

WORKERS EDUCATION TODAY

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Paper presented to the International Conference
Organised by the International Council for Adult Education
On "Towards An Authentic Development : Role of Adult
Education" Paris, October 25—31, 1982

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The aims, scope and contents of workers education have been the subject of discussion in numerous national and international fora for the past several decades. It is not necessary to start the debate again whether a field of work can be defined by exclusive reference to contents or group of its beneficiaries or the agencies providing it. What seems obvious is that workers education is concerned with the education of workers and that its contents, forms as well as techniques and methods to convey it, are determined by various factors, more particularly the economic, social, educational and political situation prevailing in the country concerned.

Since workers education must answer specific identifiable needs of the group of people called workers at a particular stage of their economic and social development, quite obviously, the scope and content must continue to change in response to them. The forms of programmes are indeed varied and have to be developed and modified and new innovations introduced to adjust to the pattern of working time schedules and availability of leisure time as well as other facilities, including transport and communication, available in the community. Similarly there is no sanctity about any particular method or technique, though there may be some broad general considerations in respect of methods and techniques

for adults. But on reflection it may appear that some of those considerations may, with equal force, also apply for the education of the younger people !

Integrated System

There is often some differentiation made between adult education, workers education and formal schooling or university education. However, the increasing appreciation of the role of productive work in educational systems and the emphasis on the access of the working people to the facilities provided by the formal institutions of education, is making the concept of recurrent education increasingly important. Its ramifications are still not fully explored and its significance not sufficiently appreciated. But it is obvious that it is going to increasingly make untenable the idea that workers education and formal education could be considered in separate watertight compartments. Indeed it appears that we are moving towards evolution of a more integrated system of education covering formal education and varied forms of non-formal education for workers and adults. The realisation is growing that there is no stage in one's life when one could consider his/her education complete and that it is a life long process. Further the term "workers" now covers a much wider clientele. It is not only applicable to industrial workers but also to rural workers covering small and marginal farmers, share-croppers, tenants, artisans and other kinds of self-employed people. This extended coverage will mean that "workers education" would cover nearly 80 to 90 per cent of the economically active population in any country. The above are compelling factors leading further towards the evolution of a more integrated national system of education.

Educationally Privileged

One fact of great importance which should always be taken into consideration in any discussion on workers education

is that so far facilities for education have benefited mainly those who are educationally privileged. The people who were deprived of education in their childhood have quite often not been able to benefit from educational programmes for the working people or the adults. In most cases the groups of socially and economically underprivileged and those of educationally underprivileged coincide. How can such a situation be changed? The experience in the educational field appears to be similar to that in the development field. While countries may claim considerable economic growth, the benefits of such growth have not always proportionately trickled down.

Historical Trends

Historically the need for workers education arose because at the time when organisational efforts began, the workers were in most countries of Europe a very neglected and underprivileged group and this in nearly every sense—economically, socially and educationally. Working class organisations like trade unions and cooperatives therefore undertook some activities within the constraints of their resources for the education of their membership. There was marked difference in educational levels as well as opportunities for education in countries of Europe and those of North America. More than half a century before compulsory primary education was introduced in Europe it had become an established fact in North America. In view of the above, while working class organisations in Europe felt the need for general education as well as trade union education for their membership, the concentration of American organisations was mainly on trade union education. Since these educational efforts were undertaken mainly by trade unions and cooperatives, all education provided by these agencies came to be considered workers education—hence this practice of defining a field of work by reference to the agency providing it. Further, as quite obviously there was considerable stress in their educational programmes on equipping the membership for active participation in the movement and on the

problems of the workers generally, workers education sometimes came to be identified by the contents of the educational programmes.

Dimensions

While the recapitulation of the historical past may be interesting, we must appreciate that in the fast changing world and widening concerns of the working people, the dimensions of workers education are also changing. But the basic fact remains that in any programme of workers education greater emphasis has to be on the problems of the workers. After long experience workers have come to the conclusion that the problems they face in relation to their work, particularly those of relations with the management, can only be adequately tackled when they are organised. An atomised individual worker feels weak and helpless in face of capital which indeed is an organisation in itself, as Marx reminded us. While the role and functions of a worker in an organisation have an important place in workers education, it must be increasingly appreciated that in all educational endeavour the individual has to be made conscious of the need of voluntary independent organisations, both for achieving common objectives—economic, social and political, as well as for further development of his personality.

Purpose of Education

Aim of education should not be mere accumulation of knowledge or the development of intellect alone, however useful they might be in themselves. Education must at the same time help development of appreciation, character and personality. It must also be understood that human beings can best develop in a social context. Cooperation with others demands constant adjustment and accommodation and thus becomes an important ingredient in any educational effort. Indeed educational theory must take note of it. Further, per-

sonality development is immeasurably helped by opportunities for self expression. Cooperation with and service to others, which is also a form of self expression, has the most beneficial effect on personality. Without the above, knowledge may remain inert. If the above premises are accepted they have their own implications for structures, methods and techniques as well as for contents in workers and adult education.

Multiple Approach

There has to be a multiple approach to workers education. Firstly conditions have to be created which will make possible the access of workers to the facilities provided by established educational institutions. Secondly, special institutions and agencies have to be created (not excluding the modifications of the existing ones) which cater specially to the targeted group of educationally, socially and economically under-privileged. And thirdly, the group of educationally underprivileged, which in most cases is also economically and socially underprivileged, has to be actively involved in the provision of educational facilities to ensure that the educational programmes and facilities correspond to the desires, needs and aspirations of this targeted group as well as that they are able to sufficiently benefit from them.

Literacy of the Whole Personality

There is now increasing recognition of the value and importance of productive work in educational programmes of formal educational institutions. Rousseau believed that by educating the children in the workshops, the hands labour to the profit of the mind. Pestalozzi was of the opinion that much time and labour can be saved by combining theoretical education with practical work. Herbart emphasised development of mechanical dexterity. Cominius felt that the "children should learn the important principles of mechanical arts so that they

understand what is going on around them and may enter the world of work easily."¹

In India Mahatma Gandhi was the first to insist that manual and productive work be an integral part of education and that education should centre around it. It may not be out of place to mention here that the Zakir Husain Committee which was appointed for giving shape to the educational ideas of Mahatma Gandhi extended the centres of education to the natural and physical environment of the child. Commenting upon the place of craft work in schools, the report submitted by the above mentioned committee says : "Modern educational thought is practically unanimous in commending the idea of educating children through some suitable form of productive work. This method is considered to be the most effective approach to the problem of providing an intergral all-sided education.

"Psychologically, it is desirable, because it relieves the child from the tyranny of a purely academic and theoretical instruction against which its active nature is always making a healthy protest. It balances the intellectual and practical elements of experience, and may be made an instrument of educating the body and the mind in co-ordination. The child requires not the superficial literacy which implies, often without warrant, a capacity to read the printed page, but the far more important capacity of using hand and intelligence for some constructive purpose. This, if we may be permitted to use the expression, is the literacy of the whole personality.

"Socially considered, the introduction of such practical productive work in education, to be participated in by all the children of the nation, will tend to break down the existing barriers of prejudice between manual and intellectual workers, harmful alike for both. It will also cultivate, in the only

1. The concept of Work Experience, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, 1970 p. 11.

possible way, a true sense of the dignity of labour and of human solidarity, an ethical and moral gain of incalculable significance.

“Economically considered, carried out intelligently and efficiently, the scheme will increase the productive capacity of our workers and will also enable them to utilize their leisure advantageously.

“From strictly the educational point of view, greater concreteness and reality can be given to the knowledge acquired by children by making some significant craft the basis of education. Knowledge will thus become related to life, and its various aspects will be correlated with one another.”¹

Recurrent Education

While the role of productive work in formal education is being increasingly emphasised, there is also, at the same time, a growing feeling that the working people should be provided opportunities to join and benefit from formal institutions of learning. Educational psychologists are now unanimous in concluding that the experience of life and work which a worker acquires enables him to understand and absorb much faster and with greater comprehension information and knowledge than ordinary school or college students. The above coupled with the general dissatisfaction “with the conditions prevailing in the field of education, due, in particular, to the frequent inability of the existing educational system to cope with changing quantitative and qualitative demands” is making the concept of recurrent education to appear as a sort of panacea for current educational ills. A major difficulty with regard to recurrent education is supposed to be “the elastic quality of the concept”. However, according to an ILO publication, it covers at least the following ideas :

1. Educational Reconstruction, Sevagram, Wardha, Hindustan Talimi Sangh, 1937, p. 91.

“Recurrent education is formal, and preferably full-time, education for adults who want to resume their education, interrupted earlier for a variety of reasons.

“Recurrent education aims to spread the period of formal education over a person’s entire life time. The notion is that instead of administering education in one concentrated dose between the ages of say, 6 and 21, everyone would still be entitled to 15 or 16 years of schooling but they would be free to postpone the last or two or three years of these to a later age.”

The above two definitions of recurrent education will clearly show that it covers both the education of young persons who would be permitted to interrupt their schooling with a spell of working life as well as the education of the working people who would interrupt their working life for a period of schooling in formal educational institutions. In both cases the emphasis is on education being a life long process.

Workers Access to Education

The trade union movement has for long struggled to achieve for the workers the right to education. This indeed in some respects is a corollary to their right to work, their right to training with guaranteed re-employment as well as their right to opportunities for vertical mobility. The right to education, however, cannot obviously be equated with the mere right to educational leave, howsoever important it may be. The right to education is inseparable, not only from the conditions of employment (the time spent at work, flexibility of working hours, etc.), but also from the establishment of the necessary educational and other facilities calculated to make it possible for the poorest strata to actually exercise this right and to adequately benefit from the facilities and opportunities.

The provision of educational facilities is indeed not synonymous with the provision of classes at educational institutions with definite syllabus and curricula. It should also include provision of guidance and support for serious learning efforts at a time and under circumstances, most favourable to the learner. If access to education for workers is to be achieved we have gradually to move towards a time-free, space-free, age-free and admission-free concept of education.

Time-free concept requires that not only education is provided at convenient times to the learner, but further that he should also be free to start it, leave it and return to a programme to suit his own convenience. The intensive terminal courses would obviously not conform to the above requirement. On the other hand, the group or modular unit system, more prevalent in the United States, would appear to be more suitable. The concept implies that the learner should be able to avail of the education, no matter where he lived, in a remote village or a city suburb or whether he was on the sea as a seafarer. The other requirement in this connection would be that whatever qualifications he obtains in one place should be recognised in other places so that he can continue his programme of studies. It would require recognition of educational achievements within countries and between countries.

Age-free concept hardly needs any comment. It simply means that there should be no bar to education in respect of age and younger and older people alike should be able to take advantage of educational facilities offered by various organisations and institutions.

The concept of admission-free education requires some explanation. In most of the countries, and in most of the educational institutions, the requirement for admission is some recognised diploma or degree. In the case of most adult workers this would prove to be a serious hurdle to their

admission. This is not to suggest that any person without a certain level of education should be admitted to an institute for higher education. This would indeed devalue education. Our conception is that if an adult worker, though he may not have put in a certain number of years in a school or a college, does possess the experience of life which equips him with some understanding of the problems which concern him and the society, he should be given the opportunity to attain the required level of learning without necessarily putting in the same number of years as required of a child.

Community Schools

Among the educational institutions specially directed towards the working people, mention may be made of community schools and folk high schools.

The idea of the community school envisages an interaction between the community and the school and considers the latter to be the focal centre in community affairs. The community school is open in the evenings and during holidays and vacations and encourages adults to make use of the school facilities whenever they can. There is no disruption of normal school activities during school hours but outside those hours the school is used for various purposes of social and cultural activities by the community. The community school is most suitable for workers and adult education because it is economical making additional use of existing resources. It brings together all groups with minimum stress and creates a bond between workers and the school. In a community school the transition from youth to adult activities becomes easier and more natural. The potentialities of the community school as a growth centre for adult and workers education needs to be explored. I am quite sure that if our existing schools, poor specimens as they are today, are gradually transformed into

community schools, we will reap rich dividends from any investment that we make for their improvement.

I may further add that one of the functions of the school-cum-community centre should also be the propagation of the various schemes of the government for self-employment and for rural development. This will kindle the interest of the population in the school with its obvious advantages. The school may thus also get the benefit of larger State resources if it is aided by the different departments seeking to use it as the focal point of their development plans. The school for example could draw on resources meant not only for primary education but also for adult education, health education, agricultural extension etc. This together with increased direct assistance from the State will enable the school to provide greater facilities and the quality of its educational services will improve.

Folk High Schools

The institutions of folk high schools have commanded attention of educationists all over the world. This movement has enabled the Danish people to rise "from ignorance and poverty to about the highest general level of education and well-being of all the peoples of the earth." The folk high schools movement was started a century back in Denmark. Grundtvig, the main spirit behind the movement, held "that prevailing higher education had given young people undefined impressions of a culture foreign to them and had taught them to neglect their own". He observed that the prevailing higher education rested on a system of examinations, which students were glad to take in the hope of "an assured livelihood in government service. He saw little love of culture for its own sake. There had resulted a caste of the educated and the masses of the country were left in ignorance to slave for them." The aim of the folk high schools, he said, "should not be

examinations and an assured livelihood, but for each individual the development and enlightenment which bring their own reward." The aim of the school should be to find "the common universal subjects to which the students want to devote their time because of their usefulness or because of the pleasure they give." Grundtvig insisted that there should be no examinations of any kind in the folk high schools, they were to teach things which are of common interest to the whole people.

In the ideas of Grundtvig we may trace some influence of Rousseau but Grundtvig did not share Rousseau's fear of civilization. It has been suggested that perhaps Grundtvig learned more from Fichte's idea of a "school for youth" a school for the prospective leaders where "in full freedom, each individual opens into moral independence as well as into a strong feeling of fellowship and responsibility for the society in which he lives."

Youth, according to Grundtvig, was the proper time for enlightenment. The child, according to him, has first of all the right to be a child and the education given to children must be adapted to their needs. Nor is adolescence the proper time for such "social responsibility education" for according to Grundtvig adolescent between fourteen and eighteen needs physical activity and familiarity with the work he may later have to do. But youth is the age of mental awakening when the great questions about life are asked. The soul of the full grown youth is far more filled with the questions than during the transitional years and it should be the task of the folk high school not to put questions, nor to begin or end with examinations, but to help youth find an answer to these questions.

The fact that the Danish folk high school movement has lost none of its vigour and enthusiasm over the past hundred

years is an eloquent testimony to the strength and authenticity of the idea. With necessary variations it has been picked up by many other countries with gratifying results. No institution can be just picked up from somewhere and grafted on another soil without modifications in the light of the prevailing economic and social situations and the peculiar genius of the people concerned. All I wish to stress is that the folk high school idea is significant enough to be studied as an educational technique of great merit and suitability for adoption in the developing countries. If we study this movement we can perhaps also get a better insight into how national and voluntary efforts can be meshed.

Trade Union Responsibility

Trade unions while having the responsibility for promoting and monitoring participation of workers in the programmes of formal education and the functioning of special agencies and institutions like school-cum-community centres and folk high schools, will also have to undertake considerable activities themselves, particularly in the field of trade union education. Trade union education being education for the leadership of a movement can best be conducted under trade union auspices. However, cooperation, help and support of the State and formal educational bodies is not excluded but should be in the form and on terms acceptable to the trade union movement or organisations of the rural poor.

Methods and Techniques

Both because considerable discussion has already taken place in many fora on methods and techniques and also because there is no limit to the methods and techniques that can be adopted and the innovations that can be devised, I would refrain from detailed discussion on them here. But three remarks perhaps may be in order: firstly, methods have to

be selected taking into consideration the peculiarities of the group for whom the education is intended. Secondly, that only educational methods and techniques which permit the maximum participation of the beneficiaries in the educational process are likely to be most effective. Participation not only makes the process of education interesting as it offers involvement but at the same time permits much greater absorption. We may keep in mind the famous and oft quoted Chinese saying: *'what I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I know.'* "What I do", is indeed participation. Further such a method enables the maximum opportunity for self expression which is evidently one of the most potent instruments for development of personality. The other comment I would like to make is that while there are scores of methods and techniques of educational work and each has its value, and it is possible to argue that one or the other is more effective in achieving particular educational objective, no single method by itself is indeed ever sufficient. In all educational work it is always beneficial to combine a number of them in order to achieve effectively our objectives in the field of workers education.

Contents

Again in regard to the contents, it is obvious that they are closely related to the needs, requirements, desires and aspirations of the group of beneficiaries for whom educational programme is arranged. Workers education must take note of the changing economic, social and political scenario in which workers find themselves and their ever widening concerns. The breath-taking changes in technology will undoubtedly have their impact on contents of workers education. The workers would need to have more information on the tremendous changes taking place and will have to be enabled to appreciate, understand and comprehend their implications.

The changes in technology triggered by what has been aptly called the 'silicon chip revolution', are indeed far-reaching. Today we are told computers have been built to perform at the dazzling speed of 800 million operations per second. The most startling feature of the new technology is said to be the unmanned factories. "Intelligent robots", we are told, "can run factories without human help, dig for coal, sow crops, mine valuable seabed minerals and even milk cows". In the case of electronics, we are told, a single machine can insert components into a printed circuit board at a rate of 72,000 pieces an hour.

It is estimated that by the turn of century 10 per cent of the labour force would be able to provide us all our material needs, i.e. with all the food we eat, all the clothes we wear, all the textiles, appliances, automobiles, houses etc. The 90 per cent of the present labour force will have to be employed elsewhere in non-manual operations which obviously would be servicing activities, more particularly education. What impact this change in volume and nature of employment will have for the working people must be of great concern to the workers.

Developments in technology are bound to affect the size of the industrial undertakings. Futurologists are talking of "electronic cottages". The GUARDIAN of England sometimes back talked of computers as "cottage industry of the 1980s". In the words of a researcher more and more companies can be described as nothing but "people huddled around a computer". Put the computer in people's homes, they say, and they no longer need to huddle. Electronic cottages that are being talked about will make it possible for upto 50 per cent of the working people to remain at home and work. This, apart from savings in scarce fuel needed for commuting between homes and manufacturing centres, may also have tremendous social implications. The movement from cities to the rural homes

may transform rural areas and have its impact on social crisis developing in industrial countries. The number of fractured families may indeed be reduced and more congenial atmosphere for work may be created and hopefully better and happy homes may emerge. But here again workers education not only has an important role to play but an urgent and immense responsibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion it may be stated that in workers education the basic concepts of education as well as the main concerns of workers have to be kept in view. The main aim of education simply stated is liberation of man and development of the individual's potentiality to his or her possible best. Education must help an individual to grow into an integrated and harmonious personality. A harmonious development of personality, however, can take place only in a social context. While at times conflict may be necessary and even desirable to fight injustice and evil, the greatest progress, as the history of human civilization amply reveals, is through cooperation with others which demands constant understanding and adjustment with others. But the achievement of cooperation is possible only through the instrumentality or mechanism of an institution or an organisation. Further active participation and involvement in the functioning of the organisations itself is a potent means of education.

For workers it is not enough that they are made conscious of the problems of their underprivileged economic and social situation. They should also, at the same time, be exposed to the ideas for their solution. The most reliable and effective way to overcome their economic and social situation is to organise themselves into independent, self-reliant, democratically functioning strong organisations of their own for effectively promo-

ting and safeguarding their interests. This is the only way they can hope to counter the formidable and powerful forces often arrayed against them. Such organisations alone will be able to deliver them out of their underprivileged status and would ensure that the fruits of national economic progress as well as facilities in the field of education duly accrue to them.

With the consensus now developing with regard to the role of productive work in education and the need for recurrent education, together with the widening concerns of workers, and their need for education and training for the increasingly important role in society, the old ideas of dividing education into water-tight compartments are changing. There is, indeed, the need to conceive education as part of an integrated national programme covering all people. I have a strong feeling that the organs or institutions for education, both the formal educational institutions as well as those specially designed to meet the needs of the targeted groups, as well as the educational efforts of the trade unions, cooperatives and rural peoples organisations, should all become the cooperative efforts of the people and the State. Further the varied mosaic of these multifarious institutions and programmes should be carefully and imaginatively linked and coordinated, each of them drawing inspiration, help and sustenance from the other. Finally they should all work under the watchful eyes of the beneficiaries who should be enabled to exercise a meaningful and effective supervision and monitoring through their own autonomous independent and self-reliant organisations.

