

CHILDREN CREATING THEIR SPACE IN FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL: AN EXPERIMENT IN ALTERNATIVE ART PEDAGOGY BY CEDAR BY ORGANISING CHILDREN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

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CEDAR started its child-rights and child-support activities in the highly child labour prone areas of Kovilpatti more than 25 years ago. Today, near 100% enrolment is reported and it applies to even the most marginalised communities living in this match-belt. But what came to be realized a few years ago was, mere enrolment was not enough. Schooling itself became problematic for many children coming from the economically and socially marginalized sections who were mostly *Dalits* but also included a few non-Dalit but marginalised castes. There emerged new forms of alienation and denial of child rights that manifested in dropouts, poor academic performances and new forms of systemic discrimination and victimizations of children wittingly and unwittingly permitted by schools, and the worst, casteism among children. CEDAR came out with Children's Resource Centre (CRC) as a community action response. This practice has borne out very fruitful results for the holistic development of children and in terms of assurance of quality. This mode of action has certain theoretical underpinnings as well.

Children's Resource Centre (CRC)

CRCs in practical terms is nothing but a regular assembly of 25 to 30 children under the leadership of a trained facilitator Monday through Friday after school hours, in a community hall or a voluntarily allotted place in the village or even a school premise. They spend the next two hours with her. In the first hour, they discuss their day in the school with the facilitator and complete any homework for the day taking help, if necessary, from her. The second important hour is exclusively devoted to children articulating artistic-cultural experiences through the mediums of performative storytelling, scripting and performing their own plays, painting, and drawing, performing folk dance and music, scrapbook making with daily news, film viewing and discussing, etc. These activities are highly participatory, and the children are encouraged to freely create anything they like. The artistic activities on a periodical basis are extended to weekends where children meet with children from other villages in a larger congregation of 100 or more. They spend a day or even two, meeting with accomplished artists, creative photographers and even art filmmakers. Again, the whole exercise is bottom-up and the children are encouraged to 'create.' CRC also has three more related activities: Child Rights Education, the Children Collectives and Children-led Journalism. Children Collectives are children's forums for debate and action on issues directly affecting them. For instance, after a deliberation, they may even make representations to the *Panchayat* (local-civic authority) say for cleaning up a piece of land that could be used as a playground. Children-led journalism helps them to articulate their views on issues they choose to speak about.

An Alternative Educational Experience

CEDAR calls CRC exposure, 'Alternative Educational Experience' which has five dynamic aspects. First, the artistic exposure children undergo has no strict pedagogic rule to follow as joyful participation takes precedence over the method. Second, the exercises on their own open up cognitive pathways in children for self-discovery. Third, the texts and narratives children produce as in artifacts like paintings and sculptures, performative expressions displayed and linguistic-literary creations, themselves are of 'truth value' and provide a great deal of insight into their world and how they represent reality. Fourth, in representing their inner reality, the children spontaneously choose their own dialects, colloquialism, religio-cultural metaphors and symbols and their own traditional art forms and celebrate- art forms which the mainstream sees as 'folk' or 'low' but the 'folk' and 'low' get valorized in the collective consciousness of the marginalized children. In other words, the children develop an alternative cultural syntax which gives them new meaning, rootedness, and identity. And five, experiences drawn from Children's Collective actions, making news scrambles and discussions, Child Right Education, and journalism, without fail infuse their consciousness with civic and political meanings and an understanding of the working of micro power structures and their larger matrices. Summing up we say:

1. **J**oyful Participation
 2. **S**elf-discovery
 3. **T**ruth Value
 4. **I**dentify
 5. **C**ivic-political Self
- [JOYSTIC]**

Theory

Why CRC and why Alternative Educational experience? CEDAR in organizing CRCs proceeds with the assumption that every child that enters the school irrespective of its class and caste carries with it, its innate creative potential. But when it comes to children coming from an impoverished background, the curricular and pedagogical practices of the school system embedded in certain policy preferences and power relations overwhelm them. Unable to cope, many underperform or just survive in the margins of the school system. Some withdraw or drop out. And a few even alienate into involving in deviant acts. Yet their creative potentials are like stagnant pools of water buried deep under their repressed selves. CRC tries to address only this problem. Highly participatory, unstructured, and bottom-up art pedagogy if at all it is called pedagogy can drill deep into the repressed selves of these children and open up the wellsprings of creativity and self-awareness- an awareness of constraints that have hitherto kept them silent. Over this initial opening up, in the second stage, children are helped to build their self-image, self-worth and the ability for self-reflection. As the children journey through this process, they gradually develop the capacity for self-direction or 'Agency' and move towards a self-

managed life. Added to this is their civic consciousness and development of their ability to analyse and understand the broader economic, socio-political, and cultural realities around them which in turn can give them larger purposes and visions of long-term goals. In short, CRC aspires to make children, change agents.

Parent-Children Dialogue

CRC exposure without fail leads to the triggering of a process of child-parent dialogue as children bring into their homes new ideas and new questions, demonstrate new patterns of behavior and demand things which they never demanded before. Or they might even question certain of the parental conduct. This might bring certain conflicting situations within the family as well. But this is also the point where parental attention is seriously drawn towards CRC activities. CEDAR makes use of this opportunity to invite parents to come in and discuss the issues with them and with other parents. Gradually a forum for child-centred discourse emerges. This CEDAR calls as Parent Collectives (PCs). PCs once formed, invite other community members too, to participate in their debates and deliberations. PCs do not end up as debating clubs but hold hands with CRCs in several child-centric activities. What needs underlining is that it is 'children-induced praxis' that is of course further amplified and used for creating child-centred and child-safe spaces in families and communities.

Engaging the Dominant Pedagogy

What would a child coming from an impoverished background who was initially adjudged as a failure, do now in the school after going through an ideal CRC experience? 'Failure' in the mainstream school, is what exams and tests largely measure all that is learnt through rote as core skills in Language (English), Mathematics and Science. ('Failure' of courses in liberal art/social science subjects like History, sociology, and economics and also in the Tamil language is considered as less abominable, and 'failure' and 'success' make blurring borders in these 'lower order subjects.' Opting for these subjects itself is considered as a failure). An ideal CRC-child should certainly be able to deconstruct her identity as 'a failed student' and reject in toto the dichotomized construct of 'success' and 'failure' that the mainstream system thrusts uniformly upon children without taking into account the social, economic, and cultural roadblocks the children of the social margins encounter in getting inducted into education. The erstwhile 'failed child' with CRC experience gradually comes out of her de-motivated condition and learns to positively look at the challenges involved in mastering what the mainstream prefers to call as 'the higher order skills' (English, Mathematics and Science), in a much broader light. Though the child may not have too many words to explicitly state what it thinks about this but would implicitly understand that education has a much wider scope than what is contoured by 'the higher order skills.' Beyond this contour, the child now knows, lies a wide array of educational choices to make, and achieve excellence. Yet, the child might consider the 'higher order skills' as pragmatically necessary and attempt

to master them. A little purposefulness and self-direction help the child to take up the challenge more confidently and bring out better results, why even the best. No more there are anxieties of playing 'knock-out tournaments' and fail. In short, the child who was once overwhelmed and pushed aside is now capable of 'creatively engaging' the dominant curricular-pedagogical discourses of the school.

Re-Positioning of the Teacher

It needs to be made clear here that the government is not unaware or indifferent to the need for curricular-pedagogical reform. Given below is a portion of the text of the Policy Note of the School Education Department of Tamil Nadu, 2018-19:

"Active Learning Methodology (ALM) is a learner-centric methodology, which involves students directly and actively in the learning process. The foremost aim of ALM is to equip the learner to "learn to learn." In a supportive learning environment, the learner could construct his own knowledge. Teacher, as a facilitator, has to create and empower every child with the skill to transform the information into knowledge. There is enough space for the children to discuss, to think, and to question. The structure of the classroom is in small groups. The mind map step in ALM reflects not only the creativity of the child but also the level of understanding. Besides, the teacher could easily identify the individuality of every child." (2018, P. 29).

The government is very right in its thinking in terms of what it intends. But what is achieved is an issue. The classrooms in many of the government schools continue to remain teacher-centred and bank on rote, in spite of several re-trainings the teachers have undergone. This means that the teachers are quite unwilling to give up the traditional identity of being 'that charismatic authority' in spite of the pressure from the top. But in classrooms CRC children study, it is our experience that there is a certain amount of fluidity infused by the 'participatory capability' demonstrated by the CRC children. The defining moment for a teacher comes when she suddenly discovers the 'unexpectedly extraordinary behavior demonstrated by an individual child or a small group of CRC children. It could be an extraordinary painting by a child, a fascinating poem written or a group of children scripting and acting out a 2-minute play on Corona Virus on their own in a half-an-hour. This is where CRC comes to receive attention from teachers and schools. The fact that of the 12 CRC centres functioning in Kovilpatti, 8 have been invited to function from school premises adds strength to this argument. And many teachers have become willing supporters of CEDAR's CRC strategy. What it means in the larger sense? The government could not do much beyond providing the grammar for creating a child-centred classroom, but the discourse could be scripted only in collaboration with CRC children leading however weak be the initial flux. We expect 'willing supporters' to become 'willing partners' in the practice of an emancipatory educational project re-positioning themselves. This is again child-inspired and child-led.

Discrimination, Injustice and Looking Forward

Nevertheless, the day is not easily won for the right-bearing, politically self-conscious and reflexive CRC child. She or he has to face everyday challenges fighting discrimination, exclusion and abuse perpetrated on the basis of caste, gender, age and ethnicity in the community they live in, and in the school. No more they submit and recline into silence.

Win or lose, they confront and fight injustice. This is how they interrogate the harsh realities around, make meaning and develop resilience. They come to repose faith in a big future. You ask the child of a bonded labourer what he would like to become. He would say, "Collector." Ask the child of a police victim, he or she would say, "Police Chief." Ask a poor widow's daughter she would say, "Doctor." If these answers come from the rich and well-endowed children, we think of them as possibilities but tend to think of the former as gibberish and pass on platitudes to avoid embarrassments to them. No wonder both the rich and the poor child desire position and power but ironically, for different reasons. The rich child invariably desires power for perpetuating the *status quo ante*, but the poor desperately need power for personal liberation and the transformation of their immediate surroundings characterised by poverty, oppression and tyranny. Their aspirations are encrypted in the labels and badges of the dominant discourse and decoding them, you discover their 'Agency' and desire to transform. In their transformation lies the transformation of a future. We have to only stand by them now.

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