



Founded by Pandit Nardev Vedalankar (1985)

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SCHOOLS ARE SACRED

Burn a school, burn the future

The nation reacted in disbelief at the sight of lecture rooms, an auditorium and campus control centre being set alight during the #Fees Must Fall protest earlier this year. Further shock followed by the events in Vuwani, Limpopo, where the community burnt more than 25 schools in an organised manner to protest against the town being demarcated into a new municipality. The cost of this wanton destruction is more than R500million, which must now be taken away from other priorities for social development. This money could have been spent on improving education facilities, but will now have to be spent on rebuilding schools and replacing learning materials. The government doesn't have the money for this unplanned and unnecessary cost.

The cost in terms of the future of the 60 000 pupils directly affected is immeasurable. When you burn a school, you burn the future of the children. The psychological damage to learners to see their schools go up in smoke will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Whatever the grievance, it does not justify the burning of schools and institutions of learning to express anger and frustration. It is difficult to understand how members of the community can jeopardize the futures of their own children in such a destructive way.

Education – a basic human right

South Africa can be justifiably proud as it has one of the most progressive and democratic Constitutions in the world. Section 29 of our Constitution states, "Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education; and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible."



So the burning of schools and destruction of university property has a direct negative impact on children to realise their right to basic education. Learners are being robbed of the opportunity to feed their young, curious minds with information that will equip them for life. If good seeds are not planted in the formative years, the child will grow up at a disadvantage to handle the challenges of a fast-changing and demanding world. Formal education has the potential to mould the child's mind to be creative, always enquiring, whilst at the same time laying firm foundations for lifelong learning.

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Education should be a means to empower children and adults as well, to become active change agents in society. Learning should also focus on the values, attitudes and behaviours which enable

individuals to learn and to live harmoniously in a very diverse world.

One of the biggest challenges facing the country today is the shortage of skills in key sectors of the economy. It is the function of business to create jobs and stimulate economic growth, but increasing numbers of school leavers are simply not employable as they don't know how to communicate effectively and don't have the

required skills for the job market. The result is high unemployment, frustration, growing poverty and a very unequal society, which is a recipe for social unrest.

“The highest education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes our lives in harmony with all existence - Tagore”

School culture today

Every year after the matric results are announced, a list of the non-performing schools is prepared. There are many ‘dysfunctional schools’, where the pass rate is zero or close to that. In these schools, the culture of teaching and learning has collapsed. Schools are places of learning, and this implies they are required to promote this culture amongst the community of learners. Discipline and rules are part of creating this culture of teaching and learning. Evidence shows that to bring discipline to bear on teachers and learners, regular attendance, punctuality and acceptance of authority is proving to be very challenging. Learners visiting shebeens in school uniforms and a lack of interest in learning have become commonplace in a number of schools.

A number of factors have led to this breakdown, viz. vandalism, gangsterism, drug abuse, a high drop-out rate, poor academic performance and demotivated learners. A culture of violence has taken root at some schools and this prevents effective learning from taking place. Learners believe that violence is acceptable and normal behaviour.

On the other hand, there are some schools which have a sense of pride in neatness, good attendance, punctuality and the efficient use of meagre resources. The difference seems to have been made where principals, teachers and parents actively participate in establishing a caring environment where a culture of learning can take root.

What the Vedas say

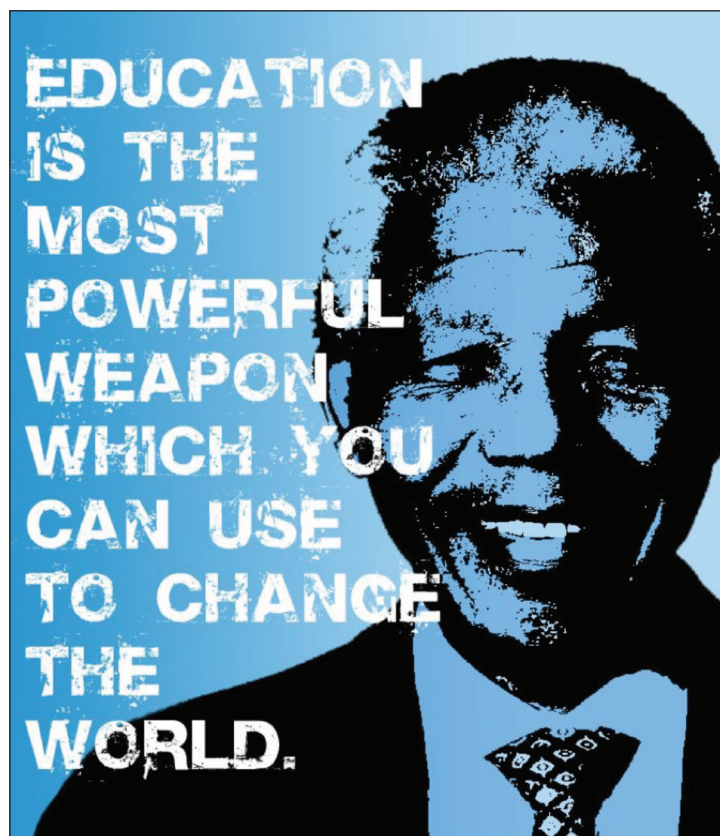
The Vedas, meaning knowledge, were revealed at the dawn of time for the benefit of mankind. Knowledge opens an individual’s inner eye, flooding him with divine and spiritual light, which equips him for the journey through life. Knowledge protects an individual like a mother and inspires him to follow the path of good conduct like a father. There are various features of Vedic education which can be applied to the modern education system. Rabindranath Tagore said the highest education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes our lives in harmony with all existence. Education is a purposeful activity. Through Vedic ideals certain desirable

changes can be brought about in the learners and students. In ancient India, the ideal of life was for one to get spiritual enlightenment. Educating children during Vedic times was geared to enable them to achieve this ideal of self-realization. The teacher was expected to have full control over his senses and then impart knowledge to his pupils. Whilst receiving education, pupils were also expected to have control over their senses. The very word ‘acharya’ (teacher) is a title of deep respect and indicates that the conduct of the imparter of the knowledge is exemplary.

We can also use various aspects of Vedic education to bring about certain changes in our modern society. These would include the following:

Moral Education

As outlined above, schools are facing major challenges in the form of behavioural problems of learners and how teachers should deal with them. Schools are not fully aware of how and when moral values should be taught to the learners. Man is a social animal and he has to learn different social habits like respect for elders and teachers, helping the poor and respect for women. Vedic education was based on moral values and strong emphasis was given to moral education. If we really want a better society with decent and pious people, then moral education should be made the prime tool for changing the nature of learners. It would not be out of order to reintroduce the subject of ‘Right Living’ to be taught formally to learners on a regular basis and not just as a ‘once off’ item.



Lessons would need to be spread over prolonged periods in order for learners to gradually internalise the lessons learnt.

Discipline

In Vedic times, learners always followed the principle of simple living and high thinking. Today, it is clear that the modern generation has adopted the reverse - simple thinking and high living. In Vedic times, learners regarded their teachers as their own fathers. During this period there was a very good mutual understanding between teacher and learner. The sense of discipline and the cordial relationship between teacher and pupil of Vedic age is legendary. Today, ill-discipline in many schools has become the norm. However, teachers can impress upon learners that any worthy achievement in life is only possible through disciplined study and dedicated, focused training. The teachings of ancient martial arts masters and modern sports coaches, where students dedicated themselves totally to the teacher's will, can be cited as examples which can yield good results.



Simple living, high thinking

Curriculum

In the Vedic period, education was not only for acquisition of knowledge but its main aim was character-building. The learner was prepared for the challenges of this world. The curricula at contemporary institutions are totally different. The ultimate aim of modern education is to prepare the student for the world of work. Education is something which should make a man self-reliant and self-less. The Atharva Veda states that through his explorations the pupil makes the earth and heaven more and more useful for himself and humanity. With the power of his simple and disciplined life, the pupil fulfils the aspirations of his teacher. It is clear that a pupil is expected to know about all objects from the sky to earth. Modern curricula mainly teach about the physical or material sciences. There must be a balance between physical and metaphysical or spiritual subjects taught at schools.

Dr. Radhakrishnan has rightly said: "A civilization is not built of bricks, steel and machinery, it is built with men, their quality and character. So the true aim of education is to develop in the body and in soul, all the beauty and all perfection of which they are capable."

Life of Students

In the Vedic age, students were allowed to lead simple lives. Nowadays, the life style of the young generation has altogether changed and there is

much emphasis on fashion, show and competition. The preoccupation with material things, designer clothing and latest gadgets, like cell phones, are placing much pressure on parents financially, and learners themselves to constantly want the best. Instead of the primary focus of a student's life being to learn and acquire knowledge, attention is diverted to these other unproductive pursuits.

"In Vedic times, learners followed the principle of simple living and high thinking."

The whole balance of life and order is disturbed. In order to make their lives healthy and less complicated, learners should be

exposed to the wisdom of the ancient way of life. Pupils led simple lives free from excessive material comforts and clothing and instead concentrated on improving their minds for the life ahead. The learners must be made to understand that a sacrifice now will lead onto greater rewards later. Although instant gratification is the order of the day, learners must be made to appreciate the wisdom of 'a sacrifice now will lead onto greater things later'. Suitable literature illustrating this very point can form part of the curriculum.

Education for Self sufficiency

The Upanishad, a Hindu holy text, says the end product of education is salvation. Education, according to Indian tradition is not merely a means of earning a living, nor is it only a nursery of thought or a school for citizenship. It is the initiation of human souls in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue. The ancient schools followed the principle of education for self-sufficiency. Modern education lays stress upon preparing students for their future lives. Vocational subjects have been included in the curriculum in order to make education a preparation for a career. However, literature with stories imparting great moral lessons and of heroes and heroines showing character should be made compulsory learning subjects. Rather than

imparting a set list of competencies or training for a specific discipline, education should prepare students to think critically and be alive to the opportunities they will undoubtedly encounter in their lives. The typical habits of a learning mind are curiosity, courage, exploration and investigation, reason and discipline, imagination and reflection. It is the job of teachers to provide an environment where these habits can be nurtured and expressed freely.



Prayer & meditation helps with better grades

Enlightened education

Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher and social reformer, believed schools should "Receive children in reverence, educate them in love and let them go forth in freedom". This is a beautiful ideal which all schools should aspire to. The school should be a place where learners go below the surface of things and grow deeper in understanding. Learners should be encouraged to be unafraid of uncertainty and complexity and say, "We don't know.....Let's find out". The new culture of education should also encourage learners to learn from each other and appreciate different ways of looking at things. Each culture has something unique and worthwhile to offer learners in their journeys of life. Such learning takes place within the classroom and school environment in general.

Studies should be integrated to enable learners to reach across traditional subjects and see their relationships. For example, history, literature, and art can be interwoven and studied together. Integrated studies enable subjects to be investigated using many forms of knowledge and expression, as literacy skills are expanded beyond the traditional focus on words and numbers to include graphics, colour, music, and motion.

Some tips for better education

Cultivate an attitude of Gratitude

Teachers can put up a gratitude poster/gratitude board in the classroom which learners can write on. A theme like, "Things We Are Grateful For"

would encourage learners to think about the blessings in their lives, rather than focus constantly on what they don't have or been deprived of. This simple action provides the opportunity to develop an appreciation for people and things that affect their lives. Such an attitude will lead learners to become more caring adults.

Prayer and Meditation

Prayer should not be a mechanical repetition of verses from a religious text. Prayer follows a certain pattern or order, and teachers should explain this structure to learners to make it more effective and meaningful. Meditation has become an absolute necessity in this world of frantic haste and busyness. It has been scientifically proven that learners who meditate are able to cope better with their studies.

"The Butterfly Effect"

This idea suggests that everything is connected, to the extent that "the beating of a butterfly's wings in one part of the world may ultimately contribute to a tornado happening in another part of the world". We must acknowledge the impact of individuals on the environment. Small changes can make a huge difference. Learners should be made to understand their contributions, and should not be seen as small and insignificant but ones that do make a difference.

"Learners who meditate are able to cope better with their studies."

Education is a Three-Way Street

Learners, teachers and parents must work together for the common objective of imparting a quality, holistic education. The key to this partnership is to maintain good communication and promote team spirit amongst the parties at all times. Most of us learn early in life that, when in a team of any sort, we are only as strong as our weakest player, so everyone has to play his part well.

Reference

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- Palm Stationery Manufactures, Phoenix Industrial Park
- Standard Printers, Springfield Park, Tel: 031 579 7400

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PBO No. 18/11/13/297