

# Adharshila Learning Center, Madhya Pradesh, India

Author - Christian Casillas, Published on - 26.2.2014

From the heart of India, a pedagogy that attempts to balance college fantasies with the reality of a subsistence-farming life.

**Place:** Madhya Pradesh, India. Located in the center of the country, this vast, largely rural state is home to some 75 million, of which 20% are members of one of the area's many indigenous groups.



*Students in the garden at Adharshila*

**The Skinny:** Founded in 1998 by two social activists, the curriculum was designed to “inculcate Adivasi [indigenous] children with a value for learning and an awareness of important issues facing their community.” The school currently has about 100 students, from grade 1-8, 70% boys. Most of the students come from nearby communities and live at the school. The students participate in the operation of the school, ranging from taking care of the school's cows and organic farm, to cooking and cleaning. The school is an evolving experiment, changing in response to children's interests and staff skill level. The teaching methods range from traditional classroom teaching, to self-paced worksheets, to project-based learning

## What Matters

: The school's project-based curriculum allows the children to develop the basic skills tested on standardized exams while also producing valuable knowledge related to the history and positive transformation and conservation of their indigenous communities.

The Adharshila Learning Center was formed with the support of a local Adivasi organization and the surrounding communities. Land was donated, and parents contributed labor and materials to help build the initial structures. The school was founded on a barren, rocky landscape, but twelve years later it sits amidst the shade of numerous groves of trees and a productive farm. Their farm provides an example of organically managed land that produces as much or more than the land of their neighbors, whose traditional farming techniques have been replaced by the use of pesticides and fertilizers. The school itself is composed of a number of interesting structures that make up classrooms, dormitories, libraries, and offices. Some of the buildings are shaped as pentagons or hexagons, and the black boards like dinosaurs. Doors swing above lines on the floor that mark out 30, 45, and 60 degrees.



*Afternoon crafts*

Very little at the school appears to be the result of a preconceived master plan, but rather the spontaneous emergence of ideas by teachers or students. However, the school today probably looks much more like a traditional school than either Amit or Jayashree had envisioned when their experiment first began with 35 children and no curriculum. The first two years they primarily focused on the children's interests. After the first several years they began receiving pressure from parents to prepare the students for the national exams for the 5th certificate, which is needed to gain access and privileges in the civic sector, including getting a driver's license. Thus began the slow movement towards a more standardized curriculum. Behind the parents' demands for standardized testing lay the false hope that passing these exams would open doors to good paying jobs in the modern economy. However, coming from rural communities, being a minority

ethnicity, and competing against the millions of other job seekers are all daunting hurdles. The ability to pass an examination does not ensure that the children will be equipped with skills and outlooks that could serve them in their future livelihoods—especially when the majority of the children will not enter the “modern economy,” but spend the rest of their lives as farmers in their home villages.

Despite the demand to prepare kids to pass national examinations[1], the school has managed to hold on to some of its founders’ original intent and implement a meaningful learning environment through project-based learning. Many aspects of their curriculum are addressed through investigations on their farm (where topics in biology, geology, and math are easily highlighted), and each year the students engage in some type of community research project. Over the years they have recorded histories of the land where the school is located, and have investigated the erosion of traditional livelihoods, quantifying the loss of seed diversity and organic farming practices, and the increased reliance on money. The project cycle spans many weeks, as the children disperse into the surrounding villages to spend time interviewing community members and analyzing and presenting their findings, sometimes in the form of books or magazines.



**In the classroom—with a dinosaur chalkboard**

The children’s activism does not stop with their project-based research, but also takes the form of drama and writing. They have shown an aptitude and passion for acting, creating their own small theater company. They have performed in many of the local communities, often choosing to focus on difficult social issues, such as alcoholism or domestic violence. They even had an international debut when the World Social Forum was held in Mumbai. The children brought down the house, making the national papers with their drama on the social consequences of harmful World Bank and IMF policies.

Many Adharshila students will not fulfill their parents’ dreams. They must overcome tremendous odds to pass a series of outrageously competitive national examinations, land a spot in a university, and then secure a well-paying job in an urban area. Indeed, most will return to their local communities and work the earth, as their families have done for generations—but they will do so with a much more holistic set of skills that can help them positively transform their local realities. They have pride and understanding of their rich local histories and traditions, organic farming skills to counter the destructive use of fertilizer and pesticides, a developed appreciation of the arts, and a nuanced and quantitative understanding of how various political and market processes have been destroying their environment and culture.

That said, it’s worth noting that there are a number of first wave graduates enrolled in several universities, most with aspirations to find socially conscious work. And the experiments in education at Adharshila are still evolving, trying to find that balance between meeting the unrealistic and inappropriate expectations embodied in the standardized curricula, and creating an authentic learning environment.

---

[1] See <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/world/asia/24test.html> for insight into the insanity of standardized testing in India