

Schools: The Mindless Few

With school-going children becoming ever and ever younger and in the absence of a sufficient number of schools catering to their needs, it is inevitable that privately owned and run schools and tutorials would see this as an opportunity for greater proliferation within the city limits. The inability of the primary education facilities within the country to meet the demand for compulsory education, and the absence of state-run English-medium institutions, it was inevitable for the private sector to see in this an opportunity to profit from tutorials and the like.

After more than two decades of watching many of these institutions grow and flourish to the extent their owners have grown rich, the question is often posed about their "bona fides" in relation to the needs of the country and to their own objectives. For example, the optimum size of classes should be in keeping with the space available keeping in mind the minimum space required per student. As most of these private institutions are housed in rented accommodation meant for family living, it is frequently to be observed that large numbers of children are crowded into small rooms, far too small to accommodate the number of children in the average class. Some teachers have reported they have no space to mingle with the students as students have to sit in one long row so that the maximum number of children can be accommodated in the class and many do not have a sufficient number of fans to keep children cool.

During the early years of formal education, it is generally agreed that the smaller the class, the better the results, an observation supported by international studies. But the cost of running a school acts as an impediment to having smaller classes. Therefore, cost becomes the determinant. With reports that even some of the better private schools have poor teacher-student ratios with as many as forty to one, we do feel the attention of the authorities should of necessity be concentrated here—if only out of concern for the health of the children and the standard of education imparted.

Although handing over education to the private sector gave the government a way out of its present predicament, this in no way exonerates it from its responsibility to maintain standards. Those private institutions that fail to provide adequate accommodation and the playing field believed essential to good health, not to speak of standardised teaching, should be closed down for, with fees at the level they are, there can be no excuse for a lowering of standards. It is a moral responsibility that can be ignored no longer. Besides, many do not boast a laboratory essential to the teaching of science.

Running a school that satisfies the needs of parents is a service not easily replicated and, with privately owned schools not subjected to licencing laws or formal permission from the Ministry of Education, most operate on a make-shift, ad-hoc arrangement which extends to the syllabus. And more attention must be paid to text book quality. Teachers are often employed who have no other qualification than the need to work. Thus many schools can be found to save on costs by employing the under-qualified. By allowing schools of this kind to function, the government does gross injustice to education and the state. It is, therefore, incumbent on the government as the guardian of the state to take responsibility for the standards of privately maintained schools.

Another situation has arisen out of the shortage of schools. Many private institutions now require guardians to apply for admission well ahead of the start of the school year, often, as much as one year. Most schools now follow a system whereby children of three-plus are admitted into what is called "Play Group". Once having guaranteed their "seat" in the school they can usually go on undisturbed up to 'O' and 'A' levels. This you may think is good and cannot be a problem, but when we remind you that these schools normally do not take responsibility for any failures in the examination, we question their morality as well. The argument in these schools is that, as examinations are conducted under London University through the British Council, pass rates are not their headache. Of course, if a student does particularly well the institution can literally "cash in" on his/her success.

That these educational institutions will continue to flourish is not in doubt given the paucity of schools, good, bad or indifferent, for education has become a matter of increasing concern to those people who know the future of their children is dependent on how well they do in recognised public examinations. But this suggests the need to look more closely at private sector education, if only to protect the people who have to pay for it. However, under scrutiny is also the relevance education in such schools has for the development of local technological capacity, national growth and the nation's pool of talent, for it must be remembered that this can only be achieved if education is built on a strong foundation. It should not, therefore, be left to chance and those schools that number among the mindless few should be weeded out from the system before it is too late.

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