



Education

Explore—Journal of Research for UG and PG Students

ISSN 2278 – 0297 (Print)

ISSN 2278 – 6414 (Online)

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<http://www.patnawomenscollege.in/journal>

Postmodernist Reading of Alternative Education in India

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Received : November 2014

Accepted : March 2015

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Abstract : *Alternative Education in its widest meaning refers to the 'enhancement of education'. It provides the ways in which children can discover their own talents and interests at their own pace, in their own ways, assisted by the teachers, parents, friends and others. It is in contrast to the mainstream education which can be defined as the system support by national governments and society in general with stipulated goals and methods of their achievement. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is perceived as a system of ideas; a way of theorising; a way of understanding contemporary social and*

cultural trend and a way of practising—there is a postmodern architecture, art, literature etc. Historically it was generated as a general term for critique of modernism particularly in art and architecture. This study is an outcome of our suspicions regarding alternative schooling and practices in India. We suspect that the alternative education that is spread across India is the "postmodernist moment" in education. With the understanding of the postmodernist education we try to read the experiences of alternative education as postmodern experiences. We suspect that the alternative education is turning the education system into a site of conflict. At least there is one similarity between alternative education and postmodernist perspective of education : they are posing challenges to existing concepts, structures and hierarchies of knowledge.

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Keywords : *Alternative Education, Postmodernism.*

School and freedom are synonymous words to me. In school I can be myself that is what I value most. I have always felt a part of school and therefore in some way responsible. I continue to discuss and argue with my mother and about the changes that take place (in school) and what need to be done. School gave me freedom to question authority, play with issues like gender and need for structure. I felt responsible at school as we were the part of planning the rules and the timetable.

*Gayatri, a student of Poorna Learning Centre, an alternative school
(Vittachi S., Raghavan, N., & Raj K. 2011)*

Introduction :

Education is production, organisation and dissemination of knowledge. In recent decades it has gone through profound changes in terms of purposes, content and methods. These changes are part of a process that generally questions the role of education as the child of Enlightenment. It claims freedom from absolute knowledge that is a comprehensive part of Modernism. Postmodernism, on the other hand is perceived as a system of ideas; a way of theorising; a way of understanding contemporary social and cultural trend and a way of practising—there is a postmodern architecture, art, literature etc. Historically it was generated as a general term for critique of modernism particularly in art and architecture. In context of education, there can't be a single way to learn and teach. Knowledge in postmodernist perspective is

- socially constructed, and takes form in the eyes of the knower.
- contextual rather than out there awaiting to be discovered.
- tentative, fragmented multifaceted and not necessarily rational. (Kilgore 2001)

The questions for the postmodernist researcher are: who decides what knowledge is and what needs to be decided? (Lyotard, 1984). It is in sharp contrast with Modernism that asserts that knowledge should be based on evidence, and

It should be reached by the others in the same way to prove it a truth. It should be empirical, mathematical and logical.

The rise of alternative education in India is indicative of discontent of a section of masses from the mainstream education. It seeks to remind that education is most important way we relate to the world. Education helps us to experience, understand and attempt to change the world. It formulates our understanding of ourselves and define our relation with others.

The purpose of this study is not to prove any thesis or substantiate a hypothesis. To us it sounds like an oxymoron to talk about such things in a text that is about the postmodern. Yet this is not a discourse analysis and we are following the paradigms of the research practices of qualitative research. We suspect that the alternative education that is spread across India is the "postmodernist moment" of education. With the understanding of the postmodernist education we try to read the experiences of alternative education in India as postmodern experiences. We suspect that the alternative education is turning the education system into a site of conflict. At least there is one similarity between alternative education and postmodernist perspective of education : they are posing challenges to existing concepts, structures and hierarchies of knowledge.

In this context the following are the questions for reference of the research:

- What is postmodernist perception of education?
- What are the educational practices at Alternative schools in India?
- What is a postmodernist model of education?"
- How the postmodernist model is different from the mainstream education?

- Does the alternative education in India represent postmodernism?

This research is an attempt to answer these questions through a careful analysis of postmodernist concept of education and the functioning of alternative schools in India.

Postmodernism and Education :

Postmodernism is a contested terrain. Postmodernity suggests something 'after' modernity, or perhaps something that has replaced it. Featherstone argues that there has occurred 'an epochal shift or break from modernity involving the emergence of a new social totality with its own distinct organising principles' (1991, p.3). But there are others who disagree with this epochal approach. Lyotard (1984) has argued that it is possible to distinguish between the modern and the postmodern but this distinction is primarily characterised by the changes in metaphysical form, narratives of legitimacy and organisation of knowledge. Foucault (1986) does not think in terms of epochal or periodic changes but rather sees modernity and postmodernity as oppositional attitudes which can be and indeed always are present in any epoch or period. Couzens Hoy (1988) points out that the very notion of periodisation is modernist. Though, these differences there is no distinguished conceptualisation and theorisation about education in postmodernism. Yet there are a number of elements in practices of alternative education that resonate postmodernist perception of education.

Alternative Education :

Alternative education in its widest meaning refers to the 'enhancement of education' (Vittachi et. al., p.1). It provides the ways in which children can discover their own talents and interests at their own pace, in their own ways, assisted by the teachers, parents, friends and others. It is in

contrast to the mainstream education which can be defined as the system support by national governments and society in general with stipulated goals and method of their achievement. Alternative Education can also be defined as a diversified sets of organic and constantly evolving approaches to learning that make the child the centre and the focus of the learning, using a variety of methods and strategies. The Alternative Education is not rote learning and it does not treat children as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. It is an alternative to the priority given by the general education solely and exclusively to passing examinations, to achieving results and ranking, to preparing children to make it in today's world using conventional yardstick of success, such as money and status and getting a good job.

The need for the alternative education germinated from the basic idea that in mainstream education, the personal growth and the talent of the students used to get silenced and swept under the carpet due to the large number of students.

Alternative education in India emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The idea of this kind of education was put forth by the social reformers like Swami Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, Syed Ahmed Khan, Jyotiba Phule, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and so on. They created a number of viable models of education as a considerable response to the ills of mainstream education. Mahatma Gandhi opposed the exam oriented bookish teaching. He took the initiative in this field by opening several alternative schools in Champaran, Sabarmati, Wadra and many other places of India. He developed Nai Taleem or Basic Education. Educationist Gijubhai Badheka emphasized that children need an atmosphere of nurturing independence and self reliance. J.Krishnamurti held education as something connected with the whole of life, not as something isolated, or leading

to alienation.

However an upsurge in the Alternative Educational thinking and practice can be seen in India after 1970s. One of the significant initiatives making forays into alternative education was by the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) in Madhya Pradesh by two voluntary organisations- Friends Rural Centre, Rasulia and Kishore Bharti, Bankheri.

Raywid (1999, 47) classifies Alternative Education under three types according to the object of reforms;

- Students are reformed.
- Schools are reformed
- Educational systems are reformed.

Several alternative educational institutions have been opened in the several states of India which came up with good results.(Vittachi, Raghvan & Raj 2011)

Features of the Alternative Education :

The Alternative Education is being implemented and successfully carried out in several Alternative schools encompassing the curricula, role of teachers, and the behaviour of students. There are certain practices that are commonly found in alternative education institutions; such as :

- Students are allowed to go out of the classroom after every class;
- No proper examination unlike the mainstream educational system;
- Learning apart from academics;
- Have to be independent without being harsh;
- Urge to study one's own country;
- Trips at regular interval;
- Students reluctant to leave school after dispersal because of happy environment;

- Multi layered fee structure;
- Parents pay only what they can afford;
- No force to educate the students;
- No physical punishment to the students;
- Passion to achieve excellence, not to be mistaken with competition.
- Excellence in everything that one does in work and life;
- Homely atmosphere; they emphasize individuality, which is developed in the uniformity of the public; they value co operation over competition;
- Fosters a culture of care and concern;
- Small size of the classroom;
- Optimistic ethos.

Alternative schools comprise students of various categories. They have been created for the gifted as well as the poor student, for the well-behaved as well as the disruptive.

A student named Dhruva was asked about the least enjoyable aspects of being a student in an alternative school. But he could count "nothing" as he appreciated everything about the school. It was due to the school's different approach towards the students. At the same time students at the alternative schools not always choose the set professions in their lives as pre set by the society they go for their passions and prove their worth. In case of Dhruva "he wanted to be a spy, because he loved codes, he liked hieroglyphics" (Vittachi et. al., 2011).

In the similar context Navroze, a well known cinematographer and photographer and the author of *The Dreams of the Dragon's Children* is also a student of an Alternative school says that his school taught him not to take a task if one is not passionate about it. He recalls that there was no sense of competition in his school (Vittachi et. al., 2011).

Avinash presently a professional artist, who studied in two alternative schools in Bangalore. He recalls:

“It was an exciting and adventurous couple of years that comprised more than academics. I felt a part of an extended family. During these years the relationship with the teachers was one of friendship, support and trust, rather than of hierarchy or fear of an authority. The school helped to begin a journey of introspection and in making one aware of the numerous seemingly transparent and habitual psychological movements of the mind. They provided us with the tools as it were, by which we look into and question the assumption by which we live, both at a personal as well as at a sociological level.”

(Vittachi et. al., 2011)

Any discussion about Alternative Education in India cannot be complete without the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program. According to HSTP “science education must aim at developing skills and attitudes which enables students to learn directly from their environment and their experience (Mukund, 1988). In rural setting it is even more beneficial as students can learn from and in the middle of environment. HSTP was a revolutionary and pedagogic breakthrough in a traditional, static and hierarchical government school system. By 1978 HSTP spread in almost all the middle schools in the Hoshangabad district. In 80s it reached across 1000 schools. (Mukherjee, 2007). It also received support from All India Science Teachers’ Association (AISTA) and scientists from Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) (Kanakalatha, 1988).

The program aimed at breaking the traditional framework of classroom teaching in which teacher holds an authoritative role and was considered as ‘centre of knowledge’. Some of its main features were as follows:

- **Based on experimental method:** children performed experiments in

groups of four. They recorded their observations and then reported it to the whole class.

- **Textbooks :** *Bal Vaigyanik*- a book of instructions for experiments is used. The layout of the book is conducive to easy reading and comprehension by the children. The books have been prepared after intensive testing and incorporating feedback from the teachers and children. The books are of low cost and locally available material has been used as far as possible. Kits and textbooks were supplied to all schools in adequate numbers.
- **Training of teachers :** Three weeks training programs were held every year for full three years. Every teacher was trained to do each and every experiment and discussion in the class.
- Monthly meetings or follow-up of the teachers were also organized.
- **Examinations :** It is stated by HSTP that- ‘no reform is possible without reform of examination system’ (Mukherjee Amitabh 2007). In general open-book exams were held and unlimited time was given.

Such changes mean change in the long established and conventional educational system.

The experiences of alternative education relates well with the postmodernist perception of education. One of the most famous models based on post modernism was given by William E.Doll, a Professor at Louisiana State University.

Features of Doll's Model :

William E.Doll created a Postmodernist matrix. He suggested the four R’s of Richness, Recursion, Relations and Rigor to serve as the criteria to foster a postmodern view and evaluate the quality of a post-modern curriculum.

1. **Richness** : This refers to a curriculum's depth, to its layers of meaning, to its multiple possibilities or interpretations. In order for students and teachers to transform and be transformed, a curriculum needs to have the "right amount" of indeterminacy, anomaly, inefficiency, chaos, disequilibrium, dissipation and lived experience. The concept of developing richness through dialogue, interpretations, hypothesis generation and proving, and pattern playing can apply to all we do in curriculum.
2. **Recursion** : Recursion is reflective and heuristic revisitings to curricular activities and concepts. Bruner (1986) states that "any formal theory of mind is helpless without recursion" and asserts the importance of recursion for epistemology and pedagogy. This is also the way one produces a sense of self, through reflective interaction with the environment, with others, with a culture. Doll stresses that "recursive reflection" lies at the heart of a transformative curriculum. Bruner (1960) defines a recursive curriculum by his "spiral curriculum". Dewey points out that every ending is a new beginning, every beginning emerges from a prior ending. Recursion aims at developing competence - the ability to organise, combine, inquire and use something heuristically. Its frame is open.
3. **Relation** : The concept of relations is important to a post-modern, transformative curriculum in two ways, in a pedagogical way and in a cultural way. In focusing on pedagogical relations, one focuses on the connections within a

curriculum's structure which give the curriculum its depth as this is developed by recursion. The concept of cultural relations grows out of a hermeneutic cosmology - one which emphasises narration and dialogue as key vehicles in interpretation.

Bowers (1987) has tied the concept of cultural relationships to the ecological crises we face today. He draws our attention to modernism's strong sense of individualism. Individualism has tended to pit humanity against nature and to believe that progress occurs through competition, not cooperation. This belief, unfortunately, is part of our present day pedagogy and cosmology.

4. **Rigor** : Rigor, in some ways, is the most important of the four criteria. It keeps a transformative curriculum from falling into either "rampant relativism" or sentimental solipsism. Rigor in a post-modern frame draws on qualities foreign to a modernist frame, for example, interpretation and indeterminacy. Rigor can be defined in terms of mixing the two. The quality of interpretation, its own richness, depends on how fully and well we develop the various alternatives that indeterminacy presents. It seems necessary to build up a community which is critical as well as supportive.

Doll's Model aims at promoting higher order competence as opposed to acquisition of subject knowledge of the curriculum. The classroom atmosphere is different from that of the traditional classroom. The teacher is no longer an authority, but a facilitator and transformative intellectual who caters for individual needs and differences. Learning is much more interactive, interesting, motivating and flexible. The Model fosters

communication, independence and self-organisation. Opportunities for reflection are offered throughout the course of learning. The Four R's of the curriculum set down the principles of an effective curriculum.

Doll's Model stresses the concept of reflection. He considers curriculum "as an instrument of construction. The role of curriculum is to help us to negotiate these passages towards this end to be rich, recursive rigorous and relational. The strength of Doll's Model is as follows:

- The open system encourages critical thinking, decision making, thus promoting a democratic society.
- It aims at promoting higher order competence as opposed to acquisition of subject knowledge of curriculum.
- There is difference in the classroom atmosphere in comparison to the traditional classroom system.
- The teacher is no longer an authority but a facilitator and transformative intellectual who caters for individual needs and differences Learning is much more interactive, interesting, motivating and flexible.

Postmodernism and Alternative Education in Conflict Zone of Education: Some Conclusion:

We have started our journey to explore the tenets of postmodernism with a number of questions in our mind. The reference questions for our research were:

- What is postmodernist perception of education?
- What are the educational practices of Alternative education in India?
- What is a postmodernist model of education?

- How is the postmodernist model different from the mainstream education?
- Does the alternative education in India represent postmodernism?

In the context of the questions mentioned above we analysed the related literature and arrived at the following view points :

What is postmodernist perception of education?

Postmodernism is a celebration and tolerance of plurality and difference. It perceives Education as a socio-cultural structure and process in all its various forms, intimately connected with the production and dissemination of foundational knowledge and therefore with the re-creation and reproduction of the differential valuations and hierarchies of knowledge.

What are the educational practices of Alternative education in India?

The alternative institutions in India are heterogeneous. The origins are in formal and non formal initiatives by dissatisfied teachers, parents, philosophers and visionaries. They often vary in their processes. We have tried to capture practices of some of the most popular ones, but they do not represent all. Initiatives by dissatisfied teachers and parents most genuinely represent the postmodernist spirit.

What is a postmodernist model of education?

The postmodernism though negates any form of preordained structuralisation yet there have been attempts to identify the tenets of postmodernism that can be modeled to create an environment of freedom of choice for students. William Doll Jr. has given four R's model: Rich, Recursive, Relational, and Rigorous which provides a reasonable but undeterministic framework for post modernist education.

How the postmodernist model is different from the mainstream education?

As one of the postmodernist educationists Doll believes that curriculum is a process not of transmitting what is known but of exploring what is unknown; and through exploration students and teachers “clear the land” together, thereby transforming both the land and themselves. He further remarks that in the modernist curriculum, our frame for teaching is based on a closed set. The teacher helps students to acquire a particular, set body of knowledge in a particular, set way. Evaluation is mainly based on grades attained by students. In a modernist frame, evaluation is basically used to separate winners from losers.

Evaluation, in a post-modern frame, serves a different function. It would be essentially a negotiary process within a communal setting for the purpose of transformation. The teacher would play a central role in this process but would not be the exclusive evaluator. Evaluation would be communal and interactive. It would be used as feedback, and as a part of the iterative process of doing-critiquing-doing-critiquing. The focus would be on helping students to develop intellectual and social powers through dialogue and constructive critique.

Does the alternative education in India represent postmodernism?

The question is the most difficult to answer as neither of the two is a homogenous group. Postmodernism in its true spirit refuses to take any ultimate stand. All of its claims of reality are relative, contextual and temporary. Though we can identify a number of features of postmodernism that can be found in many alternative schools, yet there are many others that seem to totally contradict some of the essential features of postmodernism.

The similarity between the two can be summarised as follows:

- Both of them consider tolerance plurality and difference as essential features.
- Both of them welcome the dialectical process.
- At times they agree that learning is conceived as a complex, social activity where the student makes his or her own meaning.
- They emphasise on the critical thinking and meta cognition rather than factual knowledge.
- They held that there is not one correct way to learn or one correct conclusion to a problem. Learning can proceed through multiple connections depending on the orientation of the learner.

But there are regions of disagreements:

- Many of the alternative education systems do not agree that there is no ultimate truth, even though they agree that the truth is not expressible. Shri Aurovindo’s Integral Education is an example that asserts universal framework.
- Many of the alternative education initiatives have their own designs of curriculum which may at times be rigid at times.
- Many of the propounders of alternative education believe in hermeneutic search for an underlying and unifying truth and certainty that can render the world, experiences and events (including the self and its experiences) coherent and meaningful.

Regarding these disagreement we have to say that the postmodernism has no problem with their existence so far as they do not claim to their infallibility and applicability for all.

Alternative Education and Postmodernism :

After the detailed reading of Alternative schools, its origin and the experiences of the students we can say that it projects the authenticity of such schools in India. It is the margins, openings and gaps in the structure of mainstream education that provide the possibilities for the alternatives.

At the same time stringent tenets of curricula of mainstream education is another reason to put forth the idea of alternative education. Alternative schools attempt to teach an integrated curriculum that does not strictly separate traditional areas but rather emphasises the interconnections between the disciplines. These schools to some extent represent the moment of postmodernism in India. They are of various kind and orientation addressing the desire for plurality of educational system as per the postmodernist conditions.

The Postmodern does not referred to unified moment of everyday experience. It is best understood as a state of mind or a critical self referential posture of mind. The emphasis of postmodernism is on the decentered subjects which seems to contradict the very purpose of education and the basis of educational activities. The education system itself is currently a site of conflict. A postmodernist perspective can help us to better understand the conflict and to examine the extent to which it is both a symptom of and a contributor to the socio cultural condition of postmodernity. Education in all its various forms is intimately concerned with the production, organization and dissemination of the knowledge. Postmodernism is an umbrella term under whose broad cover it encompasses a condition, a set of practices, a cultural discourse, an attitude and a mode of analysis.

The task of education has therefore been understood as one of 'bringing out', of helping to

realise this potential, so that subjects become fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency. Thus education is allotted a key role in the forming and shaping of subjectivity and identity, the task of making people into particular kinds of subject. Education does not fit easily into the postmodernist movement because educational theory and practice is founded in the modernist tradition. According to Lyotard, the project of modernity is deeply intertwined with education, modernity's belief being that progress in all areas will emancipate 'the whole of humanity from ignorance, poverty, backwardness, despotism...thanks to education in particular, it will also produce enlightened citizens, masters of their own destiny' (Lyotard, 1984).

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