

Peeping through the Window: Lessons from Children's Experiences at School

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Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi (translated by Dorothy Britton), Kodansha International Ltd., 1984; pp. 232, Rs. 772.

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Totto-chan is an autobiographical account, first published in 1981. The author, Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, wrote a memoir of her school life at Tamoe Gakuen and how the many experiences that she had in the school, deeply shaped her and the life of her peers later. A uniquely constructed school, Tamoe Gakuen presented a vision of education that was different from the mainstream education system, from which Totto-chan had been expelled, owing to her curious restlessness. The teachers at her old school failed to understand her inquisitive mind and keen spirit that refused to bow down to rules in the name of discipline. At Tamoe Gakuen, Totto-chan met a completely different atmosphere where children were treated with as much respect as adults and were given the free space to learn and grow, in their own style and at their own pace.

It is no surprise that the book seems to have found resonance across cultures and ages, as many people young and old, are able to relate to the little girl and her experiences till date. It has been translated into more than a dozen international and Indian languages. It raises many pertinent questions on different aspects of education, which seem relevant even now when we are struggling to improve the prevalent system of education.

The book provides many instances of self-discovery and encouraging curiosity in children. These could be through the lesson or the activities planned for them. I would be substantiating these with a few examples from the book. At Tamoe

Gakuen, the curriculum was flexible and the learners could decide what and when they wanted to study. They were free to plan their time-table. The teacher would list all the problems and questions in the subjects to be studied for the day, and the students would begin with whatever interested them. Children would study subjects independently and consult the respective teacher, if help was required. The teacher was a facilitator, attending to the students, one by one (p. 18-19). We see how learners' agency was given space and they had the full freedom to question, request, decide, and act. They had no fear in voicing their opinions, as the teachers treated them as individuals in their own right and listened to what they had to say, rather than talking down to them. They were asked what they would like to do after all the hard work done in the morning; this also served as a motivation for children to complete their tasks on time (p. 25). The children were encouraged to discover and develop the 'good nature' innate in them, and were encouraged to do well by reinstating their goodness time and again. These echoed the underlying philosophical bases of some of the educational thinkers who shape our education system, namely, Tagore, Gandhi, and Rousseau (NCERT, 2006).

Further, the curriculum and pedagogy, focussed on the holistic development of the child. Besides academics, space was given to sports, music, and drama as well. Children were encouraged to participate in all the activities, and encouraged to go to library and read books. Plus, the children were provided opportunities for field visits; visiting a historical site, an old temple, or going on a nature's trail. Much of the learning, in terms of content as well as skills development, was happening beyond the prescribed subjects and outside the classroom. Though for the children these walks seemed like 'time for freedom and play ... (they) were in reality precious lessons in science, history, and biology' (p.



26-27). I would also like to highlight the episode when a local farmer was invited as a resource person to facilitate the children's learning. On the one hand, the children were learning about the agricultural practices, on the other hand, they learnt to acknowledge different sources of knowledge and developed a sense of dignity of work, which goes beyond simply reading about it in the textbook (p. 108-110).

The experiences of the children also highlight the issue of self-esteem and how it impacted their positive development in later years. All the children received encouragement and were constantly reminded about how good they were, in consonance with Rogers' notion of 'unconditional positive regard' and 'developing a sense of self-worth'. Totto-chan's experiences at this school were exactly opposite from her experiences in the previous school. It is also worth highlighting that being accepted as equals and having been provided opportunities to show their capabilities, helped children with physical disability to develop positive self-esteem. The school also sets an example as a step towards inclusive education where students with different abilities study together, and never feel less competent from each other in any way.

The reason for the little girl, Totto Chan, to change school was because of being expelled. Here, an important lesson is highlighted for parents as well. Credit is due to her mother for never divulging this detail of expulsion, until she grew up to her twenties. Just imagine the stress and guilt the little girl would be carrying with her if she had been told about being expelled! It might have led to her feeling incompetent and being a failure, during her growing up years. The way in which her parents handled the situation and how the teachers in the new school were non-judgemental, are two real learnings for present times as well, where we tend to be obsessed with discipline, good grades, and appropriate behaviour.

The book also subtly raises the issue of respecting each other, whether it's the headmaster making a young boy understand why he shouldn't disturb the girls; or it's Totto-chan's mother explaining to her that all people are the same and should be treated equally, and not identified as belonging to this nation or that. Another instance worth mentioning

was where the headmaster enquired about her ribbon and requested her not to wear it to school, the reason being that his daughter had wanted a similar ribbon, but he wasn't able to procure it. This straightforward request was understood by her, and she stopped wearing her favourite ribbon as she wanted to help and not cause any problem to others (p. 122). Although young children may not have grasped the full meaning of what they were being told, such conversations and focussing on sensitive issues at an early age, go a long way in developing healthy attitudes and a sense of respect and acceptance towards all. In fact, such forms of learning will have a stronger impact in the long run. Another important practice was of everyone eating lunch together in a circle, and singing a song collectively before eating, to remind them to chew the food properly. The headmaster also ensured that the meal was balanced, as it had to be 'something from the ocean and something from the hills'. On one hand, it was fostering the bond amongst the children and on the other hand, they were getting to learn the different sources of their foods (p. 20-24). This is particularly relevant to the Indian context, where we are struggling to implement the mid-day meal scheme in its true spirit.

The struggle for a progressive and child centred education has also been on, for long. The pedagogical practices of the headmaster and his attempt at providing a holistic educational experience to the young children in the 1940s, played an important role in giving wings to students' dreams. This is documented in the epilogue where the writer traces and gives an account of her peers, who have all followed their dreams which were shaped by their experiences at Tamoe Gakuen. It suggests a sense of accomplishment and a belief that the struggle will definitely bear result, if schools keep trying and moving towards the goal of providing holistic educational experiences. In conclusion, I want to say that the book is a must read for teachers, teachers educators, parents and all other adults.

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