



## What Constitutes Alternative Schooling?

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UN/Common Schooling: EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY INDIA by Edited by  
Janaki Nair *Orient BlackSwan, 2022, 296 pp., INR 1145.00*

NOVEMBER 2023, VOLUME 47, NO 11

Mainstream education in a society as stratified and diverse as ours finds it often difficult to reach children of geographically remote and socially marginalized communities. Alternative structures and processes of schooling outside the mainstream system assume significance in their endeavour to find effective and sustainable ways of providing access to these children and also an opportunity for them to participate in a process of education which promises acceptable equality. The alternative schooling strategies under DPEP did focus on some progressive ideas of education in terms of flexibility of structure, duration, curriculum and pedagogy, but brought in a cadre of para teachers which goes against the very tenets of a good education system. As Shyam Menon writes in the Foreword of the CIE (2004) study, 'admittedly alternative schooling evoked a major debate on quality, the state's and the country's responsibilities in education and particularly the whole issue of para teachers'.

The book *Un/Common Schooling* presents case studies of alternative schooling which transform the lives of children, particularly those from the most underprivileged conditions who either have never been to school or have dropped out of the formal school system. The cases present unique and alternative ways, differing from the existing rigid structure, which is insensitive to the learner, and the processes and practices of the formal system. The cover of the book and the photographs catch the eye of the reader. They give a glimpse of the teachers' and students' engagement in the process of learning.

The book is presented in three parts. Part One focuses upon 'Reflections on Alternative Education' by three educational practitioners, on the Tilak Nagar Children's Centre, Karnataka, by KT Margaret, the Sita School, Karnataka by Jane H Sahi and Eklavya's work, Madhya Pradesh by Rashmi Paliwal. Part Two comprises 'Experiments' undertaken particularly in a rural setup, and includes narrative accounts of practices in Tagore's Sriniketan by Pradip Kumar Datta, Vikasana by MC Malathi and Kanavu by Shirly Joseph. Part Three includes essays based on life histories that were collected as part of an Oral History Project sponsored under the Transnational Research Group (TRG) of the German Historical Institute of London, and also an alternative education workshop. It consists of narratives of KN Sunandan, Shivangi Jaiswal and Megha Sharma. The concluding piece is by Nair on *Un/Common Schooling* based primarily upon Dalit autobiographies. Each of the ten essays demonstrates a vision of alternative education in our country. It offers a reflective account of how different institutions were built and delved into providing innovative approaches to learning and institution building.

The introduction by Nair poses several pertinent issues or questions which motivate the reader

and keep her/him engaged. These are broadly described in subsections such as, 'What were alternative schools an alternative to?', 'What made alternative schools possible?', 'Alternatives to education and an ethics of care?', 'What form can alternative schools take today?', taking stock of alternatives in education. In the very beginning, Nair questions the alternative as an alternative to what? As highlighted by Koerrenz et al (2018), the alternative element of alternative schooling refers to a difference that can change schooling in general and the impact of schooling on society in particular. Alternative schooling is not just about making a difference in a formal way, but about doing something better to improve schooling.

On closer examination, it is seen that the focus in the book is on both the dimensions of the alternative, one that offers a choice to the conventional education provided by state-run schools to the other that builds on a system of education which contributes to the vision of equity, justice, democracy and inclusion as ideals enshrined in our Constitution.

A lucid description followed by discussion on several common themes is seen to run across the different essays, and may be elucidated as follows: teaching-learning processes and practices, the place of the community, teacher training, innovative practices, the notion of alternative, the issue of replicability, and ideas that complement and facilitate learning such as ethics, care and support. Aspects of networking and censorship also find a place in the text.

Teaching-learning includes flexibility in pedagogy and curriculum, notions of learning and unlearning the role of the teacher, student and the family. The view of a teacher as one who cares for children/learners, understands them within their social, cultural and political context, views learning as a search for meaning out of personal experiences of her learners, creates conducive conditions for each learner in respect of the kind, pace and styles of learning, and views knowledge generation as a continuously evolving process of reflective learning. The view of the learner which the essays echo is that of an individual with a unique potential and living in a socio-cultural context, who is more than a mere psychological entity. These ideas related to teaching-learning, the learner, the teacher, the curriculum and pedagogy come very close to the paradigm shift which is discussed in the National Curriculum Framework, 2005.

Many characteristics of alternative schools as articulated by Vittachi (2007) are shared in the essays. An emphasis on an individualized approach to education and learning and according equal respect to all children is evident. Most prominently, an integration of children with mixed abilities and or different socio-economic groups and even mixed ages in the classroom are highlighted. The learning process is experiential and interest-based rather than focused only upon textbooks/teacher-dominated lessons. The curriculum interlinks different disciplines enabling children to see interconnections across various aspects of learning.

Other themes prevalent in the essays include efforts at establishing theory-practice linkages in the classroom (as emphasized in Sriniketan), and learning and unlearning of all which had been learnt earlier in teacher training (as observed in Neel Bagh). Gaining the support of parents was crucial. However, the essays bring out a point of concern: the realization of the parents that they were sending their children to the alternative centres more because the quality of education provided there was better came rather late! What had appealed to them initially was the fact that these centres were free of cost and ensured safety of their girl child.

Themes also evident in the narratives are Ethics and the Politics of Care. The figure of a Caring Teacher emerges as a common factor in some narratives. Nonetheless, what strikingly came out in the discussion was the possibility of this figure becoming a benevolent and patronizing figure of authority. It was considered to be real. In fact, this revelation in the book tends to corroborate recent researches, such as Hassan (2008) and others in the field of Teacher Education, which present a critique on the preparation of a caring teacher for our future schools. Another dimension discussed in the book is the place of Language. The preference of English by many parents and the community over their own mother tongue is highlighted. English is viewed not just as a language but a judicial/ legal apparatus, a political system, a semiotics of modernity, and more beyond.

As regards the issue of Replicability, it has been clearly articulated that this was not the interest

of the practitioners, so it has not been elaborated upon. In any case, as Nair remarks, these experiments pursued by inspired individuals, who were able to channel their skills and interests as well as their cultural capital into schools run without government support. They were outsiders to the communities they served and were able to sustain their efforts largely through external financial aid and support. Hence, she asserts, there is impossibility of replicability on any large scale.

Some references to the Right to Education Act, 2009 have been made in the text pointing out as to how an initiative that started with an objective of bringing out progressive systemic changes became a roadblock for some unconventional efforts at individual level. This is being voiced in the light of the ruling that after the implementation of the Act, any school which is not registered by the state would be declared illegal. This ruling came as a setback to individuals who were working towards running alternative schools.

A characteristic feature is that of networking among alternative education network centres. These serve as a great support system for the practitioners involved in times of stress, challenges, and as Joseph says, 'to buoy one up' during the phase of implementation. The views presented in the various essays complement each other and build upon each other's ideas. However, what stands out is Malathi's essay where she recommends that schools need to work with freedom from government control, parental influence and universalization. One may question the feasibility, the academic soundness and the desirability of creating such isolated islands of learning!

What is noteworthy is that each essay is presented as a critical reflective account of the experiment/life history or case thereby providing ample scope of understanding the vision, the merits, the challenges, the lessons to be learned and a look into the implications that this has for the future. It is remarkable that these have also been presented in some narratives as forms of self-censorship, which act as a window to view how learners made sense (later in life) of their experiences. Reading gaps in the narratives were also observed, which again became a source of deeper understanding of the lives of the learners. Many questions have been posed by the writers in each chapter, that question the success of their experiments and cases. However, very pertinently, Nair points out that these were the scarcely glimpsed promises of an alternative, for which terms like 'success' or 'failure' would be entirely inappropriate. It would be in place to appreciate the merit of this submission by the editor.

The book will serve as an invaluable resource for researchers and practitioners in the field of Education and Teacher Education, and offers food for thought for policy initiatives. The existence of a Journal titled, Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning gives an indication of how, perhaps, the dissatisfaction with the present system of education is compelling educationalists, researchers and practitioners to explore alternative ways of learning and schooling. Moving further, it is significant to note that nowhere in the book is 'Unschooling' presented as an alternative.

The book assumes significance more so in the light of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 which gives greater importance to alternative forms of schooling in addressing the problems of dropout rates and ensuring universal access to education at all levels. It has strongly recommended to put in place alternative and innovative education centres in cooperation with civil society to bring back children into mainstream education.

As the book is a collection of writings by individuals who founded alternative schools in India located mostly in remote villages with little or no access to basic civic amenities, it may serve as an essential reading for all practitioners who wish to make an impact on teaching and learning in their school. For researchers in the field, the book offers valuable insights on Methodology and Design of Research. In fact, it would not be out of place to affirm that even teachers working in mainstream education can draw upon several dimensions of classroom processes as demonstrated in the essays, into their own classes. The review may aptly be concluded with these lines of Nair: 'The critical assessment of India's educational history in Krishna Kumar's Political Agenda of Education should leave us in no doubt that the necessity

of thinking alternatives is no less urgent today than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. A record of these experiments, their achievements and failures alike, as attempted in this book, is just the inaugural step.' To this, as an educationist, one cannot agree more!

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