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Enabling Environment in Schools

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"Learning Curve is a publication on education from Azim Premji University. It aims to reach out to teachers, teacher educators, school heads, education functionaries, parents and NGOs, on contextual and thematic issues that have an enduring relevance and value to help practitioners. It provides a platform for the expression of varied opinions, perspectives, encourages new and informed positions, thought-provoking points of view and stories of innovation. The approach is a balance between being an 'academic' and 'practitioner' oriented magazine."

FROM THE EDITOR

One of the most important functions of a school as a microcosm of society is the part it plays in enabling children to become the best they can be, as citizens. The dictionary defines the word 'enable' as, 'to make able, to give power, means or ability; to make competent, authorise, to make possible or easy' (Random House Dictionary). In this Issue, we have tried to bring together articles recounting the experiences of practicing teachers, educators and students across India – even one from a school at an altitude of 12,000 feet from distant Leh! -who have all been part of this process. Since formal learning and school are synonymous, teachers are looked upon as natural enablers.

There are many factors impeding progress in the learning process. The most significant barrier to learning could be due to a number of causes: poverty, difficult location, migration, disempowerment, paucity of ordinary conveniences, to name only a few. Each of these is a concern in itself and many times they can combine to disable a child from making use of what might lie at her doorstep.

So, the word 'enabling' when used as an indicator in school education can be defined as a comprehensive, multi-faceted series of empowering activities required to address the needs of youngsters facing barriers in the acquisition of both academic and life skills. Nowhere is the idea that a school has to engage with the community it serves more of a truism than when we consider the idea of enablement, because in order to put the idea into practice there has to be the involvement of the whole community it serves. In order to enhance a whole host of academic, behavioural, emotional and health experiences, community participation is of paramount importance. Such a partnership will naturally further efforts made in the classroom to create learning, to respond to the immediate needs of the child and her background as well as to encourage home involvement in the goals of the school.

This brings us, quite naturally, to what a school can do to enable children to feel part of their classroom learning, for which, in ideal conditions of enablement, each child will take primary responsibility. The school itself can and will have a collective vision, but the success of the component parts, the aim and goal of each child, whether vocalized or not, will rest on each member of the school. It is very clear that there is a relationship between the school's ambience (often discernible from its very gates) and the achievements of its students.

It is now a well-known and well-documented fact that the dropout rates, especially in government schools, is dishearteningly high. The reasons for this could be many – distance from the home, academic failure, inadequate facilities especially for adolescent girls, etc. However, the real reason could be a mismatch between familial expectations and the education provided, where literacy and numeracy alone do not enable young people. Indeed, in many cases the reverse can occur, when students are neither empowered to be employable nor can they return equanimously to the family fold and traditional occupations. Part of the enablement process is the effort made to ameliorate some of these causes with teacher and parent involvement.

An added challenge in our classrooms is that of teaching those whose home language is not the same as the medium of instruction and who daily grapple with the difficulties of aligning the two in different subjects. Part of our journey towards enablement is to reconcile the desire to study in English medium schools – seen not without reason as the passport to a better life- with the natural advantages of an education, at least in primary school, in the home language of the student. This is a feature peculiar to India where large numbers

of aspirational young people, determined to better themselves, face barriers when they reach university level.

A school is not a static entity. It changes along with the times: it has to, or would become an anachronism, which a school cannot risk becoming. To ensure that it delivers what is expected from it, really means that all those connected with it – teachers, students, parents, school committees- have to initiate, encourage and sustain; in other words, enable change by identifying and overcoming whatever obstacles there are on the way. Societal values and goals are a major component of a school culture and it is more than likely that generations of students, myself included, were hampered in their progress because of being part of another society's offering. However, we can now be more optimistic with the system being tailored specifically to Indian needs.

In this Issue, we have articles that enlarge on the theme of empowerment through responsible citizenry by involving the community in the process, of methods used to facilitate collaborative learning by getting students and teachers to jointly examine their problems and concerns, of attitudinal changes enabled through dialogue. One article even examines the influence of a school's architecture on the process of learning and we realise anew what we already knew: that as a species, we react favourably or unfavourably to our surroundings.

We look forward to reader feedback on all the articles and we hope that you, the reader, will tell us your experiences, both as a student and as a teacher, of your own journey in becoming enabled in your school leading, finally, to a democratic and secular society.

Prema Raghunath
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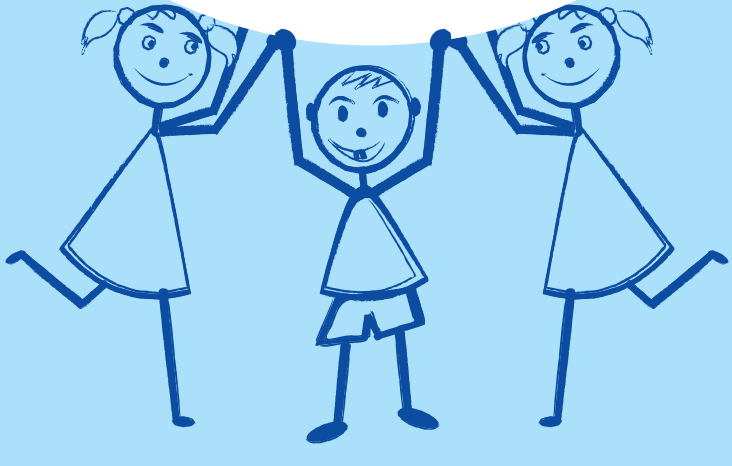
PERSPECTIVES



Within, Without

Jane Sahi

When Tagore was asked why he started a school, he responded by saying that he had such miserable memories of his own brief encounters with schooling where he was confined to a room with rows of benches, bare walls and high windows, that he longed to give children an experience of freedom and nature[i]. Schools are often restricted spaces both physically and mentally with little to stimulate the imagination or challenge the body to movement. The world of home and the village are usually in sharp contrast to the often enclosed, crowded and unfriendly space of the classroom.

A school accommodates many overlapping layers of visible and less tangible elements: the structure of the building itself and the physical surroundings, children and the teachers each with their own particular experience and sensitivity, the language, history and expectations of the immediate neighbourhood of home and community and beyond to the wider world of possibilities and constraints.

Like the human body a school has both fragility and resilience. It depends on many interconnecting systems with only a thin layer of skin to separate the inner from the outer. Primo Levi, the Italian author, writes of "the ecosystem that lodges unsuspected in my depths, saprophytes ('living organisms that feed on dead organic matter'), and birds of day and night, creepers, butterflies, crickets and fungi"[ii]. Tagore did not use the language of ecology, but he did intuit that the process of education was an individual's growing sense of unity with the natural world and of the whole of humankind.

Forty years ago when I first came to Silvepura -a village on the outskirts of Bengaluru – the majority of children did not go to school. The children of the mason, the carpenters and the workers who built our home were keen to attend school. I wondered if school for these children would inevitably mean being restricted to closed and noisy spaces. This seemed such a contrast to the children's freedom to move freely in and out of their homes and to some extent within and beyond the village.

It was for this reason that the school was designed so that there was an easy movement between inside and outside spaces and both areas were understood as potential learning areas.

Inevitably the landscape of a school and its buildings express a relationship between the children and the world. It might be the alien and

[i] Rabindranath Tagore,
'My School' in *Personality* pp.119-120.
2002 Edition. New Delhi: Rupa.

[ii] Primo Levi, (1981) *The Search for Roots.* p.5.
Translated by Peter Forbes (2001), Penguin Books.

hostile environment of Tagore's memories, but it can also be an inviting space that offers possibilities to play and work in. We can deliberately create spaces that do not sharply separate the inside from the outside by integrating verandahs, courtyards, low walls, 'jali' work and working spaces outside. Creepers can be cultivated to cover walls and even to create a shady area for play or work. Things can be made accessible, whether, books or games, and children can contribute to creating areas of interest and beauty. Bare walls can be transformed, not by adorning them with fixed, unchanging print, but by making them into dynamic, flexible spaces where children's own recent writing and pictures can be displayed.

In a rapidly changing society can we identify what are the elements that create a healthy environment for children to grow and learn in? Old school buildings are being replaced by new ones often using expensive and more durable materials but they are not necessarily more aesthetically appealing or conducive to well-being.There is a challenge to evolve designs that use materials, including new ones, which are economical and practical yet still respond to the needs of growing children.

Schools in a rural setting have the luxury of trees, rocks and open spaces, even though these are sometimes not valued. Recent research has shown that children do not respond so readily to artificial, static playgrounds, however well-equipped,but often prefer flexible, private and wild spaces beyond an adult's view and control that they can shape, change and feel responsible for[iii]. Ironically it is often economically privileged children who lead the more narrow and restricted lives because both their home and school areas are tightly controlled environments.

Children need to be in a place where they have the space to find their own connections and not have their world disembodied and compertmentalised. Loris Malaguzzi sums up the effects of an institutionalised prescriptive setting process.

They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.[iv]

The school environment is a whole world where learning needs to be grounded in the physical, sensory reality that children can relate to reflectively, practically and imaginatively.

Children can be encouraged to actively engage in caring and connecting with the surrounding environment in multiple ways through work, play and study. For example, each morning the children in the school where I work make a mandala in the middle of the main room from things they have found in the garden or sometimes from home. The designs of grasses, seeds, seedpods, flowers and leaves are never

[iii] Johnson, L.M. (1988) 'The Brook Knolls Cooperative Community: A case study for resident design of public open space', in *Landscape and Urban Planning,* 17, 283-295.See also article by the same author (Johnson), American Playgrounds and Schoolyards – A Time for Change.

[iv] Loris Malaguzzi, Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education, L. Gandini (ed.). 1998 edition, Elsevier Science

the same but reflect the season, selection and ingenuity of the children who make it. In addition to helping children observe changes in the natural world, this activity lends itself to the explorations of pattern, symmetry, shape, texture and colour.

The garden becomes a rich resource for learning as children not only play but work to maintain, the land. For example, Children can compare and contrast the advantages of raised seedbeds with other methods of planting or learn about what is biodegradable by sorting and composting organic waste. The children can observe and record changes in the growth and decay in nature around them – the appearance of fungi following a sudden downpour of rain, the arrival of a hitherto unseen species of snail or the surprising amount of time the threads of an enormous web can survive - all make the outside space a rich resource for learning.

School needs also to be linked to the lives of the children beyond the school. Children bring to school not just their bodies but so many impressions, thoughts and experiences gleaned from outside. One way to include children's own selection of news is to give time for diary keeping. Children can draw pictures, write or dictate significant events. These happenings might seem trivial to an adult, but a quarrel at home, the purchase of new clothes, the birth of puppies, a broken promise, a visit to the doctor or a journey by bus may all be worthy of being recorded in the child's mind. Language needs to be used from the beginning to share, express and extend experience.

The immediate environment of the village and home is a rich 'text' for children's learning. Teaching can begin with using what is familiar to children to open up the world of geography, history, economics and science. For example, in the history class children were asked to select an object of interest from home. Objects chosen included a door frame, a gun, a sewing machine and a smokeless 'chula'. The children discussed these things and together drew up a list of questions to ask about things they really wanted to know. There were surprising questions like, "Can you shoot ghosts with a gun?" along with more conventional enquiries about the age, material and use of the objects! This activity provided data for children to draw up a timeline that gave them a sense of the past and how things changed because of newly discovered materials and new forms of technology.

Children can begin by looking at the details of their particular everyday lives: the materials the house is made from, the clothes they wear, the remedies that are taken and the food they eat. It soon becomes clear to the children themselves that there are many forces from outside that affect choices and possibilities.

Social studies demand that we do not romanticise the past or sanitise the present but try to engage with the uncertainties and challenges of the present. The style and pace of living has changed dramatically in the surrounding communities in the last ten years. Patterns of family life, styles of child care, occupations of both men and women, eating habits, ways of resolving conflict and sources of entertainment are all in a state of transition as the community struggles to adapt to galloping urbanisation. The neighbourhood is being transformed from an agricultural based economy into a semi-urban setting with all the advantages and problems that such transformation brings.

These changes raise questions for us all and children are very aware of how these upheavals impact their lives. The growing problem of disposal of waste, the acute shortage of water or the rising power of local police are the kinds of issues that need to be addressed both through

discussion and through thinking about and imagining alternatives.

Children can begin to think about the future of the village and their part in it by studying the dramatic changes in the landscape -how fields of crops have been displaced to make way for housing plots or how water tanks have disappeared and have been replaced by brick kilns or how open wells have become defunct gaping holes .

As mentioned earlier, there are many visible and hidden, obvious and more subtle layers that make up a school's environment. The physical environment of the school and its surroundings is one dimension of the place of the school. There is another less 'namable' or identifiable dimension which is the ethos of the school. The ethos of a school is palpable in the way relationships and roles are played out, attitudes towards learning are evident, and a sense of responsibility and caring towards each other and the things and materials of the school is practiced. Does the ethos of the school reflect pressure, control and boredom or is it a space that suggests openness and freedom to explore new ideas?

Part of the ethos or character of a school is reflected in the way that words are used: who says them and to whom and why are they being voiced at all. Do the children connect to the words they hear, read and use?

Children need time and space to express their ideas whether in words or images. Pressure to produce hasty answers might mean mere repetition or imitation of someone else's formulations without internalising them.

The British novelist, Philip Pullman compares the creative process to fishing at night on an open sea where time, silence, risk taking and patience are needed and even then the results are unpredictable. He bewails the prescriptive methods that teachers use to get children to conform to different genres and techniques that concentrate on style. The products are measured against a check list of standard requirements and then produced as evidence of effective teaching.

A young child learns to use language by participating in conversations through listening and eavesdropping and then slowly discovering how to voice and share her own stories. Similarly in exploring visual language the child builds on interaction with things. Art is not primarily about making products but more about learning to look, hear, smell and touch. It begins with being in a receptive relationship with things, people and materials.

As Pullman remarks, we all need, on occasions, uninterrupted time and space. We cannot assume, for example, that children all need the same amount of time to complete a picture, a math sum or a construction. Young children can surprise us by their capacity for sustained concentration.

One of the things that we probably don't give children enough of is a sense of autonomy. Place, time and content are largely managed by the teacher who determines who should be doing what and for how long. Three years ago we began a small experiment to allow at least some choice for children. Once a week on a Friday all the children choose some activity that they want to do during 'free choice." Activities include such things as drama, cooking, paper folding, painting, pattern making, computer art, block building and clay work. The children can work alone, in pairs or in groups and choose across age groups who they work with. There is minimal intervention by teachers but at the end of the period the children present to each other what they have done.

This kind of freedom may not be practical, possible or desirable all the time and there is clearly a need for explicit instruction and mediation of new knowledge in certain areas. But a school can try to work with different children's energy, preferred styles of learning and interests and not against them.

In thinking about the school environment we can consider many layers. A healthy environment is one where there are connections - connections between the inside of the building and the outside spaces, the learning within the school and the life beyond its boundaries, the space to connect to what is going on inside you and to think, dream and imagine and the place and time to share that and the possibility to choose what to do and how. Tagore's dream of creating a shared learning space where the inner workings of the mind and the world of nature around can shape and enrich each other in freedom is an inspiration to meet the changing needs of here and now in order to prepare for a more balanced future.

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Enabling spaces: does it really matter? A dialogue between two friends

Shashidhar Jagadeeshan

Two friends, one of them a school teacher (T), are meeting after a long time. They soon begin talking and education becomes the topic of their discussion.

F: Your school is really beautiful and the children here seem very happy and friendly. But, tell me something. I see that tremendous energy goes into creating and running these schools. Does education really need special conditions?

T: I guess there are two questions here. What is the goal of education, and how does the school environment impact children?

F: But wait a minute. School environment doesn't seem so important. We know that children can learn under all kinds of circumstances, for instance in war-torn regions, in abject poverty, in conditions of hostility and domestic violence. So why all this fuss about enabling spaces? Does it really matter?

T: Would you voluntarily want your child to grow up under such hostile conditions?

F: Of course not! But in spite of going through conventional education we turned out fine didn't we?

T: I don't know about you – but I don't think I am fine!

F: What do you mean? We are fine! We are successful members of society and good people…

T: Yes! We are moderately successful and functional – but look both at society at large

and the individual in particular. I don't think that society is healthy, or that the individual is truly happy.

F: Society has many issues, but how can we as individuals fix them? Also, what has this got to do with education?

T: Before we try to fix society, shall we look at what makes society the way it is? Then perhaps we can see the connection between education and society, at least the way I see the link.

F: Boy! That is a question for sociologists, economists and philosophers –not for you and me! But if I were to speculate, I'd say the system is very corrupt, there is a nexus between the very wealthy and the politicians, there is poor governance and perhaps a million other factors we are not aware of or cannot comprehend. I have been told that it is impossible to separate the individual from his society.

T: Okay, I agree it's a very complex issue and I am definitely not competent to talk about sociology or economics. But can we focus on the human element? Why are we corrupt, exploitative and insensitive?

F: Maybe that is just part of human nature.

T: What do you mean by human nature?

F: Human beings are part of the animal kingdom, and there we see territoriality, the need to protect oneself and one's young, even in primate tribes, violence and dominance. So all that is part of our nature too…

T: But human beings can be kind, altruistic and compassionate too! And I've heard these qualities attributed to animals also. Anyway humans have this amazing capacity to learn, wouldn't you agree? Then we must ask whether education can have an impact on the individual and society.

F: Obviously it does! Education is meant to help children earn livelihoods and in that sense it does impact both the individual and society.

T: Sure, but can I share with you some insights about education by Krishnamurti? I've just been reading these books[1].

"The meaning of that word 'school' means leisure, leisure in which to learn; and a place where students and the teachers can flower, and a place where a future generation can be prepared, because schools are meant for that, not just merely to turn out human beings as mechanical, technological instruments, merely jobs and careers and so on - which is necessary - but also flower as human beings, without fear, without confusion, with great integrity. And to bring about such a good human being - I am using the word good in its proper sense, not in the respectable sense, good in the sense of a whole human being, not fragmented, not broken up, not confused."

"Surely a school is a place where one learns about the totality, the wholeness of life … It is a place where both the teacher and the taught explore not only the outer world, the world of knowledge, but also their own thinking, their own behaviour. From this they begin to discover their own conditioning and how it distorts their thinking. This conditioning is the self to which such tremendous and cruel importance is given. Freedom from conditioning and misery begins with this awareness. It is only in such freedom that true learning can take place."

F: That seems a bit daunting and overwhelming. Can education really take on such a big challenge? What kind of environment will you create if you agree with Krishnamurti about the purpose of education?

T: Well, it may sound daunting, but when I look around at the state of the world, I don't see any other way to educate! Let me tell you what my colleagues and I feel is demanded for such an education. First and foremost, the relationship between teacher and student must be based on mutual trust and affection, and not on authority and fear. If student and teacher together have to explore the nature of the human psyche, it's not going to happen when they fear and mistrust each other!

F: You are right, I remember how scared we were of our teachers. We never did feel a sense of connect, except with a few teachers who seemed kind and friendly. I have a question, though. Even in the best of relationships, being the adult and the one responsible for the child, don't you have to admonish them sometimes? Don't you have to lay down norms and raise your voice if they are being harmful to each other? Don't tell me they're never afraid of you!

T: That is a very good point, and we're not claiming to have eliminated all fear. However,

[1] Beginnings of Learning and
The Whole Movement Of Life Is Learning,
by J. Krishnamurti

it is a very different ballgame when you use fear systematically. Or when fear becomes the main currency of transaction between teacher and student. Some years ago a few teachers did a survey of children's fears across various schools in India. I remember reading some of

their responses: 'homework, tests and dangerous animals, 'the dark, math teachers and the deep parts of the swimming pool, ' 'natural disasters, Dad, teachers and tests' and 'God, snakes, some teachers'[2].

F: Hmm…I see your point that in conventional education fear seems to be the main force for motivating children to learn. Also, coming to think about it, schools generally use a lot of competition, comparison, reward and punishment. Are you saying that these are detrimental to learning?.

T: Yes! It seriously impairs learning and, more importantly, produces a brutal society. The interesting thing is that even scientific research has shown unambiguously that fear compromises academic learning and that competition, reward and punishment may produce short-term gains, but in the long run creates insensitive and insecure human beings.

F: I am beginning to see the link that you are making between society and education, but so far we seem to have approached it from the point of view of the negative effects of conventional education. Tell me something about the tangible outcomes of your approach.

T: First, a disclaimer. The more you work in the field of education, it seems the less you can theorise or guarantee results! However, from our working with children for the last 23 years we can say some things with confidence.

F: For example?

T: It is possible to teach without resorting to exams and all the other tricks that are used! In fact, because from day one students are encouraged to think, to question and make sure they understand concepts, we feel that their grasp is deep and their capacity to learn new material is enhanced. And it goes beyond learning in the usual sense. The minute we have made understanding central to our engagement with students, many subtle but significant things begin to happen, even in daily interactions. Everything that happens is addressed from the point of view of understanding, even when a child breaks a rule…

F: Don't you still face the challenge of motivation and resistance on a daily basis? Also children anyway will compare amongst themselves, even if your environment doesn't encourage it. How do you address these highly conditioned forces?

T: You've hit the nail on the head! I mean, like I said, it is actually quite possible to meet the narrower goals of education – mastering skills and concepts - without subjecting children and teachers to all the humiliation that regular schooling seems to do. But the minute you widen the canvas, you face the tremendous challenge of human conditioning. By this I mean that in our relating to each other we will

[2] See Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools, Vol 15, 2011

encounter our prejudices, fears and anxieties, hopes and desires, joys and sorrows, the need to compare and our particular ways of thinking and acting.

F: So how doyou meet this challenge?

T: Hopefully with humility! What we hope to do is to create an environment where we can become aware of our own conditioning, the forces of identity and division, belief and insecurity, and how these might play out in the larger society. Again, it's only through self understanding that change can happen.

F: What if the students are not interested in learning about themselves?

T: You can't force or coerce them, that's for sure! I think we can only invite students to learn about themselves…and in order to do this the structure of the school is designed to enable reflection and questioning. We are a community of learners with a strong emphasis on cooperation and working together. This naturally forces us to look at ourselves in the 'mirror of relationship'. We also learn about how people all over the world, under different circumstances, meet life. Then we spend a lot of time close to nature, and we have made spaces in the day for quiet reflection. One of the hardest thing students find is the half-hour of 'quiet time' everyday. And the fact that it's so difficult is quite revealing! It seems that the minute we are not occupied with any particular task or entertainment, then we become aware of a restlessness in ourselves.

F: But the student may be processing these experiences in a very different way, for example, they may interpret your 'quiet time' as a time for planning or daydreaming. How do you ensure they are really exploring the questions that animate your school?

T: You really have a knack for asking difficult questions! Yes, each of us will interpret things in our own way. We put care and energy into talking with our students. On average senior students for example spend 3 hours a week in so called dialogue sessions. They may also have informal chats with adults. The topics range from norms of the school, to understanding their own interrelationships, and their place in the world. In all these we hope to see if together we can really pay attention to all the movements of thought and emotion that are happening to us from moment to moment. It is really demanding and believe me, we are all beginners in this journey.

F: So I guess what you're saying is (though there are no guarantees here!) you are hoping to nurture compassionate human beings, free from the constraints we all unquestioningly inherit…

Shashidhar received his PhD in Mathematics from Syracuse University in 1994. He has been a teacher for over 27 years. He enjoys working and communicating with young adults, and developing the senior school programme at Centre For Learning, Bangalore. He can be contacted at jshashidhar@gmail.com

Nurturing the citizenry of the future: community involvement in schools

Nazrul Haque and Sujit Sinha

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 has stated that "fertile and robust education is always created, rooted in the physical and cultural soil of the child, and nourished through interaction with parents, teachers, fellow students and the community." However, there can be various forms of community involvement in schools. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education, 2009 (RTE Act) is a legislation which seeks to provide quality education for all children in the age group of 6-14 years. In this Act itself, specific provisions have been made for democratisation of schools and for parents and local communities to play their due roles in shaping and running of the schools in the form of School Management Committees (SMC) and preparation of School Development Plan. Although a good move, such involvements can be viewed as technical interventions and the goal is to see that the school runs effectively. However, our children are today's (and tomorrow's) citizens too. The relationship between the community and the school must be organic and something linked to the future of the child and the community. There are few instances in our country where successful school-community links have been possible –and they also contributed some meaning to the education. We are going to discuss three of them: the Vigyan Ashram IBT model, Sikshan-Mitra program in Ashram schools, both in Maharashtra; and Swanirvar experiment in West Bengal.

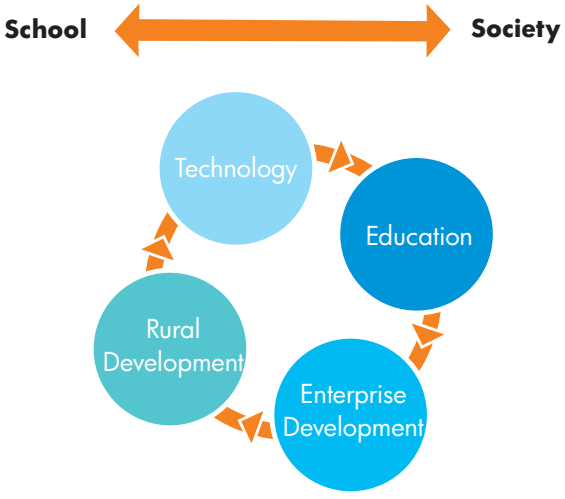
Vigyan Ashram model in Class VIII- X of government schools in Maharashtra

Vigyan Ashram was set up in Paval, Maharashtra by Dr. S Kalbag in the year 1983. Dr. Kalbag observed that all sections of society do not receive knowledge uniformly in our knowledge distribution or education system – thus leading to poor people remaining severely handicapped with regard to some basic intellectual skills. This makes them unable to use the knowledge around them. He was more concerned with the propagation of scientific and technological knowledge for "real needs of rural masses" and felt that education system is the only effective system to achieve delivery of technology. Thus came Vigyan Ashram which is working towards the stated aim of "Rural development through education system".

Apart from an in-house, informal program, Dr. Kalbag designed a course for school students – Introduction to Basic Technology (IBT). The IBT is for students of class 8-10 and is currently running in 122 public schools in four states (Maharashtra, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, and Goa). Maharashtra government has given recognition to IBT as a subject in class 10 board exam.

The IBT is quite an innovative course and the whole syllabus has four sub-disciplines: Agriculture/Animal Husbandry; Home/Health; Engineering/Material ;and Energy/environment. But our current discussion will focus more on the principles of the design of IBT and how it was created to achieve an organic school – community linkage.

The basic model is based on the following two premises –



There are four principles of the whole Vigyan Ashram education model:

Learning while doing

One cannot learn in the classroom until one has learnt the prerequisite "concepts" by experience in the real life. It has implication for education in general and for science education in particular.

Multi skill training

Skills are means to concretise one's ideas and inventions. Skills training is not intended to make the student master craftsmen (in fact VA doesn't regard itself as a vocational educational programme) but to facilitate "technological literacy"

Two-way link between school and community

The school should provide various kinds of services to the community (paid services) and while doing so the students can learn (in a real life situation) the practical and economical skills attached to their knowledge. The community becomes a stakeholder in the functioning of the school and thereby makes it financially stable.

Instructor as an entrepreneur

VA appoints a trained 'drop-out' as an instructor in the school. He operates his business with the school facilities and gives hands-on training to the students. He earns the surplus from the operation, community gets the service at modest cost ,and students get a good education.

When we think about community involvement in schools, the last two factors are quite important. There is a clear recognition that schools and students are not working in isolation; but they are part of a community where they reside. It has two implications: a) implications for the future of a child when she will finish her schooling and go back to her family and community, b) implications for the community itself as most of the schools in Maharashtra where IBT courses are running are in quite remote areas and the schools actually provide many services to the villagers! in this process, the school earns some money which goes in the running of the IBT course, the students learn in a real life problem solving mode, and the residents from surrounding areas are benefit as well. As we have already mentioned, IBT is purely a science and technology based course and the general idea behind the initiative is to equip rural people with capacities, which will help them in exploiting the gains from the new technological developments. It is seen that many new technologies are introduced in the villages through these schools (which would not have been perhaps possible otherwise). Some of these technologies and services have direct linkage with the livelihood and productivity of villagers – these are:

Agri-Animal Husbandry

Drip irrigation, sprinkler, seeding, azolla culture, pest control, soil testing etc.

Energy/Environment

Solar cooker, LED lighting, bio-gas, Soakpit, watershed etc.

Food processing

Solar drying, water testing etc.

Engineering

Ferro cement, bamboo treatment, low cost housing, toilets, pedal power etc.

The instructor should be an entrepreneur from the community! The IBT has four sub-disciplines and each one needs an expert instructor to teach the modules to the students of class 8 to 10. For example: the school will need an expert farmer, an expert welder, an expert lab person and someone having adequate skills on electricity and energy. Engaging four already existing entrepreneurs from the community serves two definite purposes: the community feels that they have a part in the school, and, secondly, these individuals become a role model for the students to stay in their villages and find or create meaningful livelihood options.

The Shikshan Mitra Programme (SMP) in Ashram Schools of Maharashtra

The SMP was an intervention done by BAIF (Bharat Agro Industries Foundation) in certain Ashram schools of Maharashtra. Ashram schools are residential schools for tribal students and are conceptualised in a different manner than regular general schools. The concept of Ashram schools had been derived from the Gandhian philosophy of basic education in which the teachers and the students live together and the students are helped to develop their complete personality and to sharpen of their abilities. Various policy guidelines emphasised that:

These schools would be set up in the most backward tribal areas;

They should be inter-village schools;

They should be opened in such areas where normal schools cannot be opened.

In Maharashtra alone, a total of about four lakh tribal students are enrolled in 1103 ashram schools (556 – Private Aided and 576 – Govt).

After years of working in rural-tribal belts of Nandurbar region, BAIF could observe that most of the tribal students return to their conventional agro-based lifestyle after completing or dropping out of school education. The concern now was whether their long years in schools equip them with necessary life skills required for their future or alienate them from actual life processes! The Shikshan Mitra programme was designed to impart values as well as practical knowledge and life skills relevant to the communities of these Ashram shala students. It was strongly felt that reciprocal relationship with the community has to be an integral part of the education system. The schools which are centres of knowledge should educate the community with the help of students by direct interaction with the community. The community in turn should contribute to the development of the school in terms of physical labour, material and by sharing their knowledge and skills in real life situations.

It is interesting to note that the BAIF intervention started with the idea that schools will work as 'development centers' for the community. BAIF was already working with various livelihood generation/enhancement activities for the tribal communities. Mostly these projects are on integrated farming, System of Rice Intensification, milk cooperative, organic traditional farming, horticulture, floriculture, cashew cultivation and so on etc. In 2003, they decided to use the Ashram schools as demonstration centers for their activities as on an average 400 children from various villages stay in one school and during their vacations they go back to their families. BAIF thought that these students can spread more awareness in their respective places about small scale rural technologies. Eight schools from Nandurbar were selected; BAIF people as well as expert farmers from the communities came there as demonstrators. In 2009, the whole intervention was launched in a more formal way in 48 Ashram schools in Nandurbar district.

The specific aim of SMP was to equip tribal students with life skills and information. These skills and information are of multiple dimensions:

- Skills and information regarding agriculture and agro- technology, imparting health education and also helping the students to assimilate essential health habits;
- Familiarising students with important local civil institutions along with essential government documents and policies to increase their social awareness;

- Creating awareness about the biodiversity in their surroundings;
- Creating opportunities for developing important life skills such as communication skills, skills of decision making, problem solving, team work, planning management etc.
- Create an atmosphere conducive for boosting the confidence of the tribal students and building positive self-image.

The complementarity between the Ashram schools and the community was tried by:

- Transmitting the latest and advanced information in agriculture, health and social topics to the surrounding tribal hamlets through the tribal students;
- Establishing links with skilled and knowledgeable villagers by inviting them to the school as resource persons. Apart from that, the parents and villagers were also asked to contribute towards the school activities by donating material (for example wood for fence) or labour;
- Participating in each other's programmes – village community can attend the functions and programmes at the school and vice versa.

"Vacation projects" was an important element of the whole school – community linkage idea of Shikshan Mitra Programme. This was created as a tool for generation and transmission of knowledge to the community by students. The later conducted vacation projects at home during Diwali and summer vacations. There were four major types of projects:

- Collection projects: seed collection or collection of traditional songs;
- Demonstration projects: demonstration related to health (e.g. preparing ORS solution or water purification) or agriculture (e.g. vermi compost);
- Survey projects: students were expected to study socially important issues at the village level, critically analyse, draw inferences and share it with the community. Some examples are – survey of village water resources, survey of drop-out students in the village, survey of availability of birth and caste certificates and ration cards etc.
- Field visits: mostly these were exposure visits to BAIF community development activities such as new experiments in agriculture, processing units, water and soil conservation sites, cooperatives and so on.

The SMP interventions were actively implemented for four years i.e. from June 2009 to March 2013. The "Action for Agricultural Renewal in Maharashtra, Pune" conducted an impact assessment of the project and came up with a report in April, 2013. The report observed that all the stakeholders of the project such as students, teachers and communities are benefitting directly by receiving information about improved agriculture, life skills, its application in the farms, growing crops by using organic manure etc. This has also led to renewal of students' interest in agriculture, and has given direction and confidence that agriculture may yet be one of the sustainable sources of livelihood. Skills gained by students regarding floriculture, kitchen gardening, vermo-composting, horticulture, plantation and nursery techniques etc. are transmitted to their parents and whole family. These are crucial issues as any community will benefit and flourish from more and more educated youths staying back and introducing better and productive livelihood enhancement measures.

The impact assessment could point out another important area: the involvement of girls in school. The report found that girls of the community have started mingling with the boys and have started participating as equals in all life skill activities. They are intend to work and do not want to get married at an early age. They are confident in talking to strangers on issues related to their health and sanitation. One can argue that these schools are effectively contributing to the enrichment of their communities as it is known that educated and empowered girls can change a whole community although these contributions might not be direct and visible at times.

Swanirvar experiment in West Bengal

In the 1990s the question which the NGO Swanirvar working in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal asked was – Can even poor illiterate communities participate in "knowledge generation and transmission" ? Or is school education only about teachers pushing "knowledge" from text books down their children's throats ? And the only "participation" that communities may do in school education is to contribute labour , and materials , and money if possible , and listen to moralistic lectures on health and hygiene from teachers ? Those days there were separate History and Geography and Science text books from Class three onwards . This was before the days of EVS. Seventeen chapters of History from Classes three to five "explained" the whole of human history. Geography was a mass of information about each district of West Bengal and each state of India along with maps to be memorised. What could poor illiterate parents do except be overawed by all this ?

Swanirvar decided to reverse this hegemony and bring in the community as real participants. Children in Classes three and four were asked to first create their own personal history or timeline. Some they remembered . But rest they had to find out . But from whom ? Who would know about their early childhood ?Would the text books have their history ?Would the teachers know ? It was the illiterate parents who had to tell their children incidents about their early life. Next was writing the family history as far as they knew going back three, four, five generations. The names, the occupations, the changes over years, any migrations. Then there was investigating the history of the oldest article in the house. And the "knowledge" of the poor illiterate parents came gushing out and the children wrote it. And this knowledge of the community came into the classroom and became something to discuss, to ponder over, to see any patterns if possible. When children were asked to find out how the village got its name ---the whole community got involved. There were several versions and the community excitedly debated and argued. And the children wrote the different versions.

How could one find out ?

What is evidence ?

What are the soil types in the village ?

What crops grow where and why ?

What are the requirements of each crop ?

What are the various village crafts and other occupations ?

Who can tell all this ?

The village farmer, the village craftsperson ?

Can they be brought into classroom or the children be taken to them ?

Can children first discuss amongst themselves and make a questionnaire ?

Can we together make a village map ?

Geography now involved the whole community and was not some boring stuff to be memorised. This, Swanirvar felt, was taking school – community linkage to another dimension where school level teaching – learning was taking place all over the community and involved everyone. NCF 2005, of course, rightfully emphasises this as a legitimate way of going about the business of education which is imparting knowledge, skills and values to everyone involved.

Conclusion

There is much work to be done. The three efforts described above are like a drop in the ocean. In more than 99% schools of India, school education is still about a teacher lording it over the students and community through the instrument of the text book. The authors are not sure what kind of capacity or environment building will lead to a fundamental attitudinal change in the majority of teachers. In the current atmosphere, if NCF 2005 is given to teachers, it will also be used as a text to be memorised rather than practiced. When a Class IX girl was taunted by the panchayat member whether Swanirvar was going to pay her for doing surveys, she challenged the panchayat member about testing

the precision of his knowledge about village problems with hers, and told the member in no uncertain terms that in the future she will become a much better panchayat member than him!

When will we have an organic school-community system that will give this courage, knowledge, skills and values to most students ?

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Chapattis and the challenges of educational change

Shashi Nair

There are three critical overarching aspects to consider when we look at educational change:'what','how' and 'who'. We need to be clear about what is worth changing. For instance, we must ensure that all teachers are in class and teaching. Obviously we need to do a lot more than that! The 'what' involves changing the practices of individuals, institutions, and the system, because as long as they continue to do what they currently do, nothing will change for the better.

But the 'what' is a lot easier to talk about than to actually execute. How do we, for instance, ensure that all teachers are in class and teaching? How do we bring about this change in practice?

We could send out a government order, but experience tells us that it does not work. We could police the teachers, but we do not have enough people to do this. Even if we did, we can never be sure that they are going about their teaching with commitment and motivation. In fact, research from around the world shows that most attempts to enforce external accountability have failed! To address this problem, as well as the many other changes in practice that need to be brought about, we need three sets of abilities:

1. We need the diagnostic abilities to understand what the real underlying problems are, and we may be surprised to find that they may not be what we think they are!
2. We need the abilities to synthesise the appropriate solutions, and here it is useful to understand the enormous body of knowledge about educational change, which tells us what really works and what does not.
3. We need the change facilitation abilities to make these solutions happen, abilities that are complex and require a great deal of expertise.

So we can see that the 'how' question is much more difficult to answer than the what.

Looking at the 'how', leads us to the third critical overarching aspect: 'who', i.e., who will need the expertise to become effective change facilitators. Is it adequate if this expertise resides in a few people in each state education department? Will a few people be able to diagnose the numerous problems and change the practices of a large numbers of individuals, institutions and the system? It is obvious, given the scale of what is involved, that we will need a critical mass of expert change facilitators.

It should be obvious by now that: very little of what we currently do to bring change focuses on effectively changing the practices of individuals, institutions and the system; we are doing little to leverage the enormous body of knowledge about educational change; and that we are doing very little to develop a critical mass of change facilitators with the deep expertise required of them.

Having looked briefly at the 'what', 'how' and 'who', let us turn our attention to a fourth aspect: "How do we develop expert change facilitators?"

It is highly unlikely that such expertise can be developed through conventional means used today – classroom training. To understand why let us turn to the science of making perfectly soft, fluffy chapattis. We all know the science: First, mix the dough, and set it aside so that it has the right level of moisture and elasticity. This allows us to roll the dough out so that it is thin enough for the later stages to work well. We then put it on the flame, and adjust the flame so that it is just right. We cook both sides just enough to form a thin layer that is impervious to steam. We continue cooking it just enough so that the steam that is formed inside pushes out the thin layers without puncturing it, while at the same time filling the entire cavity – and we have perfect, fluffy, soft, hot chapattis that are ready to eat. Some would say it is an art. Others would say that science well understood and applied is always an art.

Everything that I have discussed about making chapattis can be shared in conventional classroom training. However, it is extremely unlikely that a person by merely knowing the science will make perfect chapattis the first time. Why is this so? Because there are many unknowns in the science described above: what is the right level of moisture? What is the right level of elasticity? What is the right level of flame? When will I know that the layer that is impervious to steam is thin enough to resist breaking, but no thicker? The answers to these unknowns are tacit knowledge. They lie in the tactile knowledge of the fingertips of the person kneading the dough. They lie in the brain that knows, how much heat is right, and is a knowledge that cannot be effectively communicated in words. They have to be personally experienced to be known – and that is a key to the development of expertise.

Let us use this example to understand how expertise gets developed. This expertise can get developed through trial and error by anyone who understands the science. But let us explore how it can get developed formally in the novice, with the support of experts. One obvious part, knowledge, has to do with understanding the science – that is a given. The second is creating opportunities for the novice to try and make their own chapattis - application. The third, coaching, is for the expert to help the novice reflect on their experiences – both successes and failures – so that they can connect their practice to the science, in a way that the science comes alive and becomes almost magical. With adequate application and reflection, the novice will become an expert. There are millions of people who have developed this expertise of making melt-in-your-mouth chapattis.

Needless to say, facilitating educational change is infinitely more complex than making chapattis, but the principles of developing expert change facilitators are not very different.

There are other fields that take the idea of expertise development seriously. Take for instance the field of medicine. While there is an enormous amount knowledge that needs to be acquired, it does not stop at that. There is an enormous amount of opportunity to practice and apply (at least in the places where this is done professionally around the world); and as interns, aspiring medical practitioners work under the guidance of expert attending doctors, who guide their exposure to practice when the interns reach a stage of readiness.

Closer home to our domain, to qualify as primary school teachers in Finland, they need to acquire a research based Masters degree.

It is time we realised that educational change is serious business and can only happen if we do things differently:

1. Understand the science
2. Put in the efforts to develop change facilitators as experts, and
3. Create a critical mass of them

Can we expect change to take place if we do not do this?

There is a common notion in our country that we have good education policies, and that our problem is with implementation. I would like to argue that this is not the case. Policies that cannot be implemented cannot be 'good' policies, they

become mere wish lists. For a policy to be implemented, it needs to be accompanied by decisions (i.e. other supportive policies) that create enabling conditions for its implementation. Currently the 'what' to change is left to policy makers, while the 'how' to make the change happen is left to practitioners on the ground. Practitioners struggle to implement policies without the enabling conditions, and stand accused of 'implementation failure'. Yet decades of research on educational change tell us that the 'what' is significantly easier than the 'how'. Interestingly, when we understand the 'how', the 'what' itself changes (but that is another story). Policies made in the absence of understanding such educational change research may appear to be good policies, but research from around the world tells us that they are unimplementable. Even well-intentioned policies made in the absence of understanding educational change make it very easy to shift the burden from policy makers to practitioners and result in 'implementation failures'.

It is time we shifted the 'burden' back to policy makers. What is this 'burden' that we are talking about? It is making policies that are implementable, policies that create enabling conditions, policies based on what is known to work and how. It is time, policy makers understand the research on educational change, and set about answering the 'what', 'how', and 'who' of educational change. Create a cadre of change facilitators capable of bringing about educational change.

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Inclusive education: the way ahead

Pramila Balasundaram

In spite of the term "Inclusive Education" being more or less accepted globally, there seem to be some differences in the way the term "inclusion" is interpreted and practiced. The concept of inclusive education has emerged as a global movement to challenge exclusionary policies and practices and has become an effective approach to address the learning needs of ALL students in mainstream schools. In short, 'inclusion' refers to the opportunity for persons with a disability to participate fully in all of the educational, employment, consumer, recreational, community and domestic activities that typify everyday society. This includes the intellectually disabled as well. The quest for an acceptable lifestyle for persons with intellectual disabilities in particular, has passed many milestones such as the UNCRPD, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The whole strategy of meeting the educational needs of children with intellectual disabilities has changed drastically in the last decade and India is trying to keep pace with international developments. However we must realise that importing what works in the West is not the way forward for us. The practice hitherto has resulted in separate special education systems resulting in social segregation and isolation. We create separate worlds right from the start of a child's life, for the earliest social impact on a child is the first year of school. Inclusive education on the contrary can lay the foundation for a more inclusive society where being "different" is accepted and valued as part of humanity and its myriad forms. So, the fundamental argument for inclusive education is not only educational. There are solid social and moral arguments for it. We must also be aware of the perils of exclusion and its long range impact.

So, how should we go about implementing the inclusion aspect into our present educational system? Some situations exist which must be faced and addressed. Firstly, we must realise that inclusive education does not stop at the school gates. It goes beyond to other opportunities for training, employment, and options to choose the most suitable kind of life style. It means enabling even the intellectually disabled to make their own decisions particularly on aspects that will influence their lives. This translates into an aware community, which will include support from both the immediate family and the larger community. Second, we must also expect some reactions from parents of non-disabled children. There is much apprehension and misinterpretation about this. Finally, in India we have a different starting point since we do have a well established school system based on the western model of education.

Some major changes will have to be made. The major question is whether we have to demolish our existing system of education and reestablish roles and responsibilities. Obviously we cannot do this. Children with disabilities do need special teachers, special resources, special methodologies and sometimes special environments. These so-called 'special methods' are often no more than good child-focused teaching practices, which would even otherwise benefit all children, including those without disabilities. The focus should be on finding ways of creating the conditions that will accommodate pupil diversity and facilitate the learning of all children. The challenge here is not only to use the skills of special educationists but to find ways of helping teachers in regular schools to respond to diversity in the class room through interaction with special educators.

Research has shown that good teaching in general is based on child centered pedagogy and a stimulating educational environment. It is wrong to assume that so called special techniques can be provided by special teachers only. So, inclusion is not about making special education more inclusive but about making general education inclusive. Most skilled teachers are well aware of this and use their expertise to build on this fact. And it works best in a group that is heterogeneous – that is good, because, after all, life is heterogeneous. Available evidence from schools around the world where inclusive education is being practiced show that non disabled children do accept their disabled peers. Teachers of special education need not disappear. They will be needed to take on new responsibilities in mainstream schools to support work with children with disabilities. Their task will change, and supported by the special education professional, they will have to develop ways to cope, respond and make efforts to gain greater knowledge about disability per se. This may need modification of curriculum, reviewing of contents and teaching approaches and most of all, locating creative ways to respond to the diversity of children in the classroom. The classroom is rich

with learning opportunities as children learn through peer acceptance and support and this is where inclusion should begin.

In India, the disparity between elite educational institutions and their poorer counterparts are too glaring even to be mentioned. We must look also at the present situation in these schools. Classes where student teacher ratio is anywhere between 1: 40 and sometimes even more, definitely calls for an in-depth study before we can implement inclusion. Key elements of this should form part of the teacher training programmes but more importantly, greater emphasis should be given to in-service teacher training. Experience in other countries has shown that continuous school-based teacher training and development programmes involving the whole school are more relevant than one short training session. Techniques such as multilevel instruction and partial participation exist as well as basing educational planning on Howard Gardiner's theory of multiple intelligences. These have to be incorporated into our planning for inclusive education.

SAMADHAN's interpretation of inclusion stems from its early experience and gained momentum when inclusion became a focus for both government and educational institutions. Admitting a child without disability into our Special Education Unit was easy but admitting a child with intellectual disability in a local mainstream school was difficult. So though we continued admitting non-disabled and disabled children into our Special Education Unit we worked on making children with intellectual disability reach an academic level where they would fit into a mainstream school. So our strategy for admission of our children with

intellectual disability in mainstream schools focused on three things: to minimise and remove the negative perceptions of the community in general about inclusive education, the lack of knowledge of both Heads and teachers in mainstream schools and most importantly the attitudes of parents of non-disabled children who were unwilling to have their children "sit next to" a child with intellectual disability. Coupled with this was the lack of disability-friendly buildings, play grounds, toilets (especially for girls) and in general the complete lack of any supportive infrastructure for the intellectual or any other category of disability.

A survey of identified colonies in our low socio-economic colonies to gauge the status of awareness and knowledge of inclusive practices in the local schools helped in launching several strategically planned interventions. A workshop of local mainstream school teachers documented their views on inclusive education, readiness to accept such in their schools, awareness of policies and laws made by the government, their own attitudes and what "inclusion" should be. The results were revealing and helped in formulating regular need-based workshops on the inclusion concept in local mainstream schools.

The positive outcome was that from the teachers and parents we had met and talked to, we were able to establish a facilitator's support group. After an initial training and compulsory attendance at workshops they formed a core group of advocates who shared the message of inclusion in the community. Simultaneously, we continued an open discussion forum to share the benefits of inclusion with a variety of groups. Sensitising the community at large on inclusive was undertaken through puppet theatre, nukkadnatak, informal talks and health camps.

A survey covered 91 schools and established positive partnerships with mainstream schools who admit intellectually disabled children who pass out from our special education unit. We have admitted 16 children between the ages of 5 plus to 10 years of age into the Primary Schools of the MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi)

In reiteration, inclusion is NOT just children with disabilities being "allowed to go" to school. It is NOT just a goal. It is a process. It is NOT about creating parallel education systems or individual entitlements and it is most certainly NOT "fitting" into the currently existing education system. Inclusive education is flexible, where emphasis is on learning and not on teaching. Our SAMADHAN initiative shows that inclusive education can be implemented. Most of all it is equalisation of educational opportunities for ALL children.

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Enabling safety and freedom from abuse within the school

Sowmya Bhaskaran
Shekhar Seshadri

Each day, thousands of children across the world face situations characterised by abuse and neglect. The onus of intervention does not lie with any single agency or organisation but is a collective community responsibility.

India is home to 19% of the world's children. A study of 12447 children across 13 states in India showed that young children were most at risk for abuse and exploitation. Two thirds of children were physically abused, over 50% of children had faced one or more forms of sexual abuse and every second child reported facing emotional abuse.

Children spend a large portion of their time in school and schools are nurturing environments whose responsibility encompasses not only academic learning but to also be instrumental in social and emotional development in children. They are also places where the first relationships are formed with peers and adults outside the family and these interpersonal relations play a pivotal role in shaping young people. This makes them inherently vulnerable to the effects of an adverse school environment. It is therefore important for schools to equip themselves to be instruments of positive change and all-round development of children. Their role is particularly important when it comes to the issue of enabling safety and freedom from abuse among children and young people.

The first step towards this would be an attempt to increase awareness among the teachers that every form of maltreatment is inflicted on school going children and a thorough exploration of the teachers' opinions on abuse related issues must be carried out. It is important to determine and build upon their knowledge of the various forms of abuse- physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect, and the short-term and long-term detrimental consequences of such abusive experiences.

Teachers are in contact with children on a daily basis and are ideally placed to recognise physical and behavioural indicators suggestive of abuse. These could be extreme fluctuations in academic performance, intense hostility and anger, being passive, withdrawn, uncommunicative and sudden changes in children's behaviour. The teacher may also be able to discern children at risk for abuse from familial clues when parents consistently blame or belittle the child, see the child in negative light as compared to siblings and seem unconcerned about the child and refuse to discuss the child' s problems.

Teachers must be facilitated through workshops in learning how to respond to revelations or discoveries of abuse. It is important to for teachers to make the children as comfortable as possible, refrain from exhibiting a strong reaction to the child's disclosure, praise and support the child for revealing what happened to him/her. The child must be reassured that what happened is not his/her fault. The child may be afraid that either he or she will be taken from the home or the

parent may be arrested. If such a fear is expressed, the educator should acknowledge not knowing what will occur. In this respect it should be noted that according to" The Protection Of Children Against Sexual Offences Act 2012" it is mandatory to report the offence to the police failing which it is punishable by law with imprisonment for 6 months or fine or both.

Each school must have a reporting procedure and a clearly defined protocol for dealing with child abuse including physical abuse. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, prohibits 'physical punishment' and 'mental harassment' and makes it a punishable offence. Schools need procedures to ensure that appropriate people are notified, consultations are held and those who need to know are made aware of the student's situation.

It is extremely disturbing when a child reports that personnel in the school is involved in abuse, in this case the child needs special protection and it is important to remember that it requires courage to report. The teacher must follow the school policy and procedure in case an allegation is made against school personnel.

Identifying and reporting of child abuse are important to prevent abuse and neglect from recurring but schools must also engage in programs aimed at empowerment of children with developmentally appropriate skills and work to prevent abuse from occurring.

According to a study by TULIR, an NGO in Chennai, out of a total of 2211 child participants interviewed across schools in Chennai, 42% of the children had faced sexual abuse in one form or the other. It is therefore imperative to conduct personal safety workshops in schools on a regular basis. They help children defend themselves, especially against sexual abuse. Personal safety curricula include developmentally appropriate learning about sexual abuse, body ownership, safe, unsafe touch and confusing touch, ways of responding to unsafe touch and making children aware of potential abusers and dealing with bullies.

Although there are criticisms regarding these personal safety education for children that they make the child feel responsible for their own protection and cause them to feel guilty if they are molested, anxiety and fear towards strangers and increased risk perception, most studies indicate that children who had experienced a prevention programme were more likely to use the self-protective strategies they learned on the programme and felt more confident about doing so.

For an effective transition to adulthood, children and adolescents need to gain mastery in certain skills that are indispensable in helping them sail through life. Life skills training is an interactive process of teaching and learning which focuses on acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills which support behaviours that enable us to take greater responsibility for our own lives; by making healthy life choices, gaining greater resistance to negative pressures, and minimising harmful behaviours. It consists of a core set of skills which are problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, coping with emotion, interpersonal skills, communication, empathy and coping with stress and self-awareness. As life skills education is a dynamic process it cannot be learned or enhanced on the basis of information or discussion alone, it must involve experiential learning methods like drama, games and storytelling where there is mixture of process and content, ability to make connections with learning and the outside world and hone their ability of self-reflection. A study on implication and impact of the NIMHANS model of life skills education program among school children showed better adjustment at school and with teachers; perceived coping was better than control group.

Empowering children by facilitating inculcation of skills thorough various programmes is critical element in prevention of child abuse but provision of a safe, inclusive and accepting school environment is crucial if we need to help children reach their potential and grow up to be resilient adults. In wake of the Florida tragedy, where a

child committed suicide following cyber bullying and the arrest of two young girls aged 12 and 14 for the crime, it is the need of the day to have effective and comprehensive anti-bullying initiatives at school. Anti-bullying initiatives need a multi-faceted approach involving assessments of prevalence and frequency of bullying, intervention and prevention efforts. Efforts must be made to involve everyone in the community to send a unified message against bullying. Creation of code of conduct, school-wide rules, bullying reporting system are needed which will help in establishing a climate in which bullying is unacceptable. This must be disseminated widely through awareness campaigns. Promotive efforts like establishing a school culture of tolerance, acceptance and respect where positive social interactions and inclusiveness is encouraged must also be carried out alongside.

Having seen the significance of the role schools have to play in prevention of child abuse, it is important that schools develop a child protection policy that addresses the role, responsibilities and practices of a school in relation to child protection. When we formulate interventions in the best interest of the child, it is important to take the child's perspective in these matters through active involvement and participation of children and recognition as well as prioritisation of their needs and experiences

It is easier for children to develop and learn with the support of strong families and cooperative communities. Schools can conduct activities that help parents succeed and also prevent child abuse and neglect like promotion of parenting skills through workshops for parents on effective discipline, parent-child communication and internet-safety. Schools and communities must work collaboratively in raising public awareness regarding child abuse and neglect. These awareness campaigns must aim at helping the community understand that maltreatment of children is everyone's problem and its prevention is everyone's responsibility.

In the words of Nelson Mandela, "Safety and security don't just happen; they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear."

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Thinking differently about 'access'

Suman Bhattacharjea

I clearly remember the moment when I realized that I could read. I must have been five years old. I was at home, sitting on the floor with a storybook, reading a story one word at a time. And suddenly (this is how I remember it, at least) - I was reading whole sentences from beginning to end, without stopping. I could read!

It wasn't until many years later that I looked back and thought about this amasing moment, and everything that it signified. Obviously, it was the outcome of a process that had started years before. My mother would read to us regularly at bedtime. I was always surrounded by story books. My father was a journalist, and our home was full of print materials of all sorts. The printed word was a basic, taken-for-granted element of the fabric of our home.

But this is true for very few children in India. In 2012, volunteers for the Annual Status of

Education Report visited over 3.3 lakh households in 567 of India's 585 rural districts. These comprised all sorts of households – some more affluent, some less so; some with children, some without; some with children studying in governments schools, others where they were in private schools. Across the country, on average, ASER 2012 found that just two out of every ten households had any sort of print materials other than school textbooks. 'Inside Primary Schools', a separate study of 30,000 students across five states conducted by ASER Centre during 2009-11, suggests that children studying in government schools in rural India often come from homes that are even poorer with respect to the availability of literacy materials.

Returning to the story of the moment I discovered that I could read, equally important was what happened immediately afterwards. I remember running to my mother, excited – I can read! I can read! My mother was delighted, and her response confirmed and strengthened my belief that I had achieved something important. So did my brother's reaction, in a completely different way. Three years older than me, he was not impressed: so I could read, so what? From his perspective as an eight year old, learning how to read was a normal, ordinary part of everyday life. To me, his response signified that I had now joined the ranks of the older children, leaving the babies who couldn't read behind.

So what does my home life as a five year old have to do with access to schooling?

In India (and elsewhere in the world), we have thought a lot about access. We look at things like: what is the distance to the nearest school? If it is far away, is transport available from home to school? Is the journey safe for young children, for girls? Does the school have a ramp? In other words, we usually think about 'access' in terms of enabling children to bridge the physical distance between home and school.

But often access to learning is far more difficult. Of course children learn both inside and outside school. But for many children the formal, academic content of the school curriculum is very distant from anything they experience outside of the boundary walls of the school. Across rural India, ASER figures show that 60% of children in school today have mothers who have not themselves been to school. They have few if any print materials at home, they cannot read bedtime stories to their children, they may never have talked to a school teacher, and perhaps they do not know that telling children stories is also important for children's language development.

It is time to think differently about access, and realise that for many children bridging the distance between home and school requires much more than just a physical journey. And in the early grades at least, schools environments that enable learning are those that help children bridge this gap. These kinds of bridges are far more complex than simply constructing a building or a road, because they require understanding where children are today and helping them grow in ways that are neither visible nor easily measurable.

How good are our schools at providing these sorts of bridges? The available evidence suggests that we have a very long way to go. Here are three examples.

The first example has to do with language of instruction. Many children, often those from socially backward communities, have a different language background (in terms of dialects, vocabulary, syntax). For such children, there are many bridges that need to be crossed. Not only are they coming to school – a new thing for them and their families, but often they have to learn a whole new language as well in order to properly inhabit the new world into which they have arrived. For a young child, the school is a formal place: there are rules about the use of time and for how interactions between people must be carried out. These rules and behaviours are different from those at home or in the community. Similarly, there is a formal "school" language and style of expression which is different from how the child speaks and interacts outside school.

The 'Inside Primary Schools' study found that when the home language and school language were the same, children were far more likely to attend school regularly and do better on simple assessments in both language and math. The school environment was automatically less alien and more enabling.

The second example has to do with the content that is taught. One of the first tasks that children are given in school is to master the basic building blocks of language. In their first year of school – Std 1 – they are typically expected to learn to read and write letters, simple words, and short sentences. This is not an insurmountable task if methods and materials are carefully designed to take them from where they are today to where we want them to be at the end of the school year. But in every state in India, the curriculum and the textbook is far more difficult than what most children can manage. For example, in ASER 2012, nationally, four out of every ten children in Std 1 in rural India were unable to identify letters of the alphabet, let alone read words or sentences. But textbooks even in Std 1 expect them to be able to read and do activities based on text that is far more difficult (Fig 1). Even

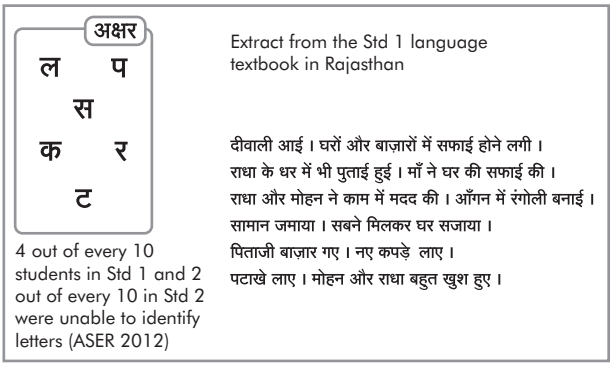

Figure 1
Children's reading: Expectations and reality

though most children are unable to master this content, the textbook for Std 2 is even more difficult – and so on with each passing year. Far from providing bridges that enable learning, our school curricula and textbooks systematically leave children further and further behind.

The third example has to do with providing 'child friendly' learning environments that make children feel comfortable, secure, and valued in school. Both the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) stress the importance of child friendly learning environments in promoting children's retention and learning. But there is little evidence on scale in India as to how child-friendly our classrooms actually are.

The 'Inside Primary Schools' study used six very simple indicators of "child friendliness" within the classroom and looked at whether these were present in more than 1,700 primary school classrooms located in 900 schools in five major states. These indicators attempted to produce a basic snapshot of each classroom in terms of several different aspects of 'child friendliness':

- Was the teacher observed smiling, laughing or joking with at least some students?
- Did at least one student ask the teacher a content-related question?
- Was children's work displayed in the classroom?
- Did the teacher use local information to make academic content relevant?
- Did the teacher use any TLM other than the textbook?
- Did the teacher ask children to work in small groups or pairs?

Data compiled from more than 1,700 classroom observations show that there is an enormous gap between what policy documents espouse and what actually happens in the classroom. In four out of every 10 classrooms, not a single one of these six indicators was observed. By contrast, four or more of these were observed in less than 1 out of every 10 classrooms. And no individual indicator was observed in more than 30% of observed classrooms (Fig. 2).

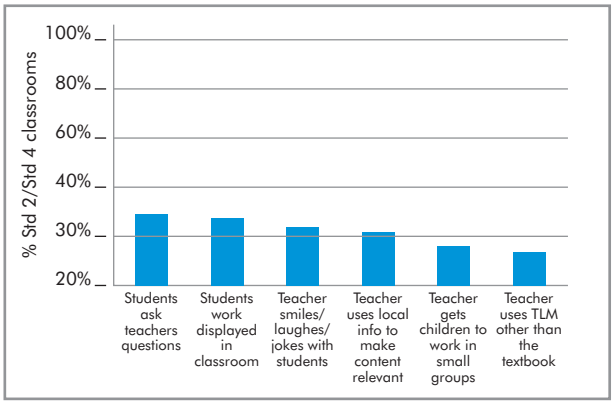

Figure 2
'Child friendly' classrooms

There is clearly a huge gap between policy and practice in terms of the scaffolding that is needed for effective teaching and sustained learning. A great deal of the discourse in India is focused on the philosophical, cognitive and pedagogical underpinnings of how to teach children and how children learn. But just as ensuring physical access to school requires knowing where children live, so too ensuring access to learning requires starting from where children are today - what they know, what they think, and what they can do.

I often ask people if they remember when they discovered reading. Few people do. It is a skill that we take entirely for granted. Like most others who are reading this article, once I started reading, my engagement with the printed word never stopped. An environment that 'enables learning' would do well to start by providing the same opportunity to all children.

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Creating better learning environments – through Systems Design and Magic!

Saumil Majumdar

Over the last four years, I have heard various educationists, school leaders, teachers and policy makers talk - at various Education conferences and in the media - about the enormous challenges in school education.

Over time, I found a few recurring themes:

1. Focus on learning, not teaching.
2. Create the joy of learning – and children will learn for life.

The biggest challenge seems to be around creating better learning environments where children are fully engaged and where children develop a love for learning.

As an engineer, when confronted with a problem, one tends to focus on design - whether it involves making new things or tinkering with existing stuff.

Try something new to make a change.

Mr. Einstein defined insanity as "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Are most of our school leaders in a state of temporary insanity? Doing the same thing and expecting different results?

Influencing any environment requires us to take into account the individuals involved and their design principles. And then try some new approach.

And when all other "scientific" approaches fail and the problem is a crucial one, turn to magic!

For solving this seemingly unsolvable problem of creating better learning environments in schools, it is probably time to combine systems design with magic.

Let me explain:

It seems to me that most of the parents, educationists, school leaders and other experts deeply concerned about creating a better learning environment in schools are missing a simple point:

The best use of a system is when you use it for what it was designed for.

And children are designed to learn through play.

Across all species, the young ones learn through play. They learn about their environment, their peers, their seniors, juniors, what hurts, what doesn't, what works, what doesn't.

And so do young humans. From a few months, the human child "plays" – with the mother, siblings, with toys - and learns. Learns about how a smile elicits a positive response, how a cry gets attention, how shapes fit into slots, how pressing a button creates music, how moving the arm with the ball can make it bounce.

Through play, they learn.

Play is often confused with sport.

Play is when you start something because it sounds interesting, try different things, see what works, what doesn't, do it many times learning

something new every time – and have fun in the process.

Sport is one very well-defined form of play. All kids love it – because it involves play.

As our advisor, Dr. George Selleck said:

"Play is a scientific experiment conducted by children"

All parents and school leaders know that children love to play. And given a choice, they will be out playing – instead of learning English or Maths.

So, the "system" of the child is designed to play.

What does the "system" of education want to create? - Better learning environments.

What is the system of education currently designed to do? Deliver a consistent academic experience to all children, measure outcomes and track progress.

Leveraging the design of the current education system, understanding the design of the key constituency – children – and introducing the Magic of Play might give us useful answers.

Magic? What magic?

Kids kick a ball around, run around in the playground, try out new stuff, meet new friends – and you get better team players, kids who understand the value of hard-work, discipline, kids who are more focused, respect the rules, understand boundaries, kids who are fitter – physically and socially.

All of this just by playing! No lectures. No teachers. No classes. Magic!

Over the last 10 years, I have seen the magic mesmerise children, parents, teachers, school leaders and educationists.

So, the best learning environments will be those that incorporate the Magic of Play into the design of the teaching-learning process. Play does not mean sport. But there are lessons from the playground that can be invaluable.

Children can "play" with science. Try out new experiments, see how stuff works, how it reacts when you throw in a new item.

Children can "play" with geography. With history. With maths.

In order to understand how to create better learning environments through play, it is important to understand the "10 Laws of Play". Laws that I have postulated based on what I have learnt while watching kids play and trying to get 200,000 children to play more over the last 10 years.

Here goes:

Universal foundation of play: You play to have fun.

Fun does not mean children have to be laughing all the time. Fun, as Dr. Selleck articulated beautifully, means:

1. Children are deeply engaged in the activity.
2. Children are connected to the group around them.
3. Children are pushed slightly beyond their limits.

1st Law of Play: You play with whatever you have.

Children are willing to work with constraints. They innovate.

Small classrooms? No problem.

Limited time? No problem.

Shared resources? No problem.

As long as they can continue to play and have fun.

2nd Law of Play: You choose the game. You make the rules.

Children make up rules as they go – in response to the environment. If an angry neighbor is around, you get "out" if your ball hits his window.

Change the game if you need to. Change the rules to include new players, new constraints.

Don't get stuck with how it was supposed to be done. Try a new approach to teaching.

The goal is not to do it "properly".

The goal is to play, learn and have fun in the process.

3rd Law of Play: The more you play, the less you get tired.

If real play is happening, children can stay focused for a very, very long time. They do not get tired. They do not get hungry. They do not need to go to the bathroom. They keep playing and learning.

You want kids to be engaged in class? Get them to "play" while they learn.

4th Law of Play: The more fluid the game, the lesser the captain matters.

Fluid games (like football and basketball) do not really need a "captain" or a "leader" while the game is on. The situation creates the leader. Structured games (like cricket) need a formal leader.

The teacher, instead of leading the class, can be the cheerleader of the class. Urging the team in the right direction, anchoring the learning to the school's context and getting all the children involved in the learning process

5th Law of Play: More scars = More fun = More learning

The scars are proof that they really tried, took a risk and went beyond what was comfortable.

Mistakes are part of the learning process. Let kids "fall". That's how they will really learn.

6th Law of Play: The more you play, the more you win.

As the child plays with the subject matter, the probability of the "Aha!" moment increases. And this win is long-lasting and intrinsic.

7th Law of Play: You need just one big win.

One big "Aha!" moment and the concept has been understood for life.

8th Law of Play: Respect the heroes. Don't copy them.

Children learn from their teachers, their peers and from their "heroes". But each child has an individuality that needs to be supported. Help children see what the "heroes" do and integrate the best practices into their style.

9th Law of Play: Mastery requires Practice. Lots of it.

Sport is probably the best teacher for this fundamental law – of play and of life.

All children understand that unless they practice, they will not get better. And their friends are getting better because they are practicing – regularly and in large enough amounts.

Get them to play regularly and they will appreciate the value of hard-work and discipline.

10th Law of Play: The game never ends.

The child wants to keep playing. If it is too late, we continue tomorrow. If it is raining, wait for the rain to stop – if they are not allowed to play in the rain!

The game never ends. And the fun, the learning and the joy of play never ends.

If we are able to get our children to experience the joy of play at school, they will seek out play for life. They will seek out friends who also share their passion for play, for exploring new things, for learning.

They will seek out opportunities for fun, for learning and keep learning for life.

There is an oft-heard saying:

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

This should actually be re-worded this way (in the context of learning environments in schools):

Give a child a lesson and you teach him for a day. Teach a child to play and you teach him for a lifetime.

The benefits of play, sport and physical activity in the playground are well known to all educationists.

Fitter children. Physically fitter and socially fitter.

Better discipline.

Better focus.

Better teamwork.

Etc…

While, over the last four years, we have been trying to "extend the classrooms into the playground" - by bringing a structured inclusive approach, assessments, teacher training and monitoring to the sports experience, it seems that the playground also has a lot to offer to the classrooms.

Integrating the 10 Laws of Play into the design of the learning environment will help you create an environment that is aligned with the design of the key constituency – the child.

And while the approach is tough and new, the teacher that succeeds in integrating play into the classroom will have created a magical learning environment where kids want to be, where all kids learn and all kids develop a joy from learning that will last for life.

Enjoy the game!

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Enabling Learning outside the Classroom

Sriparna Tamhane

"A child is not a vase to be filled but a fire to be lit" was the opinion of the French renaissance scholar and writer Francois Rabelais. Numerous educationists of eminence across centuries since then, have held that the true purpose of education is the blossoming of the individual in every possible way. Why, then have we focused so hard on "filling the vase" in our schools, while the "lighting of the fire" doesn't seem to fit somehow into the overall agenda at all? Why have we turned education into the mere transfer of information where the entire focus of one's life is one's performance in exams?

Just as a plant needs the right soil to grow, a child needs the right environment to blossom. Whether at school or home, the right environment for the child is one in which she gets some space to breathe, to discover herself, to gain confidence and realise her own potential.

Yet how many of us can honestly give true credit to the school environment for equipping us with confidence, with compassion, with the ability to think independently and make judicious choices instead of filling us with inadequacy, paranoia, fears and insecurities that have made us anything but confident and well-rounded adults, ready to cope with life?

We have ignored both the environment in the classroom and interaction spaces outside the classroom, and grossly underestimated the influence these have in shaping of the personality of the child.

The way a child is treated by parents and all caregivers has an impact on how she grows and develops. A loving and supportive environment helps children to grow and learn naturally, without the worry of acceptance and praise. The emotional environment of the child therefore, is as crucial as the physical. In a country that often has to struggle with the latter (physical), the emotional environment seems a far-fetched thing. However, a nurturing environment needs no particular infrastructure barring the warmth, understanding and sensitivity of the adults dealing with children.

The classroom itself, could set the tone for the first initiation of the child into a democratic set up, where each one is respected and allowed to explore at her own pace, in a non-threatening and happy environment. Children learn best when they are happy and free. Not free to always do what they feel like but free to explore, interpret and express. One cannot expect the child to develop, particularly in areas of cognition if she is not given adequate opportunities to learn. A variety of experiences provided through drama, music, dance, art and craft, open ended games, are effective ways to give ample opportunities for the child to develop. It is also important to tune in to the emotional worlds of the children. One could spend quality time with the children through conversations, walks, collaborative activities or play. One simple process that I can recall, that had added immense value to our interpersonal equations within the classroom was a process of sitting in a circle

sharing things, an activity we had named "Mad, sad and glad". As the name suggests, each one of us, students and the educator, shared something that he/she was mad, sad and glad about. Initially inhibited, children soon began to trust each other and shared their joys, sorrows and frustrations quite openly. Needless to say, voicing things helped in understanding each other better. It very often gave us the scope to rectify things or find solutions. As an educator, I was privileged to get a glimpse of the inner worlds of the children and that helped me in making an attempt to reach out to them more effectively.

Since the classroom environment is talked about quite often, it is the spaces outside the classroom that I specially wish to draw attention to. It is these spaces that shape young minds, and, therefore, there is a dire need to handle them with sensitivity.

Let us talk about the school assembly to begin with. The way the assembly is conducted in a school reflects its culture. This is a time when the whole school meets and therefore has abundant scope for shaping young minds in the most positive manner through thoughts, discussions, expressions through the various arts, collectively shared in order to enlighten, inspire and enable. Yet very often we turn this very sacred space into spaces where children "compete" and "perform", rather than truly share and grow. Is this space just about checking whether children stand in straight lines, whether or not they turn out always in the most neat and proper uniforms, where only the most able students get an opportunity to perform or are these also spaces that bring out the best in each individual? One of the most touching moments of my life was when a physically challenged child was helped to climb up to the stage to share the day's news. She stumbled forward and stood awkwardly before the mike. Her wobbly delivery, barely audible, was far from perfect but a lifetime's lesson in building her confidence and the compassion of the young audience.

The same could be said of cultural programmes in schools. How often is the teacher so focused on the right performance that her neurotic control over the situation creates enormous pressure on the children, more so since it is also sensed as the reflection of her own ability? How often have we seen children hurt because of rejection, tense because of the projected pressure and restricted in expression as they are hardly ever given the opportunity to think and speak for themselves, to make choices? Like all other spaces within the school, here too, they are merely expected to only follow direction, not take initiatives because of a common misconception that left to themselves, children can only create chaos. Performing on stage helps in breaking inhibitions and removes shyness and awkwardness over a period of time. Unfortunately however, only the best get to perform and the others are categorically kept away in the fear of ruining the performance, not recognising the fact that the opportunity given to a relatively less talented person might enhance her self-confidence profoundly and miraculously. An extremely positive step that the school can adopt as an enabling environment is to give an opportunity to every student to perform, no matter how. The spirit should be that of participation rather than performance, in order to benefit all, not a selected few.

The sports field is another such space where tremendous learning happens, not just of focus, practice, tenacity and team spirit but also of healthy competition. Although the term healthy competition might sound like an oxymoron, there is a point being made here. It is impossible to keep children away from competition on the sports-field, where passions run high. Yet it might be possible to explore ways to teach children to put in their best to win and yet be able to lose gracefully; To appreciate a worthy opponent, to appreciate a game for the sake of the game and praise the worthy without bias; to applaud, to celebrate, for oneself and others and last but not the least, to develop the much needed spirit of sportsmanship without which one is left incomplete in life. My mind goes back to an event

which will remain etched in my memory forever. It was a relay race, with each participant sprinting to outdo the other. The race reached its final round, where one girl clearly went way ahead of others, a sure winner. Amidst thunderous applause one watched with some amount of curiosity as the girl paused just a couple of steps before the finishing line. She waited for the other three to catch up and then hand in hand, they ran upto to the finishing mark - a thing quite unheard of on the sports field but that day the young teenager changed the rules of the game like never before!

Ever seen a child or her parents cringing at the thought of a parent –teacher meeting? While these meetings can be a boost to the parents of the "obviously gifted", it is indeed an ordeal for the one who is not academically bright or the one who does not do her homework or the one who loses her stuff….the complains are numerous and often made with great insensitivity, in front of several others. I remember a child who sobbed uncontrollably at the end of one such meeting because almost every teacher predictably just complained about her till she just about had enough. I think they managed to damage her self-image forever that day. It is time to make these spaces respect differences and the privacy of the children, time to get sensitive about giving feedback. The PTM or the Parent Teacher Meeting is another space which can be enabling or disabling forever, depending on the handling of it. If only one first genuinely tried to bring out the best in every child, without ignoring what needed to be pulled up, one would make it a kinder world to live in! inadequacies but by highlighting her strengths that one generates confidence in her.

In the words of Sri Aurbindo, "As in the education of the mind, so in the education of the heart, the best way is to put the child into the right road to his own perfection and encourage him to follow it, watching, suggesting, helping, but not interfering". This is the kind of environment that the different spaces in the school could provide, to make in truly enabling in every possible way.

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Is it just a lump of clay?

Lalita Manjunath

Any school which has set out to bring about learning in an interesting atmosphere could bring in a dedicated area for working with hands. A craft studio or center could provide a rich resource in exploring various materials and could be introduced for children from an early age.

Natural materials like clay, bamboo, wood, coconut shells, seeds pods and other fascinating materials like paper, thread, cloth and beads could be brought in for the mere joy of understanding the nature and differing qualities of these materials.

A craft studio can easily embark on using clay as one of its main mediums to bring out the imaginations and ideas of children. This is a very flexible material, which allows anybody to build, construct, design, mold, roll, readjust, reuse and break completely to start all over again without much of a problem. This area needs a fairly inexpensive investment, with least requirement of tools and equipment.

Let us slightly step back from the above to briefly look at what constitutes a vibrant, robust and open learning environment? This is crucial as learning is generally seen as just acquiring and assimilation of skills and knowledge. We have to perhaps stretch this limited use to look at other significant qualities like having the space to doubt and question, being aware of our relationships, seeing if one resorts to fear, not conforming to rigid systems while working, not using force and misplaced sense of discipline, comparison etc.

It is a worthwhile exercise to discuss how when all these aspects are combined, an enriching experience can be created, in a craft and clay studio. We could take the essential aspects to see how they could be translated into a classroom situation for a teacher to enable such challenges to happen.

Initiative to work with responsibility

A space for working with the hands draws enormous motivation to work independently or in a group, to engage with ideas and expressions with minimal support from the teacher. The teacher's role is more to make sure that they are serious, responsive to their work, with a sense of quiet and yet actively bring out their energies. This is often interspersed with sharing of thoughts

and feedback, which is essential to the process of generating ideas and techniques.

Use of discussion and dialogue for sharing and sorting out issues

The teacher has the possibility to integrate any questions pertaining to behaviour, relationships and sharing of each others' discoveries either about the work or about one's thinking, in the class in a sensitive fashion without necessarily placing these two in any order of importance.

If one is serious of not using the fabric of fear to fix issues and problems, then dialogue could have a valuable role in communicating with one another.

One could start a class or during the class talk of anything related to, that is bothering or preventing an easy flow for effective learning to manifest.

Climate of our relationships

A clay studio invariably has scope for exchange of ideas and responses of various kinds as one gets to be critical or appreciate each other's talent or capacity. The adult or teacher could use this opportunity to see how these could be done with a feeling of affection, not use any kind of comparison and favouritism or rejection, which defeats the very purpose of an open and unbiased environment.

The teacher needs to be conscious of the many emotional moments of the children, and to see how they display or dictate their state of mind while working. This often gets ignored if the teacher is preoccupied in enforcing her own demands in teaching the subject matter.

It is also an occasion to watch the dynamics displayed between the students themselves, which left on their own could make them totally preoccupied with their excitement of being together. Constant control mechanisms may not go very far in expressing the concern. How does the teacher bring in a sense of quiet and rigour in their engagement without constantly policing and reminding? This is an ongoing challenge for the teacher. It is innovative for the teacher in weaving in dialogue by involving the children to become aware of this pattern.

Evaluation and feedback

In the area of art and craft, very often one gives an immediate feedback such as: nice, not nice, good, very good or beautiful, looks exactly, marvelous, wow and so on. What does it mean to share a response, which could be factual or objective without suggesting any degree of superlatives or negatives and yet present a critical appreciation? This is a difficult aspect but cannot be ignored, as children get affected easily to such ways of evaluation, which perhaps may limit their overall creative instinct and capacity.

How does the teacher judge any work and place value on the work done by the children? This is a debate and dilemma no ready made answers. What is evident is there is something misplaced in the way adults go about looking at work and tend to evaluate in very convenient, shallow ways in order to quickly arrive at a way of marking their proficiency.

One very simple way of addressing this at this point is by giving a generous space for displaying all work done for everyone to see. Each child could share his/her thoughts and intention after making an artifact or an object. This largely takes care of not placing any order of superiority among their pieces of art.

Process overriding the result

Any healthy learning environment depends upon giving most of the importance to the process of working throughout rather than worrying about the final outcome. Resistance to try, to experiment, to take risks and to pay attention to what is at hand, may not put one to test in the process of working .

The teacher could be a catalyst in bringing to the childrens' notice and help them find out what is preventing them from getting started with their work and where the hurdles lay.

When a student finds a clay piece which he had worked on with a sense of diligence and care

collapse on completion, it is a worthwhile learning experience in spite of the outcome not being available for showcasing.

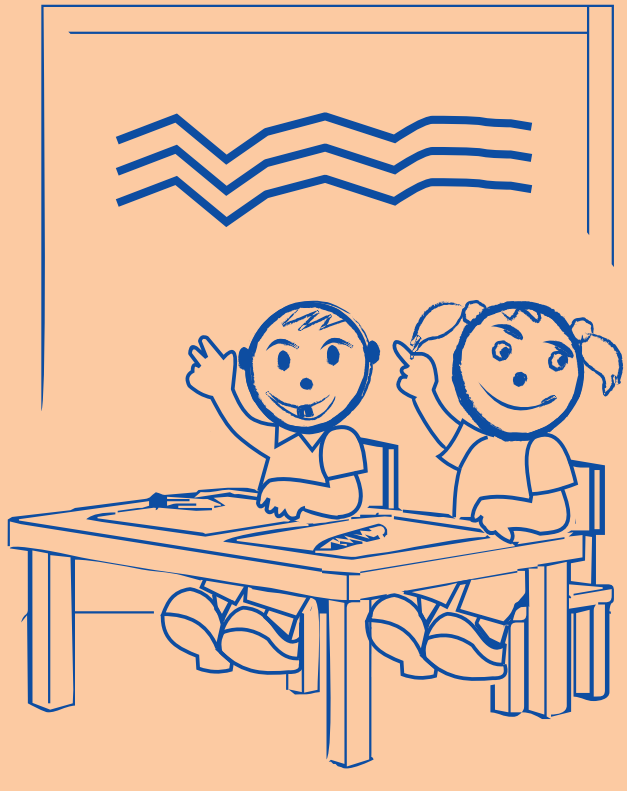
When a teacher keeps all these aspects and approaches in mind, and has an earnest motive and concern, the learning environment could definitely be enhanced in the classrooms. There are no specific methods to adhere to; rather one needs a commitment to oneself to continuously churn out energy and inclination to look and find out in every situation with a certain tenacity and curiousity.

"Real learning comes when the competitive spirit has ceased". - J.Krishnamurthi

"Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather a result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by being "with it", yet school makes them identify their personal, cognitive growth with elaborate planning and manipulation".
– Ivan Illich from the book, Deschooling Society.

Lalita has worked with children in the junior school in The Valley School and later in Centre for Learning. She also got interested in setting a pottery and craft centre for children to find interesting ways of working with materials. Presently, she has retired from full time commitment at CFL and continues to work with groups and other schools who are interested in rethinking education and learning. She can be contacted at lalita.manjunath@gmail.com

EXPERIENCES AND INSIGHTS



Creating an enabling learning environment at 12,000 Feet: SECMOL Alternative Institute

Avinash Kumar

"While [the children] may not be physically punished…a strong message is communicated to them that if they want to be accepted by the teacher and the society, they have to renounce any allegiance to their home language and culture. [W]hen the message, implicit or explicit…is "Leave your language and culture at the schoolhouse door" children also leave a central part of who they are, their identities - at the schoolhouse door."(Cummins, 2001)

Photo Credit: Krishika Shah

All I can hear is the slow thump of the bike as I manoeuvre it over the loose gravel and sand; and the sound of the wind sweeping the flat plain of the valley encircled by rocky, barren hills. I feel a nip in the air and look up to see dark clouds gathering on the horizon. I suspect I took a wrong turn at a fork in the road a few kilometres back. However, with no other humans in sight, I decide to persist. Climbing an uphill track, I am back on the serpentine tarred road; and a few curves later, perched on the hillside and overlooking the next valley, I get the first glimpse of my destination.

It stands in contrast to its surroundings – a verdant patch of habitation in the midst of miles of barrenness. I can hear the Indus flow in a gorge a few hundred feet below it, dividing the valley into two. As I ride the last mile towards the campus of Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), my mind is attempting to capture the first set of impressions in a phrase or a word – of the many that it suggests, one word lingers on,longer than the others: oasis.

The Story of SECMOL

Ladakh is one of the remotest regions in the country. And the people of Leh, one of Ladakh's two districts, are an ethnic and linguistic minority spread across habitations - which can be as small as 10-15 homes nestled on a hill - ranging in altitude from approximately 9,000 to 12,000 feet.

SECMOL Alternative Institute Campus
Photo Credit: Jamunalnamdar

Thegovernment schools here have been notoriously ineffective; and this is reflected in the dramatically low pass percentage of local students in the 10th board examinations, which stood at approximately 5% for many years. (Ganguly, 2001)

Sonam Wangchuk, one of the founders of SECMOL, had himself experienced the hopelessly dysfunctional schooling system as a child. He was fortunate to get an opportunity

to study in a school in Delhi where the encouragement of the teachers helped him come out of his shell; and he later went on to graduate as an engineer from a college in Srinagar. During his graduation years he offered academic support to Ladakhi students taking their class 10th examination – an experience that brought him face to face, yet again, with the dysfunctional schooling system in the region, and impacted him deeply. A year after his graduation, in 1988, along with a small group of other Ladakhi youths he set up SECMOL. (Ashoka India, 2002)

Even though centuries of living in harsh climatic and geographic conditions with limited resources, has led to the evolution of a Ladakhi culture that deeply values self-sufficiency and environmental sustainability, traditionally, the average Ladakhi child did not have to go through formal schooling. Children learnt in the fields and homes, watching and working alongside their parents, grandparents and neighbours. "The songs and stories of Ladakh's past would often be passed down orally while this work was being done. [And] each child would grow to become competent enough to build and maintain his or her own house, manage the farm or herd, and meet the family needs…The purpose of education was the preparation of youth for lives of meaningful work and the transmission of Ladakh's unique culture and values… [and it] allowed stable, prosperous communities to continue meeting their own needs. " (Mingle, 2010)

SECMOL started by offering courses for students who had failed (or were about to take) their 10th class exams, because as Sonam notes, "They were really in a very difficult situation because they were considered failures by the society. And these were students who had otherwise been on the farm producing their own food… But these children were sent to schools with the hope that they would fit into another sort of educated society. So they had lost the traditional skills and they had not acquired the new skills. … They were lost in between and therefore in a very depressed condition." (ibid)

With time, however, he realised that "If 95 percent of the products fail, not just in schools, in any system whether it is a car factory or jam factory, then it is not the product, it is the system … that has a defect, and the system has to be changed."(ibid) Based on its experience of working with the local students and the education system, SECMOL thus identified four main challenges: medium of instruction, unfamiliar and culturally irrelevant content in text books and curriculum, untrained teachers and communities' lack of a sense of ownership of their schools.

In the last 25 years, it has worked to address all four problem areas and has met with different levels of successes and challenges (Menon, 2010). Through the decades, however, it has continued its focus on helping students who fail the 10th class examinations. And this is done at the Alternative Institute campus designed by Sonam and built in 1994 on a barren patch of land in Phey, about 16 kilometres west of the Leh town – which I was visiting.

SECMOL Alternative Institute

It is windy outside and it has started to rain, but I am sitting in a pleasantly warm room attached to the campus-kitchen with a few friends, foreign volunteers and students - some of whom are feeding a few days old, abandoned kitten, in a corner. Chozang, an ex-student who now helps manage the day to day activities, begins to tell us about the institute: "We don't focus like a normal school on (official) curriculum, syllabus. We take the students who fail and try to re-build them (their belief in themselves) - Because once you fail your classes then everyone looks down at them – "Oh you failed, you can't do anything." We try to improve their confidence level…we call it a 'foundation year course'. All the students are from remote areas of Ladakh like Changtang, Nubra and all of them studied in government schools."

I spend the next few hours with the students of the foundation-year – hearing them make presentations and debate on questions of Buddhist philosophy, sing Ladakhi songs; having dinner with them, and answering their questions

on why I was visiting their campus! We later assemble in a large hall. A friend is facilitating an activity. "Each one of you has a story of change, a story where some kind of transformation has happened" she says, and invites us all to think of five fears that lie hidden within us; and five 'warriors' that may help us deal with them. She then suggests that we pair up and share our thoughts. My partner is a young girl who has recently joined the institute. She has listed 'exam' has her first fear. "We had an exam today no," she later explains in a low voice. "I could not answer. Means I had a paper, but I forgot." She pauses and looks down. I see her eyes welling up. "Last night I studied till 3 AM. Then I got up in the morning and studied again. But what I had studied they did not ask." She is sobbing gently now. I wonder if the twelve months at the alternate institute is really able to make a substantial difference to the lives of these children.

Next morning, I put the question to Tsetan, another ex-student who has recently joined as a faculty at the institute. He tells me that most students not just manage to clear their exams after spending a year here but, "most people go on to study further. And others…I mean they get the required knowledge, they get some ideas, what to do or not to do.""After passing from here, when we go back to schools they are astonished" he smiles. "Oh…he has improved a lot!"

So how does the institute manage to help students who are treated as failures even by their families and friends, and are habituated to a certain way of learning; and turn them into young men and women willing and capable of taking responsibility of their lives?

Of the different approaches that the SECMOL Alternative Institute takes, three key, inter-related, strategies seem to stand out.

Local language and content

Since Ladakh was annexed to Jammu and Kashmir in 1947, the official language of the region has been Urdu. When a six year old child joined school, she had to switch suddenly and completely from Ladakhi to Urdu – which is an alien language in most villages in Leh. As Sonam recalls, "It used to be a traumatic experience for the children to be in schools, suddenly welcomed with a beating stick, and then they are required to re-learn everything, all that they had known. Oma for dudh—you would be slapped if you said oma. Every time that they said something that they knew in Ladakhi so well, they would be insulted for not knowing it in Urdu. (Mingle, 2010)" In the 9th standard, Urdu, too, was abandoned and the medium of instruction in all subjects was changed to English – giving the students just two years to learn the new language and write their matriculation examination (all six subjects), in it. As Sonam remarks, "I do not know how this kind of design could come to be. It is what you would design for your enemy, not for your nation's future citizens (ibid)."

They also realised that it wasn't merely the language – the content of the textbooks too, were often completely alien to the students. Ladakhi history, culture, flora and fauna etc. found no space in these books and the overall curriculum - which were designed in Delhi or Jammu and spoke not of yaks and apricots but of elephants and rain-forests (Ganguly, 2001). Being treated as 'primitive' by non-local teachers, who often took the relevance of content for granted, exacerbated the alienation.

Textbooks using images familiar to Ladakhi children
Photo Credit: SECMOL

SECMOL understood that, as Cummins (2001) notes, "When [the children] feel the rejection, they are much less likely to participate actively and confidently in classroom instruction." And that "schools should build on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom. Whether we do it intentionally or inadvertently, when we destroy children's language and rupture their relationship with parents and grandparents, we are contradicting the very essence of education."

As the students who come to the SECMOL Alternate Institute are often from rural areas and can converse fluently only in Ladakhi, for the first few months they are encouraged to converse, make presentations to their peers, etc. in their mother tongue, as well as to share and learn more about their own culture. The faculty members are fluent in Ladakhi. And this process, thus, makes them feel accepted both inside and outside the classes. As they begin to pick up other languages - mostly English and Hindi/Urdu from their peers, foreign and domestic volunteers etc. (more on this later) the students begin to attempt a gradual and natural shift to the other languages, without being made to feel ashamed of not already being proficient in them.

SECMOL also has an active publication team which attempts to create an institutional "climate where the linguistic and cultural experience of the whole child is actively accepted and validated" (Cummins, 2001). In particular, two of their main priorities have been to (i) develop culturally and environmentally relevant text-books (such as for science and social science) for Ladakhi students and (ii) develop co-curricular content (such as children's books, a local magazine etc.) in a colloquial, written form of Ladakhi for popular consumption. This provides the readers with familiar motifs and contexts and makes it easy for them to make sense of, and begin to participate in, the academic discourses.

Rebuilding their self-belief

Another common theme that emerged as I spoke to several current and ex-students at the alternative institute, is how it hurt them to see their friends and families doubt their abilities when they failed the examination despite their best efforts. As Tsetannoted recalling his own experience, "What happened was I failed Urdu and Maths. I had worked so hard - I swear on my mother! But people at home also said…you must not have studied etc. So because of that I was very stressed. The system is like this."He feels the traditions of rural Ladakh which does not encourage children to publically or uninhibitedly express their opinions or interact freely with strangers also makes them diffident: "If there is a group sitting here…someone will say "Lets answer." So you say "You answer". He will never answer, because they have this habit you know…of bowing down. And the biggest mistake…Mother, father….whenever there are guests…they will say don't go there. They think the guests will say something. So they will tell the chid, "Aren't you ashamed? Just sit quietly." I mean, from 4/5 years you do this SO much. You give them in their mind…that if I say something what will others think?"

Recognising the complex roots and nature of the challenge the institute takes a number of steps to help the children start believing in themselves. One of the primary ones among these is to hand over the running of the campus – almost entirely - to the students. As Chozang explained, "The whole campus is run by democratic way…like a small government. There are elections every month so one student is elected as the coordinator (for one thing). That person may run the hostel. And every student has responsibility - like someone will be taking care of garden, someone will be taking care of cleaning or the solar batteries from which we get electricity, someone will be taking care of the cows that we have – milk

Students interacting with volunteers on campus
Photo Credit: Accessible Horizon Films

and everything comes from our own cows. So every student has responsibilities – They learn everything by doing."

Even as they pick up new skills, and learn to take responsibilities and live democratically among their peers, the trust that their new friends show in them goes a long way in helping them forget the trauma of having been labelled a failure, and to rebuild their confidence in themselves. "Like when a person is joining a shop or taking care of accounts" Chozangremarks, "they feel really confident of themselves. They feel like people are trusting them. And that's how they start to gain. And start learning more and more. Because then they like…you know like…they broke up. Once they fail…once the society…their family and everyone is like 'Oh you failed, you can't do anything', they are all like broken. And now here they come, and they do things and they see that people trust them…so that's what we do in the foundation year."

Given how central language is to one's sense of self, and how fundamental it is to participation in one's community and thus to one's sense of empowerment, the institute also lays considerable emphasis in developing the skills of speaking and listening in public forums. Every second month, every student, gives a presentation about their responsibilities. "Like what they learned in the classroom and while taking care of the organic garden or solar panels or taking care of a shop as an accountant etc."Chozang notes. Initially the presentations are made in Ladakhi and as the students become familiar with other languages, they are encouraged to present in other languages as well.

In addition to this, the good work that the Alternative Institute has been doing over close to two decades attracts a diverse set of foreign and domestic volunteers and visitors (Accessible Horizon Films, 2012). Many of them offer extra-curricular classes which can range from book-making to music or dance. Some also offer academic support or choose to just share their experience of travelling in different parts of the world or pursuing unusual jobs and careers. Interacting with such varied people regularly often gives the students new insights and opens up newer possibilities to them.

Effective pedagogy

While the stress during the first few months is on helping the students gain confidence through learning by doing various activities, the institute does not overlook the fact that retaking and doing well in the exams which they had previously failed, may be one of the biggest enablers and motivators for many students. They are thus also provided continuous academic support – a significant part of which is to help them break away from their old habits and become familiar with new ways of teaching and learning- which is centred around 'learning through using' and 'using what one learns'. For, unable to comprehend the text books or classroom discussions, the students in government schools here, as in many other parts of the country, often take to memorising content by rote. Asked why he had failed the Urdu examination despite having studied the language for 10 years, Tsetan responded, "But they don't teach like this you know! Their way of teaching…I mean…you cannot understand. What do teachers do? They read themselves…and then he will tell us the story (summary). And then he will tell us the appropriate lines…this for question number this."

"Here students are improving – here we improve by seeing others talk. When two people are talking …so we observe…how do they do it, and then we do it ourselves. Here, if there is science there is solar science (the campus is almost entirely dependent on solar energy and the students manage the solar network)or about the

Students discussing the environmental benefits of local mud-block buildings
Photo Credit: Accessible Horizon Films

environment. When you would read something of the local things and do practical things…then one would be interested naturally even about outside things."

The academic support continues throughout the winter when the number of volunteers and visitors dwindle, so that the students are ready to re-take the exam by the end of the academic session.

Conclusion

The SECMOL Alternate Institute has succeeded in creating an enabling learning environment for students who, as Sonam puts it, "were sent back home with a rejected stamp after spending ten precious years of their lives in schools" by (i) developing a nuanced understanding of the systemic reasons that are causing the students to fail, as well as the nature and seriousness of the personal challenges that the students face; and (ii) focussing on just a handful of strategies and implementing them well.

Given the limited resources that they work with, they do not, for instance, stress on having full time psychologists or career-counsellors on campus; but have instead chosen to focus more on creating an environment which is accepting of the children's language and culture, and thus of them. They realise that being seen as a failure by their friends and families often deeply shakes the children's belief in themselves; and that their comparatively secluded life in remote villages may not have prepared them well for the life that they must live. The Institute thus strives to rebuild and strengthen their confidence and self-belief by allowing them to take responsibilities and make decisions, and perhaps most importantly, by trusting them deeply.

SECMOL has not yet renewed its work with the local government and continues to face many challenges (Menon, 2010). However, as I leave the campus the next day starting on the road back to Leh, I am reminded yet again of the word that summarised my first impressions of the campus. For the thousands of students who have passed through its portals for over two decades, this Institute, indeed has been an oasis - rejuvenating their being, helping them prepare themselves, and setting them afresh - to discover new paths and move towards new destinations.

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Soul Culture: Creating an enabling inner environment for learning

Prerna Shivpuri and Srinivasan

They were all working in pairs filling up the classroom with the usual hustle – bustle we can expect from 4th graders. The teacher rings a small metal bell and with its tingling sound, the chatter slowly gets lost into a soft silence. The children pick up their sitting mats, form a circle, close their eyes and begin their daily practice. All this while, I did not even notice the presence of the adult (teacher) in their classroom. As if she never existed.

Photo Courtesy: The Heritage School, Gurgaon

The scene narrated above is our witness of a classroom where one would see a lot of difference in teaching on the outside but would most definitely miss to notice or realise the amount of work done at the inner level of each child as well as the educator for it to manifest in such a beautiful sight. And we are tempted to add here that this inability to take cognisance of the inner world of the child is not something new in the field of formal education. In fact, what we seem to value and judge mostly in students is their ability to replicate or reproduce the pre-imparted knowledge in the same way as it was taught to them rather than gauging their individual abilities. Where on one hand, by having standards and benchmarks, we try to bring in objectivity; on the other hand, we conveniently forget that learning is also a very personal and subjective experience. The intention here is not to negate the importance of laying down the goals that children need to work towards in a particular age group; but to highlight that the process through which each child perseveres these goals is his/ her unique journey and is therefore highly subjective.

So why is it important to nurture this unique inner environment of each child? What role does it play in the learning process of the child and is it really possible to implement this in mainstream school education? These are some questions that naturally follow from the above argument and would have crossed your mind as well. Let's address these one by one. Let us begin by understanding what the 'inner environment' of the child is made up of. According to the yogic philosophy, the mind is seen as having four functions:

Manas-The thinking and feeling mind
Chitta-The function of memory, habits and patters
Ahamkara- Involvement and self-identification
Budhi- The discriminatory or higher order

thinking mind

We all would have witnessed these functions in our own experiences without knowing the yogic terminologies for the same. If we reflect on the kind of education most of us have been through and the kind of mainstream education most prevalent these days, we would realise that it focuses essentially on training the first two faculties. There are few schools who go beyond these two functions and attempt to involve the students deeply in their own learning, sharing the ownership of learning with them and cater to the development of self or Ahamkara in students. But there are still very few schools or educational spaces that cater to the fourth aspect – building a sense of discernment in the students by engaging their higher order thinking abilities. If we truly want to nurture each child's uniqueness, we need to ensure that we engage all these four aspects of the mind while we teach. Among this, the fourth one, Budhi becomes the most critical aspect for two reasons – one; not much work has been done on it and teachers need to understand how to build a sense of discernment within their regular teaching and two; because we don't just learn from our experiences but also a lot by reflecting on our experiences. The ability to reflect, judge and take decisions is what defines our capability to discern and forms a major part of how we lead our lives. By ensuring that all these four functions of the mind are active while children are learning, we will be engaging all the aspects of their being -cognitive, affective and physical; thereby creating an enabling inner environment for learning.

It seems like a tall order to create such an enabling inner environment within students in the course of our mainstream education. It definitely takes time and effort to build something like this but there are some very simple things that teachers can do to begin the process. The first step towards this is to train students' ATTENTION. Attention is the basic lens through which we experience our lives. So working with our attention goes far beyond simply relaxing stress or improving concentration. It can change the very way we perceive and experience ourselves (self image), other people and the world at large. There are many foundational practices and principles for training attention, some of which are drawn from various contemplative traditions and most of these practices are anchored in current research in cognitive neuroscience, evidence-based classroom pedagogy, precepts of social and emotional learning (SEL), and guiding principles of positive psychology. These researches have made it evident how training attention can result in structural changes in the brain leading to positive changes in people. For instance; the parts of the brain involved in self-reflection and empathy were significantly thicker in those who developed their attention skills. These were the anterior insula, which is involved in awareness of internal states, and Brodmann area 9/10, which is involved in the integration of emotion and cognition[1].

So how do we train students' attention in order to build the kind of inner environment we are talking about. There are three phases in progression that can easily be integrated with all school programmes to develop this critical capacity within students:

Phase - I - Stabilising Attention

The first step is help students stabilise their attention so that they can take control of what they are attending to. This is done by:

- Engaging in focus and concentration activities
- Training the memory
- Fostering creativity and building problem solving abilities

[1] Lazar SW, Kerr CE, Wasserman RH, Gray JR, Greve DN, Treadway MT, McGarvey M, Quinn BT, Dusek JA, Benson H, Rauch SL, Moore CI, Fischl B. Neuroreport. 2005 Nov 28;16(17):1893-7.

Phase - II - Creating Emotional Balance

The second phase involves working with our emotions -diffusing negative emotions & enhancing positive states of minds by:

- Recognising/ becoming aware of the emotions
- Seeing the underlying patterns
- Making a choice of better alternatives

Phase - III - Discovering our unique self

Every child is born with an intrinsic sense of involvement with his/ her world; having done the foundational work of calming and balancing the mind and emotion, this natural sense of passion will find its full expression by:

- Developing the capacity to reflect and discern
- Discovering one's own calling and purpose in life
- Finding out one's core strengths and talents

The above structure is just a suggestive outline of how one can work with students at the level of their souls and foster an enabling inner culture within them. Various experiences, activities and practices have been developed around this theme that can be easily integrated in the mainstream school curriculum. Some of these are mindfulness based practices by organisations like - Plum Village, The Hawn foundation - mind up curriculum and so on.

In order to successfully build an enabling inner environment within students, one needs to understand its importance in the students' learning process and also give it a substantial amount of weightage within the school curriculum. Apart from this, it is inevitable that the teachers are prepared for this - they receive trainings that build these capacities first in them and they then acquire the skills to facilitate these within their students. Above all, the educational spaces as communities need to understand the seriousness of working on this area and commit towards making it possible.

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A New Approach for Learning Enhancement

E S Ramamurthy

The state of primary education in Public Schools gets regularly highlighted in the Annual Survey of Education Reports (ASER) from time to time. Some of the facts brought up in them are indeed disturbing; to cite an example, in Karnataka as many as 27% of the students in 7th Std are seen to lack the ability to read fluently simple non-text book content in own language. Of greater concern is the fact that such skill gaps will, if unaddressed at this stage, go on to become lifelong issues. Sikshana[i] wanted to ensure that no student leaves primary schooling without acquiring the three basic skills - reading, writing and expression in own language; as a part of this, it focussed on fluency in reading as a first step. Sikshana has come close to achieving this goal using an innovative approach, which is the focus of this article. That it is easily replicable in different environment and could also apply to other areas of primary schooling makes it even more interesting.

Sikshana realised that the shortfalls reported by ASER are notwithstanding the fact that the teachers in Public Schools are invariably well equipped to handle them in terms of qualifications and experience. Neither can it be traced to the students' inherent abilities and intelligence as, barring very few, most of them are found to be bright enough not to fail on this score.

It is generally recognised that there are two tracks for learning: acquisition of knowledge through teaching and getting/ building a skill through practice. While the former fell in the realm of the teacher, the latter depended on the student putting in the effort. It was felt that attaining fluency in reading fell in the latter category and needed to be dealt with accordingly. Focusing on this skill, Sikshana quizzed a number of Kannada teachers in randomly selected schools and ascertained the feasibility of students gaining such a skill within a reasonable timeframe. The next step was to evolve a structured programme which ensures that the students put in the required amount of effort on a verifiable basis. Thus a process along the following lines emerged:

[i] http://www.sikshana.org

At start, the kids were given a strong message that this would be their last chance to learn to read Kannada as they could expect no more interventions of this type during their schooling. However if they were willing to commit themselves for a brief spell, they could acquire this vital life skill even at this late stage- something that has eluded them in spite of years of schooling.

The practice sessions took place in the school premises- during the working hours wherever feasible. They were of one-hour duration, six days a week for five weeks with no break permitted on any grounds; nor were changes in timings or location allowed. The entire regimen was built around observance of strict discipline, which is the key to success.

Learning is enabled from a peer rather than from a 'teacher'. In fact, no teaching takes place in the conventional sense during the sessions. Kids are known to prefer practicing a skill in the company of their peers; it is further an accepted fact that learning takes place more effectively in a non-threatening support system. These form the basis of the proposed sessions, which are structured as follows.

Each learner student is paired with another who has the required skill. A common facilitator oversees a group of 15 to 20 pairs of students at a single location. Each pair is given identical reading material of appropriate level. The learner is asked to try reading the text. Whenever he comes to a stop, the mentor student is required to read out the word loudly. This intervention should happen after the learner has made an effort to read and not later than two to three seconds after the attempt, in case he/she fails. The time delay is designed is to ensure the learner is not frustrated due to persistent failures and keep a steady pace of reading going. The entire process involves three steps: effort to read, hear the correct word in case of failure and read it correctly this time while observing it 'visually'. An association between these is thus brought about in the mind of the learner, which is bound to last for some time. If the practice sessions are frequent enough, difficult words will recur to an extent that they get registered permanently in the learner's mind.

Our findings showed that children feel safe, secure and motivated to learn in the presence of an adult even if the adult is not a trained teacher. Accordingly a facilitator is provided to ensure compliance to the above guidelines during the sessions. He/ she will not however intervene in the process, especially in the role of a teacher.

The anticipated success of the venture actually centers around the incidental acquisition of the vital non-cognitive skills - perseverance, determination and grit. Once a kid agrees to submit himself/ herself to a regimen as above, he/ she is pre-disposed towards success; the above drill takes care of the rest.

To put these premises to test, a pilot was run in a school with 13 students. These were what one would call as 'down and out' kids who besides having huge skill gaps also tended to skip classes frequently and were not known to evince great interest in learning. After a briefing as prescribed, a camp was run for 30 days without a break from 31st Aug to 5th Oct; this period incidentally included three major festival holidays. The kids surprisingly offered to come to the camp on Sundays too, making it a 35 day programme. It ran with 100% attendance right through; the kids were showed unprecedented enthusiasm and a sense of pride in their progressively increasing level of competence right through the program. At the end of the stipulated period, 10 of them acquired the Level 2 reading ability as defined under ASER within the period; two more acquired it after another two weeks, leaving only one behind. The success rate of 12 out of 13 encouraged us to initiate a second phase during

Oct/ Nov 2012 with 43 schools. This time too, in spite of the fact that the schedule coincided with the mid-term holidays and three major festivals of the season, the attendance in all centers was near total. Of the 506 students covered, 327 gained the prescribed skill amounting to 65%. Though this was less than that obtained in the first trial, the figure is still a significant increase over the attrition rate of eight percent per month obtained by Sikshana under the traditional approach adopted during 2011-12 involving 3789 students in 136 schools.

The programme was then extended with a few modifications to cover 7th Std students in more than 220 Sikshana schools during the remaining period in 2012-13. Those who looked to be falling marginally short in fluency at the end of 30 days were given an extension of 15 days. Further, those who did not have the minimum knowledge of alphabets/words were taken out at the start itself and put through a 30 day qualifying programme with identical structure for acquisition of the desired skill. 7894 students participated in this phase out of which 7166, amounting to 90.8%, reached the competency levels prescribed. Taken along with those who already had the skill or acquired under its the other initiatives, the Sikshana schools scored an overall 96.9% with 17904 students out of 18471 passing the ASER benchmark of Level II for Reading. Based on this resounding validation, the program is being expanded during the current academic year to cover all the 7th Std students in Sikshana schools.

A word of caution is due here. Achievement of reading fluency as assessed under ASER does not automatically entail comprehension, which is the ultimate goal of any comprehensive reading programme; however fluency being a prerequisite for this, the acquisition of the skill becomes an important step towards achieving this objective- a fact given due recognition by the Report.

Incidentally, Sikshana ran an identical program in parallel across many schools for acquiring the ability to carry out simple division of whole numbers. Success rates obtained here too were comparable to those in the Reading Programme. This showed that it is not the targeted competence of reading that mattered; it is the role of non-cognitive skills in the enhancement of learning levels under controlled conditions. The success of this programme and the insight it provided into certain learning processes has given us hope that it can be used towards achievement of a broader range of skill sets in primary schooling.

A detailed paper going into the causative factors for the above results and providing the theoretical validation for the key presumptions is due for publication in "Working Papers on Educational Linguistics" shortly.

Ramamurthy has had a long and distinguished career in Industry. Opting to get out of it at its peak, he founded Sikshana, of which he is now the Chief Mentor. The programme is aimed at evolving a sustainable model for the Public School System. He can be contacted at esrmurthy@gmail.com

Nali Kali: Enabling for learning: Can more be done?

Namita Gupta

We all have an image of what a classroom looks like. It could be based on how we were taught, the classrooms our children may be in, or classrooms that we may be teaching in ourselves. In most cases, this classroom has a teacher talking with a group of children, who may be 25 to 50 in number. There is a blackboard, books and worksheets, and colourful charts and material on the walls, if the children are 'lucky'. The government school version of this is expected to be similar, and in most cases, drabber. But lower primary classrooms in Karnataka government schools, and in fact, many other states, such as Tamil Nadu, Chattisgarh etc. no longer look like this. They follow a multi-grade, multi-level activity based learning program, which is similar to a Montessori approach in many ways. In Karnataka, this program is called Nali Kali. This article is based on a four year evaluation of Nali Kali, carried out jointly by Prof Anjini Kochar, Stanford University, Catalyst Management Services, and Azim Premji Foundation. It was funded by Hewlett Foundation and Azim Premji Foundation.

Government schools across the country face multiple challenges. One of them is the teacher-pupil ratio. There is now a norm of 30 students to one teacher for all lower primary schools in the country. There is also a norm of a primary school within 1 km of every habitation, and an effort to do away with single teacher schools. These norms, while largely implemented, create peculiar situations. Many rural primary schools are small, with not enough students to warrant one teacher for each grade. Therefore, teachers have to teach multiple classes or grades at the same time. There may also be cases of sanctioned posts being empty, or teachers being absent, which makes multi-grade teaching necessary. Students too are at different levels of learning. This is not a challenge limited to rural or primary government schools. It is an inherent feature of teaching and learning. However, this problem may be worse for certain communities where children are not regular for socio-economic, cultural and religious reasons. They may be absent for long periods of time, and when they come back, they may be lost if the class has progressed too far ahead. Many children, and schools, neither have the resources to get extra help and 'catch up' or to ensure regular attendance. Therefore, teachers need to also teach to many different levels in a class, in addition to teaching different grades. Finally, schools often are alienating to students. Students, especially first generation school goers who have not completely 'bought in' to the idea of schooling, may not be that keen to participate if the school is unknown, irrelevant, difficult, or boring. Both research and theory also suggests that children learn better if they are interested, engaged and do activities as a way to consolidate their understanding.

The Nali Kali programme of the Government of Karnataka, aims to tackle these multiple challenges. The programme first started on a pilot

basis over 15 years ago, and was based on the RIVER method developed by Rishi Valley. In 2009-10 it was expanded to cover first and second grades of all Kannada medium primary government school. Next year, it moved to third grade as well. The Nali Kali programmme has a few key features. First, students are no longer divided into grade. Students of the first, second and third grades sit together in one classroom with one teacher. Second, students have the flexibility to learn at their own pace. The entire curriculum of a grade is broken up into steps. There are specific activities associated with each step. Students learn the content through these activities, and complete the step, progressing up the ladder. Third, the students are organised into groups. At any given point of time, there can be up to five groups in a classroom, which are created to facilitate peer learning. The teacher works with one or two groups. The students in the other groups either collaborate to learn from each other, or work independently to assess their current level. Students in a peer learning group may be at different steps in the ladder, as well as from different grades. They are, however, working on a common theme or content area. The activities that each child does are different and, tailored to the specific level and grade. Fourth, the pedagogical focus is on learning by doing. Textbooks have a minimal role in Nali Kali classes and are used primarily for revision and reading practice. The activities are described on cards, which are associated with each step of the ladder. The students are largely expected to be self-driven in carrying out the activities.

We conducted a four-year study on the Nali Kali programme, to assess its effectiveness in improving children's learning. We also looked at non-cognitive outcomes such as social skills, communication, leadership skills etc. We studied the classroom processes which give rise to these outcomes, and assessed teachers' understanding of the programme. The results show that Nali Kali has a significant impact on increasing test scores, especially in language. The impact is greater for the lower grades, when they are still in the Nali Kali classes. It is driven by the acquisition of lower level competencies, that is, children when in a higher grade, end up learning more of the previous grades. There is also a significant positive impact on leadership skills.

This is a positive result, especially in the context of the low levels of learning of children in these

schools. The classroom observations and conversations with the teachers show that the basic mechanics are in place in most schools. That means that teachers and children have adapted to the new way of organising the classroom, and the change in the teacher-student relationship that comes with it. Students are fairly comfortable with locating their current level, identifying the activity that they need to do in class, and getting into their group. This indicates a certain ownership of the process of learning, and their involvement in it. Teachers too, demonstrate a fairly high level of knowledge, in general about the programme, how it works, and what its key aspects are. However, teachers have a somewhat limited role in the Nali Kali programme. They are required to work closely with only one or two groups, while overseeing the work done by other groups. They no longer need to mediate the content in the text-books, as the activities are expected to be student driven. This means that, amongst other things, the teacher face-time that each student gets is very little. This 'loss' is expected to be substituted by peer and self-learning. However, our research shows that in 20% of the 'peer-learning' groups there is very little to no interaction of any kind between the students in the group. If students don't even talk, can they learn from each other? Nor is it clear how the material and teacher training has been re-devised to be facilitative, which is a higher order skill. The idea of self-paced learning and peer-learning, which is central to Nali Kali, seems to be undertheorised. There are also some inherent contradictions in the programme, which allows for students to learn at their own pace, provided that they all reach the end point together, at the same time.

This brings us to the crucial question-what is Nali Kali enabling the children for? A more open environment in school, which does not penalise noise and promotes working with friends, is important in itself. Students are acquiring more of the basic competencies in language and maths in the first three years. But Nali Kali does not enable students enough to learn in traditional classrooms in the fourth and fifth grades. We need to think more deeply about the teacher's role in a Nali Kali classroom, and the material she needs to effectively transact that role, before the potential of Nali Kali can be fully tapped.

Summary:

The Nali Kali Programme in Karnataka is activity-based, multi-grade multi-level. Students have ownership over their learning and work at their own pace. Though there are gains in achievement, these are limited. Peer learning is not happening adequately, nor is it clear how it is supposed to work.

Namita is a faculty at Azim Premji University where she teaches economics, education policy and research. She has been in involved in large-scale research on policy issues such as early childhood education, MGML and determinants of education participation. She can be contacted at namita@azimpremjifoundation.org

Creating Enabling Environment in Schools: An Interview with Usha Aswath Iyer

Nivedita Bedadur

Ms Usha Aswath Iyer is Deputy Commissioner and Director of the Zonal Institute of Education and Training (ZIET), Bhubaneshwar. She has a vast experience of working as a Post Graduate Teacher, Principal, and Teacher Educator. In Kendriya Vidyalaya Moscow, Ms Usha taught mixed ability group students from many countries ranging from Africa to South East Asia. She has been a pioneer in introducing inclusive practices as Principal in Kendriya Vidyalaya Calicut and Kendriya Vidyalaya No II, Air Force Station, Lohegaon.

Nivedita (N) : What is your experience of creating enabling environments for special children? As a teacher and principal is there any awareness/ training/ policy you need for managing it in a better manner?

Usha (U) : There have been very few children with special needs in the schools I have worked in. In the early days of my career, my efforts were limited to using my common sense in trying to solve some of their problems related to the physical environment. No training has been put in place for the teachers or the administrative staff. Teachers and principals along with parents, need to be sensitive and counselled in supporting children with special needs so that they become happy children who are firmly set onto the path of discovery of life and learning.

N : I believe all of us as children need a lot of support with something or the other. In school I was so fearful of Mathematics that I didn't believe I could ever do a sum.

U : Me too, but do we think of it as a teacher or principal? I specially hate it when, during school inspections, the teacher will explain away a child's inability to answer with the remark that "he/she is a slow learner". Surprisingly, or may be not so surprisingly, even students of Class II and above know very well who is a slow learner! No teacher feels it is his duty to help the child answer. The teacher in the classroom is like a parent. Just as a parent protects and supports a child against any criticism, attack or abuse, the teacher should react instinctively giving the child every opportunity to solve a problem.

N: What role does infrastructure have to play in creating an enabling environment?

U: Yes, infrastructure does play a significant role in creating an enabling environment. Seating is a big problem in most schools as the furniture is heavy and uncomfortable. The feeble attempts to make the same kind of standardised furniture in all places for all classes, does not take into account the different needs of different age groups, subject requirements or climate. However infrastructure cannot replace emotional connect and common sense.

I remember a teacher who placed a mat in the space near the blackboard, strung up some magazines and books as a makeshift class library and gave her students the freedom to use these resources whenever they had free time. This was a Class II I am talking about (about six or seven years old kids). During one of my rounds I was amazed to see this class all working on some task though there was no teacher present. And there were two students who were helping two other learners with the day's studies.

As a teacher I remember Ashutosh- one of my very bright students in the Science stream. He used to wear calipers so it was very difficult for him to move about. But he was very enthusiastic and wanted to write on the board and participate in the class. Most of us, encouraged him. And one day, during inspection, he answered in class- without standing up. And the Inspector was very annoyed. He commented about it in class as well as reported it in my inspection report. I felt too embarrassed to explain to the inspector that Ashutosh was physically challenged and so could not easily stand up.

N : Which of these do you think are most important / most challenging in creating an enabling environment : respect and value each child, listen to children and learning and openness?

U : Respect and value each child- I strongly believe this is important. It is the most challenging too as people have to analyse why they treat children/people who are different from them differently, whether it is due to differences of social or economic strata or of abilities. There are deep cultural roots to our behavior. To replace the prejudices we cultivate as social beings with openness is definitely a challenge. Yet there have always been heart-warming moments when change seemed to happen.

In one of my schools a teacher on her own devised a method to bring the slow learners of her class on par with the rest of the class. There were four or five students who had no clue about English but had managed to reach Class V. She was in despair as she just could not get through to them. She hit upon the idea of starting with Class I textbooks and guided them through Class II and III as well. The change was almost a miracle. After hearing the words, "Why can't you?" they were surprised to hear the words, "You did it!"

Listen to children and learn- This is the next most difficult attitude to change; as most adults feel they know everything and children need only to be ordered to do things. We rarely allow students to ask questions. I remember one class where I interacted with Class IX students. And the questions they asked about the political and social problems was amazing. There is a policy of free education for a single girl child in Kendriya Vidyalayas – where a single girl is the only child of the parents. I remember a boy telling me that the policy of giving free education to the single girl child was less necessary than a policy that would help to give the single girl child in a family of boys, preferential treatment. He said that in those rare cases where a single child, even a girl, is found, the child is usually given special treatment as there is no other child to compare her with.

N : In your long tenure of more than 10 years as a principal you have taken many steps to bring about attitudinal change in teachers and slowly turned prejudice into appreciation. Tell us about some of those experiences.

U : Remember Abhay of KV AFS 2 Pune? He was in Class V at that time and I had gone on my regular class inspection. An English class was in

progress. The teacher asked questions and the usual set of students answered. Once Abhay raised his hand to answer. He answered correctly- but in Hindi. The question was: What do you do to cool yourself on a hot summer's day? And among the various answers of air conditioners, swimming, fans, coolers etc. came his response-"dubkilagana''. Abhay came from a very poor background- almost a slum area. For him a pool of water- any pool of water was a good way of cooling off. And this is true of many of our students. How many actually use a swimming pool? But the teacher's response was a harsh- keep quiet. I had to intervene. And my praise seemed to help him to jump with more answers. Another question to which he answered" ice kagolla" was received enthusiastically be me. After that Abhay became one of our favourite students.

It is only after I became a principal, I realised that the physically challenged students have special needs which we don't understand immediately. One of the students in Class X was deaf. She did not wear a hearing aid. The reason- the hearing aid amplified the noise the students in her class made, during the gaps between two periods and she could not bear it. I discussed with her teachers, and we decided to give her written notes which she would have to copy out as she could not always lip read the teachers' speech. We also made some worksheets for her.

And then there was this girl in Calicut. She could not move on her own. It took me almost a year to realise that she could not use the normal Indian toilet marked for students. I managed to contact the CPWD and get toilets made for children with special needs and this was done fairly quickly thanks to the Vidyalaya Management Committee's support.

N :What difference do you see in your role in creating an enabling environment – as a teacher, as a principal, as a teacher educator?

U : As a teacher I could support all students and my friendly nature usually made them feel relaxed. I don't think I did anything different for

them or anything special. As a principal I could easily take decisions where changes in the physical environment had to be made- whether it was changing a classroom, building special toilets or allowing books to be taken to a paraplegic student as he could not reach the library. As a teacher educator, I spread awareness through workshops and school visits. However I have no direct control or authority over policy making.

N : Have incidences of violence, abuse and neglect led you to wonder whether all children at all times can be provided with an enabling environment in the absence of community engagement?

U : Yes. I remember this boy in Class IX with the innocence of a Class VI child. He had cerebral palsy so his gait was erratic and his sitting posture also a little awkward. And his teacher, I found, had been pinching and punishing him- ostensibly to improve his posture! The teacher did not really understand my anger; he only understood that the parent was very angry and he could lose his job. What guarantee that the teacher would not continue his ill-treatment of other children? And what guarantee that this child would not have to face similar treatment from others?

N : If you had the power to improve one school policy to create a more enabling environment – what would it be?

U: Educational policies should clearly spell out the requirements, the methods and awareness measures for different stakeholders. There should be regular discussions on the problems faced by special students and steps taken to overcome them. B Ed programmes should have a component on special education. Every school should have the post of a special educator which will be of immense help in making teachers aware about the support needed by such students.

Students' Council, Student representation in school boards like VMC or PTA would help students' voices to be heard. Value education, religion, examples of great leaders I hope will make an impact. Yes, awareness has to be created among parents, teachers and children themselves about respecting the uniqueness of each individual and the need for all kinds of skills and talents in this modern world.

I would welcome a policy where report cards are purely verbal and only point out the plus points of each child, where there are no numerical marks awarded as this invariably leads to comparison and feelings of inferiority- whether it is in the home or school or society as a whole.

Nivedita is presently working as Specialist, Academics and Pedagogy in the University Resource Centre of Azim Premji University. She has been interested in research on the use of mobiles for language learning and has conducted some experiments with SMS and language learning and a research study on the same subject has been published in *Continuing Professional Development : Lessons from India,* a book published by British Council. She has experience of teaching English at secondary and higher secondary levels through her long stint at Kendriya Vidyalayas in India and abroad for more than 29 years. In the course of her career she has also worked as Vice-Principal and Principal in Kendriya Vidyalayas and a private CBSE school. She is a recipient of the incentive award for teachers during her career as a teacher in Kendriya Vidyalaya, Kathmandu. She can be contacted at nivedita@azimpremjifoundation.org

An Attitudinal Change

Aruna V. Prasad

> "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves"
>
> - Carl Jung

Going by the statement made by Jung, it seems that life challenges us in more ways than one, giving us an opportunity to reflect upon ourselves. Let us consider a case on hand to understand this further.

A nine year old child walked into the lives of 15 adults last August (2012) at Azim Premji School, Udhamsinghnagar. The profile of the child at the time of admission was –

- Very little sense of schooling, its requirements and demands
- Clinically diagnosed as child with low IQ level
- Rules, expectations and routines did not mean much to her
- Challenged not only academically but also socially and behaviorally
- She was not refined in her manners with peers
- Impulses ran high
- Got aggressive at times
- Could not sit in one place
- Snatched things away from others
- She would lie down wherever and wasn't fully toilet trained
- She needed repeated instructions and reinforcements to help retain and make sense of the instructions given.

I wondered if as adults we know what it takes to learn something (read-academics) as often, we tend to take the developmental stages of a child for granted. We are also at a loss in handling someone who takes time to learn or someone who is differently abled. What if a child is different from the rest? Can we teach in ways that he/she can learn or to provide with what is required to make the child independent? It seems obvious then to have a special educator in every school; however, the reality is far from that. Teachers who handle 'normal' kids are expected to deal with the 'special needs' kids as well. Understandably, they not only lack the expertise but are also at a loss given their own attitudinal issues in handling such children– like any other adult! This comes into focus more simply because their 'profession' requires them to teach all irrespective of the differences in the learning levels or capabilities.

It wasn't an easy situation to handle and teachers were at a loss. I was wondering how to equip the teachers who have not handled children with different needs? I knew there was resentment although it wasn't openly stated. It was important to equip the teachers as they are the ones who would be managing the child.

In the meetings that were held, it was decided, that not one but all of them would be responsible for this child in school. It has to be a team effort. As a single point contact with parents, one of them was made the class teacher. It was clear that some general strategies had to be thought of to begin with. To list a few:

1. The instructions given would be simple, clear and short
2. All teachers to identify the problematic behavioural patterns of the child that had to be addressed on a priority basis.
3. Ensure that the parents are kept in the loop for consistency, continuity and similarity in the approaches. Instructions given to be same at home as well in school. Also to learn from each other in understanding ways of dealing with the child.
4. Didi (helper) would be our translator as the child could follow only Bengali. Didi was also made responsible for the child's hygiene and other such needs.
5. It was also decided that academics would not be 'the main focus.' This was communicated to the parents as well.
6. Class teacher to be kept informed of everything and also to remain in touch with the parents

Though I knew that these strategies per se were not going to be of much help, I let things be because I knew that more than anything else the teachers were in need of time in figuring out things for themselves and by the child.

During my visit in November, I observed that all was not well and the teachers- as expected - were frustrated and running out of ideas in handling the child. They were requested to pen down their experiences in dealing with this child.

Extracts

"I was shocked that she has been given admission. Ma'am has made a mistake. The child should have been referred to a special school. I realised it is not her fault that her brain is not developed. But after joining us, I can see that her behavior has undergone a change."

"When she joined, I felt how will she mix with other kids? She cannot even express her needs. But now she indicates what she wants. She understands us. I also understand her. Over time she will become alright."

"She has no sense of good or bad. No knowledge of why she does something. If given some proper work she sits with it for some time. She does things only under instructions, 'do not waste food,''wash your plate' etc. I think she is progressing in the correct direction, getting love like at home. She has learnt a lot after coming here. She is happy. I am happy."

"I was scared of her in the beginning. I felt a need to maintain a distance. I used to even chase her away. Once she brought flowers and indicated to me to put it in my hair. I felt, perhaps I was doing the wrong things. I started talking to her. She was happy to see me when I went for substitution classes. I felt it is not her wish to be born like this."

"It was a new experience. She started watching other kids and imitating them."

I thought she has some mental problem. There hasn't been much improvement in her over the three months. She has troubled teachers and children a lot."

"In the beginning I used to be irritated, get angry. I felt she should be given work, made her sit next to me. I noticed improvement. One day she said in English, 'may I come in ma'am?' I felt happy."

"She would not sit without her mother in the beginning. But now she does. She is friends with one or two kids, likes to come to school, listens to

teachers at times. If we focus more she will improve."

"I was wondering who will teach her. Over time there has been an improvement. She is not a barrier anymore"

"I feel she is mentally ill. We cannot educate her with normal children."

"Lots of difference from the time she joined. If she does not beat us then why does she do that to her peers? May be they don't share things with her!"

"She has started listening to her friends. If they say, 'don't do,' she will not do. She needs attention. She has improved socially and is trying to mix with people."

Going by the reflections it was clear that barring a few, the rest had actually started noticing a change in the child, more so in the way they had started to accept her for what she was, making it possible for them to relate to the child. Children of classes III and above were spoken to and sensitised along with being equipped to say 'no' to this child whenever she became aggressive or got into socially unacceptable behavior rather than hitting her back or teasing her.

The admin person as well as the principal also started pitching in by engaging her in conversations and teaching her a few alphabets to begin with. She had developed some interest in coloring. A set of worksheets (coloring, writing of the alphabets etc.) were prepared and kept handy. Teachers were to give it to her whenever she entered their classrooms. Some of the sheets were occasionally sent home as well.

The end of the academic year threw up yet another challenge – progress report card - what should be written in the report? The team met to identify the positives and the areas for improvement.

Following points emerged:

- She has stopped wandering around
- Started looking into books, ask questions
- Follows simple instructions
- She imitates her peers and tries to sing
- Toilet trained and so on

Areas of concern

- Continues to be aggressive at times
- Tears paper

To everyone's surprise it was 29 positives as against 10 concerns!

It was heartening to see both the parents attend the Parent Teacher Meetings. They said, "We are happy to see our child enjoying coming to school, she acts busy by opening books and sharing things that happen at school, and above all is being treated as a human being, and has friends."

The teachers definitely needed time and space to figure out many things for themselves. Having got the time and space to figure out things, the teachers had come a long way in accepting the child. Now they are coming up with their own strategies in handling the child which I think is going to make both the child as well as the teachers independent.

Children do not discriminate. Rather, it is we who do so in finding it difficult to accept such differences.

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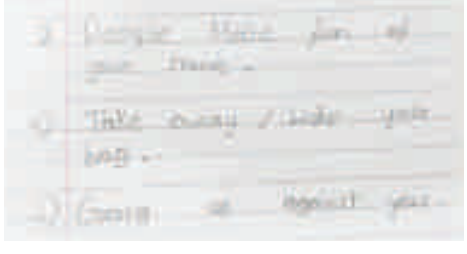
Culture that Matters

Karpagam S

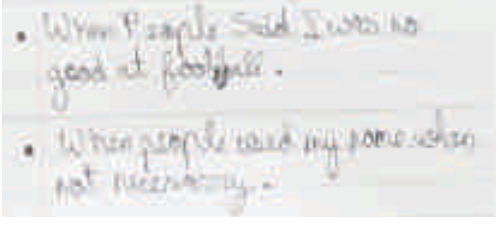
As a class teacher in the middle school [Grades V, VI & VII] I have heard children rebuke one another during the class sessions, in the common school areas where they sit and chat while waiting for their bus, while they go pass staff rooms. Initially I thought children coming of age have this awkwardness in expressing themselves and so tease each other gently as a way and means to start and strike a conversation with their peers. But as a teacher I was always 'ears'to what language they are using to address each other, are they being very aggressive in their remarks and so on. At the same time equally I was on guard as to not to interfere too much at every single comment or mock as I felt that this is an important part of their growing up process and they need to go through it and stand up to it in their own way.

Feeling this way, I had also indicated to my children in different ways and during different sessions that I would be available if they needed me when they were unable to tackle any teasing they faced. As teachers we decided that we would speak to a few children who we felt needed this support separately when they are



alone, so that they would feel confident enough to come and tell us if something went wrong. This was done so discreetly that they did not feel vulnerable by getting exposed in front of the whole class. We also spoke to the children who are slightly dominant by nature and tended to take these talks or warnings lightly.

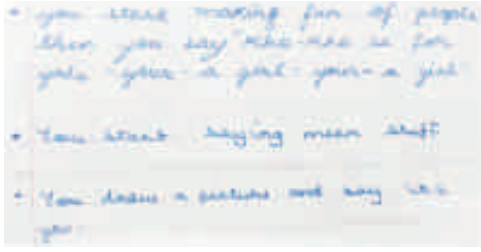
Once as I walked into my class I heard a part of a conversation between two children ending with, "Hey, today we have upma for snacks, yuck!"I just entered the class asking,'You don't like upma?" and turned around to the class. Everyone looked at oneanother and said, "Nothinglike that, aunty" [that's the way teachers were addressed in the school I worked]. I told myself not to waste time on it and I continued my class. But I told myself that eating habits need to be addressed with children.



After a month or so, the dining hall manager complained to us teachers in the meeting that children flocked the dining hall for some snacks like pavbaaji, bhelpuri, sweet buns, fried items but did not enter for some snacks, like steamed food and other termed 'good-for-health' by adults.

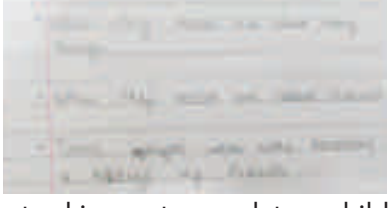
One day I was told that by a child in my class that his father might be coming on that day to meet me. This child was known to be a kind, ever-loving and soft-spokenboy, as one of his classmates put it. In fact, I was planning to meet his parents to let

them know of these remarks passed by his peers. After lunch break, his father came as said and we met in the staff room. What he shared for the next couple of minutes was so shocking that I hardly believed my ears. He said that his son was becoming very violent and throwing tantrums if he did not get what he wanted. Earlier he would choose his things but when his parents suggested he would immediately comply. Initially, the parents thought that he just wanted his own way. But within few months he seemed to want only expensive, branded T- shirts, stationery, shoes and socks and other sports equipment. He asked me whether I could talk to him confidentially about this new behaviour. Although I promised this parent that I would do the needful, wasn't sure what was happening.



Something of similar nature was brought to my colleagues' attention from their class students' parents. We did start noticing that children were wearing a particular brand and playing only a particular sport which they felt was superior. When we suggested some indoor games and other few sports they brushed it aside saying that it's a 'babies game'. We just put it down to growing up and copying their seniors.

Although we left it there, after a few more parents called, we had this nagging sense that we were missing something. We shared our experiences in a teachers' meeting and decided to find a solution after a discussion. An opportunity was another parent asking us to speak to a child for a similar incident. Since it had come from a parent, I called the child and started by asking about his new shoes and whether he was enjoying playing with them. The child told me he had not had a chance to play and he could not tell the teacher as he would be ostracised. Then it came out that all the children were copying each other, both about their things and the food. So a subtle bullying had started! This could lead to other things: it is widely accepted that ongoing bullying has harmful effects for all parties and if their behavior goes unchecked, children who act as bullies are likely to behave in anti-social ways when they leave school (Rigby, 2003). So we reviewed our initial idea of not interfering in the children's interaction with their peers and others and decided that intervention and guidance were necessary to let the children know the seriousness of the issue. We used the assembly to bring the matter up, with presentations on bullying. We needed to go slow, but at the same time let the children know of the seriousness of the issue. We used our assembly and open house for opening up the issue. This also let the children bring up their viewpoints. Children wrote about the hold peer influence had on them. Research findings confirm that when students are given opportunities to discuss values explicitly, student well-being is enhanced, bullying is reduced and conditions for learning are improved(Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty & Nielsen, 2009).We also discovered that the bullies themselves needed more help and support than their victims. They had been bullied and were doing the same in their turn. It began as light fun, but after a point they did not know how to stop. When they found they were not going to



be reprimanded, they came to us with their problems.

After one term of handholding, we knew it was time to empower them. We reflected on our own learning in one of the teachers' meetings and realised that the experience had enriched us. An enabling environment became more important than academics. Related research about the brain and emotions asserts that when students experience psychological safety, they are in a better learning state (Bernard, 1996; Goleman, 2006): creating a caring, collaborative and student-centred classroom provides the scaffolding needed for psychological safety and social and emotional understanding at school (Hart, 1992;Johnson and Johnson, 2003; Walberg, Zins and Weissberg, 2004). Providing the space for physical, psychological safety was our biggest task. Despite the numerous resources available, we knew that this was a very sensitive topic for the child. This article merely gives a picture of our experiences. Here are some of the very valuable things I personally learnt from this experience:

1. Don't condemn – spend time in trying to understand a child's actions.
2. Talk to the parents, peers and teachers of the child in order to gain understanding. This is not gossip – it is valuable information about the child which is of relevance.
3. Take the parents into your confidence. They have a right to know and they have to take responsibility. They can help the process of socialisation, as well as learning to resist peer pressure and influences.
4. Keep a diary as a record of notes made on a day-to –day basis. The entries will help get objective advice and suggestions. It also helps in creating greater enablement.

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Bullies and victims in a primary classroom: Scaffolding a collaborative community of practice. Veronica Morcom and Wendy Cumming-Potvin, Murdoch University

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Creating a Learning Environment at Azim Premji School

Tapasya Saha

> “In brief, the environment consists of those conditions that promote, or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being”
>
> John Dewey

Learning is a continuous journey. This thought is as old as Confucius (551-479BCE) who felt that success in life is linked to learning, which should be instilled in childhood. The Buddhist “Vinay”, and in Islam, madrasa, both refer to a physical space where religious and philosophical discussion can take place. Plato’s “Academy” was perhaps the first school, or his most famous student, Aristotle’s “Lyceum” where the wealthy menfolk would gather to discuss philosophy, politics and learn from each other’s views. As time passed on society needed different kinds of workers.

It has been accepted by us that learning in a systematic manner through a structure, by a specified curriculum is demanded by the society; hence a modern system of school has come into existence.

Over the years such teaching learning has become mechanical, and the main thrust being on scoring marks.

In Azim Premji Foundation’s, ‘Child Friendly School Initiative’ in Shorapur, schools were observed on 214 indicators which included infrastructure in school, classroom environment, teaching learning process, teacher-capacity building and community participation in school. Now, 60 indicators are being used, focusing on intervening only in areas of capacity building of the teacher and on the quality of teaching learning process. Thus, these two areas remain very important to us.

Now while focusing on these two areas we also need to remember that, learning happens only when we look at the safety, health, equity and inclusion of each and every learner. Each of these

describes an essential feature of a quality learning environment. If we can make these four principles cohesive and connected in an effective manner while facilitating, then learning environment thus created remains sustainable.

Keeping these thoughts as much as teachers could understand, and as much as these were possible to bring into practice, I am referring to the newly appointed teachers coming with limited understanding of teaching learning process, the kind of which is being talked about here, we set out to establish the ' Azim Premji Schools'.

Thus, to achieve our goal of "Quality Learning", we looked down and around to see what takes this "quality learning"to happen. Is it the infrastructure, sitting arrangement in the class, a healthy MDM, being strict with the children, discipline them all the time, giving voluminous home work, take tests and exams very often, punishments? It's a long list to look at. That's what, many of us experienced when we grew up.

We understood that both physical and psycho-social environment needs to be conducive.

Psycho-social Environment.

In our schools we have tried to take care of every one of these areas as much as possible. Even before the school started functioning, we invited the children from the community to come and be with us at the school premise. (Fig.1)

Children with learning problems have been admitted in Sirohi, Rudrapur and Tonk.We found children at different levels; teachers kept track of every needs of every child and prepared their lesson plans. It's not only the cognitive level of the child, it is also the child's regularity that is kept in mind. In Sirohi some students came with siblings, one came with either Dadi or Mother for some days. One of our teachers in Sirohi came to school every day with her one and half year old daughter. School routine was never hampered; all the staff cooperated with the mother and the child.

In the very beginning, many a times children would peep into the kitchen and express their wish to have a biscuit; we were ready for the first few months to take care of that. Sometimes students would have a ball all to her and stay out of the class for the whole day, teachers with great patience and love gave her that opportunity. She grew out of this habit soon. These small deeds were the teacher's achievements, which kept the teachers motivated.

Physical Environment.

All the Azim Premji Schools started out of rented premise, which are not meant to be schools, so not all the classroom are airy and well-lit. Not all schools have a playground.

Furniture is few in all the schools. Sitting arrangement is on durries on the floor to make the best use of the space. We have kept low tables for the children to use. Every class has strings to display children's work and a shelf to keep books. The teacher has put up some charts and posters.(Fig 2).

Insistence on physical environment has been kept low for three reasons. One, these are all rented premises; two, the school should not stand out in

isolation. The children should feel the school to be an extension of their community.

In Azim Premji Schools we made best use of the existing building and made minimum physical changes. Classrooms were clean and food was good, but most of all a bondage of trust and respect, freedom and understanding was established between every child and every teacher. Children who joined Azim Premji School, in Sirohi were mostly coming for the first time to school. Some were also the dropouts. Many never had the patience to sit in the class for even 15 minutes at a time. Children decided when and which class to sit in the initial days. After a month and half or so we found the same children wanted to be inside the class they actually belonged to.

Using abusive language and hitting and kicking each other were not exactly revengeful fighting but seem to me like enjoyment. As we discussed, it became clearer that this is what the children see and hear at home and around; so their enjoyment, pasttime and enjoyment all are reflected in their fighting, vocabulary and lack of sensitivity towards each other. Such incidents

occurred very frequently, the children would come running to complain; every time they came

we had been gentle with them all, never questioned why, rather made them friends again and involved them in different kinds of games. Nothing much has changed but definitely the vehemence, attitude and frequency has definitely come down. They have shown more interest in other games than in what they did earlier.

Children never felt threatened in any way, they felt accepted without any condition, there was no burden of learning what they were not interested in, or any load of homework. Emphasis was mainly on teaching through meaningful activities, group work, and paired-work. Each child learned in her / his pace and was given qualitative assessment at the end of the session. Teachers have been checking the levels of the children and been restructuring their teaching process accordingly.(Fig 3 below).

Once I was asked by a confused parent of Azim Premji School at Rudrapur, as to what this school is trying to do, as he found the school process beyond his understanding. I simply asked him if his child comes to school regularly, so as to not open a dialogue for which I had not enough time. He answered with a broad smile, "Yes, yes, my son would not be absent for a day."

Tapasya is presently associated with the 'School Core Team' at Azim Premji Foundation. She has taught geography for high-school grades for about 14 years. She can be contacted at tapasya@azimpremjifoundation.org

Enabling environment in schools for children of migrant labour

H K Shubha

Millions of unskilled and semiskilled labourers have left their native villages to escape extreme rural poverty and to find a job in big cities. These migrant workers travel from one area of work to another along with their families. They live in small sheds, sometimes provided by the construction company for the duration of the construction project and then move to another site. Most of the time the construction companies do not provide electricity or sanitation facilities.

A majority of children from these families do not go to school, given the migratory nature of their families and the lack of suitable access to proximate quality schools. Along with this, these children have to shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of their younger siblings and their house while their parents go out to work. As a result, these children are little adults in terms of their knowledge of taking care of their siblings and carrying out household responsibilities. Among this population, naturally, education for these children is the last priority as earning their daily bread is an everyday struggle; also the children are mostly first generation learners.

To understand what it takes in terms of curriculum and other enablers, to provide quality education to these children, Azim Premji Foundation decided to start schools for these children. In partnership with two builders we started two schools in Bangalore for children of migrant construction labour in 2007. The journey so far, from setting up the schools to running them smoothly, providing facilities, training teachers, overhauling the curriculum etc. has helped us understand the needs of these children and it continues to help us learn about them.

One of the first things we realised was that, if we take only children between the age group of 6 to 12 years we are going to have no children in the classroom because the majority of them have the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings or other babies in the neighbourhood for a minimum amount of Rs. 400/- to Rs.500/- per month. So we decided to provide a creche and preschool facility for infants and toddlers in the schools. We also decided to have a school either in the camp or close to the camp to ensure that the children feel safe and are able to keep an eye on their small tents and their belongings. These were the main reasons for these children to discontinue their studies. This arrangement frees children to continue their studies and the parents also feel that their children and their belongings are safe.

After enrolling children in the school, we realised that most of the children were malnourished. Hence we decided to provide three meals to all children. The menu for the three meals was decided based on the suggestion of nutritionists. Children now get breakfast, lunch and an evening snack everyday. Regular health (teeth, overall body and eye) check-ups and follow-up treatments as required are provided to every child's. Apart from this, all children's height and weight are checked and recorded every month

and reviewed often to know the impact of our intervention. This initiative has definitely helped us to improve their health status. Apart from medical attention, we have tried to create an awareness about hygiene and healthy habits. Besides this, children learn many other skills such as sharing, taking responsibilities, serving food, eating together, washing one's plates, cleaning the place, team work.

It is so much fun to share

We were sure that the regular state curriculum would not work with these children for the following two reasons; first, the duration of children's stay in school is uncertain and very short, therefore, we do not have the luxury of taking years to teach the requisite academic skills; second, the children come from different parts of India with different languages, cultures and learning levels.

Azim Premji Foundation has decided to develop a curriculum, and a relevant pedagogy most suitable to children that constitute this heterogeneous group. This has further necessitated the development of a package that meets multilingual, multicultural and multisocial requirements of children of the above profile. We adopted a module based approach. Each module covers basic competencies and skills that facilitate children to join other mainstream schools if they move out from this school in between. There are two to three modules transacted at a time to cater to different learning levels of children. Here the effort throughout the

transaction of the module is to make them independent learners.

Child friendly classrooms

To understand the level of their learning in different subjects and their health status when they enter the school, we design and use entry assessment forms. Based on this, they are put in different modules. Children and parents who would like to move out of the camp are provided with an "Exit Certificate" which contains the child's details such as his/her stay in the school, topics dealt with and current learning level. Based on this certificate the child would be able to get admission in another schools.

When children enter the school, they spend their first few days wandering around the school, often with babies dangling on the hips of older siblings. They walk in and out as they please. Sufficient time is given for a smooth transition and separation of sibling to separate groups.

Our little adults

Since the children's stay in schools is uncertain and very short, these two schools are kept open throughout the year. Teachers of these schools

along with children do not get any formal vacation time. But, children go to their villages during harvesting season for a month or two with their parents. Initially we struggled to convince parents and children not to miss school, and now, children fight with teachers not to close the school even for teacher development workshops and weekends.

For the children, small things make a big difference. Children are provided with a full size mirror, comb, hair oil, talcum powder and petroleum jelly. Every day it is a very enjoyable ritual for children to stand in front of the mirror, dress themselves and their siblings -this helps to build their confidence level. Apart from this, safe drinking water, running water, electricity, separate toilet for girls and boys are some of the basic facilities we provide to children, and it is now a habit for them to use it.

The space in the classrooms is made flexible by using movable furniture. Both the school team and children respect and care for the physical environment by keeping it clean, uncluttered and well-maintained.

In the classroom children make rules and they keep reminding each other about the rules. Safety in the school is one of the most important components in the school. We have tried to make the physical environment safe, friendly and simple. This way the school feels like an extension of the child's home. To add to this we have the school helper from the same community as well as teachers mostly from their native places.

Those children who complete five modules as well as the transition module (to facilitate the adaptation of the child into a mainstream regular school), are provided every opportunity and their parents are given all the encouragement and support to move them to a mainstream school. The team also follows up their progress by regularly visiting the schools and checking their progress with teaching staff in those schools.

The parents get complete support and motivation from the team to mainstream their children who completes all five modules and a transition module (which is to train children to get used to the regular schooling system)in our school. What is interesting is that, children who are going to regular schools make sure that they come to school (Migrant School) everyday, share the day's happenings, have evening snacks, finish their homework at school and only then go home. The children who move out of our school are tracked quarterly to check on their progress.

Parents' participation in school events

Early in our journey we realised that parents' support and conviction is necessary for the child to continue in school. So we work at building a rapport and an ongoing relationship of trust with the parents. We make sure that one teacher visits the camp, gets to know the child's family, listens to what the parents have to say about their child, shares their child's progress in learning and dialogues with them to convince them to continue their child's education. They are regularly invited to visit the schools and share their talents (storytelling, painting, carpentry and masonry) with children.

It took us a long while to identify the right people and build a team to run these schools. We were looking for people with a combination of high energy, the ability to gel with children and the desire and ability to innovate as well as possessing a professional teaching degree. We now have a team of dedicated young energetic teachers who grudge no effort to the school or the children. It is the relationship between adults in

the school and children based on mutual care and respect that is making a lot of difference. Both adults and children here learn to appreciate differences between religion, cultural and sexual orientation in the school. The team in the school not only empowers children academically, but also helps them develop emotionally, physically and morally to their full potential.

Happy teachers and happy children

It is a joint effort of parents, motivated and dedicated teachers, and the builder's willingness which is keeping the schools vibrant.

Shubha has been working with Azim Premji Foundation since 2007. She is associated with 'Education for the Children of Migrant Labour' since its very inception of setting up schools. Currently, she is mentoring the Principal of the Azim Premji School at Yadgir, along with anchoring two Migrant labour schools in Bangalore. She can be contacted at shubha@azimpremjifoundation.org

'Din ki shuruaat'

Surendra Kuntal

Din ki shuruaat is the name given to the informal assembly organised every morning for the duration of 40 minutes. In the morning we all group ourselves in a circle in the courtyard of the school. Then we start counting, one by one. This is used for the activities of the day by the teacher who is responsible.

Why was it named din ki shuruaat?

In July we found children at many different levels with respect to their learning standards. The students were new and most of them had never gone to school as they were dropouts or have never been enrolled. We also were not at ease with them as we had not taught these many small children.

As children come to school with lots of energy we decided to use it in a positive manner. As all teachers attended the "shuruaat" we thought that it would be easier for us to engage with them. We decided to do something different and explored the themes. As it was to be organised at the beginning of the school day, it was named din ki shuruaat.

Our objectives

- To engage the children for a period of 30 minutes
- To build a bond
- Develop self-confidence
- To motivate and provide a platform for self-expression
- To experiment whether they learn together with fun and games
- Learn to deal with multi-grade and multi-level children together

Its format

It was decided that every teacher would introduce a poem or activity relevant to her subject to enhance learning for forty minutes at the start of school. Its duration was also fixed for a period of forty minutes at the beginning of the day. This was done according to a fixed timetable.

Processes that were undertaken and that were related to the subjects

Language -We started with action songs and rhymes which were firstly sung and introduced by the teachers. Afterwards children learnt them and

- Cauliflower- while the midday meal was served a child called Praveen said, "Wow! Aaj to cauliflower ki sabji hai")
- (Solving a riddle in Hindi A poem based on riddle was recited in the assembly. To solve it students used basic operation of addition and subtraction. All the students were busy doing so on the floor of the courtyard to solve it)
- (Rules not a matter of concern – when a student was asked if she had understood the rules of game she said,"Pata hai hop a little karke jaana hai!")

led the singing by turns. New words were introduced either from the songs and the rhymes or their immediate surroundings that the children could feel connected with and can use them in their daily life. Children took much interest in singing and reciting the rhymes and songs together by turns and felt very happy as they were leading the others. Games were also played to introduce the names of body parts, colours, fruits, vegetables, animals, days, months, the alphabets of English and Hindi. Displays of the songs and rhymes were pasted on the walls through charts. The words that were introduced were also written and pasted on the walls for the children to read and copy.

Maths- Counting was initially done by the children when they assembled themselves in a circle. Afterwards the activities were related with the different concepts and were conducted in a form of games . The games were grouping the children as even and odd numbers and playing a game such as hopscotch, and hitting the glass with the ball. Children wrote the numbers that were given to them for identification, registered them and followed this by the basic operations of addition and subtraction. Skip counting introduced multiplication.

(To have fun with Maths, the children played kabaddi. For this they were grouped and the game was played. At the end of the game they

counted themselves as how many remained safe in the team. Then the symbols of greater than (>), less than (<) and equal to (=) were introduced) it should be in a box

Use of walls- Children wrote the date in the DD/MM/YYYY format after the introduction of the months through a song. A calendar of the months was wrote on the wall from which the children can identify the date and day. Children wrote the words that were introduced and poems and songs, names of the days and the four directions were displayed on the walls. The names of the students and the alphabets in English as well in Hindi were also written by the students through games.

Directions – the theme of knowing the directions was also introduced. Most of the children knew the direction from which sun rises. Based on that, we did activities to learn the names of directions, by grouping the children according to the direction from which they came to school

and the directions in which their homes are situated from school.

Calendar- The theme of it included the introduction of names of the days and months. Names of the months were introduced through a song and by showing by the name written on cards. Then the children arranged the cards in proper order. By then the children had learnt to count up to 30, and could arrange the numbers

from one to 30 from the cards, and started writing in the DD/MM/YYYY format on the blackboard. All the children found this very interesting.

Balance- The school has a balance fixed in a corner of the courtyard. When it was first tied it broke as there were many children doing different experiments to weigh and get to know how the needle of the balance moved. The balance is now fixed permanently as the children weighed everything from a brick to mud and sticks to plants. It is now being used for maths and EVS.

Marking of sun's rays- As the sun's rays fall in a definite angle on our courtyard, we decided to mark it. We started doing this once in two days and saw the marked deflection in the angle. The children were very excited doing this and finally we used the globe to explain the movement of the earth round the sun to explain the seasons. Most of the older students got to know why it is so hot in summer and why it is cold in winter and the impact of rays falling on earth.

Clock activity- We took a clock and opened it, removed the glass from it and also removed the second hand. We placed the minute hand on 12 and started the activity of telling the time. The students who recognised the numbers well started to tell the time correctly. Then we introduced the minute hand. Some found this idea difficult as it goes with the multiplication tables. We provided opportunities for the children to ask, tell and, most importantly, to touch the needle and move around the numbers. Children showed much interest in touching it and moved the hour hand round and round even if they didn't know the time.

Measuring tape- A measuring tape was also pasted in one corner to measure the height of the children. Afterwards it was used by the children to see the numbers and measure each other's heights. Even those who could not identify the numbers found observing the tape interesting.

Achievements

- The children became confident and expressed themselves strongly.
- The children learnt the words and actions of both Hindi and English rhymes quite easily. By the end of the year, they could recite 18 Hindi poems and 12 English ones.
- Children learnt most of the maths concepts and English words. Also the children started using Hindi while talking which was earlier their mother tongue.
- Children started writing the dates by themselves.
- Children learnt to tell the time in hours, some even in hours and minutes.
- The children also got knowledge of the directions.
- The children also helped each other in reciting and writing and understanding of the concepts.
- We developed good relations with the children which was very useful.
- They all learnt together and we also felt comfortable with the children.

Challenges

Now we have more than 75 students enrolled. Space has become short for our activities and games. We must now think of new ways to introduce activities and learning within the space we have. The children and their energy are our motivators, although to do any activity we feel shortage of space especially organising any game.

Surendra is an English teacher in the Azim Premji School at Mandwa in Sirohi district of Rajasthan since February 2012. He has earlier taught the senior classes in reputed schools for four years. His interests are reading, playing badminton and relaxing with friends. He believes that he can achieve what he has set out to through constant effort. He can be contacted at surendra.kuntal@azimpremjifoundation.org

Creating An Enabling Environment for Girls in Schools

Nirmala V G

Background

In Indian rural communities many adolescent girls are neglected and vulnerable. In most cases they are fed and brought up with the mindset that they are 'somebody else's wealth' and are considered to be burden on the family, to be given away with a dowry. Other societal myths also add to the feeling. Consequently, parental discrimination against the girl child triggers gender disparities in schooling. Hence, adult girls are not able to get the necessary knowledge and skills to advance and as a result they remain dis empowered and face an extreme degree of pressure from peers, parents, society and their own lack of self confidence.

In this background, there is an immediate need for creating awareness about gender discrimination, life skills, nutrition and health and related issues. Young girls becoming responsible for these things reinforces the concept that self-confidence comes from making decisions. Being responsible for themselves as well as learning how to evaluate alternatives and make proper judgment is crucial in the life of these young adults. It is a difficult process but it is only through this awareness they can lead a dignified life.

Why Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV schools)?

To overcome the above circumstances, girls need to develop self-confidence, to build up a positive self-image which will help them improve their decision- making skills and cope with the fear of failure. To aid this process, the Government of India has launched a new scheme for girls' education called "Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya". Under this scheme, residential schools with boarding facilities are provided at elementary level for girls who have dropped out of school in the age group of 11 to 14 years who predominantly belong to the SC, ST, OBC and minority communities in backward areas. The objective is to ensure access to quality education to girls from disadvantaged groups of society. It also aims at increasing enrolment and reducing the dropout rate. At the primary level the emphasis is on the slightly older girls who dropped out of school and were unable to complete primary schooling. However, in difficult areas (migratory populations, scattered habitations that do not qualify for primary/upper primary schools) younger girls are also targeted at the upper primary level. The focus is on adolescent girls who are unable to go to regular schools. The girls might require bridge courses before mainstreaming them to KGBV schools as they were not enrolled / absent / dropped out of school in lower classes.

The primary objective of the KGBV schools is to develop an individual through a holistic approach by giving the required support in the areas of the teaching- learning process, teacher support and providing a supportive school/ classroom environment along with facilititating the community participation. All these are aimed at improving the quality of education in KGBV schools.

However, there are some obstacles such as the traditional definition of gender, its impact on girls' roles in society and child marriages. These are big barriers to achieving expected results. Socio-economic and cultural reasons like customs, poverty in the communities further curtail the value of education for girls. In this context dropout rate of girls is high, as most of the families often subject them to hard labour in order to earn a supplementary income.

Girls face a variety of problems in getting higher secondary education. Some of these are - poverty, a lack of proper information channels, timely inputs and required resources on health related issues resulting in problems like general illness, anemia, micronutrient deficiencies and menstruation problems. Menstruation and menstrual practices are still clouded by socio-cultural restrictions resulting in adolescent girls remaining ignorant of the scientific facts of hygiene and related practices, which sometimes result in health disorders.

What the needs are

In the context of KGBV Schools the enabling environment means the provision of physical, psychological, social and emotional inputs to help these young girls grow and lead dignified, meaningful, productive and happy lives. This automatically requires better quality infrastructure such as proper classrooms, hostel rooms and functional toilets. These, along with adequate teaching-learning materials, play a crucial role in creating an enabling environment. Appropriate systems for providing necessary academic support and for evaluation and monitoring to motivate and prepare the girls and their families to send them to residential school have also got to be put in place.

Curricular objectives need to connect with social values as well as their life realities which girls face outside the school as, for example, beginning with important aspects like scarcity of water and going right up to violence and other multiple challenges. The significant question is how the curriculum should be designed so that the social milieu and context of girls is addressed.

Teachers need to be educated by strategies that empower them to identify the hidden, discriminatory messages prevalent in their own practices. They can demonstrate the same during their day today communication and could be the role models for the girls understanding about equality and justice in classrooms. They can take initiatives in curricula and teaching practices that challenge patriarchal attitudes resulting in social inequalities that exist in the society they live. Teachers could also follow relevant teaching learning practices to address the advantages and disadvantages of these children's diverse socio-economic backgrounds at different learning levels.

Means to develop such environment

In collaboration with local groups, villages, volunteers, and international well-wishers, a new generation has to be trained who can work with communities of these children to bring change in their understanding about women education.

There is a need to adopt the gender sensitive approach to the KGBV schools. In this context NGOs entrusted with the responsibility of running the scheme need to be carefully selected. NGO teachers who work with communities should have the same socio-cultural- background, so that they understand the issues in a cohesive manner and get social acceptance. Their presence will help build a good rapport with the community, especially in imparting vocational skills, tackling problems related to health and nutrition, without losing sight of the objectives of the KGBV schools.

These girls also need sports and physical education support to build their confidence and

capabilities as it is needed the most in their real life circumstances. The Arts and Aesthetics could also be introduced in KGBV Schools to encourage them to explore their creativity as well as to build their new life with fresh explorations and experiments.

Some of the recommendations that could bring the desired changes in the future are listed below.

Awareness about menstrual hygiene

Educating adolescent girls in menstrual hygiene issue is very important factor in the KGBV schools. Appropriate training should include aspects of menstrual cleanliness, importance of usage and disposals of pads, reproductive tract infections etc.

Creation of a safe and friendly environment

A safe, friendly, personal and confidential school environment should be provided to the adolescent girls. These include facilities like adequate water, clean bathrooms, individual bedding and separate rooms so that personal hygiene is ensured. Other important aspects are the organisation of health and counseling camps to support girls and emotionally and psychologically, particularly to help them take long-term decisions. Well-planned, regularly run health education programmes need to be designed and implemented as for a regular, intensive focus on child health and hygiene. Apart from these, nutritious food and yoga classes are essential for a sense of well-being

To conclude, enabling environments in the KGBV schools must include knowledge on health and hygiene issues since they are so important. Many of these require only friendly intervention from teachers and wardens. Privacy has to be ensured, as many problems arise from its lack. All findings reinforce the need to encourage safe and hygienic practices among adolescent girls and bring them out of misconceptions and restrictions regarding menstruation and related issues.

Nirmala is working as a Resource Person at Yadgir District Institute, Azim Premji Foundation, Karnataka, for the last one year. She is currently working with Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) for adolescent girls, in Yadgir district, focusing on health and hygiene. She has a Masters degree in Political Science from Karnatak University, Dharwad and Human Resource Management from Bangalore University. She has been working in the development sector for the last 12 years, in various domains including, Women and Child development, Health, Livelihood and Human Resource. She can be contacted at nirmala.vg@azimpremjifoundation.org

STUDENT VOICES

Inventuring Week

Ananya Ramgopal

When I first set foot in the halls of Inventure Academy, it's safe to say I was a nervous-wreck. Starting 9th grade in an all new school in an all new city can be quite a nerve wracking experience. As I first entered the class that would soon come to be one of my favorite places, I saw hoards of excited students gathering around one another, chattering and yelping like infants on caffeine. For a new student, however, the sight could not have been more intimidating. I was in their territory now and I hadn't the faintest clue about what to do.

Fortunately for me, Inventure is not like most other schools. They do not believe in getting right down to business at the beginning of the year. Instead, they give their students, especially the new ones time to adapt or re-adapt to their school environment rather than plunging them back into the daily grind. Thus, was born the idea of 'Inventuring', a week of school filled students getting to know each other via fun activities, usually involving the undertaking of a large art project. The idea behind a project of this sort is that students can see the progress they are making, plan ahead and be rewarded with the satisfaction they feel at the completion of their given task. Students are provided with a wide variety of possible projects and are given the opportunity to chose the one that most appeals to them. Last year, we had options such as- building a birdhouse, painting a mural, decorating a garden etc. I chose to build a birdhouse and was grouped with 10 other students from different grades, who were to do the same. Though it seemed like the easiest of the projects when I first chose to do it, building a birdhouse proved to be far from simple. It really did involve a lot of planning, including what materials we needed, possible designs, and expert advice and help required. After we had a rough idea of how to go about our project it was time to get down to actually doing it. At this stage the realisation began to dawn on us that all the planning in the world could not have prepared us for the actual making of the birdhouse. Here is where our problem solving skills kicked in, desperately trying to avoid total failure we also realised the importance of working together and relying on one another to get the job done. By the end of the week, we miraculously found ourselves staring admiringly at our beautiful, completed birdhouse. For me, that wasn't the only task I had accomplished that week. I had inadvertently made some great friends in the process and it felt great not to be the outsider looking in.

Inventuring week culminates in a sleepover for students of grades 4-10 on the Friday of the week. The sleepover is always the single greatest part of Inventuring. Even being a new student who had known the people around her for just a week, the sleepover was an amazing experience. It exceeded all my expectations and left me wanting more. Whether it was staying up chatting till the sun came up or dancing in the courtyard till way past midnight, there was something for everyone. I went home the next day

feeling for the first time like I belonged at Inventure.

I'm certain that even without Inventuring, I would have made friends in school over time. However that one week of school gave me exactly what I needed at the time. It helped to instil self-confidence and a take-charge attitude in me as well as helping me figure out how to work in a team. Moreover, encouraged me to be creative and innovative and at the same time challenge myself and use all the skills I had gained over the years. Most of all, however, it ensured I had a great time and made some amazing friends and for that I will be eternally grateful to Inventuring. Now, over a year later, I still look back on my first Inventuring with the fondest of memories.

Ananya is a student of Grade 10 at Inventure Academy, Bangalore. She can be contacted at ananya.ramgopal@gmail.com

Stepping Stones

Ankita Kodavoor

I stared at the beckoning gates of Vidya Niketan School. I stepped in gingerly, wondering what this new phase in life would bring me. Just then a smiling girl shook my hand and greeted me with a cheerful "Good Morning!". She continued to greet every student with the same gusto. I was pleasantly surprised by the gesture, which, as I came to know, was a Vidya Niketan tradition.

Though a new comer, I felt a certain warmth being exuded right from the pale yellow walls to the cheerful, accepting people. Optimism seemed to glint off every nook and cranny; an ideal atmosphere to spend the final years of my schooling. This is a place that strives towards discipline, but at the same time, it does so without excessively restraining or suppressing the potential in a student. A place where ideas are free flowing, yet not spiraling out of control.

A welcome change was the use of Smartboards in class. These boards enable a wider spectrum of activities in class. Yes, it is agreed by most that the good old text book is the way, but without going beyond fine print we are stuck in a mundane, restrictive world. The open-minded nature of our teachers is uplifting and often stimulates healthy discussions in class. A relatively small class strength also encourages inputs from the entire class.

Though a cliché, I reiterate, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

Vidya Niketan is a realm where academics and other activities are on equal footing. Widely engaging in sports events as well as inter-school fests, Model UN (MUN) and debates, I think it's safe to say that school keeps us far from "dull". The learning experience is as good as void unless we are able to practically apply all our textual knowledge.

Along with the tangles of growing and learning comes taking up the mantle of responsibility. Hosting a fest as well as a MUN and putting up various shows in school, Vidya Niketan school allows us to shoulder this responsibility. It is such opportunities that build confidence. It is at times likes this when creativity and leadership qualities come to the fore.

As much as studies and other events, school life revolves around our peers and teachers as well. It is comforting to know that there is an approachable, caring teacher to share our woes. We often get so carried away in our frenzied

existence that we forget our fellow beings or how we treat them. What I love about Vidya Niketan is the deeply embedded value of sharing. We have weekly classes where we share our thoughts. Most inhibitions are dropped in these sessions and the entire class takes time off to listen to one another. Our life skills teacher never fails to leave us with some new aspect of life to delve upon. It has always heartened me, the care with which sensitive issues such as those of bullying have been handled, and promptly at that.

School is the place we learn; the place we blossom. It is the place that moulds us into what we become in our (fast approaching) adult lives. "The classroom should be an entrance into the world, not an escape from it", said John Ciardi and I could not agree with him more.

Ankita is a Class 11 student at Vidya Niketan School, Bangalore. She can be contacted at anki.kodavoor@gmail.com

Teachers can make or mar

Gururaj K S

I studied in a private English-medium co-ed School in Dharwad, Karnataka from Kindergarten to the 10th standard.

Our School started in a decades-old girls' Kannada-medium high school building. I remember moving to our own school building in the same campus in the 8th Standard.

Our school had several factors conducive for education such as sufficient number of teachers, well-ventilated classrooms, a big playground, open spaces, toilets and drinking water facility. Our school was also close to home and the fees were affordable.

Our school followed the "Banking Concept of Education", the terminology made popular by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher of the twentieth century. In the Banking Concept of Education, the scope of action allowed to the students extended only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits, the teacher as the 'depositor' and the students 'depositories'. One additional thing we were required to do in school was to reproduce from memory in the exams.

We had four exams in a year, quarterly, mid-term, third-quarterly and the final exam. Based on the marks in the exams, ranks were given to students. Based on these ranks students were labeled 'intelligent' and 'dullards'. Students could fail in a few subjects in the first three exams but were required to pass in all the subjects in the final exam to be promoted to the next standard.

As I moved to eighth standard, A and B sections were combined to form one section. Therefore, the teacher-pupil ratio our Class became 1:56.

Two combinations were available to the eighth standard students and those, who chose Sanskrit as the first language would have English as the second language and Kannada as the third language. The students who chose English as the first language, would have Kannada as the second language and Hindi as the third language. For all the other subjects namely Mathematics, Science and Social Studies, we would sit together in one class.

Teaching is considered as a noble profession. A teacher has an important role in developing her students as critical thinkers, to provide education that can develop them into capable and responsible citizens who can then take on different functions needed to sustain and improve the general welfare of the society.

I remember two teachers who taught me in the 8th Standard, one for all the wrong reasons and the other one for all the right reasons.

We had a new Mathematics teacher with several years of experience teaching the subject in a nearby boys' School. He was also the younger brother of our principal. A chain smoker, he became popular for the innovative physical punishments he subjected the students to. The students whom he targeted were the ones unable to complete homework and those who got less marks in the test. His punishments were meant

only for the boys and done with an element of surprise.

Some methods included grabbing the fleshy part of the stomach and twisting it, banging head against the wall, hitting with the wooden foot ruler on knuckles, sometimes until the foot ruler broke and throwing a chalk piece and duster at the students who did not pay attention in his class. He made two sets of question paper for the test, one for the bright students and another one for the rest. Therefore, it was no wonder that the majority of my classmates dreaded attending, his class.

The other teacher, who I remember for the good reasons, taught us English and Kannada. I remember her for her knowledge, guidance and encouragement.

I distinctly remember her teaching us a Kannada poem on Shabari, a devotee of Lord Rama. She brought to life the poem through her gestures and recitation. We knew that she was not as comfortable in Kannada as she was in English but she always came well prepared.

In the English class, we were asked to read out passages from the English textbook. Our teacher made us experiment on our accent, gave advice on making the reading impactful. She encouraged us to be innovative while doing the exercise 'Use the following words to make sentences'. Her classes were fun-filled as she cracked witty jokes.

Nearly thirty years later I can still recall the words of appreciation from this inspirational teacher.

My two daughters study in a popular private school in our neighbourhood in Bangalore where admissions are difficult to get and the fees high. I studied the state board syllabus while they study the CBSE syllabus. I have observed that ranks have now become grades, the best being 'A+' and the worst being 'E'. Examinations have been replaced by continuous comprehensive evaluation. Names of students who get 'A+' in all the semesters are displayed in the reception area. Many times during the parent-teacher meeting, the Teacher discusses the child's progress in her presence of the child.

Students who secure 'D' and 'E' grades are asked to attend remedial class every Saturday. Their names are announced in the classroom in the presence of their other classmates. This builds pressure on children. Aamir Khan's statement "grades create divides" in the movie "3 Idiots" holds true here.

I learnt from my children and their schoolmates that physical punishment does exist in the school. Twisting of ears, hitting with foot ruler, slapping, hitting on the head with the textbook, knocking on the head with the finger ring and throwing a chalk piece is common. In the name of discipline, many teachers create a fearful atmosphere in the class, discouraging students from asking questions. For many teachers, the goal is to complete the syllabus.

Each child is unique and learns differently. Children are happy and develop confidence and learn better when they receive appreciation and encouragement.

A teacher can make or mar.

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Gururaj has been working with Azim Premji Foundation for the past five and a half years. He is currently managing the Library and Activity Centre at the Karnataka State Institute. He has Bachelor's degrees in Computer Science Engineering and Library and Information Science. He joined the Foundation from Bangalore University. He can be contacted at gururaj@azimpremjifoundation.org

From the Pen of a Disillusioned Learner

Samvida S. Venkatesh

Yesterday, one of my juniors called me. "Samvida, I have my physics exam tomorrow, and I have a doubt. Can you help me?" I was only too happy to assist, and spent a couple of minutes going over the question with her. When we reached a concept she hadn't learnt yet, I began explaining to her, but she cut me off midway. "It's okay, we haven't learnt it, it can't come in the paper," she assured me confidently. When I put down the phone, I did so with some niggling uneasiness.

"It's not in the portions," is a term that, to me, symbolises the biggest flaw in our education system: learning for the sake of passing tests.

I am in the middle of my half-terms now. My classmates are sitting up all night with physics numericals and organic chemistry textbooks by their sides. And I? Despite being a student of science, I'm watching Khan Academy videos on world history and macroeconomics because I find them fascinating. But the most terrible aspect of this is that I am chastising myself for it – "Samvida, it's not in your portions, please go do something useful now," is what I keep telling myself. But I shouldn't be. The purpose of education should be to help me learn, not to help me pass tests, yet I increasingly find myself learning to pass tomorrow's assignment or next month's exam. But where has this attitude sprung from?

Every day, I see it burgeoning around me in classrooms and in homes. It starts small – when a friend is asked a doubt in class–"It's not in portions, don't worry." When a teacher asks if she should cover a topic in depth - "Ma'am, there are only four lines in the textbook, telling us more will just confuse us." When a biology student says she writes computer programmes for "fun", the glances she gets range from curious to, sadly, hostile.

But it gets bigger. Teachers refuse to deal with subjects outside the recommended syllabus. Parents forbid you from reading up subjects that do not pertain to your stream. If you're a JEE aspirant, your coaching institution keeps you far away from the books on biology, economics, history, architecture and twenty thousand other topics. And the excuse that you are given is this – it's only to help you focus." Focus on what? Doing well on an exam.

So to me, the most disabling school environment is the excessive emphasis on studying for the sake of clearing tests. I can't blame students (me included) for learning for a test. That test could be the one deciding your college, your career, and eventually, the kind of life you lead. But that shouldn't be the case. Your future shouldn't hang on a bunch of tests that you write when you're sixteen. Your college shouldn't judge you on one test score. Your prospective employer shouldn't hire you based on your college GPA.

I'm not suggesting we should do away with tests. The thought of the chaos it would create is terrifying. But we need to find a more effective

method of testing. A "test" needn't be a three hour paper that you write in a strictly invigilated exam hall. We need to broaden our thinking on tests and exams, how they connect to learning, and how much importance we finally give to these tests.

It's easy to whine about, but very hard to praise, our education system. Being a product (or should I say, a victim) of Indian schooling, I am almost always cynical when asked about my school environment. But isn't it only through complaints like mine that the system evolves? Unless students like me are here to point out the fallacies, everything will seem dandy, and nothing will ever change. An education system shouldn't be a stagnant pool, it should be a flowing river, forever evolving to meet the demands of the society it creates.

Samvida is a 16 year old student at National Public School, Bangalore. She can be contacted at samvida.venkatesh@gmail.com

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