

Book Review

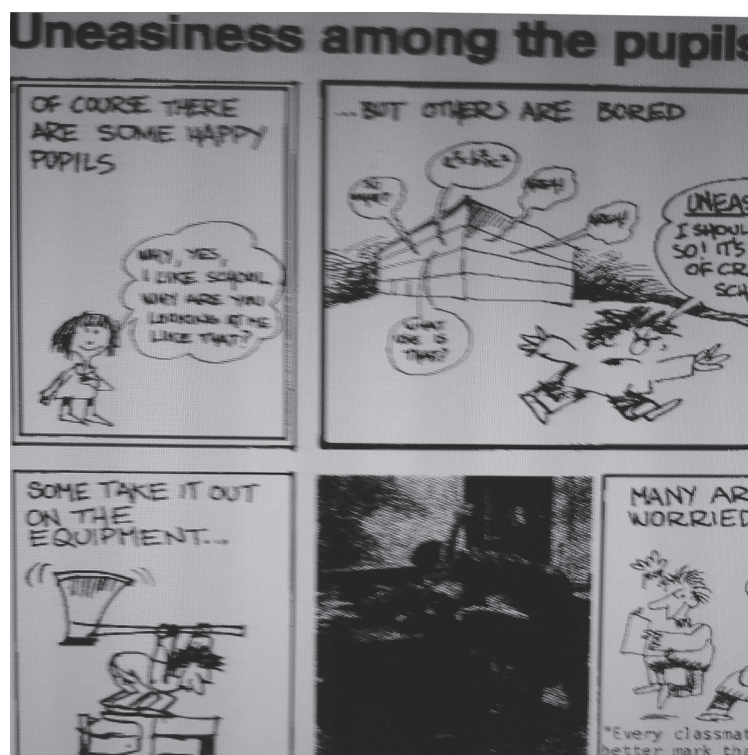
Danger: School!

Author and Publisher: Institute for Cultural Action
Indian Edition

Other India Press

YEAR: 1996

PAGE: 100; **Price:** ₹160



Provocative in nature, the book questions the education system. It gives a detailed account about children's experiences at school. Difficult to word, the inner experiences of school are beautifully illustrated in the book. It was prepared by members of the Institute for Cultural Action (IDAC), Geneva for children, parents and teachers. Etched by one of the most distinguished cartoonists, Claudius, the book employs graphics, illustrations, quotes, comics and photographs, explicating beautifully an 'inside of the school'. The symbol 'school ahead' is also used in a slightly modified way, as a cover picture to depict a hurried child. Much was learnt, as I exchanged some e-mails with Arvind Gupta, a toy maker. He revealed, "Paulo Freire, the radical Brazilian pedagogue was expelled from his country for professing a liberating educational method. The World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland gave him refuge. IDAC started there. Danger School was illustrated by Claudius - Brazil's ace political cartoonist. After Freire's death, the group disintegrated" (A. Gupta, personal communication, July 16, 2014). He also mentioned that it is difficult to find any references to IDAC on the internet. Mr. Gupta and his friends Mr. Claude Alvares and Dr. Vinod Raina worked together in making an Indian adaptation to the same. Illustrations in the book were re-done to suit Indian conditions. Its translation has also been printed in Hindi and Marathi with the name, '*khatra: school*'.

The book comprises of excerpts from Friere's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* focusing majorly on aspects like 'oppressed states', 'banking concept of education' and 'narration sickness'. Emphasis is also laid upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Ecological Systems Theory* demonstrating, in great detail, the significant role of the environment in child's development. The book cites certain researches as well. It also introduces us to the two comic characters who in continuous dialogues with each other define school. School is defined as a place that creates some uneasiness amongst students, teachers and parents. It is also seen as a place where children are not allowed to talk.

The book also gives an elaborate account about the schooling system in the 18th century. It discusses how schools came into being and how 'Education for All' gradually emerged as a new trend. The book compares the school system with a machine and various aspects of it, which have been referred as cogs, with different parts of the machine. All the functions of school are shown as mechanical, like the way machine works. The book describes school as *a world apart*, where child is entrusted like a registered parcel. The illustration disguised children as parcels are tagged 'fragile'. The silent comic strip introduces the readers to yet another cog of this teaching machinery and calls it, *cut off from life*. This comic strip shows the child

looking gruelingly at school. School is also ascribed with the label of a *world of unchangeable rites* where everything is fixed. The book quotes a child's spontaneous reply to his mother as an example. When he was asked about what he learnt about speaking, he replied that they were told to keep quiet, thus introducing yet another world, one that of *silence and immobility*. School is also seen as a place where *uniformity* is practised. Each child is expected to work and behave the same way. Does this let us think that we expect children to work at the same pace? Is there then a space for individual differences? Besides this, school is also a *world of punishments* and of *unusual subjects*. It tells us how the same is devoid of reality. Subjects taught are devoid of everyday real events and practical experiences.

Some illustrations in the book made me remember my own anxieties at school, while some, forced me to raise few imperative questions.

- i. In one of the illustrations, teacher's face consists of a 'talking' mouth. Emphasis on mouth alone explains that the role of a teacher is to do the talking. She is also shown with a stick in one hand. Whereas, students are denoted by ears illustrating children as passive listeners. This corresponds well with the 'narration sickness' elaborated by Paulo Friere, where teachers act as narrating subjects while students as listening objects. Narration sickness explains how children are expected to mechanically memorise the narrated contents.
- ii. There is a great variety of subjects that children study at school. But, there seems to be no association between them. Illustrations in the book reveal how children are put to study those subjects, the usefulness and the meaning of which is not known to them. Adults do not have any answer to convince them except establishing it as a fact that the same is going to be useful in the later years of their life.
- iii. Teachers apparently get busy highlighting their own respective subjects, thus creating a hierarchy. Some subjects are considered more important than others. Parents give prime importance to the science and commerce streams as choosing humanities is looked down in the society. Parents often worry that if their children score less, they may be forced to opt for the courses which are less valuable.
- iv. Hierarchy is not only created in the value a subject holds, in fact, even the people associated with the schools are put under a hierarchical framework. The book talks about the teachers who have the authorities over children at school. Although they are powerful, yet are worried and afraid of those who have the authorities over them. Teachers

are bound to work according to the institutions in which they serve. They are tied to the people above them, also colleagues, parents and the school programme. We talk about children's freedom. Can this freedom be brought by the teachers who are themselves not free?

- v. Tests and examinations, today, are considered hurdles as it creates fear and anxiety in children. High competition and the idea to stand well to the expectations of teachers and parents further worsen the situation. A child with poor marks is seen with low eyes. This further enforces the sense of competition in young children. However, it gets so high that they tend to keep their personal notes and notebooks hidden.
 - vi. The book shows us the sample of a kind of punishment often put to use by the teachers in school like writing for a given number of times, the acts which are not permissible. For example, I will not misbehave in class; I will not come late to the school etcetera. The child is made to write what he is ought *not* to do.
 - vii. Through interactions and everyday practices, it is often communicated to the children that there is simply one way to learn— the way indoctrinated by the teachers. Any diversion in the same will bring punishments. Thus, a child is not free to act
- his way but the desired or the expected way. In order to avoid conflicts that may otherwise arise, the child never questions. Thus, establishing silence as the most acceptable norm in schools. It is often thought that a quiet class is a good class. In the pursuit of maintaining discipline, the child is often rendered silent and immobile.
- viii. The book is critical to the fixed number of hours of study, of play, of going to the toilets etcetera. This is, however, a difficult question to answer. For the ones who talk about freedom in school looks critically at binding children in hours and for the ones who enforce discipline, makes it a forced one.
 - ix. As Mackenzie (1970) pointed out, "Philosophers throughout the ages have debated what the word 'good' means, but the educationists have no doubts. The good pupil is the the pupil with the high intelligence" (p. 18). In this particular statement, the title 'good' is associated sarcastically with intelligence. In a similar way, the book also talks about the model of a good pupil. One of the teacher's definitions of a good child is: "*A docile, patient child who knows how to keep quiet and listen to what the teacher is saying, we give good marks to those who fold their arms!*" (p 40). The book cites a research

by Robert Rosenthal, who with an experiment conducted at an elementary school in South San Francisco, found that the idea of good and bad pupils was teachers' own creation.

Through the title and cover page, it can be deduced that school is a place that creates 'unrest' amongst all those who are closely associated to school— children, teachers and parents. Pictures, illustrations, graphics and drawings have been beautifully used to convey significant meanings about school. For example, an illustration of the distorted school building exemplifies its broken state. It, however, seems to be an audacious attempt to label school as danger. The book is sure to keep its readers engrossed through its captive illustrations. Apparently, the descriptions made in the book are quite critical and sarcastic. For example, sarcastic comparisons between: '*school system and machinery*' and '*good and intelligence*'; sarcastic labelling of various cogs of teaching machinery like: *a world of punishments, world*

of silence and immobility, cut off from life etcetera; inferiority and fear of conflict defined as values; calling these values, a *mechanism* for the effective functioning of schools. Besides captive illustrations, another major strength of the book is the way it ended. Even though the book was critical and sarcastic to majority of the children's school experiences, it ended with a positive note. It welcomes and appreciates 'change'.

The book has revealed a lot about the child's experiences at school. Though the book was written years ago, it has beautifully exemplified the current school system in our nation. It thus seemed important to revive such a strong and powerful book. Besides the fact that Government has, since then, formulated various reforms, policies and acts towards free and compulsory education, it seems imperative to review this book before attempting to formulate any policy related to education. Probably, as a benchmark, it is also important to understand 'school' from the child's perspective so as to be able to design a 'happy school'.

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