were held, and one case study was developed with a particular student in school and at his home.

There are a total of 932 students in the school (at the time fieldwork was conducted) and of the 45 students who took part in this study, the fathers of 32 are engaged in some kind of skilled or semi-skilled occupations and private business. These include that of telephone mechanic, fitter in railways, shopkeepers, bus driver, policemen, artist, property dealer, clerk, guest house manager, messenger with a government agency, and the like. The rest include those who earn their livelihood from setting up a small moveable stall selling towels, barber, gardener, labourers, cook, milkman, and other such occupations. All the mothers are 'housewives' except one, a widow, who works at home by cutting out and preparing stickers for sale. Using material from this school, from observation of events such as the morning assembly, classroom encounters, staff room conversations, and other aspects of school life, including the voices of students, I now examine specific aspects of what is considered citizenship education.

History Teaching and Values of Freedom

The relationship between the teaching of particular subjects and the development of values and a morality is evident from the teaching of history. An important part of history teaching in secondary schools in India is the portrayal of the national struggle for liberation from British rule. The aim appears to not only provide information about the past that was so significant to the development of an independent India but more importantly to constitute an ideology of patriotism, loyalty and fearless commitment to the cause of political freedom. At the same time, it also provides and apparently neutral but obviously tempered view of Hindu-Muslims relations at the time and constructs the Muslim other as difficult to deal with (especially in the persona of Jinnah and the Muslim League) and does not fail to emphasise the role of Gandhi, Nehru and other nationalist leaders. The values espoused by Gandhi as crucial to his strategy for wresting freedom from the British are mentioned but not explained in a detailed or nuanced telling

of the times. In this context, Krishna Kumar argues that as Gandhi is given a ‘unique status’ in these texts, his “motivation, his philosophy and his logic need to be understood as the basis for the appreciation of his actions” (2001: 138-9). However, the textbooks provide a minimal understanding of terms such as ‘truth’ and ‘non-violence’ and therefore Krishna Kumar poses the question, “is a nominal understanding of such ideals adequate for appreciating Gandhi’s political leadership?” (*ibid.*: 139). Undoubtedly not, as evidence from the school shows us.

The writings of class 9 students in GBSSS point to their complete disavowal of privileging the authority of the textbook in articulating their preference from among the leaders of the national struggle against the colonialist regime. They are almost unanimous in voicing their preference for the one leader who, in their minds, used violence and led a passionate struggle against authority and British rule. Gandhi is clearly not the preferred choice. An almost equal number of students prefer Gandhi and Bhagat Singh over other leaders. However, while Gandhi is appreciated for his gentleness, non-violent methods and qualities that make him into a ‘Mahatma’, Bhagat Singh is also valorized for his spirit of sacrifice and the belief that had he not been there, India would not have attained freedom from British rule. The reasons they give for their support of Bhagat Singh point to the ideals of aggression, violence, fearlessness within an overall language of social acceptability, viz. the value of ‘sacrifice’ for the nation-state. Although textbooks do not ‘teach’ this particular contribution made by Bhagat Singh, students seem to have imbibed it from somewhere. The popular culture, through Bollywood films, television, folklore, stories, comic books, no doubt influences student constructions of valour and heroism. We need to also understand the role of the peer group which further develops these understandings into a more coherent perspective and provides legitimacy to that which would otherwise remain embedded in the ‘private’ worlds of children, unspoken and unknown to others, especially teachers and other adults. In an informal conversation with class 12 students in GBSSS, a question about why Gandhi is called ‘Bapu’ triggers off a spate of negative responses: “He is not ‘Bapu’ but ‘*Sautela*’ bapu” (step-father), “you know he sold our country, he is responsible for creating Pakistan,” “Today, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh would be one country.” The support for Bhagat Singh is unanimous; on being asked about their choice among the freedom fighters, the students reply in chorus – “Bhagat Singh.”

Quizzed further for their reflection on the Bhagat Singh's ideology, they reply, "*desh sewa*" (service to the nation).

This value of selfless service to the nation, and the heroism embedded in the value of sacrifice, reflect an ideal of citizenship in the minds of students and is no doubt derived from the emphasis on patriotism, respect for national boundaries and the emergence of a self in relation to this narrowly defined identity that is sought to be inculcated through public events in the school, such as the morning assembly. Morality is however not reflected in respect for the nation-state alone, but also through other ideals of citizenship such as 'good education' and 'good behaviour'. Our understanding of this aspect of schooling would be incomplete without an understanding of the assembly at GBSSS.

Morning Assembly at GBSSS

The morning assembly at GBSSS is an important component of the school routine as it is a daily collective event symbolizing a coming together of students and teachers to ritually celebrate their common presence in the space of the school.⁵ It is also a requirement from the DOE and is therefore indispensable to the curriculum. The respect for the national anthem is well ingrained in all students who display remarkable restraint in their behaviour by standing still, poised and focused completely on the singing of this particular piece. The symbolism of the national anthem as a song worthy of highest respect and stature is fixed in the minds and hearts of all children and the teachers. Group solidarity and loyalty are undeniably centrally focused in the singing of the anthem which symbolizes not just the nation but also the individual's relationship to the nation through embodied gestures that signify respect and deference. The development of boundaries at this stage is quite sharp. There is not only a sense of 'my nation' but also of 'my religion' that comes from the songs and music as well as from the lectures by teachers on this occasion. A clear sense of religious identity is therefore linked to national identity in the choice and repetitive singing of particular kinds of music. There is undoubtedly an exclusion of all other religions in the choice and it is not clear whether this is at the direction of the DOE or is the school's or particular teacher's choice. Further inculcation of

⁵ Elsewhere, I have identified the morning assembly as part of a set of rituals and ceremonies that are essential to maintaining a sense of *communitas*, or we-feeling, in the school culture. See Thapan (2006b).

ideals of 'good' behaviour and religious practice takes place through the brief lectures and homilies presented by various teachers.

One such is the following by a teacher, "Our development takes place through religious prayer and song. Keep faith in god and have peace in your mind. We should keep away from bad company especially from dirty boys. We should not eat *gutka*." Good behaviour is expected to flow from such a virtuous life that includes 'peace in the mind/heart'. This is symbolic of the value of 'goodness' that is perhaps associated with an ideal citizenry and its meaning is not lost on the students who tend to mouth similar homilies in interaction with them. Citizenship education takes on the form of character education in such contexts as teachers strive to ensure that 'good' character forms the basis for 'good' citizenship.

Teachers also use the assembly to provide their perspective on the mix between religion and everyday life. This includes references to popular gods as well as to Hindu leaders and the element of discipleship that is considered central to being a good Hindu. "Hanuman is god of Thoughts. You all should be acquainted with good thoughts because it will give you self-satisfaction and moral height. Students should always be obedient and see the example of Vivekananda and his guru Paramhansa. Vivekananda was the best student of Paramhansa and it was because of his obedience that the guru blessed him to be successful and he remained immortal even after his death". The virtues of the *Guru-chela* relationship are extolled and presented as paramount. There is an explicit effort to suggest obedience, loyalty and subservience on the part of the student. The attempt to inculcate a religio-national identity, appealing to 'good' thoughts and 'peaceful' minds, is part of the attempt to locate national identity in a well-marked and clearly defined religious identity.

To put the assembly in the perspective of the student culture is interesting for it reveals their cynicism towards school culture: students believe that the songs are for the benefit of the officers from the Directorate, who may visit the school 'to keep them happy'. While this may appear to thereby suggest that there is no serious meaning attached to such music, the repetitive nature of the ritual, enacted on a daily basis, has the potential for developing an identity in the context of special national and religious boundaries.

Students express and share their views without any hesitation in their peer group. Fear of being different from the peer group, as well as from the culture of school life, is however rather strong, and conformity becomes the norm to ensure a sense of security and safety among

children against the largely dominating world of the adults. This in its own way creates and sharpens the culture of sameness, already promoted in all schools, so that difference is emphasized and becomes an alien presence. Identities are therefore formed, and reaffirmed, in relation to those others who are more or less alike, have unopposed views and are largely defined by their cultural and religious roots.

Classroom Encounters: Creating the Other

In this student culture, the pedagogic encounter that takes place in the classroom has a particular value because it allows for the expression of views and perspectives in front of the ‘authority’ of the teacher, depending on the particular teacher who is present in a classroom on a particular day. The classroom is also that space where ‘legitimate’ knowledge is transmitted which sets the agenda for what students understand about the ‘idea’ of citizenship, as derived from textbooks and from the teacher’s perspective.

A Civics classroom: the teacher enters the classroom at 12.30 pm (several minutes late). There were only 18 students present and several of them without books.

Teacher: Today I am going to teach a very important chapter and questions are bound to come in the examinations. I’m going to teach you about Democratic Rights.

(The emphasis on the examination results in two students who were sitting at the back bench going forward to sit in the front desks.)

Teacher: What are the Fundamental Rights given to the Indian citizen?

Student 1: Right to Equality and Right to Freedom.

Student 2: Sir, we have right to religion.

Student 3: Right to protest against inequality.

Teacher: Yes, you are all right. Well tell me why are rights given to the citizen?

There is no answer from the students.

Teacher: Who gives us the rights?

Student 1: The government gives us the rights.

Student 2: Society gives us the rights.

Student 3: Constitution gives us the rights.

Teacher: Who protects the rights?

There is no answer, and then the teacher explains.

Teacher: The law protects the rights. We cannot develop without rights neither our society can develop. The rights are sanctioned by the society and protected by law.

Teacher: Tell me what is the importance of rights?

Student 1: Sir, Rights are important for the development of humanity.

“Good”, the teacher encourages other students.

Student 2: For the development of society.

Good, the teacher looks at the book and then again asks the students.

Teacher: Is India a secular country?

The reply “Yes” is in chorus.

Teacher: How can you say that India is a secular country?

Student 1: Sir, we have freedom to enjoy any religion we want.

Student 2: Sir, there are many religions practiced in our country.

Teacher: You both are right. In India, many religions are practiced and we are free to enjoy any religion we want. Nobody can be punished on the basis of religion. In our constitution the word ‘secular’ is clearly mentioned, the Government cannot interfere on the basis of religion.

Student: Sir, then, why is some religion given more preference like the Muslims of our school are paid Rs. 300 every year?

Teacher: See, the government adopts measures to bring the minority religion to the mainstream and government gives financial help to those who are below poverty line.

“Now show me the home-work and, those who have not done, stand up,” said the teacher.

The efforts by the state to include poor children from a community that is a religious minority by offering cash incentives for school attendance in fact ends up highlighting their difference from the rest. Often, at assembly, announcements are made asking these children to bring their guardians to school to collect the money. As this lesson on ‘rights’ very clearly shows us, Muslim students are seen as being privileged because they receive an annual cash allowance. Considering the overall background of children in this school, as underprivileged and first generation learners, the animosity that is built up against

Muslim students who are favoured with special dispensation, is a real and palpable presence. The teachers have not yet evolved a method through which they can actually rectify some of these misapprehensions through dialogue and discussion and perfunctory reasons are provided primarily to close discussion rather than open them up in any meaningful manner.

This pervasive culture of the authority of the teacher, and the school as an institution, surrounded by ambiguity and confusion, in which the only semblance of order comes from the commands at morning assembly, or from the Principal's office, where large charts detailing the day's activities, the time-table, various lists and notices are prominently displayed constitutes the school culture. It is also the chaotic and turbulent world in which students learn to survive, rebel, and also manipulate to their advantage. The Principal's complaint that the largest problem he faces is that of truancy is easily understood as he really does not have very much to keep the boys in school. Some teachers themselves go twenty minutes late to class, but freely use corporeal punishment to check latecomers or those who don't bring their books to class, twisting their ears and caning them on their backs with complete abandon and fearlessness in the presence of the researcher. The boys exit from the school gate in full view of anyone who cares to watch, telling the lone researcher who observes their departure, that they are going to watch films, or play cricket, or just hang about with other boys outside. What emerges is the complete uselessness of it all and the ideals for citizenship education are, no doubt, lost in this bedlam that passes for education in contemporary India.

Schooling and Educating for Citizenship in Contemporary India

The conditions we encounter in urban government schools, like the one under study, in contemporary India are fraught with apathy on the part of teachers, resistance and boredom on the part of students, conflict, and suffering. This is the reality of our schools, especially those run by the state. In addition, the social condition of acute poverty disallows some to come to school and those who do, to perhaps never achieve their goals. The question of critical significance, to the purpose of this paper, is about how prevailing school cultures, such as at GBSSS, inflect ideals of citizenship education and in turn impact the formation of identities? Undoubtedly, these 'ideals' of citizenship education are theoretically framed and articulated by educators outside schools. Schools, in themselves, continue with character education,

understood as citizenship education, engendering a culture of obedience and loyalty, focusing on the narrow and known, unable to open up or understand the world of the unknown. Identities therefore remain encapsulated within this culture of the known, which emphasizes sameness and eliminates or marks our difference as problematic. Identities in this manner are fixed in a collective self, separated from others, which results in prejudices which get embedded in the minds of children (Piper and Garratt 2004).

Building up a culture of willingness to explore the unknown would imply a movement away from the dominant culture and a commitment to recognise and respect other cultures, religions, and people. Such an engagement with the unknown is the only way to understanding, sharing, and relating to those others who are differentiated from the majority by caste, class, gender, race and religion. The experience of sameness must be extended across divisions of religion, class, gender and caste. This is possible only when there has been an unlearning of the hurts and memories of the past taught through history textbooks of various times and the development of a completely new perspective that looks afresh at people and relationships. Such a view opens up a vast arena of potentiality, as it seeks to break boundaries and borders, to end closure and look only to openness, or to that which may bring the unknown into close and intimate connection.

The effort to inculcate a culture of questioning, doubt and criticism, is no doubt a laudable aim in schooling processes that have numbed the minds of children through decades of rote memorisation, repetition, and sheer boredom. While such methods may create a culture of critique and engagement that is important and engenders an understanding, for example, of how power works in everyday life, this in itself is not enough to allow for the movement into the unknown. In an important paper on the loss of the Buddhist conscience in contemporary times in Sri Lanka, Obeyesekere quoting the Buddha, cautions us, "Hatred that burns on the fuel of justifications must be quenched with the water of compassion, not fed with the firewood of reasons and causes" (1991: 232). This indicates the necessity of a completely new approach that works in different ways with teachers and children. It is apparent that this approach undeniably appeals to the psychological dimensions of human behaviour, including emotions, through developing feelings and behaviour in consonance with compassion and 'imaginative action'. In the same spirit, Yusuf Waghid (2005), writing in the context of education in South Africa, argues for a policy of citizenship education that advocates

‘compassionate action’. Compassionate action is based on an understanding and experience of compassion that is not necessarily derived from rational choice and explanation. Compassion, Waghid argues, is necessary for understanding the suffering of others and in this manner “pushes the boundaries of the self” outwards (Nussbaum, as quoted by Waghid, *ibid.*: 334).

To be in relationship is the central tenet of the work of the Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti (1895-1986) reflected in his uncompromising assertion, “You are the world”.⁶ This sense of loss of identity as a self-concerned individual is in fact critical to Krishnamurti’s writings where he repeatedly asserts that ‘relationship’ is the basis of human existence. He points out, for example, “There is no life without relationship; and to understand this relationship does not mean isolation. On the contrary, it demands a full recognition or awareness of the total process of relationship” (Krishnamurti 2001). Compassion comes about through intelligence which, for Krishnamurti, is not derived from academic knowledge or by learning some skills.⁷

To begin with, children and teachers must understand that suffering is serious and is undeserved by anyone. Moreover, it is possible to experience the suffering of another as one’s own and through this process, recognize that that it is necessary to alleviate the suffering. The cultivation of compassion therefore depends on the

⁶ See Krishnamurti (2007b) for his complete works. I have elsewhere discussed Krishnamurti’s work on education in depth; see for example Thapan (2001, 2006b).

⁷ At the Rishi Valley School, located in rural Andhra Pradesh, (run by the Krishnamurti Foundation, India), there is an effort to develop this sensitivity and awaken intelligence in a variety of ways including a non-authoritarian relationship among teachers and students based on trust and understanding, discussion during ‘culture’ classes, the assembly, and through participation in work and activities relating to the school’s environment regeneration, rural education and health programmes. As a point of contrast, it is of interest to note that the Vancouver School Board (that governs public schools in Vancouver, Canada) has a programme in place for elementary school children. Entitled ‘Roots of Empathy’, this programme is designed to develop ‘emotional literacy’ in young children with the help of a baby and parent who visit the classroom every three weeks in an academic year. It is claimed that the programme has ‘shown dramatic effect in reducing levels of aggression and violence among school children while raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy’ (Roots of Empathy). While I cannot go into the details of this programme here, my observation of an elementary school classroom using this programme in Vancouver, in December 2007, records, on that particular day, the depth with which young children learn to share experiences of sorrow and suffering in their everyday lives bringing about an awareness amongst themselves of such issues (Thapan n. d.).

elimination of difference and the ability to acknowledge some sort of community between oneself and the other. This understanding of citizenship education needs to prevail in schools to enable the possibilities of a culture based on equality and justice in the complex times we live in.

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