

A GLARING GAP IN THE COUNTRY'S REVISED EDUCATION POLICY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The shaping of character at an early age is essential but the policy fails to give it due consideration

The recently announced National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 that aims to make "India a global knowledge superpower" has drawn praise from many quarters. But it has a glaring omission: It does not focus enough on character building. Much of its attention is on experiential learning, multi-disciplinary courses, critical thinking, and so on. As Martin Luther King, Jr., had said, "Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education."

School is the first social structure a child encounters. So it is an ideal place to learn the important beliefs or values shared by members of a society on what is right or wrong and desirable or undesirable. Knowing these dos and don'ts are essential to building character. Classroom activities can encourage students to adopt ethical principles and behaviours that are followed later in life.

Teachers are well suited to play a crucial role in the character-moulding process of students. They spend a lot of time with them in their formative years. They also hold positions of authority in society. Most students will forget their chemical formulae, mathematical theorems and dates of important wars they learnt in school. But even decades later, they will remember the names and faces of their school teachers. The longevity of this memory is a testament to the impact that school teachers have on one's life.

Every society wants to change several behaviours or inculcate new ones among its citizens. Schools can be one of the crucibles where this behaviour-shaping process is initiated. But just the introduction of a few courses on ethics, culture or values, as suggested in the NEP 2020, will not achieve character-building. The whole process will have to be institutionalized.

Military academies are an excellent example of institutions that perfectly combine the character-building and learning aspects of education. In *Absolutely American: Four years at West Point*, David Lipsky describes how this US military school is able to transform teenagers into leaders who are willing to give up their lives for the country. Every action at West Point is an act of learning. For example, strict adherence to protocols at the breakfast or dinner table is very important for procedural discipline ("I forgot to put tea on the table and I killed a platoon"). Strict rules and punishments are key to moulding the behaviour of cadets.

The Salesians of Don Bosco who run several educational and skill-building institutions around the world have a very different approach to moulding behaviours. They do not use punishments at all in their educational methodology. Called a preventive system, it stands in contrast to repressive systems that use severe punishments to keep students from doing anything wrong. In a preventive system, instead of punishments given, a friendly atmosphere is created where the supervisor lovingly corrects students when they make mistakes, and thus manages to reduce wrongdoing.

An excellent example of schools being used as tools to mitigate social problems was the US Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The judgement led to the introduction of integrated schools as a state intervention to help bridge a racial divide in

American society. Attitudes and beliefs are harder to change as one grows older. Early exposure to people of various identities offers the best chance of removing biases and stereotypes. Long-term studies of high school and university students from the US, Europe and South Africa confirm that students in integrated schools demonstrate more tolerance and inclusive behaviours.

While it is beyond dispute that what is taught in classrooms has a significant effect on shaping students' thoughts and behaviours, the elephant in the room in any discussion on the use of educational institutions to mould the character of students is the syllabus.

Consider the case of Rwanda. In the mid-1990s, it faced one of the worst genocides in recent history after clashes broke out between ethnic groups. Its government understood that children who did not experience the horrors made up the "social soil" in which ideas of a new national identity could be planted. So, it used a new national curriculum to help create a new national identity. The basic education syllabi under the curriculum included elements of myths, values and symbols that could help mould the new identity of Rwandans.

A similar experiment of a national curriculum might not be a good idea in a vast and diverse country like India. With thousands of years of history, it might not be easy—nay, even impossible—to string together all events of history in a single thread. There will be the risk of placing past events out of context or viewing them in the present context. This could create huge conflicts in society. The Indian educational system already has some excellent school- and college-based initiatives, like the National Cadet Corps and the National Service Scheme, that have contributed to character-building. A lot more could have been done in the NEP to strengthen such initiatives.

The NEP 2020 aims to bring pre-school education for children of ages 3 to 5 under the ambit of formal schooling. This age bracket has been recognized globally as crucial for the development of a child's mental faculties. Such students spend a few hours every day for several years in the controlled environment of an education system. This is an ideal opportunity to mould their character and behaviours. But the policy, it seems, has failed to take advantage of it.

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