
UNIT 1 THE LEARNER AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

- You should be able to understand the needs of our young students
- You should be able to understand the difference between a teacher and a facilitator of learning
- You should be able to understand and develop the power of empathic listening.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Our educational system is failing to meet the real needs of our society. Our schools generally constitute the most traditional, conservative, rigid, bureaucratic institution of our time. But this does not describe the whole situation. There are new developments — progressive schools, open schools and opportunities for independent study — all kinds of adventurous and innovative experiments and enterprises are being carried out by dedicated teachers.

The most important concern of our educational system in the present (for that matter any time) is the development of our most precious natural resource — the minds and hearts of our young people. It is their curiosity, their eagerness to learn, their ability to make difficult and complex choices that will decide the future of our world.

We need the help of all our youth — the serious and the thoughtful, the not so fortunate ones, the aimless, the affluent — the whole mass of our young people — if we are to preserve this fragile planet and build a future world worthy of the human race. The only way we can be assured of that help is to assist our youth to learn, deeply and broadly, and above all learn how to learn. No one book, no one person can achieve such an aim, but we can all do our bit.

Our youngsters have to be ready to face a world full of controversy — political, social, international as well as personal. They will be involved in making judgements, choices, decisions that will affect their own lives, their families and their society. Yet, they have no experience or training in the school that will prepare them for life in this difficult world.

We, as teachers, have to create a genuinely humane climate in which we have to initiate a process where a young person can find him/herself respected, can make responsible choices, can experience the excitement of learning, can lay the basis for living as an

effective, concerned citizen, well informed, competent in knowledge and skills and confident of facing the future.

Check Your Progress I

1. What, according to you, are the problems of our teenagers in the school?

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2. Describe some ways in which these could be effectively tackled in the school situation.

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1.2 NEEDS OF THE YOUNGSTERS

1.2.1. Search for Identity

We are all of us, perhaps, engaged in a struggle to discover our identity, the person we are, and choose to be. This is a very pervasive search — it involves our clothes, our hair, our appearance. At a more significant level, it involves our choice of values, our stance in relation to different people, the relationship we choose to have towards society, our whole philosophy of life. It is a most perplexing search.

This search for one's real self, for identity is more of a problem today than in the historical past. In the past, it made little difference whether the individual discovered him/herself. The identity was well defined by the society. The landlord or the zamindar led a luxurious life and his children continued in the same role. The cobbler knew that he and his sons would always be cobblers; his wife and daughters would always be primarily servants of their husbands. There were almost no options. They were told what to wear, how to behave, where to live, what to do. They were given an identity, told who they were, and the agonising personal search that most of us must go through was not necessary.

In the present times an individual's life is no longer defined (though it may be influenced) by one's family, social class caste, creed, religion or the nation.

We carry the burden ourselves of discovering our identity.

Our Role as Teachers

What would be your answer to the question 'Can You be Yourself in the Classroom?' One reply, typical of many, would be "of course, Not !" believing it to be utterly impossible to be real whole human beings in a classroom situation.

One major reason for this is that all of us teachers, have been conditioned to think of ourselves as experts, information givers, the keepers of order, the evaluators of products, the examination givers.

With this 'holier, than thou' images we firmly believe that we would be destroyed if we let ourselves emerge as the human beings we really are. We know that, at some level, that if we let our masks slip, if we showed ourselves as we are, there would be questions to which

we would have to answer, "I don't know". It would be very risky to let students know us as persons, because we would be making ourselves vulnerable and fallible. Therefore, most of us play it safe, firmly fasten our masks and maintain our roles as experts!

Many a student has his/her facade too, and often this mask is even more impenetrable than ours. These students shut attitudes carefully within themselves because they only wish to pass in different subjects, to acquire a good reputation and move one step further every year. So for many students, it is far too much of a risk to be whole human beings in the class. For them it would mean letting their feelings show — feelings of indifference, resentment at discrimination they feel that is aimed at them, feeling upset about unpleasant family atmosphere, their sharp curiosity about sex - you name it!

What does it mean to find one's real self? It is a process, a direction and not a static achievement. It means moving away from hiding behind facades and pretenses. An individual may become aware of a childish need to depend on someone, to be cared for and protected, but in other situations the same person may rebel and show anger. A man may show soft tender feelings with satisfaction and not feel a sense of shame.

When we appear without masks and let our students see our real self, that is when they start dropping their masks too, and start becoming real people.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Why do the present day youngsters go through identity crisis?

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2. What are the dangers and values of exposing our real selves to our students?

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1.2.2 Acceptance through Empathy

Someone asked Carl Rogers, "What changes would you like to see in education?" He answered, "with an imaginary wand, with one sweep, I would cause every teacher at every level to forget that s/he is a teacher. Instead, s/he will possess the skills of a **facilitator of learning** - genuineness, prizing and empathy."

'Facilitator of learning' is not just a fancy name for a teacher. There is no resemblance between the traditional function of teaching and the function of the facilitator of learning.

The 'good' traditional teacher - asks him/herself questions of this sort:

- What do I think would be good for a student to learn at this particular age and level of competence?
- How can I plan a proper lesson for my students?
- How can I inculcate motivation to learn?
- How can I teach in such a way that enough knowledge is gained?

- How can I set an examination paper to see whether enough knowledge has been gained?

On the other hand, the facilitator of learning asks questions such as these:

- What things puzzle my students?
- What issues concern them?
- What problems do they wish I could help them solve?

Then asks himself/herself:

- How can I help them find resources — the people, the experiences, the learning facilities, the books, the knowledge in myself.
- How can I help them evaluate their own progress.
- How can I help them achieve future learning goals based on this self-evaluation.

If we were willing to admit that some students surpass us in knowledge, some in insight, some in perception in human relationships, then we would step off the 'teacher pedestal' and become facilitative learners among learners.

There cannot be any 'acceptance' of a person if s/he is without empathy. The first question that needs to be raised is:

- What is it like to be a child/young person who is learning something significant?

'Seek first to understand' seems a very simple principle for effective communication, when we all typically seek first to be understood. Most of us do not listen with the intent to understand; we listen with the intent to reply.

Let's look at this conversation between two teachers:

A: I can't understand this child. He just wouldn't listen to me at all.

B: Let me restate what you just said — you don't understand this child because he won't listen to you?

A: That's right.

B: Let me try again. You don't understand your student because HE won't listen to YOU?

A: That's what I said.

B: I thought that to understand another person, you needed to listen to him!

This is the case with so many of us. We are filled with our own rightness, our own autobiography.

When we are listening to our students, we are usually listening at one of the four levels.

- We may **ignore** them - not really be listening at all. We may be merely pretending to listen.
- We may practice **selective** listening, hearing only certain parts of the conversation.
- We may practice **active** listening, paying attention and focussing our energy on the words that are being uttered.
- Very few of us practice the fourth level - the highest form of listening - **empathic listening** - listening with the intent to understand.

Communication experts estimate that only 10% of our communication is represented by words, 30% is by sounds and 60% by our body language. In empathic listening we not only

listen with our ears, but more importantly with our eyes and heart. We listen for feeling, for meaning.

Next to physical survival, the greatest need for a youngsters (for that matter everyone) is psychological survival - to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated.

When we listen to our students with empathy - we give them psychological air. And that's what they need most!

Check Your Progress 3

1. What is the difference between a teacher and a facilitator of learning?

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2. What is empathic listening? Give an example (real/imaginary) of empathic listening by a teacher in the school situation.

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1.3 THE FINAL ISSUE

What then is the challenge and the final issue of our profession as teachers/educators/facilitators?

Who do we, as people, want from our schools? What do we hope for, in the students who emerge? What sort of young citizens do we need and want in our society?

We, as facilitators of learning can create a humane climate in which, being ourselves real persons, we also respect the personhood of the students. This atmosphere is conducive to understanding, caring and stimulation.

This person centred approach is consistent with the values, the goals and the ideals of any democratic nation.

To be fully human, to trust in people, to grant freedom with responsibility—these are not easy to achieve. These present a challenge. These involve a change in our thinking, in our way of being, in our relationship with our students.

It all boils down to the question we must ask, both individually and collectively : DO WE DARE?

1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to make you aware that it is not enough to be merely a teacher who wears a "know all" mask, but a facilitator who understands her students, empathizes with him/her, and in fact becomes part of the search with her students, for knowledge and wisdom.

1.5 KEY WORDS

- empathy** The quality of being able to imagine and share the thoughts, feelings and point of view of other people.
- facilitator** a person who makes easy for another person the attainment of certain goals/results. This person promotes, helps, provides facilities to help the other person.

1.6 SUGGESTED READING

Rogers, Carl. 1983 *Freedom to Learn for the Eighties*. New York, Merrill Publishing House.

Covey, Stephen. *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York, Simon and Schuster.