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PRESENT EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

In this International Year of the Child, thousands of words have already been spoken and written about the dignity of the child as a person and a potential citizen, the child's rights, his needs. Promises have been made and resolutions framed in committees the world over. A few years ago during International Women's Year, women, because they could speak for themselves, moved legislators, achieved the goal of drawing attention to the rights of woman as person. Some resolutions and some promises of that year were kept. But we wonder, perhaps with a bit of cynicism, what the results of the International Year of the Child will be - and principally because the child cannot speak for himself. The child only wants enough to eat, to be warm, to be loved and give love. His voice is too small to be heard in an adult world. It is only later in life when he is no longer a child that he realizes what he has missed because of an abused childhood, a broken family, a starved body.

It is a privilege today for me to speak on behalf of the child to an adult group specifically organized to listen for a child's voice. I ask you not only to hear and read but to listen.

For this part of the programme we are to consider "Present Educational Needs." Ironically the present demanding needs are those which re-appear constantly in the history of education. Above all we need teachers who want to teach, who love children; dedicated teachers possessing a sense of wonder and trust which they can instill into their students. For these we need ⁽²⁾ training colleges which have the autonomy and the leadership to devise curricula and formation programme that will develop creative teachers.

⁽³⁾ We need administrators who will study the world the child is growing into and will construct and adapt syllabuses and texts to prepare him for life.

There are primarily two areas where radical changes are needed in our present day educational structure. One is the area of ⁽⁴⁾ Early Childhood education and the other is the area of ⁽⁵⁾ Special Education for the Handicapped.

Just a few comments on the first area. Psychologists tell us that almost all a child is going to be, basic attitudes toward life, people and self is set by the age of One. Between 0 years and 6 imagine the life activities a child has learned - speech, and language mobility, number concept, recognition of innumerable objects of daily life. In spite of what we know about the tremendous learning capacity of the small child, we stifle his imagination and reasoning powers when we put him into a classroom at the age of 5 or 6, make him sit still for five hours on an uncomfortable bench, repeatedly writing dull sums, listlessly reading out loud uninteresting stories. Is this the best an adult world can do for the child who is eager to learn, bursting with energy to experiment with his world?

But let us look for a moment at the second area, Special Education for the Handicapped, and listen to the silent voice of these children. The handicapped children are the disponsible ones - who when a welfare or educational budget is cut are the first to suffer.

Let me cite a few instances. In the last Five Year Plan, primary education was to receive a glorious percentage of funds and much was promised. But we have crippled children, blind and deaf children, mentally retarded children who also want primary education. And where did we see them in the budget? - at the very last section as if they were an afterthought, a postscript. Last year the Government of Karnataka proposed scholarships for handicapped children, but were the mentally handicapped even to be seen on the list of eligible children?

Yes, this is the International Year of the Child and my plea is that organizations like the Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare join hands with those of us who work for the handicapped children to provide them with the basics which are their rightful heritage. All children are entitled to free education, but are there enough - nay, any - institutions where the handicapped children can receive an adequate education particularly geared to their handicapped.

I would like to just briefly refer to mentally handicapped children - briefly because more will be said about these children tomorrow.

Many definitions have been worded, but all allude to sub-average general intellectual functioning originating frequently from disease or injury. Mental retardation is not synonymous with mental illness which can be cured. To some degree mental retardation can be prevented but not cured. Education which helps the mentally retarded child reach his potential can ameliorate the condition and make him more socially acceptable. Most of these children are capable of doing much more than the average person thinks that they can achieve.

The most generally accepted rule-of-thumb approach to an estimate of mental retardation has been a rate of about 3 percent of the population. However, this rate is frequently higher in specific areas and among certain portions of the population. Nevertheless, even this minimal estimate would indicate some 20,000,000 persons as retarded in India's general population of 660,000,000. In Bangalore alone, basing the figure on 3% of the population, we can expect the number of mentally retarded children to come close to 60,000.

We have very few schools in Bangalore set up primarily for the handicapped. One school for the physically handicapped, one for the deaf, about three or four for the mentally retarded, perhaps one for the blind. More schools are needed. Day care centres for small children who are mentally handicapped are essential - centres where children from a very young age can be motivated and animated and trained in social habits. We need teacher training courses for all areas of handicaps.

Voluntary organizations have done yeoman service in all these areas. Now it is time for an enlightened and caring citizenry to pressure Government to recognize handicapped children as persons, as future citizens and not merely as statistics. Indeed, so far no statistics have been gathered on the number of handicapped persons!

Yes, we see all kinds of voids in our educational set-up. But there are schools for normal, healthy children, there are teachers trained to teach them, there are funds for the opening and maintenance of schools for children with healthy minds and strong bodies. We may question the standards of excellence in many schools, we may look askance at the ethics and morality of the management - we may criticize the curriculum, the texts - that is quite another question. The point I emphatically stress today is that we can hardly find schools, managements, teachers, curricula, texts for special education.

If we look back into the history of any country, we can find numerous instances where good, wise and just legislation matured from a seed planted by a common man. In this year of the Child let us heed the voice of the handicapped and utilize and organize all our efforts and resources to awaken the conscience of Government and the citizenry to their obligations to provide rehabilitation and education for the handicapped.

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is a gift

to give a chance, to let a child sing, to let him spread his wings
with your help the clouds will await him like open doors to the
blue sky above, the flight will last forever.

- Paul R. Garrido,
IVC Secretariat.