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Adult Education: The Freire Way

MY point of departure is the premise that adult education is an exchange between equals. That the teacher has as much to learn from his students as the students from him. Among the best teachers I have had in my life, I will always cite some of the urban workers and peasants I met when I first started teaching", says Paulo Freire, the acknowledged father of a literacy theory which places the accent not just on the acquisition of reading and writing skills but on the development of the individual as a responsible and participating member of society.

"Education should make every person aware of his rights and duties, of his class status. Just being able to sign your name or being able to read sentences does not mean anything in itself. Literacy should enable a person to function as an aware human being, capable of shaking off oppression", says Freire.

In recognition of his work, Paulo Freire was awarded the Unesco 1976 Nadezhda Krupskaya Prize for literacy. More recently, in 1986, he won the Unesco Prize for Peace Education which carries a medal, a citation and a cash award of 60,000 US dollars. Freire teaches education at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil and is a visiting fellow at Harvard University in the United States of America.

He was born in the north-eastern Brazilian province of Recife, where drought is an accepted fact of life and where living conditions are difficult. "My family suffered a great deal as a result of the Great Depression of 1929", he recalls. "Even today, I remember what it means to be hungry. And by hunger, I mean when you can't eat and you don't know when you will be able to eat. This marked me for life and gave me a certain degree of empathy towards the people I try to teach; people who come from the more deprived sections of society, people who have been denied the basic right to education."

Freire first started teaching while still a student, in order to pay his way through university. The lessons he taught adult illiterates in the slums and shanty towns near Recife in 1942 made him choose his vocation.

The Political Nature Of Education

Vaiju Mahindroo interviews the renowned educator, Paulo Freire of Brazil, whose consultant services have been commissioned by Greece which is working hard to improve its adult education programme

"The harsh realities of life in the slums and the overwhelming nature of the problems of those I taught gave me, over the years, a sense of humility. I began working with the children of urban workers, as the director of a set of urban primary schools. I held seminars with the teachers, tried to build up communication with the parents, and I realised that the child's education levels depended largely on his or her total environment, not just on the kind of school he or she attended. I understood little by little the political nature of education. Education by nature is political." But Freire is quick to point out that his theory is devoid of partisan politics.

He says his students must have the freedom to decide if they want to be employed or not, whether they want to go on to university or not and if they would prefer to do manual rather than intellectual work. "These are

political choices. And education gives the individual the freedom to exercise these choices."

Needs Of The Learners: Paulo Freire's pedagogical methods, which look upon the adult illiterate as an intelligent and experienced adult, and not as a child, have been extensively used all over the developing world. The contents of the lessons thus spring directly from the experiences day to day of the learners and are directly related to their needs. Thus, legal advice, the discussion of agricultural problems as well as diverse social issues often become part of the curriculum. A group of urban slum dwellers may therefore, in an adult literacy class, tackle the problem of obtaining drinking water or better sanitation from the local authorities. The problems of health, family planning, and employment thus become the objectives to be tackled, and

literacy, though it remains the principal objective for the teacher, becomes a by-product for the learner. Hence Freire's belief: "Education frees people from oppression."

So, adult illiterates in any of the Unesco-sponsored projects in several developing countries across the world may well find themselves digging wells, building houses, filling up ditches or engaged in other services for the common good. In Tanzania, for instance, over three million people were recently involved in a learning-through-radio project which used information media to coordinate learning and community service activities. Nicaragua, Brazil, Indonesia and several Asian and African nations have successfully applied the "Paulo Freire methods" or combination of methods. Programmes in several Indian States have attempted to teach adult students such widely differing professions as printing, pottery, masonry and leather craft introducing learning processes into the world of work. —UNESCO SPECIAL