

The crisis in education

Krishna Kumar highlights the disparities that exist in the system: gender, caste, class, and the urban-rural gap, and also casts a light on how schools treat their youngest citizens

Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta

As we celebrate another Children's Day in a pandemic year, it is worth reflecting on how we regard children and how we have treated them. The pandemic has been especially difficult on our youngest citizens. Existing disparities have deepened. A section of children has been pushed out of the path of formal education, into forced labour or child marriage.

Children from poor families have missed school meals. Children with disabilities have faced greater challenges. As far as the return to schools, conversations are so preoccupied with the metaphor of "catching up" that they forget that education was never supposed to be a race. Even where children have returned to schools, the well-meaning idiom of "learning loss" has treated them as passive vessels to receive information from textbooks and teachers, rather than as individuals who have agency and are co-creators of their own understanding of the world.

Source of conflict

While the pandemic has made visible the disparities in how children are treated, these inequalities are not new. They have existed for a long time.

"As a social institution, education is supposed to make economic and cultural conflicts bearable. At the same time, it also serves as a source

of conflict," writes Krishna Kumar in his deeply thoughtful collection of essays about school education, *Smaller Citizens*. As educational theorist and former Director of the National Council of Education Research and Training, Kumar has seen this paradox play out in the landscape of teaching and learning over many decades.

Over the years since the Right To Education Act of 2009, the legislation has been interpreted narrowly as a way only to ensure universality through access.

However, its potential to reform elementary education and make it more equitable has met with resistance. More fundamentally, its vision of creating space for the child's agency, and enabling teachers to recognise and respect that agency, remains to be fulfilled.

Kumar cites incidents from across the country to cast a light on how the education system treats children. A child is beaten to death by his teachers. A headmistress refuses admission to two girl students because they are child brides. Four adolescent girls jump into a well in Panapakkam, Tamil Nadu. They had been scolded by a teacher for poor academic performance and told to call their parents.

These are not isolated instances, but represent deep failures within the system. Kumar takes a long look at the deep disparities that exist in education: gender, caste, class, the urban-rural gap. "On a visit to a village school, one cannot miss the tragic implications of the teacher's lowly status and poor-quality training."

On gender, he points out that girls' education is not just a simple matter of access; those who care about it must understand the nature and quality of girls' educational experience. "In the case of girls, school-related anxieties are compounded by older, entrenched anxieties associated with gendering."

Kumar invokes feminist anthropologist Leela Dube's use of the term 'inescapability' to depict a major dimension of a girl's preparation for the kind of life that is destined for her.

Using the metaphor of metal casting, he describes girlhood in terms of the lost wax method: "the malleability of wax that has been intricately crafted by expert hands to leave the exact marks of a chosen design on the clay that will serve, after it is fired, as a mould for metal casting. The term 'girlhood' refers to the culturally crafted mould used for imprinting the mind of the female child from the earliest stage of life."

Teachers like messengers

On the treatment of the teacher by the education system, Kumar is caustic. "For well over a century, India has treated its teachers like messengers who need not know or understand the message themselves." Kumar evokes the philosophical approach of Devi Prasad, the Gandhian art educator and pacifist, whose art teaching in schools led to his conceptualising the nature and logic of children's art as an activity whose ultimate aim is freedom.

Prasad reflects on his own experience as a teacher to understand how children's art can be a way to creative imagination and free expres-

sion. In Devi Prasad's vision of children's schooling, art education "offers a sense of dignity and a historic role to the teacher of the young."

Peace at school

According to Kumar, peace is something that "has to be experienced by children in their everyday life at school, at the hands of a teacher who is aware of the scale and types of injustice that any child can sense in the air, irrespective of the social location. Schools and colleges socialise the young to ignore the world or fear it, rather than approach it with the passion to understand it and engage with it. That is the job that the system of education is not performing at present."

Education has always had two seemingly contradictory responsibilities: one, to help children learn to think independently and critically; the other, to teach children to adjust to rules and function as members of a society.

How well an education system can navigate this terrain has profound implications for how society functions. Unfortunately, short-term thinking tends to focus on measurable outcomes – compliance on tasks and test performance – without caring about long-term effects on children, their imagination and independent thinking. "In its true sense, education requires distant time horizons. Only instrumentalist goals can be realised quickly," remarks Kumar. This profoundly insightful collection of essays is a must for those who care about children.

.....
The reviewer is in the IAS. The views are personal.



Smaller Citizens: Writings on the Making of Indian Citizens
Krishna Kumar
Orient Blackswan
₹395



Minimum

Children at a rural school sit outdoors and practise their slate.