

Baala Balaga School's innovative approach to education puts play at the centre of learning

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To fully comprehend and experience the philosophy of *Baala Balaga School*, a visit to its unique campus in Dharwad is necessary. Walk through the three acre campus and you will find yourself amidst trees, lily ponds, and an al fresco amphitheatre. Children make the most of the vast, open spaces, running freely around the scattered, low-lying buildings, climbing walls, laughing in the sandpit, and looking for all the world like they are on holiday.



Baala Balaga was founded as an equal opportunity school in 1996 by Dr. Sanjeev Kulkarni and his wife Pratibha to fulfill a personal need. Inspired by the pedagogical philosophy of books like [Tottochan](#) and [Teacher](#), the daily grind of the mainstream school system, with its emphasis on rote learning and examinations, appeared lacklustre. The couple teamed up with theatre artistes Rajani and Prakash Garud to tutor their 3 children at home, employing a mix of activity-based, experiential learning, theatre, and play to teach basic math and language skills.

These early days helped strengthen the Kulkarnis' resolve to create an alternative educational system that encouraged freedom of expression and activity, secular thought, and gender equality. Dr. Kulkarni explains the school's philosophy saying,

"A happy, stress-free child is one whose mind is open to absorb new information. As soon as a child feels evaluated or threatened, the doors of the mind are shut and no new learning takes place, no matter how accomplished the teacher."

As word spread of its unique approach to learning, the school's strength grew to 12 by the end of 1996. "The decision to expand the school was a response to a demand from parents who saw that their children enjoyed the ambience of freedom in the school", informs Dr. Kulkarni. The school moved to larger premises nearby which, to complement the ethos of Baala Balaga, were designed as child-friendly spaces for children to play and be close to nature.



Children's art adorns the walls of their classrooms.

Cross-subsidised fee model for equal access to education

Today, the Baala Balaga Srujanasheela Shikshana Trust is a recognised school with classes Nursery to X. It accepts students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The school, which is completely unaided by the state, depends on voluntary donations from the community and on an annual student fee of Rs. 5000-6000 to meet operating costs. Besides the annual fee, children pay a one-time refundable deposit of Rs. 14,000 at the time of admission which is used to meet infrastructure costs and returned when the child leaves the school.

In order to widen access to education, the school has adopted a unique financing structure that eschews compulsory donation based admission. This cross-subsidization model allows students to pay as much as they can afford of the fee and the deposit, with the school meeting the remainder of the student's cost. About 20 percent of Baala Balaga's 320 students avail either a partial concession on fee and deposit or a full fee and deposit waiver.



Activity-based teaching for all-round development

The school has developed its own curriculum for use by students up to Class 5 following which they transition to the State syllabus. Baala Balaga's curriculum, designed based on its early successes, emphasizes child-friendly, activity and experience-oriented learning using alternative teaching styles. Classrooms are fear-free spaces where children are encouraged to ask questions and share their thoughts. Younger students learn the basics of math and language using drama, puppetry, and music. Holistic learning is ensured through regular outdoor activities like treks and nature walks, music and dance training, and theatre workshops. With periodic training, teachers are kept abreast of the latest developments in non-formal teaching methodology.

"When children are regular, active participants in classroom learning and extracurricular activities, they receive all-round exposure and grow up to be responsible adults, confident about their abilities and self-worth", says Dr. Kulkarni.

Given Baala Balaga's strong focus on constructive learning, the decision to adopt mother tongue based early learning was a natural one. Kannada was chosen as the medium of instruction because students belong predominantly to the Dharwad region and were found to best grasp and articulate their thoughts in Kannada. English is taught as an additional subject and becomes the medium of instruction from Class 8 onwards.

Teaching Math through play

To improve students' understanding of basic mathematical concepts with a view to improving their performance in public exams, Baala Balaga developed the 'Math Through Games Project' which employs creative, low-cost games that teachers can use to help elementary school children absorb and internalise basic math while engaging them in play. The games are followed up with debriefing sessions where the games are deconstructed for children to understand the learning that took place. After having successfully implemented the project with its own students, Baala Balaga, with a grant from Deshpande Foundation, is using the Math Through Games Project to change the way Math is taught in 4 schools in Dharwad. At the end of the two-year project, Dr. Kulkarni says, "We hope to have documented 150 such games together with instructions on how they can be played to develop various math concepts. This material will be very useful in training teachers in alternative pedagogy."

Simplicity forms a core value of the school's philosophy and can be seen in various aspects of design and function. Students and teachers dress simply, in khadi twice a week and are required to be barefoot on school premises. Classrooms are colourful but basic, with no doors or windows. Students are responsible for cleaning their classrooms and toilets. They are also encouraged to carry simple, wholesome, home-cooked meals to school.



A peer learning session in progress.

Family-incorporated learning structures iron out hierarchies

In order to do away with hierarchies in the learning environment, the school has adopted family- incorporated learning structures. Individual attention is ensured with a class strength of 30. Teachers and school staff are referred to by informal terms like 'Maushi', 'Maama', 'Akka', and 'Anna'. Parent participation is encouraged in the school's governance, decision making and resource mobilisation. Parents can also support teaching, guide extracurricular activities, and assist as student mentors and guest faculty. Regular communication with parents is facilitated by parent meetings and homework is designed to allow parent-child interaction. The annual parents' festival is a celebrated event at Baala Balaga and brings families from different social backgrounds together for weeks of practice, preparation, and performance.

The minimal presence of Baala Balaga on the Internet confirms the school's reticence with using mainstream media and advertising channels to spread word of its methods, preferring to rely on word-of-mouth publicity. "The fact that we tested out the efficacy of our model on our own son gives others confidence to seek admission here", Dr. Kulkarni laughs.



To give students a broad picture of gender roles, every school event is presided over by a female and a male Chief Guest.

Its charming setting and idyllic practices belie the challenges involved in running an alternative school in a growing city like Dharwad. Says Dr. Kulkarni, "Given current market preferences, parents' desire for an English medium education administered with conventional pedagogical tools is understandable." But, he admits that the school loses 6-7 students annually to its English medium counterparts and that staff has a hard time convincing parents of the critical role extracurricular activities can play in a child's development. The management has struck a balance between some of its core founding principles and the needs of the community. Conducting regular assessments and grading students' academic performance is one way in which the school has gained parents' confidence. Adopting what he calls 'the middle path', has made it appealing to a wider section of society rather than to a small, niche audience.

To know more about *Baala Balaga* School or donate towards its development, write to sankulajeev@gmail.com

Images courtesy Baala Balaga School.

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