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CONTENTS

| Sr. No. | Author | Title of the Paper | Page No. |
|---------|--|---|----------|
| 1 | Chiya Parvizpur & Fazel Asadi Amjad | The Unconscious Criticality of Wright's Native Son to Capitalism | 1 |
| 2 | B.A. Tina Zahel & Prof. Dr. Franz Josef Gellert | Ageing Workers in SMEs and the Influence on Corporate's Internationalization | 12 |
| 3 | Mimita Sachdeva | Life Skills and the Autistic Child | 26 |
| 4 | Talluri Mathew Bhaskar | The Fire and the Rain: A Myth Retold | 29 |
| 5 | Dr. Ankita Khanna | Assessments beyond Writing: An Attempt to Provide a Fair Chance to the Learners | 44 |
| 6 | Dr. Meetakshi Pant | Total Factor Productivity and Financial Structure of Steel Industry | 49 |
| 7 | Ashish Kumar | Carelessness of Man's Mind: a Study of Albert Camus's the Stranger | 62 |
| 8 | Dr. Manju Lalwani Pathak | Debunking the image of Sindhis as Refugees | 68 |
| 9 | Rita Malache | Approaches of tribal development: A critical Perspective | 72 |
| 10 | Prof. Dr. Patil Vijaykumar Ambadasrao | Wendy Wasserstein's An American Daughter: An Analysis | 82 |

| | | | |
|----|---|--|-----|
| | | | |
| 11 | Dr. Khandekar Surendra Sakhar | Portrayal of Relations and Globalization in Kiran Desai's Novel 'The Inheritance of Loss' | 89 |
| 12 | Dr. Rakseh Rai | A Study of Social Intelligence among College Students of Tura (West Garo Hills) in Meghalaya | 95 |
| 13 | Prof. Vijay D. Songire | Male Sufferers in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Sula and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things | 109 |
| 14 | Prof. R.Y. Shinde & Dr. Archana Durgesh | Vijay Tendulkar's His Fifth Woman: A Brief Introduction | 116 |
| 15 | Prof. (Dr) Mala Tandon | Alternate Schooling and Teacher Education: Issues, Challenges and Priorities | 122 |
| 16 | Dr. J. Thirumaran | A study on three leading stochastic Optimization methods in simulation | 130 |
| 17 | Dr Tanu Tandon Mr. Durgesh Pathak | Media and Education: Pathways to End Women Violence | 135 |
| 18 | K. Ravi Sankar & Dr. V. B. Chithra | The Inner Awareness of the Human Soul: A Study of the Apprentice | 139 |
| 19 | Dr. Vitthal V. Parab | A Socio-Literary Perspective in the Novels of Jhumpa Lahiri & Bharati Mukherjee | 147 |

Alternate Schooling and Teacher Education: Issues, Challenges and Priorities**Prof. (Dr) Mala Tandon***Dy. Director, Amity Institute of Education, Amity University, Lucknow, (U.P.) India,***Abstract**

Alternative-education programs can alter the culture and basic ground rules that can stifle change in conventional public education. For three decades their pioneers have been creating personalized, flexible learning environments for students who are “at risk” of not completing high school. And their tremendous growth and high levels of student and parent satisfaction help make the case for having a conscious policy of creating new and different schools to improve student outcomes. Teachers play a larger role in establishing the culture of alternative programs. With their role in governance they are able to establish small classes, individualized curriculum including integration of education, provision for employment and social service. They set a culture that values personal relationships with students and recognize their extended roles in understanding and responding effectively to problems of students outside school which are affecting their classroom performance. Teachers function as ‘extended families’ and care about their social and emotional problems helping them to adjust and maintain their learning schedules during tough times. However the path of alternative schooling for teachers in our traditional set-up is not an easy one, there are varied issues and challenges which the teachers face and which also need to be dealt in teacher education. Teachers and teacher education need to prioritize these issues and challenges. In the present paper efforts have been made to define the issues, challenges and priorities concerned with alternative schooling and teacher education.

Key Words: Alternate Schooling, Teacher Education, Challenges, Priorities, Teachers, Alternative Education

Educational Institutions: Their Need and Types

Schools are academic institutions dedicated to the imparting of knowledge among the students and are also organizations that encourage the development of the personality and psychology of the child. Therefore it is natural that the schools play a very fundamental role in the growth of the child or the student and therefore school education is essential and a right of every child. If one follows the mode of education in a traditional school, the students are required to visit the school at a particular

time of the day following a pre-given routine and then spend a few hours in the school. Schools are not only to convey educational knowledge but at the same time also encourage other forms of extracurricular activities as well.

In general the schools follow a set curriculum which is devised in keeping with the motto of the school and in most schools the means of imparting education are more or less similar.

However, there are certain educational institutions that encourage the usage of

newer innovative modes and techniques in order to make the educational experience an exciting one instead of the usual monotonous way of learning. Such schools are popularly referred to as **alternative schools or mini schools**. In most cases, it has been observed that these alternative schools follow a different pattern of educational curriculum than those practiced commonly in the traditional schools and these study programs are not as rigid as those of the traditional schools. Since they are more flexible, the amount of pressure on the child is also lesser.

Importance of Alternative Schools: Reasons for Existence

Alternative schools were introduced in the United States of America in the seventh decade of the 19th century and during these years the main purpose of setting up these alternative schools was to ensure that there could be established a different mode of learning moving away from the traditions and consciousness of the traditional schooling system. Many of these alternative schools provided extremely philosophical and scholarly orientations while some were dipped in political color. But in all cases, there were certain innovative features being introduced for the cause of imparting education.

It is to be noted that in the United States of America especially, the term alternative school has been used as a broad term and there are many educational institutions which fall under its umbrella like the independent schools, home schooling etc. It can also at times refer to institutions providing alternative education. Special

schools which are dedicated to the service of students having psychological disorders or behavioral problems are also included under this category.

Alternative schools attracted many educators, students and parents. Some parents were rather satisfied in alternative schools. Alternative Schools are started to provide options to the traditional model to serve the educational needs within the community. They have more comprehensive goals than traditional schools and are usually smaller than comprehensive high schools.

Meaning of Alternative Education

Alternative education is an approach to education with a philosophy and style which differs from that of mainstream education. There are a number of alternative forms of education, geared at a wide variety of students, and many nations have some option available for people who want it, especially in urban areas. Some people refer to this type of education as “nontraditional education,” to emphasize the fact that it does not use traditional practices.

Alternative education, also known as **non-traditional education** or **educational alternative**, includes a number of approaches to teaching and learning separate from what is offered by mainstream or traditional education.

The focal point of alternative education is school choice. In communities without alternative options for education, students generally only have one school which they can attend, in contrast with communities in which students can explore multiple schools and educational paths. This type of education also does not have to occur in the

classroom. Home-based learning, apprenticeships, and independent study are all forms of alternative learning.

In many cases, alternative educational principles are aimed at particular types of students. Some focus on at-risk youth, while others provide college-track programs, or schools with a heavy focus on environmental ethics, social responsibility, or other philosophical approaches. Many religious schools are also alternative forms of education, especially in secular countries.

The practice of alternative education is certainly not a new thing, and some very venerable academic institutions were actually originally founded as education resources for people who disliked the conventional school system.

Educational alternatives are often rooted in various philosophies that are fundamentally different from those of mainstream or traditional education. While some alternatives have strong political, scholarly, or philosophical orientations, others are started by informal associations of teachers and students dissatisfied with some aspects of mainstream or traditional education. Educational alternatives, which include charter schools, alternative schools, independent schools, and home based learning vary widely, but often emphasize the values of small class sizes, close relationships between students and teachers and a strong sense of community

Alternative Education, a program that exists to meet the needs of students that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom setting but through the assignment of students to alternative classrooms, centers, or campuses

that are designed to remediate academic performance, improve behavior, or provide an enhanced learning experience. Alternative education programs do not include career or technical centers or departments.

Alternative-education programs can alter the culture and basic ground rules that can stifle change in conventional public education. For three decades their pioneers have been creating personalized, flexible learning environments for students who are “at risk” of not completing high school. And their tremendous growth and high levels of student and parent satisfaction help make the case for having a conscious policy of creating new and different schools to improve student outcomes.

Alternative Schooling in India

In India, from the early 20th century, some educational theorists discussed and implemented radically different forms of education. Rabindranath Tagore’s Visva-Bharti University and Sri Aurobindo’s Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education are prime examples. In recent years many new alternative schools have formed.

The traditional system of learning in India was for students to stay in Gurukuls where they received free food, shelter, and education from a “guru” (“teacher” in Sanskrit). Progress was not based on examinations and marks; tests were given by the gurus but not ranks. This system aimed to nurture the students' natural creativity and all-round personality development. While the mainstream education system in India is still based on that introduced by Lord Macaulay a few projects aim to rejuvenate

the early system, Some students in these and similar projects take up research work in the field of Sanskrit studies, Vedic studies, Vedic Science, Yoga and Ayurveda. Others after completing their education in a Gurukula continue into regular mainstream education such as Bachelor degrees in Commerce, Science, and Engineering etc

The Culture of Learning in Alternative Forms of Education

In its broadest sense Alternative Education covers all educational activities that fall outside the traditional school system. The techniques and methods adopted for optimum development of children are also planned and utilized in accordance with the kind of experiences, skills and qualities desired to be developed. The culture of any learning environment can be estimated by reviewing the following-

- a) concept of the learner as well as the techniques and methods of learning adopted,
- b) the learning environment
- c) the role of teacher

In the Alternative Education, the culture of learning is as defined:

a) The Conception of the Learner : techniques and methods of learning adopted:

All alternative models of education perceive and organize learning as an active process based on needs and interests of individual students, their conception of learner can be defined as-

Children are viewed as competent beings capable of self-directed learning who learn naturally and in a different way from adults,

through interaction with their environment. During different developmental phases children go through different sensitive periods when they are open to learning specific skills. During early years, learning is sensory based, experiential and imitative. Learning by doing is considered most effective.

Focus on developing children's emotional life, artistic expression, intellectual understanding, capacity for abstract and conceptual thinking and moral judgment, attitudes and skills, intrinsic motivation, sense of responsibility and compassion for wider world and community and develop their capacity for leadership. This can be done through integrated and partially self-initiated projects and active social responsibility through community service. Students are encouraged to select their own work and to continue work on chosen projects over spans of hours, days, weeks and months. The students are visualized as a self-responsible, intrinsically motivated individual who plan their own schedules of working and learning. They set their own goals, acquire skills, their persistence, creativity, self-evaluation of progress, time management and leadership development. Schools ensure that children always work at their individual level of competence and their individual needs are taken into account to assist the child to identify their next steps in learning.

b) The Learning Environment

The learning environments in Alternative Schooling are set up to put the learner centre platform, to provide a wide array of learning resources and to facilitate individual as well

as collaborative learning. Since Alternative Education tends to emphasize the interrelation between effective learning and the individual's emotional well-being, they often pay attention to the aesthetic side of learning environments. Efforts are to educate the whole human being –“Head, Heart and Hands” through an integrated curriculum emphasizing imagination, the set-up of class reflects creative and artistic approaches to learning. The systematic display of students' works is a core feature of many alternative learning environments. As children learn through discovery, the learning material is self-contained, ICT learning opportunities are also included .

The environment enhances flexibility in learning pace and creates a non-competitive atmosphere of mutual learning and support allowing children to teach others by sharing what they have learnt. Alternative Education gives institutions considerable freedom to students to choose learning activities they desire or feel the need to do, therefore it also uses the community as a deliberate extension to the classroom where students use community resources including people, natural resources and cultural institutions enrich their own learning.

c) The Role of Teachers

The status of teacher reflects the socio-cultural ethos of the society. Teachers play a very important role as transmitters, inspirers and promoter of an individuals' eternal quest for knowledge. The importance of competent teachers to the nation's school system can in no way be overemphasized.

Teachers play a larger role in establishing the culture of alternative programs. With

their role in governance they are able to establish small classes, individualized curriculum including integration of education, provision for employment and social service. They set a culture that values personal relationships with students and recognize their extended roles in understanding and responding effectively to problems of students outside school which are affecting their classroom performance. Teachers function as 'extended families' and care about their social and emotional problems helping them to adjust and maintain their learning schedules during tough times. However the path of alternative schooling for teachers in our traditional set-up is not an easy one, there are varied issues and challenges which the teachers face and which also need to be dealt in teacher education. Teachers and teacher education need to prioritize these issues and challenges.

It is very well known that the quality and extent of learner enhancement are determined primarily by teacher competence, sensitivity and teacher motivation. Teachers serve as role models and resources. The teacher is required to focus on those teaching strategies which acknowledge and support what children do well in, and to use these strengths of children in areas of weakness. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the lessons requested by the child are in accordance with his needs

As all models of alternative education are learner focused, teachers are much more than mere agents of curriculum delivery. The teacher's role ranges from being a coach who can be a provider, organizer and

manager of customized learning in experiential learning environments. In individual one to one sessions, the teachers' help the children understand their own learning and motivation and set aims for themselves.

It is the teachers' responsibility to work at a balance between support and intrusion and to know when not to interfere with the child's activity. Teachers are to recognize and follow up the child's interests and needs and when appropriate, to assist the child in articulating these.

Role of teachers is also to focus on the students' emotional and ethical development and to prepare a stimulating learning environment. Teachers arrange challenging experiences, in which learners are able to take initiatives, make decisions and are accountable for results.

Teachers are required to contribute more than just the subject area they are expert in. Teachers are responsible to ensure that assessment processes are non-invasive and do not produce anxiety.

Teaching and Teacher Education

Teaching and teacher education are at the center of the educational enterprise. The development of young people in our society depends on the skill, knowledge, and caring of practicing professionals. Attending to the quality of schooling is fundamental to concerns for equity, opportunity, and the growth of human potential. In recent years, both teaching and the professional education designed to develop it have come under fire. Teaching and teacher education prepares accomplished scholars, teachers, and leaders

with the knowledge and skill to develop and improve practice in disciplined ways.

Teaching and Teacher Education take a common set of core courses, dealing with the practice and scholarship of teaching and teacher education and policy contexts of professional education. They also select electives from other areas, and from programs and departments outside the School of Education. While some focus on teaching and teacher education in particular school subjects, others consider issues common across subject matter boundaries. In addition, the students are engaged in a practicum experience in teacher education on campus and in schools to provide focused opportunities to learn to use what they are learning in programs of teacher education. Teacher Education faculty is engaged in a wide variety of projects, within the school and nationally and internationally. Hence, myriad opportunities exist for students going to be teachers, to gain professional knowledge and skill through their involvement in these projects.

Teacher Education and its relevance in Alternative Education

Teachers are central to the quality of students' opportunities to learn in schools. Teaching is a complex practice, requiring substantial knowledge and skill, and involving relationships not only with learners, but with other professionals, parents, and community members. Debates over professionalism of teaching and about the challenges of equity and diversity has shaped teacher education as a field today

The study of teaching and teacher education is rooted in close attention to the demands

and nature of practice. Faculty members also investigate a variety of contexts for teacher development, from formal programs of teacher education and professional development, to the organization of schools and teacher networks and groups. Opportunities to learn more about teaching, about teacher learning and teacher development, and about professional education are the cornerstones of programs in Teaching and Teacher Education.

Global upsurge for universal education, explosion of knowledge, expectation and aspirations for better quality of life have led to the exploration of alternatives to formal system which suffers from inherent inadequacies of rigidity and structural deficiencies. These alternatives include non-formal education, adult education, distance education, etc. While a good deal of work has been undertaken to spread and improve education through various alternatives, a major problem has been lack of trained functionaries. However, these functionaries cannot be prepared on the formal models of teacher preparation. Since they are required to perform functions of different nature, their training essentially has to be job-specific. Developing skills, competencies and commitments in the personnel involved in alternative strategies demand preparation and use of teaching and learning materials to be specifically designed for the programmes.

Alternative Schooling and Teacher Education: Issues, Challenges and Priorities

Keeping in mind the **issues** concerning Alternative Education like – concept of learner, type of environment and activities in

Alternative Schooling, effect on target groups-i.e.-students, parents, teachers and community, future benefits for target groups, involvement of resources of man, money, material and management., provisions to be arranged for etc. and the respective **challenges** faced by authorities providing alternative education, students receiving or opting for it, teachers and teacher educators and other stake holders like parents, community, and society at large.—The need to prioritize the priorities concerned which can be defined for alternative schools as well as Teacher Education, need to be revised and re-revised so that Alternative Education and Schooling can be well integrated with Teacher Education and Training in order to provide better improved opportunities to students ‘at risk’ as well as other students who opt for Alternative education programs.

Teachers need to be oriented and trained in accordance with the requirements of Alternative Schools in areas of Methods, Techniques, Environment creation. All issues related to inclusive education, perspectives for equitable and sustainable development, gender perspectives, of community knowledge in education and ICT in schooling as well as learning in Alternative Schools along with traditional schools need to be addressed.

The country has to address the need of supplying well qualified and professionally trained teachers in large numbers. The length of academic preparation, the level and quality of subject matter knowledge, the repertoire of pedagogical skills the teachers possess to the needs of diverse learning situations, the degree of

commitment to the profession, sensitivity to contemporary issues and problems as also to learners and the level of motivation critically influence the quality of curriculum transaction in the classrooms and alternative school systems and thereby pupil learning and the larger processes of social transformation.

Initial teacher education has a major part to play in making of a teacher. The teacher must be equipped not only to teach but also to understand the students and the community of parents so that children can learn as per their and interests and teachers can actually help the students as 'extended families'.

Conclusion

Teacher Education and Alternative Schooling: The Need of the Hour:

Alternative Schooling requires teachers who are efficient and effective enough to establish the culture of alternate education programs and develop personalities of students they come in contact with, helping them to adjust in their surroundings- familial, professional and social.

In our traditional set-up –the path of alternative education is not an easy one for

teachers as they have to be prepared for multi-tasking and provide quality, personalized education to students, some of whom are 'at risk' students too. This demands greater devotion and training in dealing with such situations. The teacher needs to be equipped with all those skills which he requires to work in set-ups which are different from traditional ones and yet very demanding in terms of skills to deal with critical issues relating to students and Alternate Schooling.

Teacher Education should be so designed and provided to future teachers which enable and equip them to meet the demands of the stake holders. The teacher training and education should include all those components which help in preparing teachers for Alternative Schools.

With the government firm that a teacher's qualification must be standardized under the RTE Act, bigger "alternative schools" have fallen in line with the NCTE's prescription while the smaller ones are looking at the prospect of closing down.

It is thus required that those in authority should priorities the Issues and Challenges as related to Alternative Schooling as well as Teacher Education.

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