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Educational Paradigms in Earth's Global Village



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"It takes a village to raise a child," claims an African proverb. "The world is a global village," many have declared, especially since the advent of the World Wide Web. "Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime," Confucius taught. "With the world illiteracy rate at 16.3 percent,¹ the global village is not adequately educating its people," note I.

Why? Children enter the world with curiosity, and they learn from their families and neighbors: to read books, to read nature, or to become street smart; to love or to hate; to foster peace or to fight; to explore the world or, bully-like, drag others down into diminishing mentality.

At the global level, world leaders have directed much effort to eradicate illiteracy. The United Nations' #2 Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is to "Achieve Universal Primary Education" by 2015. The current status, according to a UN web site, is that "primary education in developing regions reached 90 percent in 2010, up from 82 percent in 1999" and that "gender gaps in youth literacy rates are also narrowing." However, "In 2010, 61 million children of primary school age were still out of school," with the majority of them living in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. Even with "large strides" made by "countries with the toughest challenges, progress on primary school enrollment has slowed since 2004, dimming hopes for achieving universal primary education by 2015."²

This goal relates to MDG #4 to "Reduce Child Mortality," which promotes education of mothers whose children "are more likely to survive than children of mothers with no education."³

Similarly, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) created a Programme for the Education of Children in Need, which, according to UNESCO's web site, is "to offer a future to vulnerable children through education." Since its inception in 1992, the programme has generated more than 40 million U.S. dollars to fund over 400 projects in 97 countries.⁴

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is, according to its web site, "committed to ensuring that all children—regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background or circumstances—realize their right to a quality education." UNICEF's programmes and initiatives "focus on the world's most

1 "List of countries by literacy rate," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_literacy_rate, cited March 27, 2013

2 "Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education," United Nations, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/education.shtml>, cited March 27, 2013

3 "Goal 4: Reduce Child Mortality," United Nations, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/childhealth.shtml>, cited March 27, 2013

4 "Programme for the Education of Children in Need," UNESCO, Social and Human Services, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/fight-against-discrimination/education-of-children-in-need/>, cited March 27, 2013

excluded and vulnerable children, including girls, the disabled, ethnic minorities, the rural and urban poor, victims of conflict and natural disasters, and children affected by HIV and AIDS.”⁵

These measures show that, at least, the United Nations is paying attention to every person's need for and right to quality education. So, why do disappointing statistics still exist? Why can 163 people out of every 1000 still not read even their native languages? Apparently, in some places between the local village and the global stratum, the educational system is breaking down. Where?

Statistics and stories indicate that the problem occurs within legislative jurisdictions—nations, states, provinces, districts—where geographic breadth is too large to foster individual care and political viewpoints are too narrow to care about the world at large.

One example comes from the State of Alabama within the United States, where I lived in the 1970s. This was in the waning days of the Civil Rights Movement. Children of African-American descent were then enrolled in schools, both classrooms and bathrooms were integrated, but segregationist George Wallace (1919–1998) was still the governor of Alabama.

I knew families who lived in a new, all-white subdivision on the outskirts of the City of Montgomery. These children's homes were within walking distance of their school, but the school was on the opposite side of a four-lane, divided U.S. highway, and the Montgomery school system would not provide a bus to safely transport the children to and from school. The neighborhood protested in dramatic ways, bringing their situation to statewide attention.

One evening, Governor George Wallace himself telephoned one vocal couple and told them that the school district wouldn't provide a bus for the white children because it would set an undesirable precedent. The Governor explained that while state law entitled all children to receive an education, those who live within a certain distance of their schools were not given bus transportation. The law stated that these children, such as blacks in inner-city Montgomery, were therefore not required to attend school. The Governor's message, in effect, was: "If we provide a bus for your white kids, we'll have to provide a bus for the black kids—and we don't want to do that."

This is just one story of an all too prevalent mindset of some governmental leaders who, still today, choose to advocate for the limitations of inequitable social and educational status quo rather than advance the literacy rate and general well-being of those who live within their legislative district.

⁵ "UNICEF priorities," UNICEF, Basic education and gender equality, http://www.unicef.org/education/bege_61625.html, cited March 27, 2013

Fortunately, history also provides us with uplifting stories. One of those comes from the nation of Turkey and educational advocate Mustafa Kemal (1881–1938), founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey. Because of his military valor in wars to end the lingering influence of the ancient Ottoman Empire as well as his political leadership, Turkey's Grand National Assembly formally gave him the name Ataturk—"Father of the Turks"—in 1934.⁶

When Mustafa Kemal took office in 1923, his goal was to modernize Turkey. He set his focus on education, which he regarded as the force that would galvanize the nation in social and economic development.⁷ His initiative included establishment of a new Turkish alphabet, based on removal of Arabic script and adoption of the Latin alphabet.⁸

Under Ataturk's leadership, education was declared to be free, secular, co-educational, and compulsory for all children from grade school through graduate school. He personally instructed in classrooms, parks, and other public places.⁹ On April 23, 1929, the Turkish Grand National Assembly acted on Ataturk's proposal and decreed that day as a national holiday for children, making Turkey the first nation to celebrate an official Children's Day—a tradition that continues today.¹⁰

In his personal life, Ataturk adopted seven daughters and one son and took two more children under his protection. He died in Istanbul, while still in office, on November 10, 1938; his body is entombed in Anitkabir, the Ataturk Mausoleum.¹¹

In my country, I find a mix of stories and statistics. The U.S., with its statement of "liberty and justice for all," seems to believe in quality education for its entire populace—and many have excelled, but universal education was not always the case as cited by the Montgomery, Alabama, story above and preceding situations that deprived African-American slave children of a formal education. The U.S. also has an infamous history of preventing Native American children from practicing their indigenous languages and customs. Even today, many educators decry federally legislated testing standards that, they say, get in the way of a quality education and classroom discipline.

In other countries, limiting paradigms have caused certain books to be banned because of their political, religious, or moral content, and book burning is a

6 Burak Sansal, "Ataturk's reforms," All about Turkey, <http://www.allaboutturkey.com/reform.htm>, cited March 27, 2013

7 "Mustafa Kemal Ataturk," Columbia University, <http://www.columbia.edu/~sss31/Turkiye/ata/hayati.html>, cited March 27, 2013

8 "Ataturk's Reforms," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atat%C3%BCrk's_Reforms, cited March 27, 2013

9 "Mustafa Kemal Ataturk," Columbia University, <http://www.columbia.edu/~sss31/Turkiye/ata/hayati.html>, cited March 27, 2013

10 "National Sovereignty and Children's Day," Turkish Coalition of America, <http://www.tc-america.org/issues-information/turkish-history/national-sovereignty-and-childrens-day-678.htm>, cited March 27, 2013

11 "Ataturk, Founder of the Turkish Republic and the First President of the Republic," www.goturkey.com, <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN,31350/biography-of-ataturk.html>, cited March 27, 2013

technique used, historically, to force the populace to march to a particular government-approved beat.

International interference with education is happening currently in Tibet where the occupying Chinese forces are attempting—and, to a great extent, succeeding—to obliterate the Tibetan Buddhist language, culture, and religion. Many Tibetans, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, have fled into nearby India. More than 100 monks, nuns, and notable civilians who remained in Tibet have set themselves ablaze in a statement of protest against the Chinese, a loss of life and knowledge.

In recent years, I've had the privilege to travel extensively in India, live among the people there, write stories, and help to author a book about education. I see India as a political entity in which national leaders express concern about educational quality while the government itself does little to improve education and local adults dedicate themselves to educate children in urban slums and poor rural villages.

India is one of eight nations in the world where over two-thirds of the world's 793 million illiterate adults, most of them women, reside. The illiteracy rate in India is more than 25 % overall, with 18 % of men and 35% of women unable to read.¹² Various Internet sites offer more statistics, observations, commentary, questions, and suggestions.

In 2007, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh assessed the country's university system as being "in a state of disrepair." He is quoted, "In almost half the districts in the country, higher education enrollments are abysmally low, almost two-thirds of our universities and 90 percent of our colleges are rated as below average on quality parameters." Singh cited politicization of university appointments and "complaints of favouritism and corruption."¹³

Among the stories coming from India are those of global villagers who flock from developed countries, bringing educational materials and humanitarian services for underprivileged peasant children. I met some of these educators in the Himalayas and in the city of Kolkata.

One is Rosalie Giffoniello of New Jersey, USA, co-founder of Empower The Children,¹⁴ a nonprofit that instituted, operates, and/or funds 13 educational or vocational programs in Kolkata. Rosalie also teaches once a week in most of these schools during the six months that she resides there each year.

Rosalie's endeavors in India began in 1994 when she taught English to Tibetan Buddhist nuns in MacLeod Ganj. In 1999, she volunteered for a summer at one of

12 "List of countries by literacy rate," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_literacy_rate, cited March 27, 2013

13 "Education in India," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_India, cited March 27, 2013

14 "Transforming Lives One Child at a Time," Empower The Children, www.empower-children.org, cited March 27, 2013

Mother Teresa's orphanages in Kolkata, an endeavor that she continued more extensively in 2000 and 2001 before diverting to help kids in even more schools, orphanages, and children's hospitals through Empower The Children.

Working with Rosalie to craft her book, *Reclaiming Lives*,¹⁵ which is about her ongoing work in Kolkata, I've come to see, first-hand, the panorama of education that exists in that city, surrounding villages, and other communities.

Yes, many children do receive a formal education from government-sponsored schools. These kids are recognizable by their plain-colored uniforms, dress shoes, and book backpacks. For the most part, they sit in desks arranged neatly in rank-and-file format in orderly classrooms and learn by rote.

But there's another prevalent side of education in Kolkata—the nonformal schools, which are often one-room buildings used at night by local men's groups for smoking and gossip. In nonformal schools, children don't wear uniforms, which they can't afford anyway. They park their flip-flops at the door and crowd onto the floor. They don't have books, and the only aids to learning are a few color picture posters and one or two small, wall-mounted slate boards on which teachers write with chalk. For some of these children, the hot, nutritious meal they receive in school is the only food they eat each day. Yet, at a young age, they are multi-lingual in Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, English and, often, a local dialect. Plus, the nonformal school curricula allows for theatrical and cultural programs not often found in the formal schools.

The nonformal school buildings are likely to have dirt floors, holes in slate roofs, few if any windows, a ceiling fan hung precariously with wire or twine from bamboo rafters, and frayed electrical wiring. In one Empower the Children school, Preyrona 2,¹⁶ the students number 70 to 90 and the teaching space is 24 feet by 24 feet, the size of a two-car garage in the Western world.¹⁷

These conditions are not because teachers, administrators, and funders don't care; this is all that's available for children who wouldn't otherwise receive any education at all. One school administrator, for example, told Rosalie that she's been waiting 25 years for the Indian government to fulfill a promise to build a new school building.

Fortunately, for the students at Preyrona 2, a better educational environment is coming, thanks to Empower The Children partnering with funding organizations in The Netherlands and Japan. The decrepit men's club has been torn down and a new

15 Robert M. Weir, "Reclaiming Lives" web page, <http://www.robertmweir.com/reclaiming-lives.html>, cited April 5, 2013

16 Preyrona (also spelled Praroyna) means "inspiration."

17 "Experiencing Life in Kolkata Through the Eyes of 8 Children," Empower The Children, Preyrona, www.preyrona.org, cited March 27, 2013

building is nearly complete. Even during construction, the desire to teach and learn was so strong that children attended classes whenever laborers were temporarily absent.

In the village of Khamargachi, one of the entities funded by the Netherlands-based philanthropic organization Help2Help¹⁸ is a school for children of laborers in a nearby brick factory. The school itself is a small temple with iron grillwork instead of walls. The children who attend this school often bring their unclothed baby siblings and hold them on their lap while they attempt to learn.

Willeke van Nieuwenhuijze, founder of Help2Help, works with Indian social worker and administrator Shelley Chatterjee. They note that the parents have been duped by brick factory owners who lured them from several hundred miles away with a promise of decent wages. Upon arrival, however, the working families were presented with exorbitant bills for travel expenses that they can't ever hope to repay. Illiterate, they know only what the factory owners tell them of their current debt. Shelley is determined to teach the children so they don't fall into this trap.

In the West Bengal village of Purulia, children who attend a school run by the Church of North India¹⁹ receive an education as well as a respite from their tiny mud huts. Some of these children are the beneficiaries of a new school hostel built with donations from the congregation of St. Martin of Tours Episcopal Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA. Since 2010, The Rev. Mary Perrin, pastor of St. Martin, and some of her congregants have come to Purulia as well as the affiliated community of Durgapur to meet and work with the students. With artistic talent and musical skills, these American visitors educate through entertainment, culminating their stay with a concert of song and dance in which all of the students participate. The evening is a gala event in a hall well-decorated with student art, most parents in the audience, and the children themselves dressed in their most colorful indigenous clothing.

Seth Shaffer of California, USA, created his organization, Harmony Through Education,²⁰ to provide a school and teachers for mentally challenged children in Dharamsala, the region of the Himalayan foothills where the Dalai Lama established the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in the 1950s. The enrollment at the Harmony Through Education school is 25 students with a waiting list that would nearly double the population if space, teachers, and funds were available. As is typical, the staff consists entirely of Indians who take great pride in the service they provide to their local youth.²¹

18 "Stichting Help2Help," <http://www.help-2-help.nl/> (in Dutch)

19 "Church of North India," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_North_India, cited March 27, 2013

20 "Harmony Through Education," <http://www.harmonythrougheducation.org/>, cited March 27, 2013

21 Robert M. Weir, "Harmony Through Education" travel blog,

http://www.robertmweir.com/mcleodganj.html#harmony_through_education_school, cited March 27, 2013

In MacLeod Ganj, the up-the-mountain sister community to Dharamsala, I also had the opportunity to educate.²² My students were four Tibetan Buddhist monks who lived in a monastery a few hundred yards from the Buddhist Main Temple and the official residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. My opportunity came courtesy of Barbara Kane who lives in California, USA. Barbara had come to MacLeod Ganj four months prior with the intention of staying only a few weeks. But when the occasion arose to teach the monks, she extended her visit to the maximum 180 days allowed by India's visa regulations. She taught them on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings. I offered to do the same on one Tuesday and Thursday during my only available week there, and I quickly learned the thrill of being an educator, albeit informally and for a short time.

Barbara had set a good foundation by using a textbook of words and phrases written in both the Tibetan language and English. For variety, I chose conversation as my teaching method. I started by asking the name of each monk and the name's meaning, being amazed at the prophetic accuracy of the elders who had named these men when they were only infants; the Geshe, for example, was Lobsang Khedup, a name that means "good heart professor" and perfectly matches both his personality and role.

From this simple exchange, one of the monks launched us into deep discussion by asking me about my religion. Using simple English, I attempted to explain Christianity to men who knew little about Jesus Christ. Then another asked about the difference between Buddhist God and Christian God. I stated that there was no difference, that God is Universal Love.

On my second night, one monk brought Internet stories, all in English, about monks and nuns in Tibet who had set themselves on fire in self-immolation to protest of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. I used the headlines to discern the synonymous characteristics of "afire," "ablaze," and "afire." Then I asked how they felt about Buddhist holy people taking their own lives, a question that led to even deeper philosophical discussion about karma, self-sacrifice, and soul evolution. On a lighter note, I ended the session with examples of formal and informal English: the difference between "please" and texting's "plz," between "thank you" and "thanks," between "you're welcome" and "no problem." It was an evening I will always remember.

In retrospect, I sense my brief inauguration into this world of education might be akin to what Mustafa Kemal Ataturk experienced during his times of informally teaching in public places. Perhaps it's similar to conversations that Socrates and Plato may have initiated with their students under the trees of ancient Greece and the parables put forth by Christ, Mohammad, Buddha, Ramakrishna, Confucius, and Lao Tzu. Not that I'm an educator of that ilk, but education through philosophical

²² Robert M. Weir, "Teaching Tibetan monks to speak English" travel blog, http://www.robertmweir.com/mcleodganj.html#teaching_tibetan_monks_to_speak_english, cited March 27, 2013

discussion is certainly an elevated, thought-provoking method of teaching and learning.

And it is that high desire to share information and seek understanding that all people must honor if we are to advance as a global village. Our ability to read and to express oral histories are humanity's connection to our past, the continuation of our living traditions, and the foundation for our fulfilling future. Our communications and conversations, whether in formal or informal classrooms, whether indoors or out in nature, are essential in order for us to create a more productive, more peaceful, more loving future with ourselves, with our brothers and sisters in our family and communities, and with our neighbors in Earth's global village. Education is our tool through which we can, together, raise ourselves and everyone to a higher level of information-sharing and understanding.

A Sampling of Literate and Illiterate Nations

Most of the world's illiterate adults reside in Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan. A sampling of national illiteracy rates are: Burkina Faso 78.2%; South Sudan 73.0%; Afghanistan 71.9%; Niger 71.3%; Mali 68.9%; Guinea 59%; Sierra Leone 54.9%; Ivory Coast 43.5%; Liberia 39.2%; India 25.96%; China 7.8%; Turkey 5.9%; Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Guam, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Monaco, Netherlands, North Korea, St. Pierre and Miquelon, Switzerland, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States 1%; Kazakhstan, Poland .5; Russia, Slovakia .4%; Samoa, Slovenia, Tajikistan .3%; Cuba, Estonia, Latvia .2%; Andorra, Greenland, Lichtenstein, Luxemburg, Norway 0% (total literacy). Tibet is no longer listed as being among the world's nations. "*List of countries by literacy rate*," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_literacy_rate, cited March 27, 2013

Robert M. Weir is a writer, author, speaker, book editor, and author's coach. His subjects are people, peace, social justice, environment, and international travel.

The book about education of Kolkata's children, mentioned in this article, is *Reclaiming Lives*, authored by Rosalie Giffoniello with Robert's assistance; it is currently a manuscript in the final stages of development while the co-authors seek a publisher. His previous books include *Cobble Creek* (short stories and poetry), *Brain Tumor* (medical memoir), *Peace, Justice, Care of Earth* (biography of John McConnell, founder of the original Earth Day and creator of the Earth Flag), and numerous travel blogs and essays on his web site. He has written more than 150 published articles for magazines and the Internet.

As an editor and coach, Weir assists both established and emerging authors; notable among these are *Spontaneous Evolution* by Bruce Lipton and Steve Bhaerman (Hay House 2009), *Power Up Your Brain* by Alberto Villoldo and David

Perlmutter (Hay House 2011), *Sportuality: Finding Joy in the Games* by Jeanne Hess (Balboa 2012), and *Full Cup, Thirsty Spirit* by Karen Horneffer-Ginter (Hay House 2012). Because of the nature of his client's work, Weir considers himself to be "a contributor to the world's leaders in humanity's spiritual and metaphysical evolution."

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