

Diversity in Education in an Era of Globalization

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These are turbulent times. The forces of globalization have engulfed most countries in the present world. Globalization is reinforcing and perpetuating the existing unequal relationships of power and income between the First World and the rest of the world, and creating massive upheavals in communities. Globalization is also sparking a revolution in information and communication technology (ICT) which is ushering in an Information Age that promises to bring about new levels of global interconnectedness. Yet this is also creating new challenges. A widening of the gap between the 'information-rich' and the 'information-deprived' is taking place at the international, national and local levels. Also, the rapid changes that are now occurring in all countries are requiring that knowledge and skills be updated continuously.

In India, the impact of globalization is now beginning to be felt. With the economic restructuring, fast developing changes are bringing about important transformations at various levels. Signs of marginalization of vast sections of the Indian population in terms of growing disparities in income, health care facilities, and other measures of well being, are becoming increasingly visible. Overcoming this process of marginalization requires concerted efforts on many fronts: political, social, economic and educational. The formal system of education, however, is still ill-equipped to respond to the challenges of globalization.

Masses of adult men and women are still inadequately prepared to participate in the emerging global society as parents, workers and citizens. Concerted attention to their learning needs would have to be paid in order to stem the divisive and destructive forces of globalization and of economic restructuring. Likewise, rather than meekly succumbing to the onslaught of the ICTs, there would be need to create learning spaces whereby communities can understand and critically reflect on the changes taking place around them and explore and develop new approaches for bringing about positive changes in their lives and in the lives of those to come.

The 1990s could be said to have been a decade that helped develop universal awareness and collective mobilization vis-à-vis education. The goals set at Jomtien to provide Education for All (EFA) have sought to guide educational policy and practice around the world. Recognizing the importance of moving beyond a narrow concept of basic education, the World Education for All document stated, "what is needed is an 'expanded vision' that surpasses present resource levels, institutional structures, curricula, and conventional delivery systems while building on the best in current practices" (Article 2). From the beginning, EFA has underscored the need for each country to adapt the principles and goals to country-specific objectives and mandates and to establish its own plans of action and its own programmes. In other words, EFA has recognized the need for flexibility and adaptability to suit local contexts and specific circumstances. This has been reiterated in subsequent EFA documents.

Experience, however, has shown that while flexibility was considered to be desirable, in reality, uniformity has still remained the practice. The Indian experience has shown that far from reaching the EFA goals, the World Bank-funded District Primary Education Project (DPEP) has become a 'blue-print' for providing basic education to children, inasmuch as the Post Literacy and Continuing Education phases of the government-funded Total Literacy Campaigns (TLCs) became a uniform model for providing education to adults. Clearly, there is a disconnect between EFA statements and what has been happening on the ground.

If there is a growing realization of the desirability of flexibility and diversity and of the need to move away from a 'one size fits all' mentality in education, what vision of development is this thinking related to? According to Rogers (1999), there have been three main development discourses that have influenced the field of adult education. The first discourse is based on **deficit**, the second on **disadvantage** and the third on **diversity**. The deficit discourse suggests that societies, communities and individuals are lacking in material resources, skills, training, and/or attitudinal resources and that development can take place if the identified deficits can be met. Many literacy programmes of the 1950s and 1960s were built on such a deficit discourse. The discourse on disadvantage seeks answers to the question "Why are some people kept poor?" Rather than blaming the poor, it seeks to identify oppressive structures and the attitudes of the privileged as the cause of under-development, and advocates social action and empowerment of the participant groups for bringing about change. Freirean-based literacy programmes belong to this category.

The discourse on diversity not only sees participant groups as capable of development on their own but also sees them as being already engaged in daily processes of self and community development. Rather than outside 'experts' planning and designing programmes for meeting the needs of different groups, the diversity discourse allows for greater decision-making on the part of the participant groups. Educational programmes emerging from this discourse would thus look for increasingly diverse solutions rather than propagating universal solutions for all.

According to Torres (2000), if the ultimate aim of education is learning and learning has to meet the needs and interests of learners, diversity must become the norm, not the exception. The answer is not designing remedial and compensatory programmes for the poor, the adolescent girls, indigenous groups, street and working children, migrant population. Rather than accepting that there is one single pattern for everybody, what is required is designing diversified educational models that meet the specific needs of each group. This would then mean that learning and achievement expectations would also have to be diverse. The challenge would be to ensure that in each case, quality education which is meaningful/relevant to each learner, but does not create new forms of discrimination, is provided to all. If spaces could be created for individuals and communities to define quality education, the diversified education model would then, in some measure, be addressing the tension that exists between issues of diversity, equality and equity. This would also require relevant context-specific research, connected with meaningful and broad consultation and participation.

Education thus far has been artificially divided into categories such as 'basic education,' and/or 'post literacy' and 'continuing education' for adults. If we recognize that individuals and communities are constantly learning and are constructing/sharing knowledge even when there are no formal educational programmes, we would understand the importance of building a learning society grounded in the diversity discourse.

The value of the discourse of 'diversity' becomes evident when we see that today there is a growing realization that development strategies have to become people-centric. People have to be looked at mainly as 'solutions' rather than as 'problems' that they have tended to be so far. Local citizens' movements and alternative institutions are emerging to meet basic economic needs, to preserve local traditions, to establish ecological chains, and to struggle for human rights and dignity. As a response to forces of globalization, more and more people are beginning to work out their own strategies for survival and development and, in the process, are connecting with people across the world.

Facing these challenges and taking advantage of emerging opportunities calls for a complete change of mind-set among policymakers, planners, administrators, academicians, researchers and people at large. Whether this will happen, remains to be seen.

REFERENCES:

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