



NEWSLETTER: CHILD FOCUS



Dear friends in India and around the world,

We from SERFAC (Service and Research Institute on Family and Children) bring to you aspects of the phases between infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, young adulthood, and ageing, and the critical need for education during each phase. Erik Erikson, an American psychologist, called these phases 'developmental stages'. His work teaches us that a child needs a nurturing environment and stable family life at home and school, and that there must be security at home, so that the young may arrive at adolescence with a strong sense of identity and capable of healthy socialization. When the family cannot provide children security, they grow up without a safety net. In the long term, the individual breaks down, families dysfunction, and the community suffers unrest and violence.

At a seminar last month on how corporate social responsibility can transform the world, I spoke on how education of the child is of paramount importance, and therefore how investing in education was the first step. This newsletter carries an edited version of my speech.

With my warm wishes,
Catherine Bernard

Invest in education—insights and experiences

Dr. Catherine Bernard *Founder and Director of SERFAC, Chennai* Panel discussion

How can corporate social responsibility transform the world? Invest to educate the excluded—insights and practices in India

Seminar organised by UN Global Compact Network India and Aide et Action, Chennai, 30 October 2014

Under the new Companies Act, corporate entities have to spend at least 2 per cent of their net profits on discharging their social responsibilities. Education is one of the first areas which come to mind where a difference can be made. It is one of the uncontested ways of including the excluded and traditionally marginalized into mainstream society.

Limitations of access to education

To alert the world community to the deterioration of educational access in the developing world, the UNESCO Conference, UNICEF and World Bank focussed attention on basic education and its vital importance in achieving economic and social goals—as early as in 1990. Of the approximate 150 million worldwide who are deprived of full schooling, almost half drop out before they are fully lettered. Nearly one billion adults, of whom two-thirds are women, are unlettered—most of them in the developing world. A lot more needs to be done in the area of education, but perhaps it has become too easy an avenue for keeping to the letter of the law.

A general perspective on education

Education is more than being literate, getting good grades or topping examinations. It is a universal need. It reframes the realities of relationship with self, others, family and society—irrespective of social, ethnic, religious and economic contexts.

Rapid change and the dramatic influence of technology in different social systems has brought about the growing need to clarify the role, need, purpose and goal of education. With ongoing social change, in coming years education is likely to create still more stressors that can cause increasing emotional imbalance for individuals and families, especially youth.

To ensure safety in the not-too-distant future, there is an urgent need for new educational processes, and a new paradigm, which creates a climate of support for the family and its members. Neglect—over time—might manifest in increasing risk behaviour, social drifting, addictions, overt and covert forms of violence, dysfunction and family and social breakdown.

It is important to realise that education begins before formal schooling starts. The first tools that children need to learn evolve within the family. Love, trust and empathy form the basis of education.

They unfold in our first relationships—not in academic institutions, but at home. Several research indicators published by the International Institute of Marriage and Family, Canada conclude that early learning programmes that involve taking children of younger and younger ages outside the home will always fall short in providing a basis for lifelong education.

Recent advances in neuroscience are extremely significant not only with regard to developing healthy children but in preventing growing social problems in youth and children. A renowned psychologist cautions: ‘When the care of children and youth are neglected, it becomes a source of social infection as real and as serious as the HIV-Aids virus. Hence, starting formal education at a very early age is a wrongheaded direction in child development.’

The United Nations 1995 Occasional Papers Series on Family and Education states: ‘The strength of adult-child relationships notably are family relationships when supported by educational networks, and intelligent government policies enhance the capacity of families for long-term commitment to children; their education capacities will re-emerge.’

A new vision

Educational systems call for comprehensive rethinking to ensure that they go beyond mere literacy and embrace key development tasks. While literacy is essential for earning one’s livelihood, it must be relevant and accompanied by the teaching of other life skills such as handling of stress, ways of coping, endurance etc.

Basic education is a lifelong process. It must be multi-sectoral, with several delivery points for implementation. It includes non-formal education for children and adults, especially for women, and helps in socialization of children, especially during the formative period of 4–5 years of age.

Over the years, and with the rapidity of change and introduction of technologically assisted lifestyles, pressures of work have caused a diminution of family responsibility in educating the individual child to prepare him to take his place in society. This responsibility is passed on to the school, where the child is also expected to collect formal education certificates which will gain him admission to a professional college.

The emotional balance and internal congruence of children, or their ability to learn, their personal value systems, or their willingness to participate in and contribute to their social groups are often given the least emphasis and are frequently neglected. Educating girls greatly influences the Human Development Index and reduces the risks of various life situations such as teenage pregnancies, and educating the public is a powerful tool against any form of abuse and has the proven ability to transform social attitudes.

The importance of schooling cannot be underestimated. But research from around the world cautions against exclusive school-based programmes, and calls attention to the reality that family processes and participation in children's education greatly enhance the impact of schooling and improve the quality of both study and behaviour.

The major developmental gains in human life—physical, emotional, social and intellectual—are made in the early years. Later, as children are taken care of/put under the charge of schools, they are helped or impeded in their learning more by family processes than by school variables.

The role of the family and family education

The essential aim and central objective of family education is to empower parents to fulfil their roles and responsibilities by caring for and nurturing their children, to give children a loving and interactive environment and to support the child's journey to adulthood.

In personal terms, 'empowerment' means having self-esteem, feeling competent about parenting and entering into the adventure of the child's life as the child journeys from one developmental stage to the next. In social terms, parents are expected to take control of their own resources and environment.

Unlike formal education, which is a certified process, and aims at enabling access to employment and social position, family education is concerned with achieving competence rather than social mobility. Its rewards are not easily discernible; the public does not perceive it to be as worthwhile as formal education. Hence, strong communications programmes are imperative to make known the rewards of family education. Such rewards are many and invaluable; for example, knowledge and adequate foresight can prevent the use of drugs and/or alcohol, and protect children from child abuse. Similarly, educating a young mother about pregnancy and childcare forges a link between parents and children, who then tend to bond better.

Given the tragic problems faced by a growing number of families, concerns about child protection, juvenile crime, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and after-school care are urgent. By responding actively to genuine public concerns, the family education movement may be able to make valuable contribution in confronting reality through support groups and neighbours.

Remedial intervention

Poverty in itself is family breakdown, because it cripples parents' ability to cope with marriage, economic deprivation, and with being socially excluded. They are unable and either ill-equipped or not equipped to be parents. Formal education by itself is hardly capable of overcoming economic, social and cultural disadvantages of students coming from deprived sectors; on the contrary, it tends to reproduce those disadvantages.

Poverty, which keeps people in states of dependency, nullifies the very reality of the need for education because it cripples families from undertaking the roles and responsibilities of family life; consequently, children become victims of social drifting and dysfunction. Remedial intervention is essential and indispensable for enabling family education and formal education to take place.

Such education needs to be multi-pronged and aggressive, and coupled with an enabling environment that helps beneficiaries emerge from poverty. Such an approach will enable the poor to move from social isolation, feel human and be confident of having a say in their own destiny.

I invite all stakeholders to move beyond the understanding of education as a 'standalone' project, and look at 'family and its environment' as a prerequisite for sustainable education, and engage in the process of education from its first stages within the family, which is the foundation of society and basis of civilization. I am persuaded that this is the most sustainable investment for humanity and will lead to global transformation.

Tasks for state, social and religious institutions

'A family centric model' is a call to everyone to engage in appropriate levels of intervention to enable education. bitly.com/ffutures