

Offering Learning Experiences to Children

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Written specially for Vikalp Sangam It was during a journey to Madhya Pradesh that I came to enjoy the company of four-year-old Roshni. She belonged to a farming family in a village in U.P.'s Gorakhpur district. Like any other girl of that age, she would not miss any opportunity for fun and excitement with fellow passengers. Gradually, I withdrew my attention from her and tried to focus on reading a book, while the others slipped into silence. Noticing the stillness, Roshni grabbed a notebook from her mother's bag and started scribbling the Hindi alphabet and drawing some pictures. It was her own initiative; no one had advised her to do so. Teachers and parents who always attempt to 'create interest' in children to learn lessons, acquire knowledge and skills often are unmindful of the fact that children are self motivated and there is an inherent urge in them to learn new things and experience the joy of exploring the unknown. There is an innate desire for development in their nature which is expressed in their own pace. Disregarding this universal fact, we use coercive strategies, enforce classroom instruction and burden them with homework to make the whole experience undesirable and tyrannical for them. What could have been realized just by creating a conducive atmosphere, at best supplemented by some kind of stimuli, instead turns into adult hegemony of over children. In this adult quest to achieve results, the organic way in which children learn is rarely considered. The situation in most of rural public schools is different. Most rural government schools are often the last shelter for vulnerable children who can't afford the heavy private school fees. But, they too follow the practice of urban private schools by offering non productive education that is limited to transmitting information to children through conventional pedagogy. A different atmosphere does not necessarily mean a productive one, though it is comparatively freer of pressure from parents, teachers, peers and community at large. Every year, Pratham's **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)** reminds us of the poor learning outcomes in government schools, which would deter any capable parent from sending their children to one of them. To this day, the public education system in the country has not moved beyond offering rudimentary facilities - an all weather building, black board, chalk, text books and a few teachers running the show on behalf of the state. The numbers of teachers is often inadequate, falling way below the government's own approved child teacher ratio. In such deplorable conditions, what most of the children can at best hope for is the attainment of literacy, which would enable them to reproduce information (not knowledge), imbibed through rote learning. As for the other children, they are fated to become 'dropouts' (actually, pushed out by the discouraging and unproductive classroom experience, as the eminent educationist Prof. Anil Sadgopal puts it) or continue attending class without learning anything substantial until circumstances force them to earn a living. It is important to investigate why children, who have the natural instinct to learn, are excited to discover new things and grow, remain stunted in our schools. Children (except children with various disabilities) at the age of 2 to 4 learn to speak their mother tongue along with other various skills through informal education fail to sustain their interest to do so and learn more in the classrooms confirm the dismal situation of the formal education system that is designed for their development. It is important for every educator and responsible citizen of our nation to recognize why our schools fail to encourage children to develop enquiring minds and the ability to find answers to questions through personal and collective experimentation and investigation. It is hard to find any object in a government school that is meant to stimulate the natural curiosity of children. Libraries and laboratories are luxurious and unimaginable amenities in many government schools. Children in these schools are denied every opportunity to work and gain knowledge which is beyond the conventional chalk and talk pedagogy, let alone given opportunities to become creators of new knowledge. The content of curriculum and pedagogy are completely – and alarmingly - disconnected from the reality of the students. Children in rural areas do not find any linkage between their prescribed lessons and their everyday reality, and it is no wonder that they end up withdrawing from the system. Most of the teachers who are burdened with responsibilities of maintaining records are discontented about their job for various reasons and therefore fail to make any effort to improve the miserable state of affairs. The aim of the productive classroom should be to build aware citizens for a truly democratic, egalitarian, secular and enlightened India. Children in every school should be given the opportunity to work with equipments and tools so they can acquire knowledge through doing and observing rather than merely accumulating information. It is essential to create classrooms that foster creativity, and channel the innate desire in every child to learn and experience the joy of productive knowledge that is in tune with the diverse needs of young minds and their socio-economic realities. Many alternative visions of schooling have emerged in India that use unconventional means and ways of education. Great efforts by these individuals and groups have demonstrated the true value of education in various ways. Though they remain as models or islands of success, one can not dismiss their relevance and scope for social transformation. However, as long as there is no political intervention to transform the education system into more democratic and creative process where children are given freedom to explore knowledge, values and skills in a just and equitable manner, these attempts are likely to remain as centres of excellence to be appreciated from a distance. It is important for educators and citizens alike to have a collective experience of successful attempts at building more democratic schools. Several individuals have spent entire lifetimes building more educationally and socially responsive institutions. Knowing about the long and storied tradition of such efforts is important to keep the stream flowing. One such ground-breaking initiative is [Kanavu](#), which means 'dream', and is essentially a dream project of writer-turned activist K.J. Baby. He started the school in the Cheengodu Hills of Nadavayal village in Wayanad District of Kerala. It was conceived as an alternative to the existing education system based on colonial values and market economy. Kanavu soon became a pilgrimage centre for several activists and likeminded people. Adivasi folksongs and rituals were incorporated in the training sessions, which helped to reinforce a sense of identity among the children. Self-reliance is an important aspect of [Kanavu's](#) curriculum. Training is given in such a way as to develop varied talents – be it music, painting, dance, farming, martial art or the like. Kanavu has been identified as a unique experiment in cultural formation and learning and also has a history of training many students who are now working in different parts of India. The school has always kept itself away from the conventional style of teaching in a classroom with a formal syllabus. Students are formed into groups based on their level of awareness. More than a school, it is a commune – a way of collective living, where learning happens at its natural pace. As an institution, they have adopted the philosophy of education as a means for emancipation. The children of the commune could move towards developing a holistic personality that is sensitive to the issues of wider social life. Another innovative effort in Kerala is the

Sarang

Rural University, founded in 1982 by Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalekshmi, both former government school teachers in Attapadi, in Palakkad district. Focusing on local adivasi children and the so-called academically backward, Sarang was conceived as an experimental centre for alternative education. A rural "university" was their dream and an ideal campus was what they set out to create. In 1983, with the help of friends, they bought some degraded forest land very cheaply. Local tribal children were enrolled and the Sarang journey began. The curriculum was to be based on the real life situation of the students. The land was a barren hill top, with no water, and the people struggled for simple amenities. So, improving this situation became the curriculum. The Sarang experiment lasted for over a decade. Unfortunately, it had to wind up as the founders were unable to finance it any longer. Gautam, Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalekshmi's son, grew up with Sarang. He was an intimate part of the experiment, both as a student and later as a teacher. He is a young man now, and is all set to revive this real life university, fully convinced that it is his turn to offer to others the unique learning experience he received at Sarang. Another initiative, [Vidya Vanam](#) is an elementary school for children from adivasi and underprivileged families in rural India established in 2007 and is an initiative of the Bhuvana Foundation. A non residential school for rural children from adivasi and underprivileged families, it is located about 45 kms north east of Coimbatore, in Anaikatti, at the border of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The parents of these children are either illiterate or have had no formal education, and hence the sons and daughters represent first-time learners.

[Vidya Vanam](#)

provides children with the tools for self-learning while simultaneously recognizing their rich cultural identity and instilling pride and respect for their roots, environment and culture. Another pioneering endeavor, [Eklavya](#) is a non-profit, non-government organisation that develops and field tests innovative educational programmes and trains resource people to implement these programmes. It functions through a network of education resource centres located in Madhya Pradesh. It was founded in 1982 with the objective of conducting micro-level field-based experiments in education and developing methods and collaborations for their diffusion. For over two decades, Eklavya has sought to relate the content and pedagogy of education – both formal and non-formal - to initiate social change and the all-round development of the learner. It evolves learner-centred teaching methodologies that foster problem-solving skills in children and encourage them to ask questions about their natural and social environment. This approach helps children become life-long self-learners. [Eklavya](#) looks at innovation holistically, which means that reforms in classroom practices are accompanied by reforms in examination systems, teacher training methods and the way schools are managed. It also means that learning spaces are extended beyond the school into the community. [Eklavya](#) has built up an extensive base of resource material that includes educational literature, children's literature, magazines, textbooks and other learning aids. There are many more such initiatives, some of them still unknown to the wider world, which explore the possibilities of creative space silently for the healthy growth and development of children and thus for a more humane society responsible for a sustainable, equitable and egalitarian world. In the midst of schools that fail to promote education in the true sense and instead deprive children of a meaningful learning experience, such experiments stand tall as beacons of hope and inspiration. Note:

Anil Sadgopal's talk

on a CD - it is a series of 7 CDs which are available at the following address: Kishore Bharati Trust, E-8/29, Sahakar Nagar, Bhopal-462039.
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