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TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT *WITH* YOUNG PEOPLE

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**Information Technology:
Challenges for Paradigm Shift
from Obedience to Negotiation
with Children**

Usha S. Nayar

... SMS (Short Messaging Service), Cell phones, chatting on internet, KBC (Kaun Banega Crorepati), e-commerce, Jazzy cars, Java, Orange sim card, Kittie Party, counter-strike, bill_gates@rediff.com... you have reached the voice mail box of 9820 ... all this is the essence of environment of children in India of the 21st century.

This century children are having a lifestyle, far too different as compared to their parents and teachers. Parents, teachers and adults are put into a situation where reflection and review of their ways to relate and reconnect with the present generation of children in modern India is inevitable.

The focus of this article is on the context in which new information technology has emerged as an important agent of socialization for children, and how it has posed a challenge to teachers and school systems for the education of children. Further, it highlights the diversified perceptions of adults

towards children and childhood. These perceptions are linked with the relationships between children and adults – they may be teachers, parents and other adults in various roles in Indian society.

Context

The basic functions of behavioral research are to increase our understanding of the mechanics and motives of how one reacts or acts. In the case of children, and the impact as well as the role of technology, behavioral research plays a very crucial and multiple role in the nexus formed between policy makers, scientists, technocrats, teachers, parents, other adults and children themselves.

How do children react and act towards technology and its sudden spurt in varied forms? What is the influence – essential and other wise, in the context of their growth and development? Is it possible — for the adults, the elderly, the wise, the policy maker, the technocrat, the teachers - to pause for a while, look around and review the socialization process, the nature, the implications and the consequences of technology and its large scale induction into our lives?

To day, for instance, 'nature' and 'reality' are terms not easy to comprehend (not that it ever was easy); we have Virtual reality, Virtual memory, *Neural* networks, and virtual(ly) everything! Is technology the monster that some make it out, or is technology the ultimate answer? Or, are adults, blinded by the pace and progress with which technological innovations keep appearing, believe, that since evolution and change is inevitable, these are good and appropriate. Will this illusion continue?

The Chip has revolutionized the way we look at, and understand our world, and it is certain that the range of functions it performs would pervade all aspects of human existence. Education, Medicine, Communications, and Transport to name a few fields, have already experienced the impact of the Chip. And it must be added that some of these interventions have been positive and greatly reduced the margin of error and improved overall efficiency.

Children are the inheritors of this planet and represent an investment for humankind. This is a universal fact. The world

is in the midst of a technological era, and the impact of technology has been felt by all, be they, the developing, or the industrialised world and would certainly continue.

Researchers looking into modern childhood socialization processes in industrialised countries have been pointing out for several years that these are no longer almost exclusively governed by the traditional agents, since a third and important agent has entered the equation. The resulting basic socialization tripod is made up of the family, school and new screens that is, the set of new audiovisual information and communication technologies that can be accessed easily by children (Cases et.al., 2001).

Children are very comfortable with technology, since many of them have been exposed to the Chip and its many forms, right from their birth (and even before) and have grown up with the same. For children and young people, who have grown up with these technologies, a life without computers is difficult even to imagine (Hagen, 2002).

Witness the ease with which children handle the various games, and operate various gadgets, like the T.V., Video games, and Computers with minimal instructions. Most people's reaction to technology depends on the level of use or the lack of it in their lives.

Today technology is the buzzword. For users of technology and the purveyors of technology related material, it is the ultimate panacea to any problem. However, like other developments and movements initiated and fostered by humankind, technology also has its share of myths and *bugs* (Nayar, 1997).

To most parents who are worried about the inordinate time spent by their children in front of the screen, either TV, cable network showing several serials and sequels or the computers with its never ending games, they feel that the root of all problems lies in these new fanged innovations.

To many others, it is quite intimidating and, either they shrug off any attempt at knowing, or they are in such awe that they would not even attempt trying to figure out, or they criticize, and become cynical. At best they romanticize and urge the return to the rural idyllic, or the past that is mostly imagined.

Neil Postman (1983) voiced as early as in eighties, rather with deep concern, that the media and specifically television – are effectively destroying childhood as we know children and childhood. He documented his arguments in his book 'The disappearance of childhood'. Another argument to support the thesis was forwarded by Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are blurring.

Such arguments display a kind of technological determination, whereas, the question is definitely of our changing or not changing the conceptions of childhood in modern society and also of 'critical pedagogy' in media education. It is an approach that implicitly regards media teaching as a form of counter-indoctrination (Buckingham, 1996).

Information communication technologies (ICT) are appropriated into particular social contexts, subject to specific national policies, and valued within certain cultural frameworks. Although, in simple terms, most or all children and young people are now, in some way or another, new media users, suggest that countries are following diverse paths in the adoption of ICT. As a result, for a variety of social and cultural reasons, children and young people in different countries come to use ICT in somewhat different ways (Lingingstone, 1999).

This discussion also raises the fundamental issue: how children and childhood are being viewed in our time by Indian society? Since, school-teachers themselves are part of a larger social environment, it is important to examine various conceptualizations.

The Competent vs. Incompetent Child

Historically, the notion of "competent child" can be traced back to what has been called a 'shift in research paradigm' in psychology and other social sciences dealing with childhood and child development. There are many different and context based studies concerning the social competence of children, all of them concluding that in earlier research the social and communicative competence of children have been underestimated. These studies, though, never produced an overall and universalistic image of 'the competent child', as such. In discourses of children's rights,

competence is used as a legal concept related to a psychological conceptualization.

The attribution of incompetence or low competence in children, both legally and psychologically, is often used to deny children's participation rights (Flekkoy, 1993; Mortier, 1997).

This concept being researched and experimented more in the industrialized world than in a country like India. Although children's parliament, children's participation in city life, programmes related to realization of children's rights are being supported and fostered by some voluntary organizations viz, Community Aid Sponsorship Programme (CASP), Child Line, Institute of Psychological and Educational Research (IPER), Technology and Social Health (TASH) Foundation, Youth For Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) etc. Their efforts though commendable, are few and far from broad social realities. Nevertheless, there seems to be some transformation and some illustrations of considering 'competent child'.

Competence is described as a kind of individual and immanent quality all children have by virtue of their natural beings. The essential competent child has both the capacity and the responsibility to choose freely and decide what is best for her/himself (Kjorholt, 2001).

Children as Playing Citizens vs. Adults as Non-playing Citizens

Children constitute a common culture, with common interests. In this concept, the child is presented as a natural being, creative, emotional, spontaneous and embodied – the tribal child, as James, Prout and Jenks (1998) put it. Play is seen as the central core in this culture of children.

In traditional Indian society, the notion of childhood and play are interwoven. Childhood means play and innocence. The fact that often school children accuse each other of 'being childish' when they play, emphasizes the deprecatory meaning of both the term 'play' and the concept of 'child' (Kjorholt, 2001). To some the word 'play' coupled with 'child' connotes triviality (Thorne, 1993). What is striking is that play functions as a symbolic strong fence between the notions of childhood and

adulthood. Adults having a different culture and for them the core of life and living is not centered to play. Thus, childhood and adulthood become two distinct social and political categories.

Children as Powerless vs. Powerful Adults

'Power' is described as the main singular dimension constituting the relations between adults and children. There is a dualistic nature in these descriptions dividing children and adults into the different life worlds. The emphasis on the differences between children and adults obscure the continuity between the child and adult world. Although the pre-eminent model in family life in some of the societies, like, Norwegian has changed from the one based on obedience and 'being of use' to one based on negotiation and 'being oneself' (Gullestad, 1996).

In a recent study at Mumbai (Nayar, 2002) in the narratives given by children on use of computers both at home and school, it was found that children very clearly see the 'power' is with teachers and parents in terms of "control" on their lives.

"Mom wanted the computer so that I don't sit idle and get addicted to the TV", said 11 year old Rahul from Mumbai.

"I use the computer maximum in my family. Two hours on school days and 5-6 hours on holidays", confidently expressed by 14-year old Sumedha.

"The schools are far behind in teaching children the applications of computers – how to use the computer practically", says Priyanka's mother. "Initially I thought that computers is a wonderful thing but really it contributes a lot in our way of living, it could help children to understand the world better especially with the 'Net'. Subsequently, I found that unless the children have back-up knowledge from their school, it is being used as a toy and for chatting on the net. Even now, they play games, it is not being used for educational purposes and I am uncomfortable with it".

"I thought that after I get the computer my kids will get good marks in computers at least but they are not getting. It is a different thing having a computer at home and a different thing teaching people how to use it", said mother of 12 year old Sashank and 10 year old daughter Seema.

“..... to-day’s children when you see, they feel that they know everything because they have computer knowledge. But, any father and mother, they have seen many rains, seen many monsoons, you know it better than that person, at that moment you will always argue I am right but it is always the parent who knows it best” , said father of 15 year old Aditya.

“.... Computer is not so important for the members in the family, it is good for moving ahead in life and gaining knowledge”, ... felt mother of 16 year old Mitali.

“ When I read in newspapers that people are very much into pornography that irritates me because I feel children are also very accessible to this everything has a time frame, children are getting access to information much earlier”, ... a concerned father of 15 year old daughter Smita.

Children as a Resource vs. Liability

Children as a resource, a frequently recurring phrase in media, texts and newspapers is an illustration of how the notion of the ‘competent child’ is being transformed and mixed with a consumer discourse using concepts from economy and market-sphere. The concept of competent and creative children as a resource for the society for the present and future is a positive note. But, on the contrary, the consumerist view of child influencing the decision of buying “branded” garments, food items, furniture, car – any commodity, is the distortion and way of exploitation of the ‘child’ by adults in society.

The participating child, the competent child, the child with her/his own rights as a citizen in a society raises a vital issue of mixture of democracy and traditionalism in Indian culture. The mixture can be understood in terms of contemporary global processes in general and evolution of information technology. It has profound implications for the social construction of ‘childhood’ in modern India.

Today, children are being drawn increasingly into economic markets – as both consumers and workers; not only due to poverty but also from the middle and affluent classes in advertising, modeling and other fields (Nayar, 2001). The notion of childhood as a domain outside the market and market driven

politics is increasingly under threat in late modern society (Stephens, 1995).

Kjorholt (2001) emphasizes the narrative of children as a "endangered people" is at the same time both traditional and revolutionary. On the one hand, it reconstructs earlier romantic, natural and playing child different from the rational adult and in need to care and protection from civil life and the public sphere and rights to citizenship. On the other hand, it stresses the need to integrate the 'playing child' into public life, emphasizing the children's rights on par with adults to participate in public life 'on their own premises'.

On the other side, the new emphasis on children's social participation can also be interpreted as part of more general processes in late modernity, processes whereby children and nature are increasingly drawn into the public sphere as 'human capital' and 'productive resources' than seeing them as dependent, powerless, vulnerable and liability on adults.

We may also question if this human capital – the child – is constructed according to desirable traits in economy and politics, demanding flexible organizations, 'flexible bodies' and 'flexible souls' (Martin, 1994, Feudler, 2001).

The construction of "competent child" has much in common with contemporary thinking for educational reforms constituting the child as an 'active learner' – a whole child, and take advantage of the communication technology revolution.

Obedient vs. Children Negotiating with Authority

The traditional emphasis on the value of 'total obedience' of children by adults has to go under value of children's rights, children as resource and not only as support. The paradigm shift is imperative in this discourse from 'obedience' to 'negotiations'. Obedience depicting more as fixed, rigid and static rules and negotiations, indicating the relations as more flexible and based on equality and humane rights. In this case, children negotiate with 'authority' for their interests and adults, parents, teachers also negotiate with children in terms of time to be spent on certain activities and also of sharing the resources available at home as well as in school, more as equal partners, stake holders and investors in civic society.

The facts are :

- Children today, are increasingly experiencing different family situations, and exposed to a surfeit of technology, in its various forms, than any time before.
- The electronic media (the interactive as well as the others) provide a mixed package i.e. it has positive and creative, as well as, negative and destructive inputs, as an inevitable part of the evolving *Techno culture*.
- Children today are exposed to the values of individualism, patriarchy, mechanization, consumerism, nationalism, and terrorism. They are also the witness to movements that support ecology, peace, human rights and other humane movements of the post modern era.

Considering the various options available to interact with technology, some progressive others bewildering – are we giving our children any choice, or confusing them with what appears to be the options?

The goals of education *primarily, are* —

- To stimulate thinking, problem solving and motivate children for learning.
- To facilitate them to develop the ability to set goals and to find out their pathways to achieve them.
- To access, assimilate and retain relevant information in science, mathematics, psychology, geography, history, and other academic areas.
- To provide the opportunity to each child to develop general competence with one's own pace, style and ability.
- To develop team spirit and the values of co-operation and consideration.
- To provide gender equality.
- To provide the opportunity to communicate with peers locally and globally.

These goals are from the viewpoint of society, child's individual point of view in terms of child's personal, social,

cognitive, emotional, spiritual and overall personality development.

New Technology and the School Environment

I. CHILDREN — SCHOOL — EDUCATIONAL COMPUTING



II. COMPUTER — INFORMATION PROCESSING ⇒ SPECIALISED SUBJECTS —

- DESIGN
- MUSIC
- TUTOR /TEACHER
- EVALUATOR

III. COMPUTERS — ENTERTAINMENT — GAMES

- GENERAL KNOWLEDGE
- DEVELOPING SOFTWARE

IV. COMPUTERS + INTERFACE ⇒ MULTI MEDIA

- + TELEPHONE — [COMMUNICATION (INTERNET)]
- + VIDEO + AUDIO — [AUDIO VISUAL/HYPER MEDIA]

The Role of a Teacher

- (1) The teacher assumes the role of a facilitator and a support for the children.
- (2) The teacher needs to pay individual attention to children.
- (3) The teacher helps to encourage gender equality in creating equal opportunities for girls and boys.
- (4) The teacher becomes a friend.
- (5) The teacher helps in building team and encourages team spirit.
- (6) The teacher chooses appropriate software for various levels of knowledge and information for the children as they set the educational goals for children.
- (7) The teacher gets involved in the development of software to be used for children.

- (8) The teacher involves children in developing the software.
- (9) The teacher shares his/her experiences with children and listens to their experiences.

Limitation of a Teacher

1. Teachers can no more portray as the authoritarian and custodian of knowledge in the classroom. As a computer is not the black-board, slate or notebook. Computer is an intelligent tool in the class for the children and teacher.
2. The teacher need not be threatened by the presence of computer in the classroom.
3. The teacher need not act as a competitor of power with children.

Conclusion

There are thinkers as mentioned earlier who bemoan the disappearance of childhood. I feel that there is a reappearance of childhood, the context has definitely changed, and the roles of the socializing agencies like family and schools have now become more challenging. Constructing childhood would now mean being increasingly child centred, and using technology to their advantage.

The school and schooling continues to be a significant socializing process for children, be they pre-school children.

The teacher remains in charge and mentor for the children in school. The teacher monitors the learning of art, culture, history, geography, mathematics, science, initiating and fostering the skills of drama, theatre, debates, and above all developing and shaping the 'self' in children for themselves and society.

For the Indian society, the construction of children as an active humanistic subject within educational contexts could be a new way of recognizing the new resource for rebuilding the nation. The next fifty years will yield more imperative results than those achieved over the course of the last fifty years as these children are fourth generation born in free and independent India.

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