

Summer Holidays as Informal Learning Experience

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‘That children’s learning begins long before they attend school is the starting point of this discussion. Any learning a child encounters in school always has a previous history. For example, children begin to study arithmetic in school, but long beforehand they have had some experience with quantity...’ LS Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*

Learning does not depend only on the challenging environment of the school: Vygotsky’s entire work supports the significance of social interactions in learning. As a system, the school provides many formal and informal spaces in which to interact. It has been observed that most alternative schools utilise informal spaces more than regular schools do and learnings from such opportunities have a value for life and is a part of an unendingly memorable childhood. As adults, we become habituated to train our brains to work at certain times and rest at certain times, ignoring our personal likes and dislikes and wait for a good time and opportunity to learn as a natural process. But for a child it is truly difficult to see learning in chunks of time and space. For them learning is a continuous process irrespective of time and other co-related factors.

Summer vacation as a space to settle down

Children have various pressures like completing tasks, projects, social and emotional adjustments, home assignments, classwork. Unfortunately, we have built our schools as places of preparation for ‘livelihoods’, instead of ‘life’ itself. Perspectives can be narrow: we often force our children to become doctors or engineers, or in some way get prepared for the hardships of life. Among all such self-created high expectations a child is the worst sufferer as she is typically made to live out her parents’ unfulfilled dreams.

This is when the leisure of the summer holidays is so important because children can find a break from such pressures and get an opportunity to have some time of their own through the vacation. Our frustrations and rigidity show up as comments on the grades and marks in their examination performance, usually held just before the summer

vacations. So, summer holidays can prove to be a welcome relief from a sometimes monotonous and tedious formal school system for children of all ages.

Vacation in the urban context

It is not a matter for comparison, but in urban setups we have spoilt, or reduced, informal learning opportunities. Fancy coaching centres, tuition classes, abacus maths, mind development, yoga, karate, etc have exploited the dreams of parents who are trapped in the system. They feel that their children’s learning should not be stopped during the vacation and so send them to various alternative classes. Unfortunately, our media and social world has also created an imaginary universe and put our children into a commercial world made attractive by marketing strategies like competitions, experts’ comments, championships etc.

Other contexts

The gift of unstructured and unorganised periods, when a child can recharge, is a rural wealth which is rarely experienced in metros. In rural settings, families may have their struggles, hardships and challenges, but they create a bond of love and respect for each other. In tribal villages people welcome their guests. They offer tea, water, food though they may not bother much about serving fancy and costly items beyond their monthly budget. They put their heart and soul in their hospitality. Children who spend their vacation among them also learn values like respect, social adjustment, interaction with persons. They understand the value of human interaction, meeting with each other, being together. Such connected social structures give people strength to struggle with the hardships of life. Family problems are seen as problems of that community.

In rural and semi-rural setups, diversity is another social wealth which further constitutes learning for life, giving a new dimension to their futures. Rainbow children, a term coined by Sister Cyril for children of deprived socio-economic backgrounds who have successfully integrated into mainstream

education, have shades and emotions which cannot be experienced among the homogenous socio-economic backgrounds of most of our schools. However, they understand differences of opinion, individual identities, get familiar with cultures, helping each-other, exposure to different languages and vocabularies. Summer vacation allows children the space to interact and spend time to learn these values in a non-organised, non-formal way.

Summer vacations - space for play

Despite limitations of context, children never miss enjoying their time with their friends. They get together, play together and act together. Children want to copy adults' world and for this they have

invented free play, they interact and create world of adults. They feel happier to enter in their domain through mime, role play, expressions etc. They liberate themselves from various structured rules and regulations, they taste power through playing different characters of society. They act and create dialogues of their own.

Overall, summer breaks are part of the informal learning space and will continue to be in existence in our country. Because summer holidays are during the hottest part of the year, they will remain as long break when children rightfully get to spend time on their own, in their own ways, making them valuable learning experiences.

References

Mind in Society, L S Vygotsky

The Rainbow Programme, Sister C M Cyril Mooney

Escape From Childhood - the Needs and Rights of Children, John Holt

Conversations with children from Shankardah and Dondki villages, Chhattisgarh.

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