

**Article History:** Received: 1 March 2021; Revised: 18 March 2021; Accepted: 22 March 2021

## ***Book Review***

### **Book Review: An Alternative Approach to Schooling and Education**

#### **School on Trial: How Freedom and Creativity Can Fix Our Educational Malpractice**

Nikhil Goyal, 2016

Doubleday

320 pp., ISBN 13:9780385540124, \$11.97 (Paperback)

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The book “School on Trial: How Freedom and Creativity Can Fix Our Educational Malpractice”, written by Nikhil Goyal, focuses on the drawbacks, as the author says 'malpractice', in the compulsory education system. The author criticizes the pedagogical practices in schools, methods of student evaluation and assessment, irrespective of learners' independence, and how the compulsory structured education system matches itself with an industrial or factory setting of the last century. The author portrays 'the antidemocratic and cruel nature of the contemporary schools' and argues for bringing transformations in the whole education system beginning with the way we deal with students. The author divides the book into nine chapters.

In Chapter I, the author presents that the education system is at fault arguing for reprimanding the students for their attitude, behaviour, and their lack of curiosity. The author points out some flaws in the contemporary education system in which students

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ISSN: 2091-0118 (Print) / 2091-2560 (Online)

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Journal homepages: <sup>1</sup><http://www.kusoed.edu.np/journal/index.php/je>

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Published by Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal.

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are made to memorize lessons as the highest form of intellectual activity, though it is at the lowest level in Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills. In the present educational system, there is very little space for one's idea, creativity, voicing of criticisms, and challenging the existing knowledge. The grim picture of the school as portrayed in the book strongly urges for the transformation of today's schools into learner-centred facilities.

Chapter II explores the historical roots of the development of the existing education system in America and compared it with the modern education system. The chapter explains Americans were taken to be literate when they were able to read and had basic numeracy skills before the compulsory and systematic form of education was established. Education was informal and community took major stakes in education. The author argues that the contemporary system of education was framed with the idea of creating a society that could be controlled or 'manipulated' by a few elites. The education system, the curricula, the lessons being taught were designed to create a class of individuals who are taught to obey and serve without questioning the interest of the elite who control the education system and they were prepared with skills required for the industrial workforce.

Chapter III describes the ill effects of standardized tests and their increasing intellectual as well as psychological effect on children. The author describes that the program 'No Child Left Behind' in the United States was a failure in the education system where schools were to take standardized tests for Math and Reading. It put pressure on schools and teachers to prepare their students well for the tests and the schools actually 'filtered' the students before taking tests to show good grades and was fabricated and false. Less time was allocated to other subjects like Art, Music, History, and Science because these subjects were not tested and ignored. The psychological pressure demoralized and caused low self-esteem for those who secured low grades and were labelled 'failures' or 'stupid'.

Chapter IV discusses how students are forced to study in formal schools. The author argues that children have the instinct to learn such as learning to babble and later pronounce intelligible words, learning to crawl and slowly walk, mimic adults, and in other sense, they are born to learn. We all are always learning something or the other. The author provides examples of how learning has been rather a designed set of

activities where the teacher provides information on a related subject within the curricula. He argues that designed set activities forced students to sacrifice a large number of other significant subjects, which could be more important for life. The author argues that schools categorize children based on their scores in tests and also by the notion of 'schooled' and 'unschooled' children. The author is against the idea that knowledge is just within the walls of the school. When going through the chapter, the author made me think if I, myself as a teacher, was doing injustice to children by sort of being too engaged with the structured curriculum that provided very limited time to discuss other important aspects of life, his/her interests, and motivations.

Chapter V discusses the association of playing and learning and how the contemporary education system disregards the importance of play in schools. The author argues that constant surveillance, expected rewards, and competitions kill creativity in children as they are expected to stick to the rules and critical and creative questions are never discussed in classrooms. The author favours alternative schools i.e., unstructured schools like 'Brightworks' that he closely studied. According to him, such schools provide more space for children to explore, teachers take the role of mentors and facilitators, and students develop and value teamwork, respect for peers, and work in groups. In my view, even though the author provides evidence for the importance of play for the cognitive as well as social development of children, he argues that there is still plenty of space to integrate games in the curriculum to bring out the best in children through play.

Chapter VI presents a different perspective to the traditional education system in which teachers teach students based on a curriculum designed by a designated authority in a teacher-centred approach. The author brings a case of Summerhill School which is based on a student-centred learning approach. The students determine what they are to be taught and by whom. School as a system includes students in the decision-making process as well. The main argument set by the author is that to help students become responsible citizens, schools need to provide the students with real-life scenarios where they make decisions and are responsible for their actions.

In Chapter VII, the author introduces the concept of the 'Maker Movement'. According to the author, it provides more credence to the 'vocational education' than the existing educational system. The central argument of the chapter revolves around how

schools should have 'Maker Space' – a space where children are given the freedom to create, think, experiment, and build, an idea propagated by John Dewey's philosophy of learning by doing. He describes his experience of visiting such schools that focused on 'project-based learning' and how children are self-motivated towards thinking, making models, and Do-It-Yourself (DIY). The author has provided an insight as to how different alternatives to schooling can be used for making the learning system interesting, intriguing and innovative.

Chapter VIII discusses, in detail, the concept of learners' enrolling in the real world arguing the traditional education system focuses more on rote-memorization and remembering than the high cognitive skills and fails to prepare students for their professional and social life. With the absence of apprenticeship or internship programs in the traditional educational system, the students are not ready for their professional life. In other words, the students are being taught something different from what the real-life situation demands, what the 'employers' or 'hiring companies demand', or what a human resource department personnel would look for while selecting an employee.

In Chapter IX, the author suggests the ways how schools can be reformed. The author envisions a different system of schools that are within walls but the flow of knowledge goes beyond the walls of schools preparing students for real-world situations. The writer, however, acknowledges that apart from the academic system or schooling, socio-economic and political structures among others are also responsible for shaping the future of children.

The book as a whole is a critic of the existing system of American education highlighting several 'malpractices' in the system, mainly pedagogical ones. The author claims that he visited several so-called 'democratic and free schools' to document the real-life experiences of various school principals, teachers, and students. Reflecting on the issues raised in the book, I contemplate the issues of the educational system in Nepal and feel that the education system of my country fails to incorporate innovations in education. For example, our educational plans in the past have largely focused on increasing the enrolment rates in primary levels (Ministry of Education, 2009; Ministry of Education and Sports, 2003) and the recent policies have now brought out issues like equity in terms of access, participation, and learning outcomes (Department of Education, 2014) and also integrating technical and vocational education in the

mainstream education. Our education policy documents are almost silent on the issues of integrating apprenticeship and internship programs in school curricula so that students are provided exposure to real-life situations preparing themselves for life.

The book deconstructs the notion of the compulsory education system and making us ask if our education system is creating a different social class to serve the interest of the dominant class, the so-called elites (Saha, 2008). For teachers especially, the book would haunt us reminding our responsibility undermining the desires of students but working to fulfil the interest of a certain class.

For me, the book makes me aware of the assessment model that quantitative measures are not the only ways to evaluate the performance of students but rethink while evaluating their performance with a focus on the process of learning various soft skills, problem-solving, and communication skills along with their emotional and cognitive developments.

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#### **To cite this article:**

Maskey, S. (2021). Book review: An alternative approach to schooling and education. *Journal of Education and Research*, 11(1), 115-119. <https://doi.org/10.51474/jer.v11i1.503>