Standardization of Education in India and the Alternative School Network

<u>Shared Schooling Practices of the Education Network</u>

Introduction – the Network, the beginnings

I want to thank the School of Social Sciences for the invitation and all of you for being present here. We are happy to be amongst people invovled with education in this premiere institution particularly because we know that you go `beyond education'. Most of us in the Network have not written papers on our understanding of education but tried to `live' it as best as we thought.

We have moved education from the narrow confines of classrooms to Values and a way of life that had to be lived. Our concerns are varied. What does education mean to the poor, the marginalised, to the dalits, to the adivasis, to those who believe that nature's gifts are to be shared with all creatures – all these and more are the kind of concerns that we grapple with. For us these are not academic issues but matters we deal with on a day to day basis. They affect us deeply because this has to do with our lives and many of us have spent a life-time grappling with these.

I have been given the task of introducing our Network to you. When we, our Network, met in Gudalur last week, on the 2nd of February, it was commemorating the 20th year of our coming together. It also happened to be the place where the Network began 20 years ago. I did not deliberately use the word association instead the phrase `coming together'. The word association has a certain legal and binding connotation which is not exactly the way we have been functioning. The Network is not a registered body, nor does it have a well-defined constitution which binds its associates. It has grown slowly over the years, although building up a large membership was clearly not a goal. In fact, one never knew if this group would go on from year to year. Each year one waited with bated breath to see if members attended or not. Some years there have been large gatherings and some small, but since 1993 we have met regularly every year. If some one had told us back in 1993 that we would be called one day to talk before an audience such as this, we would have had a good laugh. However, it must be acknowledged that the seriousness, commitment, perseverance and dedication of the group to education in the face of innumerable problems both personal and institutional has what has got us this far.

Prof Susan Visvanathan discovered us in the process of her travels and felt that some of us should voice our concerns about education before such a forum and I think that is how this meeting has come to be. There are a couple of things about the title that I need to clarify. One is that it refers to the Network of `schools'. Not all of us run schools. At the very first meeting we had decided that `the Network' was not to be confined to teachers alone. It was felt that there were many who were actively interested in furthering

meaningful education and they should also be a part of 'the Network.' So we prefer to refer to ourselves as educational initiatives.

The second aspect of the title is the term `alternative'. If you look at our reports, only the first one refers to our educational initiatives as alternative. From then on we have referred to ourselves simply as Education Network. We have discussed this at length and felt that we are not attempting to be different for the sake of being different or alternative for the sake of being alternative, rather whatever we are attempting to do is education in the real sense of the term. However, as the term is used here, I will carry on referring to it as it appears to make things clear.

Today we are gathered to discuss the issue of `standardization of education' that appears to result from the Right to Education Act. Way back in our first meeting we envisaged such a situation would come to pass and stated... `*at present the trend is towards almost total dependance on and control by the state, particularly towards the primary and the secondary stages of education. There is an urgent need to build up public opinion in favour of leaving space for alternate education in the present scheme of things*.' That situation has come to be.

Just now I do not want to go into the Right to Education Act. We will have time for that. I just want to say that the Network is a microcosm of the diversity that exists in the country and the people who have come here, some of whom from the Network and others who address other crucial concerns of marginalized communities are representative of these concerns. I hope you will be able to appreciate the issues that compel us to keep doing what we are doing and believe in.

The Network – the Search for meaning as the sustainability factor

I know that it appears unnecessary to keep harping on this group lasting 20 years. I am sure that there are many others that have lasted more. The difference with this one I believe is that this has no membership and one never knows whether someone is in or out. Yet most people have come together over the years without having to be compelled to do so. I believe that what has kept this group going was the Search that they were seeking. I do not want to spell these out because each of them can speak for themselves. Nevertheless, as most young people found something that they were dissatisfied with in the given scheme of things, and, opted out to create a more egalitarian, a more humane society – each little school attempting to create a microcosm of the future society that each envisaged. Each year we sought to clarify, understand one more thing and make ours and our children's lives better. This search has been an important part of our lives and even today we seek out each other to fulfill it.

Today I want to try to trace its history and functioning and in my own simple way attempt to see whether there is a parallel between the way the Network designed its functioning to the way we each of us have conceptualized our educational processes.

To begin with, the first meeting of the Network took place in Gudalur, in the

Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, where Rama and I work. We had just withdrawn our children from the local school and decided to home school them. Then colleagues started to send in their children and so a small school began at home. Both of us, and particularly Rama, had been a teacher for ten years in a small school for children of fisher folk and leprosy patients in a slum in Pondicherry. We had been trained by two highly imaginative friends Shankar and Sharada and had been very successful there. We therefore felt that we were more qualified to teach our children than the local schools.

However, living in a place that was back of beyond especially in those days, we felt isolated and lost with little or no possibility of discussion with people of similar ideas. It was then that Rama and I decided to meet friends we had known of,   working under similar conditions. A year's pilgrimage led us to various friends some of whom are here today. And so the first meeting took place in 1993. When we began the meeting there was no intention to start a Network. The idea as articulated was basically to meet, share and exchange ideas. As we went around meeting people we realised that each of the schools had something special to offer in different fields depending upon the background of the founder of the school. Each of the schools were founded based on the inspiration of certain philosophies, developed certain pedagogies based on these philosophies. It was fascinating exposure. We felt that if these could be pooled and shared it would benefit all.

The second aspect that we noticed was that it was not just we who had problems, but all the others too had problems, some worse than ours – problems with the children, problems with the community, problems with the government, problems with funds and so on. Therefore we felt that this was also something that we could share and support each other in small ways if it was possible.

At the end of the first meeting we realised that we shared a common philosophy, although we have never attempted to articulate it. It had brought us together and compelled us to stay together. We realised that we needed to meet for our own reasons and so decided to meet again the following year. The Network is not an institution and has no assets except those in our hearts and minds. Our strength, I believe, has been that our commitment has not been to brick and mortar or to an abstract idea, but to each other and to the children we work with and through them to the communities they live in. I must state that just the fact that ten persons working in educational initiatives felt that is was worth joining the meeting this year is sufficient acknowledgment that this is a movement of sorts and that there are both young and old who think that it important enough to come together to challenge existing unjust structures by creating a more meaningful and harmonious world.

The Network's members

All the members of the Network are persons who have felt that there was something that schools were missing and so in their own way as teachers, educationists, formally or non-formally, have attempted to create spaces for children to build a better life for all. Most have been working with marginalised communities both rural and urban who have been denied

opportunities and a possibility of meaningful education. There are others who have also been working with the middle class too but who also want a more meaningful life. The Network has provided space for these sections too.

It appears rather arrogant to say that we are part of a tradition of people in this country who decided to step out and create their own educational processes that they thought were meaningful as against the mainstream - Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, J. Krishnamurti, Ambedkar, Sri Aurobindo, to name just a few. Nevertheless, these among others have been sources of inspiration and also legitimization that when one disagrees with a system one has the moral right to step aside and do what one feels deeply is right. I wonder if this is possible any more.

Values - Diversity as a unifying factor

Given the backgrounds of different persons who initiated these educational projects and schools and the sources of their inspiration there has been diversity of approaches. We also differed in our the materials we used , the methods we followed. The way our schools were "un-structured" were also different. Some ran small schools and others ran non-formal education programmes amongst large numbers of illiterate people. For us, this diversity has not been a deterrent. Quite the contrary. To quote from the first report of the Network:

"There is naturally a rich diversity amongst us. This diversity can work to our advantage if we do not let it divide us. It is one of our urgent duties to add to our knowledge and understanding of our heritage and tradition. Besides we should inform and enrich ourselves by learning from each other.

The best maxim is to let each follow his swadharma while respecting the swadharma of others and each of us go on perfecting one's own understanding and practice of dharma. Let us cooperate with and assist each other to better ourselves. We have the great example of the numerous gharanas of Indian classical music which have in actual fact brought varied musicians together and created harmonious melodies."

This is not to say that there have not been individuals who have not found the group to their liking or have not gelled and therefore left. All those who have continued to remain have shared a common goal, a common aspiration. What this is we have not tried to spell out in so many words. Probably it is our outlook on children. We did not look upon education as a means of fitting them into the present social order. We started with respect for the child's own personality and wished to make it blossom forth in freedom and creativity. Perhaps it was also towards a more egalitarian society, a concern for others particularly for the marginalised, a deep felt need for a more wholesome and harmonious life. Our approaches have been varied. We have not agreed on every thing we have discussed but we have given it thought.

I realize that all these terms mean different things to different people and would need to be deconstructed. I hope all of us will be able to clarify a few of them in the course of the day. As mentioned we have never articulated all that we thought, clearly, not because we were unable to but we tried to live it as

best as we could. All of us have over the years learned from each other and changed. The openness has been a source of richness.

Each of the educational initiatives have been open to change and not tried to cling to one ideological source. The starting points of each of them has been different – some have been inspired by philosophers and others by issues such as discrimination felt by marginalised communities like the Dalits and adivasis, besides issues such as degrading environments and cultural forms. Each of these institutions have had to develop pedagogies that addressed these issues. Thus no two schools had a pedagogical approach which would have been the same. The Network provided the platform to discuss these approaches and effect changes. The idea was never to arrive at an overarching methodological approach in all the schools, a standardization, rather to become even more sensitive to the needs of that community or issue that was being primarily addressed and make necessary changes. This openness found in the schools was also reflected in the Network.

Another important area has been the diversity of emphasis in each of the schools. While it is necessary that children learn all subjects, the approach to learn them have differed depending upon the emphasis that the school has given to itself. Each of these schools or initiatives have founders who have a certain background in terms of skills or interests. These skills or interests have been the emphasis around which the school has grown. So a variety of such interests present themselves in these initiatives. There is language, art, science, agriculture, history, culture, environment, theatre, health, philosophy and so on.

When one looks at this variety one cannot help wondering how standardization can be a solution to our educational ills. Today the state boasts of Activity based Learning (ABL) spread out in over 75,000 schools in the country. Where did the idea of using activities begin? They began in our schools. We have been working relentlessly to see how we can make various aspects of learning easier and more akin to the nature of the child. We know from the experience of our own children that no two children are the same even if they are twins. In such a situation how does one keep a class room alive, interesting and and as learning centre? In a country such as ours with various languages, dialects, cultures, traditions, vocations, social and economic situations, each of these have to be addressed if they are to be relevant to children and the community that sends them to school. These are the questions that we have had to grapple with over these years and have come up with extremely innovative ways of dealing with them.

Highly innovative methods of teaching language have been developed, with even text books written. Science experiments for children even at the primary levels have been developed and published. Craft as a pedagogical method has been tried beginning with Gandhian schools even today. Agriculture, not simply as part of grow-more-food campaign, but as a value, a principle of life and sustenance has been central to some of our schools, the preservation of cultures and languages particularly among adivasi communities has been a central issue for some of us, the liberation from certain cultures has been a theme of certain schools. These have been sufficiently recognized and some of our members have sat in on the Focus Groups when the NCERT was drawing

up its National Curriculum Framework 2005.

Unlike traditional privately-run and publicly-run schools which are remarkably similar in many aspects to one another, most alternatives do not subscribe to a "one model fits all" approach. Each educational alternative attempts to create and maintain its own methods and approaches to learning and teaching. Practitioners aspire to realize that there are many ways of conceiving and understanding the needs of the whole child in balance with the needs of the community and society at large. Thus, each alternative approach is founded upon, sometimes drastically, different beliefs about what it means to <u>live, learn, and grow in today's society.</u>

Another quality that distinguishes educational alternatives is the <u>curricula</u> taught within their respective settings. Across these alternatives, we find that traditional subjects such as <u>reading</u>, <u>writing</u>, and <u>mathematics</u> are not always taught separately but integrated into the overall learning experience. Other subjects like <u>environmental education</u>, the arts and spirituality, which are often not found in more traditional school curricula, emerge from the interests of learners and teachers in a more open-ended learning community. Often alternative approaches to education will vary considerably from one cultural or geographic setting to another.

Alternative Educational Initiatives – some characteristics

I have put down some of the main characteristics that appear to me that set alternative initiatives in education apart. One can only wonder whether any of these can be saved through standardization.

- All alternative schools are guided by a clear philosophy of education and life which promotes cooperation, dialogue, simplicity, concern for the environment and non-violence

- Alternative schools have a small number of students or if they are large then they have a very high teacher-student ratio
- Children are allowed to learn the basic skills of reading and writing at their own pace
- Such schools may or may not subscribe to the national examination system. Learning is pursued for the sake of knowledge and building character
- These schools develop or change existing curriculum to suit the local requirements, culture and ethos or the needs of the children in order to foster learning. Imagination and innovation become central in the design of the curriculum.
- They attempt to make the learning process experiential and use as many facilities that are available outside of the schools
- Methodologies of teaching vary according to children's needs, thus allowing for tremendous flexibility of approaches
- A system of assessment that enhances what the child knows and helps the teacher review her effectiveness
- Learning is not considered as a hierarchical process with passing and

failing rather it is to do with understanding/assimilating

- There is an inherent spirit of cooperation with an internal discipline. The uniqueness of each child is nurtured
- Alternatives in education nurture latent capabilities and inculcate love for learning.
- There is little or no internal hierarchy in alternative schools. The ambiance is essentially fluid and informal
- Responsibility is shared among various sections of the school community in the learning process
- The management of the school is cooperative, so also the learning process
- Selection for admission is not based on scholastic achievement nor on ability to pay the full fee
- The institution fosters a sense of community
- Involvement of parents or the community around, in the functioning of the initiative is an essential part of the educative process

One can go into each of these aspects in great detail but I wish to point to a few of the important aspects of these schools which have also been important for the Network.

The first of them is that of dialogue. One hears this word bandied about a lot in every forum. If I remember right it was at the third meeting itself that a brief paper on Dialogue by David Bohm was brought to the meeting and we went through it in great detail. It is also published in one of our Reports. Ever since then we have returned to that paper at least five times during these 20 years and I have applied it much in our school I am sure others have applied it in their institutions as well. This is such an important value when one deals with children as we often never listen to them. We know that when children are not articulate and most children are not, they communicate in other ways and only a very sensitive person listens. We value the time we have spent on discussing Dialogue as it has become integral to our lives now.

The second value is that of sense of community. A sense of community emerges only in a non-hierarchical set up where dialogue is possible. There has to be a certain equality of relationship between teachers and students, between management and staff, between elders and younger ones in order to build a community. These have been fostered in these small schools and have found a place in the Network too. Whether such a relationship can be built in a government school or private school is open to question. Most of these places still maintain a very colonial attitude.

These schools also make learning as an experiential process rather than from text books or by rote. All of us know the value of such learning. Learning using our multiple intelligences enhances understanding. We know that these cannot be done in a mass production school. We also know that activity for the sake of activity reduces it to a mere play and little learning. This is the fear that we have when activity based learning is bandied across the country as one-shoe-fits-all solution. Activities cannot be an end in themselves, they are part of a whole system of functioning and relationships.

For us education also needs to play a liberative role. Society has tied the child in knots of one kind or another, irrespective of which section of society she belongs to. The theme of the next meeting of the Network is Justice and Identity which will address precisely what role education can play in the process of liberation.

Conclusion

Today we discuss standardisation in the light of the Right to Education Act. We are faced with huge problems – large numbers of drop-outs particularly among adivasis and dalits, growing illiteracy, the lack of motivated teachers in both government and private. We are faced with another huge problem that of commercialisation of education. OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment put India at 72 out of the 73 countries studied. So where does the problem lie? I firmly believe that the symptoms point to a problem that lies at the root of our approach to education, but the cure that is being prescribed has nothing to do with it the symptoms or the root causes.

These and other issues are precisely the ones that we have been able to overcome. I do not want to dwell on the pedagogical processes that have been employed just now. As I look at the Act I see the ideas plucked out of our minds, methods taken out of our classrooms, words taken out of our contexts, but I do not see the intention or the motivation to make it work. While at the same time, these very initiatives and pedagogies that gave rise to the Act may well cease to function.