

Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

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Democratizing Education
through Learning Centers

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The Journey Starts Where the Learning is Now and Ends When the Learner is Successful

Naznin Chavda

Beginning of the Journey

Samerth started its first learning center in 2017, in one of the most densely populated low-income housing areas of Ahmedabad. This was not our first initiative in education. Before this, we had worked in the area of early education for more than a decade.

The learning center was envisaged as a space for us to implement different pedagogies and teaching-learning materials and gauge their impact, and then start working in schools.

The idea was to build the communities' capacities and once they are empowered, they would demand and access services and entitlements. In most cases facilitators like I were also from the community, and ensured that learning and connect happened from within the group.

After a few years, once the governmental anganwadis took over our early education centers, we decided to work with government schools to enhance the quality of learning. We had already undergone extensive training on creative pedagogy, various developmental stages and child-centric learning for children from three to five years of age. The plan was now to start working with them once they reached schools.

We requested support from Eklavya (Bhopal), Dakshinamurti (Bhavnagar) and Digantar (Jaipur) to help us further build our capacities to work with children aged 6 to 8 years in government schools. At first, I balked at the idea of going and teaching in a school.

I had discontinued my education after I failed in mathematics in 10th grade. My father was not keeping well and I was expected to start earning to support him take care of our family that consisted of my parents and two younger brothers.

Learning is a Social Act: Some Personal Notes

I was born and brought up in Juhapura (an area in Ahmedabad) and had never travelled outside. I had started doing odd jobs and then joined Samerth when I was 19 as a support teacher in an early education center. Over the next three years, I was fortunate enough to undertake trainings by many organisations such as Mukhtangan, Mobile Creches, etc and was now confident working with preschool children and helping them achieve developmental milestones.

During my tenure, I had worked closely with many Anganwadi Karyakartas and Child Development Program Officers, most of whom had been very accommodative. But working with government teachers seemed very challenging. I did not have great memories of my own school teachers and showing them different ways of teaching and learning – in their own classrooms - was a daunting idea.

My colleagues resonated with my idea. Together we thought of starting learning centers in areas where there were many

first-generation learners and out of school children. The idea was to start a center in the area with high need, support children, and work in the same schools so that the learners feel comfortable with an adult they know in the school.

The learning center was envisaged as a space for us to implement different pedagogies and teaching-learning materials and gauge their impact, and then start working in schools. This strategy helped us regain some of our lost confidence and made us a little less scared of the idea of going to schools and teaching there.

Making Education Central for a Marginal Social Group

In the initial selection of the place for a learning center, we continued in the areas which had a lot of out of school and first-generation learners. One of them was a basti of more than 500 families belonging to the Mir Fakir tribe.

This Denotified Tribe is known to travel from one place to another in search of livelihood, stay for some time, and then move on. Till

a few decades back, they were known as performers – who would sing and dance on the streets. Village communities would offer them food and spaces to stay. The Mir Fakirs would travel from one village to another, telling tales, performing antics, singing and dancing.

With the advent of television and internet in villages, people have less time and patience for such performances. So, the Mir Fakir folk now travel to cities, take up small jobs, and sometimes sell cheap Chinese toys on footpaths and at traffic signals.

Their children are exceptionally street smart, with a host of talents. But being first generational learners, they often have had difficulties in mastering the foundational skills of reading, writing and numeracy.

It was a perfect area for setting up a learning center. But the first issue was to find space. After many weeks of negotiations, the community allowed us to start a center in an open space within their basti. In a few months, around 20 children had started coming regularly at the center.

Samerth Charitable Trust



Learning the Letters Together

As time went by, we realised that owing to the nature of their work, the Mir Fakirs would migrate for about four months every year. This would be to cities like Surat during festivals or to other religious places when there would be an expectation of better earnings by performing and begging. They definitely needed their children with them then. Hence, continuity of our processes at the learning center was a big challenge.

The other issue was their reluctance to send children to school. Since parents did not have reading and writing skills, they were unsure of their children going to school. After a lot of convincing, a few parents agreed to send their children to school from the next academic year. By now, the community had grown more accepting of us, the children were learning well.

Coping with Disruptions the Samerth Way

And then suddenly, the road abutting the basti needed to be widened. People employed by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation came with a bulldozer and almost overnight about 80% of the people shifted to other areas. Some of them shifted out of the city, others to different areas within the city. The remaining 20% did not want to continue the learning center. They were also not interested to send their children to school.

This was a huge setback, and a great learning. It is imperative that there is a school in the vicinity of a learning center. It is also important that the parents have to be on board with the children continuing their education – not just at the learning center but for a more formal engagement with the school system. This is especially relevant, if the children in question have a role to play in earning their livelihood. The other centers had exceptional results. In the first year, we were able to enrol 24 children in schools. They have continued with some hiccups; but are now well entrenched in the mainstream system.

We work hard to make the words, the poems, the stories and the teaching-learning material something that the child can

relate to, is inexpensive and therefore easily replicable. It takes into account the socio-economic conditions and cultural traditions of the learners and the local environment. In a few months, the children would come running at the sound of us opening doors of the center.

The other challenge was to divide the groups at the center based on their prior understanding of concepts as well as age. Sometimes we would have a five-year-old and a ten-year-old – both completely new to foundational learning. But there was an ease with which the ten-year-old could grasp concepts and later overshadow the five-year-old. This meant having many groups on the same learning level to begin with and later branching them out based on levels, all the time keeping things fluid.

We work hard to make the words, the poems, the stories and the teaching-learning material something that the child can relate to, is inexpensive and therefore easily replicable.

After a year of running the learning center, I started working in the school. To my surprise, things had changed for the better there. The teachers were more open. Once they realised that we will be working with them (and not above them) they were very forthcoming. We had examples of teachers from other classes coming to discuss a concept and enquiring if it could be presented in a more simple and straightforward manner. The principal would call us for important meetings and visits and this helped us become a part of the school system.

And then Comes the Pandemic

The pandemic changed all of this. After the initial mayhem, we started receiving calls from children, parents and school teachers



Building Capabilities through Collaborative Learning

to start something as there was a complete gap. Initially, we started weekly distribution of grade-wise worksheets for children, both at the centers as well as at the school. Children, parents and teachers would collect them once a week and submit them over the next week. Queries would be answered on submission of the worksheet.

As days went by, we reopened the centers, maintaining social distance and other Covid protocols. More and more children were now showing signs of boredom and anxiety. We started general workshops on dance, drawing, public speaking, mental games etc., where children participate, have fun, and connect with themselves and each other.

After the onset of the pandemic, the learning center has evolved as a community space that is used for distribution of ration kits to the needy, and where members hold meetings on issues related to basic amenities etc. This has also morphed into a place where

schoolteachers come to collaborate and hold meetings with parents. It has become a space rooted in, and owned by, the community.

Naznin Chavda joined as a fourteen-year-old volunteer for the Mobile Library Program that was initiated by Samerth in the slums and government schools of Ahmedabad. Today, fifteen years later, she is one of the core team members of the urban program and works as the Team Lead on education with a special focus on improving learning outcomes.

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What is a Learning Center?

KT Margaret

What is 'Best Education?'

All parents, irrespective of their status in life, desire and dream of 'the best education' for their children.

Before we define the concept of 'the best education,' it will be helpful for us to be aware of how the gradual distortion or varying of this concept happens with time.

It varies from person to person, group to group and culture to culture. It is even dependent on the popular thinking of a particular time appealing to the emotions of the masses.

Those who have been concerned about this deterioration, have tried to evaluate the situation, modifying and renaming with suitable names to improve the quality of education, which worked successfully for a period of time. The concept of 'the best education' still remains a problem to be solved.

We are still exploring, and I am sure will continue to explore, the essence of the concept of 'the best education'; and the essential aspects of this concept. It is like a mine involving risks, needing time, patience and courage for exploration.

Where is 'Best Education' to be Found?

I am also part of this process of exploring the essence and essentials of this concept. So far from my experience in going through this process of exploration, this is what I have understood.

I must say here that this understanding is not complete or perfect. But it has been satisfying. It has encouraged me to continue the hard work which the process involves.

Most of us think that education is the responsibility of a school which is the formal authority of education, that is the center for learning. Since these learning centers vary in the quality and quantity of education they provide, parents often go searching for good schools which will provide the 'the best education' for their children.

What is a learning center? What are the essential components of a learning center?

The first learning center for a child is his/her home, the place where he lives with his family. This is the 'nursery' of the learning center. The parents are his first educators, his first teachers. So, parents who desire and dream for 'the best education' for their children have to prepare and provide the best nursery for their children in their homes.

One can only learn in an atmosphere of love. Learning and growing healthily becomes an easy process in an atmosphere of love.

The care and nourishment children get emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually at home help them to get a strong foundation with sturdy, healthy roots. This helps them to withstand the tempest and face problems when they are transplanted from the nursery (home) to the school (formal learning center) for growth and development. Here they learn to work with their peer groups, teachers and other adults in the center.

The essence of the learning center is 'LOVE'. One can only learn in an atmosphere of love.

Learning and growing healthily becomes an easy process in an atmosphere of love. The essentials required are commitment, patience, attention, care, understanding, wisdom and interest; all of these flow from love, which is primary.

The atmosphere of love needed for learning goes beyond emotional attachment which is very selfish and possessive. Possessive love blocks the personality development of the child, because it fails to respect the person of the child and his uniqueness. It makes the child a puppet in the hands of the adults, depending on the adult for everything. In such a situation, the child will be afraid and unable to think independently, to make mature decisions and act courageously and honestly.



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The adults especially the parents have to learn to accept the fact that they are chosen and given a precious responsibility to be the caretakers of a growing, unique human person. When adults value this responsibility, they accomplish it with selfless love and with utmost care. Their main focus then will be to observe carefully the growth process of the child and guide him.

The child is guided, and supported to grow into what he has intended to be and not what the adults want him to be. Every other activity of the parents then becomes secondary and is undertaken to support this major responsibility. Life then becomes meaningful, well-centered, and all their labour and effort in fulfilling its responsibilities will be a joyous one and not a burden.

A young child nurtured in such an atmosphere in his home nursery will be free of emotional blocks, his mind creative and clear, spontaneous in his speech and actions. Even his innocent mischiefs and naughty behaviour would be honestly shared with his parents without fear. The child then is on the path of growing into a mature, reliable human person.

Stepping Across Two Learning Centers: From Home to School

With this preparedness, he steps into the formal learning center, the school, for his next stage of growth, involving intellectual and social development. In this learning center, his parents are replaced by another group of adults, the teachers, children of his age group, and other adults. This shift is a very crucial period for the child and so it is necessary and important that parents and teachers must work with one heart and one mind, in this process of education.

The profession of a teacher is also a call, it is a commitment. A teacher is chosen and given the valuable responsibility in the growth and development of a person. The same essence and essentials of the nursery learning center are required for a teacher, along with a few more essentials necessary for this age.

At this phase the child's intelligence is sharp and she is able to grasp, analyse, find out, and apply the learnings in her life and environment. The teacher need not have to stuff the child with knowledge. She innately has it. The teacher has to provide a suitable environment where the child can develop and grow.

A gardener provides all that is needed for the growth of the plants in her care. This she does with love, patience, care and attention. She devotes her time and energy on providing the best environment for the plants. In her care the plants, grow, flourish and yield a hundred-fold. Nevertheless, growing a specific kind of tree is not in her hands.

That quality is innately present in the plant itself. The gardener is only a provider who finds out, understands, the best environment for the plants to grow.

Possessive love blocks the personality development of the child, because it fails to respect the person of the child and his uniqueness.

A teacher is the gardener of the learning center. This gardener should be aware of the truth, that the children who come to the center have been born with innate intelligence, capacities and skills needed for them to grow into what they are meant to be. They need an environment which will help them develop and grow these talents in them.

The teacher, responsible like the gardener, should devote her time and energy in finding out what are the innate potentials present in the children in her care. She must be alert and attentive to provide the suitable environment needed for their healthy growth so that they produce hundred-fold yield. This involves a lot of mental and physical discipline on the part of the teacher and also on the part of the learner.

“Has the Wind Life Like Us?”

From my experience as a teacher what I found was that young learners are ready for this type of discipline. It is the adult who has to change. The curriculum, syllabus, lesson plans, time table are all planned by adults in order to cut and shape the learners according to the adults' thinking and plan. This has to change completely and these have to be cut and shaped according to the needs and requirements of the learners.

In a learning center, a young teacher with all enthusiasm prepared materials to teach a four years' old child, the letters of the English alphabet, names of objects, and colours, etc.

The child refused to learn in the way the teacher asked him to do. On the other hand, while in the class, he heard the noise of a strong wind blowing and saw the branches of the trees moving and leaves falling.

He asked the teacher “Has the wind life like us?” The teacher, busy with her teaching of the letters of the alphabet, said, “I do not know.” The child in turn said, “Well, you find out and know why and tell me.” The child on his own later read all the letters correctly, named and matched the colours and names of the objects. The teacher was surprised.

In this situation it is clear that it is not the teacher who plans what to teach, it is the child who asks the teacher what he wants to learn.

So, the essence of the learning center is ‘LOVE’ and the essentials are – the teacher has to restructure his/her thinking, attitudes, behaviour in teaching and learn to understand who is the child? What is he?

For this, find the child in himself/ herself and understand “Who am I?” “What am I?” Honest answers to these questions will help a teacher to know the essentials of a learning center.

KT Margaret has worked as a teacher for more than thirty years. She has taught through the media of English, Tamil and Kannada, in formal and informal institutions, to students of both elite and underprivileged backgrounds.

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Sikshan the Eklavya Way

A Two-Decade-Long Journey with Learning Centers

Samuhik Pahal Team

Eklavya is a non-profit, non-government organisation that develops and field tests innovative educational programs and trains resource people to implement these programs. For over two decades, Eklavya has sought to relate the content and pedagogy of education – both formal and non-formal - to social change and the all-round development of the learner. Eklavya has built up an extensive base of resource materials that includes educational literature, children’s literature, magazines, textbooks and other learning aids.

Samuhik Pahal: Good evening. Please tell us about the experiences of Eklavya in running learning centers. Eklavya has been using them as a key intervention strategy for a long time and other organizations will have a lot to learn from you.

Rajesh Khindri: Eklavya was set up almost four decades back in the early 1980s... to primarily work on figuring out how learning can be improved in government schools. In those days, more than 90% schools were government schools. There were hardly any private schools. Eklavya comes out of an earlier initiative called ‘Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program’. But as soon as Eklavya was set up, we got into working on other curricular areas like social sciences, languages and mathematics etc.

So, almost for a couple of decades from the 1980s to the 1990s-2000, Eklavya focused primarily on developing curricular packages for social sciences, languages, and mathematics, and on spreading the

Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program to larger geographies. Eklavya’s vision and intention has been based on ‘from micro-level experiments to macro-level action’, that is to undertake intensive field engagements to develop programs, which might take 3, 4, 5, 6 years, as often these programs do. And then we try to scale these up through government structures-systems and through other avenues.

We started realizing the importance of community engagement in late-eighties and early nineties, as local issues-voices started cropping up, even though we had the state backing.

So, for the first two decades, our interaction was mostly with schoolteachers, children and domain experts in the entire range. This was going fine as far as elements of holistic packages were concerned. But one crucial piece was missing, that was engagement with the community. We started realizing the importance of community engagement in late-eighties and early nineties, as local issues-voices started cropping up, even though we had the state backing.

Some parents or community members would question a certain method or a pedagogic practice. They’d say it is all child’s play, and there is no serious teaching. Or they’d complain as to why we brood on flowers and

trees and cow dung, when it is the age of modern science and rockets! Across many semi-urban geographies, these kinds of issues started cropping up and we found that it was important to engage with the community as well.

Second, we also realized that this kind of total reliance on state structure and governmental permissions can be fatal at times; and, that did happen with three of our iconic programs between 2001 and 2002. Permissions were withdrawn for all the three major curricular interventions - the science teaching program, the social science program and the Prathmik Shiksha Karyakram. So, that was when we started thinking seriously that it is important to have educational engagements that are independent of the state permissions as well.

So, in this background, around 1998, some explorations were started in Shahpur Block of Betul district in Madhya Pradesh. In this block, Eklavya's primary education program was already running in the entire block in a couple of hundred primary schools. So, the local team thought of trying out some explorations working with the communities to figure out a way ... and, thus, the first such center was set up on a pilot basis.

At the same time, in addition to the two things that I mentioned, the third reason was that when we got into primary education, we also realized that the kind of academic and cultural support that most of us get in middle class families from parents, siblings and relatives is not at all available to a large section of children going to government primary schools, both in tribal belts and rural belts... even sometimes in urban areas as well. So, we felt that one has to conceptualize a space wherein a similar kind of support can be provided to these children, which we middle class folk get in our own homes. The support system ensures that this kind of input reaches children who do not have the organization from within their social circle.

So, that was the idea.

So, when we started this in 1998-99 at Shahpur, we had two-three such centers. In those initial years, as well as today, we have had to ensure that this input is not mistaken as a parallel school. This is also not a coaching facility wherein school-work/home-work is done. It is not even a full-fledged alternative school. But we hope that if students spend a considerable time over 3-5 years in this setup, they will be able to do much better in the school situation.

What we had in mind was to be able to prepare the children, so that they can learn all that is needed to enter a school and be comfortable there, that they become much more confident, and they are able to cope with their level-appropriate education in classes. That has been the idea. And, to enforce this we began 'Shiksha Protsahan Kendra' (SPK), an engagement in partnership with local communities. The pedagogy and the approach that Eklavya believes in, in primary education, in language education, in mathematics education, that is what is followed.

An SPK has about 30-35 students who work together. It has students from class 1-5 and a local youth, who'd ideally be from the same or a neighboring village, working to facilitate the learning of students for at least two hours every day. It is ideally arranged in the morning hours, but depending on local processes and needs, some centers also hold



Eklavya

Mohalla Learning Activity Center
at Matapura in Hoshangabad District

it in the evening. Either in the evenings or in the mornings, there are students from all age groups from 6 to 11; hence they are divided into three groups - A, B and C.

The clubbing occurs based on the existing skill-knowledge base of students: like the ones who are engaging with the foundational ideas of arithmetic or language, say are in group C and the ones who are fully aware of the basics and are ready to traverse into other developed domains are in A, and the ones who are in the middle are accommodated in B.

So, we felt that one has to conceptualize a space wherein a similar kind of support can be provided to these children, which we middle class folk get in our own homes.

This entire process requires some initial assessment that is done by the Eklavya team for which we use tools to classify children into three segments. And then, within that center students work as three independent groups, C, B, and A, with whom the facilitator must work. In general, we can assume that the students in class 1 and 2 are in Group C, students from class 3 and the beginning of 4 are in B and the ones in class 5 are in A. That is a general picture, but there are variations and mixes in each center, based on skill-knowledge level of each student.

So obviously it's an MGML – Multi-grade Multi-level - kind of approach. In this, the facilitator usually spends the most amount of time with Group C, that needs individual attention. She can then look at Group B and assign Group A with some activity to keep them engaged. It is entirely activity-based; whether it is language, or arithmetic, or way to know places, theatre and everything else is done this way.

But where does the community come in? This process starts with a series of visits and meetings with the local community. We sit with them for meetings after meetings to understand their perception of children, their ideas on learning, and on the standards of the students' knowledge. It is only if there is mutual consensus and keenness to collaborate that the Shiksha Protsahan Kendra is set up in that particular locale.

Right from the beginning, it is clear that the community will have to take responsibility to select the person who would run the SPK in that locality. So, they locate students who have finished matriculation or are in college from either the same village or from nearby ones. While selecting, they also discuss and deliberate with our team about the expectations from the facilitator, her/his role-responsibilities etc. While there are local pushes-and-pulls, they are also keen that an appropriate person gets selected. There is also the most important part of how we expect them to create an environment in the village which is conducive for students' learning, as well as for them to show interest in learning. While selection of the local facilitator is a crucial first step, organization of space of the SPK is as important.

So, for most of our centers in the initial days, it is the community that provided the space, whether it is a Panchayat Bhawan, or a room or any open space which can be used by the students. We realized soon enough that parents can't really contribute to the effort with regular financial inputs, so we tried to find a way out. Usually when the harvest season arrives, community members take care of a few expenses of the SPK—making available notebook, pencils and other stationaries for children. This is how the community takes further responsibilities.

We also ensure that every month a meeting is held with the local community wherein there would be discussions about the functioning of the center, updates about

the SPK, students' progress and a meet to present students' achievements facilitated by the young facilitator. We see to it that such meetings are regularly attended and participated with interest. We also set up a committee from the local community which has a couple of members from the school management committee as well.

Samuhik Pahal: In communities where you work, the parents are not exposed to education, but you are involving them in the education process through community participation. How has the parents' involvement in the work of these learning centers worked in your experience? What impact does it have on the children's learning outcomes?

Rajesh Khindri: So, we shall understand this in three steps. We believe that there are people in the students' community—the elders, parents, and others—who possess life skills and critical knowledge that might be very useful in learning, for example—a vast knowledge base about farming, weather changes and terrain conditions etc. These also include their own ways of doing mathematics, their intrinsic linguistic skills etc. The problem is that society does not consider these as important and because of the perception that is created, local communities do not even realize that they possess important knowledge.

In SPK, it is possible to work with parents as well as students. Parents soon realize that the student had been going to school for two-three years, but she has picked up much more in just three months in SPK! And over time, over a year or two, some of the parents become confident enough that they start raising these issues and concerns in the mainstream school system as well, especially when they are formal members of the school management committees. This also pressurizes the mainstream education system to perform better.

Most of the facilitators are quite young — usually matriculate or college going, in some rare cases, even school drop-outs. So, we arrange intensive training sessions for them. In the first year they have three intensive, week-long residential training sessions; one at the beginning, another after 4-5 months and the third at the end after another gap of 4-5 months. In these sessions we try and discuss what is education, what is meant by learning, the relationship between understanding and learning—all these are discussed, not delivered as speeches from the stage. Along with these, the concrete matters of formulating teaching plans, monthly activities, day-to-day actions are all taken up.

We believe that there are people in the students' community—the elders, parents, and others—who possess life skills and critical knowledge that might be very useful in learning

The facilitators in the SPKs, i.e., the learning centers, work for two hours every day, and that too with different level-age groups. Hence, they are provided specific inputs to formulate strategies to work with multiple groups simultaneously. Content and process related topics are discussed in the training sessions. Additionally, we have fortnightly review and planning meetings. So, once every fortnight about 15-20 SPK facilitators meet along with 2-3 members of the Eklavya team. In these meetings they review the previous fortnight's actions and plan for the next one.

Over the last few years, we have realized that probably this capacity building has to be more intensive and requires one day every week. So, now at many places, these centers run for five days and facilitators

spend one day every week for preparations. So, over time, a strong local cadre gets built which looks after the education of students in that particular area. We also focus on and help toward further formal education of the facilitators. We explore options like D.Ed., B.Ed., completing graduation etc. So, although the SPK focuses mostly on students' primary education, very many other kinds of activities keep happening alongside.

Samuhik Pahal: You mentioned earlier that everyone contributes to the running of the learning centers. Would it be correct to say that the cost is shared between all the stakeholders who run these? And, that it is also a testimony to their motivation to have a learning center and their belief in education?

Second, is there a difference in the manner of participation of boys and girls? What different approaches are required? Is it the same when you reach out to girls and boys or did you try out some other approaches to encourage girls to join the learning centers?

Rajesh Khindri: One major recurring expense is the facilitator's honorarium. During the initial period, the stipend used to be about 1500 rupees per month. Now it is 2,000, 2,500 and 3,000 rupees, as per experience and location. In addition, there are many one-time/capital and some more recurring expenses. These were always taken care of by Eklavya, using various project-specific grants that it receives. The community was mostly responsible for providing space, allocation of time, involvement in the process of teaching-learning and, sharing some responsibility of the stationary materials etc.

Till the time we had 4-5 centers, there was intensive training for the facilitators. Every fortnight there were meetings to decide the course of action. And, there was on-site support too - Eklavya team members used to visit the centers regularly. This was not an 'inspection' or 'monitoring' but more on the lines of on-site training support. It was meant

to analyze, with the facilitator, the problem areas, the nature of issues and troubles, and to discuss children's participation, problems, and solutions, if any. Until 2004, when there were 4-5 centers, all these activities were being undertaken by the Eklavya team members directly.

such out-of-school educational efforts and structures are necessary only because the State is not delivering on its promise.

By 2004-5 all the components of the SPK model were worked out and it was ready for being scaled up. So, it was decided that henceforth we would plan for a cluster, say of about 20-25 centers in one area. This would result in optimizing our efforts on fortnightly meetings, trainings and other organizational aspects. It was worked out that if an area has about 25 SPK centers, then it would require two Eklavya core team members. But two team members cannot visit all these 25 centers regularly.

But on-site support is quite important in this structure. So, we added one more tier to it, the 'anuvartankarta'. They were usually inducted from the team of sanchalaks/facilitators who were doing really well and picked up content-methodology and became more proactive. The anuvartankarta had to visit a different center every day during the week and would be responsible for about 5-6 centers each, with a weekly onsite support cycle. So, for every cluster of 25-30 SPKs there would be one sanchalak each and one anuvartankarta for every 5-6 centers. So, there would be about 5-6 anuvartankartas and a couple of Eklavya team members anchoring this entire enterprise in terms of providing academic support and other operational inputs.

In this structure, cost of the salaries of the Eklavya's staff, the anuvartankarta and the sanchalak, and some other running costs are involved as well. Each SPK needs to have a set of books; 40-50 books ought to be there - a set of some other teaching-learning materials too, and a set of stationery items, in addition to individual notebooks/pencils for students. So, while nothing compared to a school, the cost for running an SPK is about one lakh rupees per year to cover all the expenses. Hence, a cluster of around 25 centers, will require about 25-30 lakhs for a year. This is not very high if you look at the school system. But it is not so very little that it can be mobilized easily by the community locally, which anyway has scarce resources.

Question of long-term sustainability of such an effort crops up time and again. We did try a model of partial economic contributions from the local community for a few years between 2014 and 2018, but it did not work out. The effort required to raise partial contributions was enormous, so it negated the purpose. We have been told that other organizations have managed to achieve this. But a couple of other such efforts that we have seen could not be sustained for long. Probably if there is a very strong local movement base, the scenario might be different. Also, we believe that responsibility of basic needs of the society rests with the State, and such out-of-school educational efforts and structures are necessary only because the State is not delivering on its promise. So, the debate continues.

Samuhik Pahal: Given that this experience of running these learning centers has been going on for the last 23 years almost, what role has it played in Eklavya's thinking about education? When the Shiksha Protsahan Kendras were started, they began because of particular organizational and field related needs. But did you have any other specific initiatives in mind which you were trying to learn from while doing this? Something that

other organizations would have done earlier, for example, and in a similar domain?

Rajesh Khindri: I will like to get back to a question asked earlier, that I had missed answering, because it kind of ties up with the concerns raised in this question. It is the question about participation of girls. We noted that wherever the facilitators were women/girls, the center saw an increased and active participation of girls. So, over time, consciously, we tried that at least 50 percent of facilitators should be girls or women. This made a huge difference. That was an important lesson that we learnt.

We are banking on the fact that once students reach a point, the agency of the student, the young-adult will take over, for them to flourish and learn.

In this context another experience comes to mind. In another phase in 2015-18, we tried to develop a model for middle school SPK. In Shahpur, where our primary school centers were running for 15 years, our team shared that participation of girls in middle school SPKs dropped significantly. On closer scrutiny, they realized that the girls coming to middle school SPK were about 11-14 years old. They had to take care of all the household chores. So, they could move out of the house only after completing all the cooking, cleaning and washing tasks at home. So, we had to change the timings of the middle school SPK centers so that many more girls could attend. In the long run, we understood that both the course design and schedule were impacted by girls' participation.

Let me also talk a little about how things moved after the first SPK decade. Around 2010-11 we thought that we must try and gauge how it has impacted the education and learning processes of these areas, hence

we undertook a detailed study. At the same time, we also came to realize that impact can be enhanced if we are working in both the spaces. So, we proposed a composite model wherein we would have SPKs located in the community; but, at the same time would work with government schools and teachers in the same geography.

The approach was to provide workshop cum training support for teachers who are interested in a certain subject area. It also included components of onsite support where anuvartankartas would go to the school and work with the teachers, undertake some academic exercises and classes together, and plan with them. So, over the last decade a composite model evolved, wherein we work with the teachers inside the school and we also work with government school structures. This means that wherever possible we also engage at Jan Shiksha Kendra / Shala Sankool level to conduct trainings and orientations of teachers.

That is why we say, all that we are doing with the community must also get reflected in the school. If you look at the last ten years, now more than fifty percent of our centers are being held in school premises. In such places, we make the materials available to the teachers as well. That is, if teachers want to use these for the regular school, all the SPK resources are available and accessible — say ‘Cardon ka Pitara’ for language-maths activities, ‘Gintimala’ for foundational mathematics, or number cards set, or perhaps library books! So, the same set of resources can be used in SPK as well as in schools. This is another direction in which we have been travelling in the last 8-10 years.

The other question was, how long will the SPKs continue to function in an area? So, three years ago one of our teams decided to try and build a set of criteria and parameters to review and examine an SPK’s continued existence. They evolved a checklist of 10-15 parameters. These are used to review the

current functioning and status of an SPK.

This led to a new model. If 10-12 conditions/criteria are fulfilled, that means a sustained educational change has occurred in that locality and hence the SPK can be closed now. But that doesn’t mean we pull out. We replace the SPK by a transformed structure called a ‘Gatividhi Kendra’, which has been developed in the last 2-3 years in a separate geography in Shahpur Block of Betul district. The Gatividhi Kendra is located inside the school, not outside. The older students studying in classes 6, 7 or 8 usually run these Gatividhi Kendras. So, the students who have studied in the SPKs will run these GKs and it will also have necessary resources – books and TLMs. So, these will act as a resource centers and will figure out their own mechanisms—whether they will have weekly or daily activities, or anything else that they deem fit. Teachers act as patrons, and don’t have any major responsibility.

So, over the last decade a composite model evolved, wherein we work with the teachers inside the school and we also work with government school structures.

So, we tried this in Shahpur in a specific engagement slowly over last three years by reviewing and closing SPK centers. In the first year we reviewed and closed five SPK centers, next year we closed 10, and opened ‘Gatividhi Kendras’. Now we have 25 such Gatividhi Kendras/centers running in Shahpur, wherein SPKs have been closed down by a conscious process and decision. And a transformed structure is in place. This opens up possibilities of a new trajectory.

At the end, I would also like to share another



Mohalla Learning Activity Center at Sitapuri in Dhar District

very recent achievement that is built on these community-based engagements. By mid-March last year, all the schools were closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. By mid-May, it was apparent that the schools were not going to open anytime soon. The state was all into the digital mode. By mid-June we realized that there is no way that these digital measures are reaching the sections of society that we are working with. We were also clear that it is extremely important for young children to have face to face interactions, group-peer interactions, to meet, to get out of their houses that were in a very stressful situation because of economic hardships.

So, in June 2020 we started a sort of community engagement in two places, in Hoshangabad and in Shahpur. It took the form of Mohalla Learning Activity Center (MLAC) in Hoshangabad and Mohalla Gatividhi Kendra in Shahpur. In these, students of a locality come together, and guided by a local youth they spend some time together every day, without any external physical movement into the locality. The only requirement was that the facilitator be of the same locality, and that the facilitator had access to a smart

phone on Saturdays wherein they could attend planning meetings for a couple of hours.

For example, the planning team sits in Shahpur and the cluster is in Dhodra Mau, where the center is. So, the team plans activities for two-three hours daily and ensures that the center has enough stock of books and stationary items. The trial centers ran in well-ventilated spaces. Not more than 10-12 children came and interacted maintaining COVID safety protocols. This trial took place for 2-3-weeks in the second half of June and the beginning of July and it worked well. Local Communities responded with enthusiasm and interest, especially because children had not been to school for many months and parents were concerned about their education.

So, in July we decided to launch these centers on full scale. Within one month, in Eklavya's geography, we had 300 Mohalla Learning Activity Centers running. By September 2020, we had 600 centers running daily for two hours. And the Shahpur centers, which had become 'Gatividhi Kendras' run

by older children of class 6, 7 or 8 took up this task seamlessly. So, we could work with around 15,000 students throughout the year, during a year wherein the mainstream education system came to a standstill. Because of this, we now have a cadre of 600-700 Youth Volunteers across five districts. We feel that a cadre of local youth who can contribute to the education of that area is being built up, and this will also facilitate their own learning curves.

Samuhik Pahal: Please give us a generic sense of the good things happening at learning centers per se, not only from Madhya Pradesh but from across India. Secondly, we request you to discuss some of the more negative aspects related to running learning centers. Any observations from different models that you have been reading about or experienced?

Rajesh Khindri: I think this provides an opportunity to reflect on a four-decade journey wherein one sees a cyclic learning. Right from mid-1980s, starting in Dewas and in Hoshangabad later, we set up 'Chakmak Clubs' anchored by a resource pool of students. 'Chakmak' is a monthly magazine for children that Eklavya brings out.

It started in 1985 and it has been running for the last 35 years. Interested active students of middle and high schools with initiative, selected through a process of workshops, usually 4-6 in each village, ran what we called a 'Chakmak Club'. They could undertake whatever they wished to do, be it opening a library or doing some daily activities like origami and clay modelling, or form a study-discussion circle. And it was entirely voluntary.

Our input was that every month they would come together for at least two days in residential workshops to review, plan and learn some new activities. A similar kind of model was later tried in Hoshangabad, what we called 'Baal Samooh'. In this process we saw children's own learning, understanding

of social issues, sensitivity towards issues, problem solving evolving enormously.

It was an open platform where not only learning was in focus, but social issues were also discussed. These spaces are very important and crucial. We must see how we can create more of such spaces. From running SPKs, then working with schools, to Gatividhi Kendras run voluntarily by students; we are almost back full-circle to the point where we started.

So, over time, a strong local cadre gets built which looks after the education of students in that particular area.

We are banking on the fact that once students reach a point, the agency of the student, the young-adult will take over, for them to flourish and learn. I see a loop, and a question emerges: that wherefrom will the understanding of society and sensitiveness to diversity come from?

In all this the most critical issue is that all stakeholders—children, youth and others—see their relevance, their roles and understand the workings of this process of democratization while simultaneously realizing their own importance and potentials.

Introduction to the Interviewee: After a basic exposure to science during formal education, **Rajesh Khindri** learnt science-education on-the-job during a longish stint with Hoshanagbad Science Teaching Program (HSTP), from 1986 to 2002 in Eklavya. He has also served as the Editor of 'Sandarbh', a bimonthly magazine for teachers. He is keen on the development and dissemination of educational materials and ideas, and in issues related to sustainable development.

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Learning for Life, Journey through Education

A review of 'The Open Classroom' by K. T. Margaret

T Shivanand

Many take up the teaching profession as it offers them a livelihood opportunity. There are few who become teachers out of considered interest in working with children. And there are fewer still for whom teaching is a calling in life. K. T. Margaret is clearly one of those who wholeheartedly embraced working with children as a way of living. Margaret was part of the three decades of progressive, feverish, individual experimentation in education across India in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, before rapid commercialization scaled and consumed the space, widening inequities already inherent in access and quality of education.

'The Open Classroom' is a document that chronicles her 'journey through education', as the subtitle of the book goes, over these years of working in schools and running learning centers in urban and rural India. The thrust of the book is to present key ideas, influences and experiences that shaped her journey in education. The approach that Margaret has taken is an interesting mix of linear narrative liberally scattered with examples of working with children and teachers, and of experiences distilled in the form of reflections in the realms of her personal and professional growth as a teacher.

Margaret begins the book with a preface setting its context, her influences and the reasons for writing it. These are primarily documentary in nature to express her journey in education and locate her experiences in the wider context of questioning and

experimentation of the non-formal education space in India. She formally opens the book with a chapter on education that offers her thoughts on the central concerns of education while critiquing the formal system in place. She is thoughtful and gentle, but firm, and quietly devastating in sharing her concerns around the structures and processes of today's education that impact a child's inner growth and learning.

Margaret was part of the three decades of progressive, feverish, individual experimentation in education across India in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, before rapid commercialization scaled and consumed the space

She progresses in the book to describe the genesis of her work as a teacher. Here, the book follows a linear trajectory for a few chapters. After obtaining a formal teaching degree and starting work as a high school science teacher in Bangalore, she describes a pivotal moment in her transition to being a primary school teacher.

This is the first of many instances in the book that reveals the reflective and insightful side to Margaret's life and work as well as her seriousness, drive and focus that have supported her in over five decades of work

that continues till date. She describes her introduction to Freud's ideas in education, the initial scepticism followed by deep internalization and acceptance, tempered by her gradual understanding of social and economic ground realities of working with children in a low-income housing area in Bangalore.

In the next few chapters, she captures this part of her journey in starting an informal community learning center that morphed into a large residential learning center for children of the urban poor. In addition to anecdotes and examples of children's learning journeys, she periodically reflects on her own motivations in continuing to work for children from underprivileged communities. The narrative also combines insights in pedagogy, operational details and challenges of running a growing learning center. She describes, for instance, her forays into gaining the trust of parents in encouraging higher attendance in classes, the approach she took to understand the community, and the role she envisaged for the use of audio-visual material in her classes.

Margaret is refreshingly frank in discussing the pitfalls she encountered and mistakes she made as a teacher and teacher trainer, and in running the learning center. This makes the book valuable for novice teacher-initiates beginning to negotiate the education space for themselves. She does not hesitate to experiment, but cautions the reader regarding initiating one before understanding the context.

Children, she reminds us, face the consequences of our work. While they participate, tug, and actively shape the process of learning, any heavy-handedness on the part of the educators can only backfire as it first impacts children. This aspect permeates the entire book. But it is particularly evident in the chapters related to her teaching career and running of the learning center at Tilaknagar.

The book then shifts gears to talk about educational initiatives and projects run by NGOs as part of development programs and experiments in alternative schooling. These were implemented across the country in the 1980s and 1990s. Margaret records her impressions and experiences of these as responses to the inflexibility of the formal education system to the learning needs of children and their emotional lives, and looking at socio-economic disparities in access to quality education.

Margaret is refreshingly frank in discussing the pitfalls she encountered and mistakes she made as a teacher and teacher trainer, and in running the learning center.

As someone who had a ringside view of the entire process and knew the people concerned intimately, she is one of the few who have captured this time and in writing. She notes the various strides made by these schools in the realms of curriculum, pedagogy, teacher education, empowerment, the participation of children in shaping the learning process, and contribution to the national dialogue on quality education. She also adds a note of caution about their limitations in terms of their direct reach and sustainability beyond the founders.

The book finally returns to her own journey as an educator and the radical move she made to shift to Raichur district, a deeply rural part of northern Karnataka with poor socio-economic indicators.

This shift in location also includes a change in her role from being primarily a facilitator of children's learning to training teachers in progressive approaches of working with children.

She shares the challenges confronting teachers in working with the system, the lack of autonomy, agency and confidence, and elaborates with examples particular to teachers working in rural contexts. This part of the book reveals Margaret's empathy and sensitivity to young teacher trainees, while offering glimpses of her own internal dissatisfaction about their situation. This concludes the first section of "The Open Classroom."

The second section of the volume under discussion appears to be an afterthought, since it doesn't necessarily flow with the narrative-based approach taken in the first part. Margaret here presents notes on her understanding related to child psychology, the significance of play in a young child's life and learning, and the meaning of freedom in learning. These represent a distillation of many years of experience and are in themselves a valuable contribution which are worthy of being developed as a separate book. The reader is nonetheless left with a tantalizing glimpse of the child's learning world and many questions on their learning process that practically begs a follow-up by Margaret. We hope there is more in this direction from her in future.

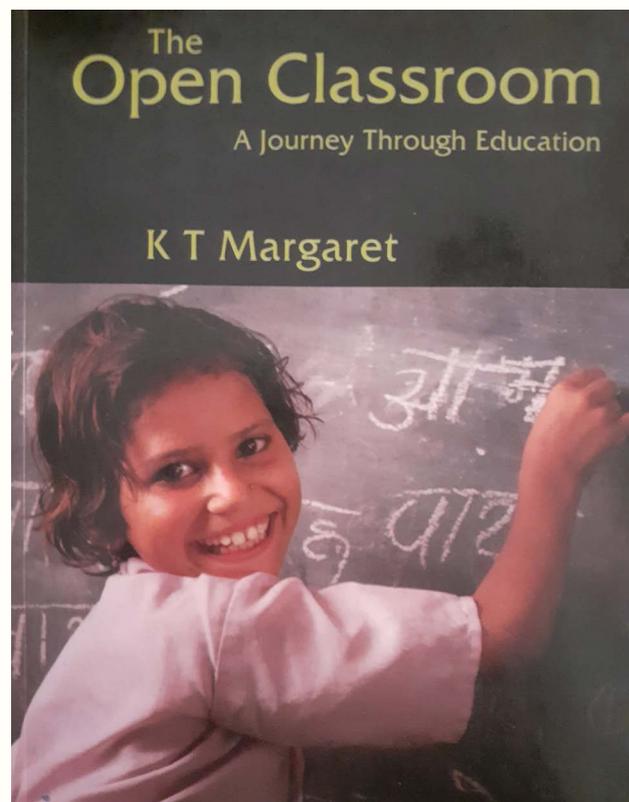
The chapters in the book are short, sectionized into clear, self-contained parts, that largely flow well into the next set of ideas and experiences within each chapter. There are discontinuities in the narrative between chapters; for instance, her work in the Tilaknagar learning center is interrupted by observations on education experiments by NGOs and alternative schools, before launching on challenges in teacher training in rural areas. The reader is left wondering if these are deliberate omissions to make essential highlights available to the reader, or the limitations imposed by memory.

Nevertheless, this reviewer feels that an editor could have helped support and frame the book with a better narrative flow

to highlight the obviously richly insightful text. The language is accessible, authentic, reflective, and often conversational, which invites the reader to easily move forward along with the writer. There aren't many accounts of teachers writing as reflective practitioners, so it is important from that perspective as well.

Margaret has written extensively documenting pedagogical practice in another book of hers on the role of play in children, titled 'The Substance of Play: Principles of Pre-Primary Teaching'. The book under review here, 'The Open Classroom' however is an autobiographical account of someone looking back at decades of work and is an important testament to the significance of such an endeavour. We have much to learn from Margaret, as teachers, teacher trainers, school heads, officials and funders involved in the education space. This book is a good place to begin to learn of her work.

Bibliographic Details: K. T. Margaret. 2012 (First Published in 1999). *The Open Classroom: A Journey Through Education*. Chennai: Orient BlackSwan. 204+ xviii pages.



Cover of 'The Open Classroom'

Democratizing Education through Learning Centers

C Sutar

What practices are organizations adapting to make their Learning Centers valuable to communities?

Most view learning centers as a vehicle to increase elementary school enrollments and retention and reducing the number of out-of-school children. Although that remains an overarching objective for a large number of nonprofits, the approach to running learning centers has become much more nuanced and well-thought-out over the past decade. The focus has moved from merely achieving academic milestones to holistic development and engaging parents for better learning orientation.

We spoke to education nonprofits such as Vikramshila Education Resource Society (West Bengal), Samridhdhi Trust (Karnataka), North East Education Trust (NEET) (Assam), and the Association of People with Disability (Karnataka) to understand practices that they have adapted to make their learning centers safe, vibrant, all-inclusive, and geared toward nurturing the holistic development of children.

The Learning Center as Lab and Bridge

Before the Right to Education (RTE) Bill was passed in 2009, it was challenging to enroll students in government schools. Organizations have had to build credibility to gain the school administration's attention and get pupils admitted to an age-appropriate class. West Bengal-based Vikramshila Education Resource Society is perhaps one of the few such nonprofits that have built strong credibility.



Vikramshila Education Resource Society

Learning Support in a Community Space

Since 1999 Vikramshila has been working with Kolkata Police to safeguard out-of-school children from a life of crime. The place where they started their center is infamous for criminal activities, including drug abuse. These centers (called Naba Disha Centers) are located within police station premises. While the objective of the police was to keep the children off the streets, Vikramshila also focused on providing children with a safe space and giving them educational and social-emotional support. Vikramshila uses the learnings from Naba Disha Centers while setting up new centers.

Shubhra from Vikramshila says, “We had to struggle to find good quality centers back then. We used to train children and then get them admitted to mainstream schools. Admissions to schools became relatively easy after the RTE Bill was passed. At one point, we thought about whether we must continue, but we realized a need for supplementary centers. Living in congested homes, children didn't have spaces to study, and they got the psychosocial support at the centers which they lacked at home.”

Vikramshila works on pedagogy, curriculum development, and teacher development programs. Their learning centers also function as labs to test their teaching and learning materials and tools. “Since we implement teaching and learning curriculums across different states and organizations, having tested the methods at our learning centers, we feel confident about implementing it for other children from similar backgrounds,” adds Shubhra.

The Naba Disha Centers focus on Early Grade Reading, Mathematics, Language, Library, and ICT-enabled programs in a community setting. Namrata from Vikramshila says, “The advantage of Naba Disha is that it is not dependent on any school for its premises. It operates in a community setting. This allows children to remain engaged even after school hours or when the schools are shut for long periods during holidays.”

Apart from the Naba Disha model, Vikramshila also runs supplementary learning centers and afterschool programs in school premises in collaboration with the school management, and in community spaces in partnership with communities. Vikramshila’s role across all these models is to provide resource support, academic and technical support on education, the well-being of children, community sensitization, and formulating school-community linkages.

Building relationships with stakeholders, including the education departments of state governments, is a part of running learning centers. One of the approaches that helped Vikramshila channel their efforts into strengthening the school education system was to open the doors of their learning centers to government school teachers and let them experience their teaching and learning methods. The result was that after a few visits, the schools themselves started inviting Vikramshila to take remedial classes.

“At the end of the day, the work has to speak for itself. We have to deliver on our promise.

The center has to show the result. Our children are completing their board exams, they become confident. Simply following up with the government doesn’t help,” adds Namrata.

Centers that Reach Out to the Margins

Another remarkable case study is Karnataka-based Samridhdhi Trust which works with 4,000 out-of-school children of migrants in Bangalore, Pune, and Delhi NCR.

Samridhdhi’s goal is to take these children from ‘school-ready’ to ‘job-ready’ stage. The children associated with the Trust come along with their parents from states like UP, Bihar, Assam, Bengal, and Odisha.

Uttam from Samridhdhi says, “We started with a bridge project after doing surveys in the communities where these children lived. As a part of the program, we trained them in literacy and numeracy and especially the state language. And once ready, we enrolled them in government schools or low-fee private schools.”



After-school Classes

Samridhdhi Trust

In many cases, the Trust offers to pay 50% of the school fees for boys and 60% school fees for girls enrolled in low-fee private schools. After a child is enrolled into the school, Samridhdhi works with the child in an ‘After School Program’ and handholds them for the next ten years till they are employable, ensuring that they don’t drop out. The After School Program either operates on school

premises or in a rented place, where school teachers and community volunteers resolve any doubts that children might have.

“Once children are enrolled, it is important to keep them in the school. We pay attention to their smallest of needs such as providing snacks before the After School Program, arranging pick-up and drop bus services to the schools, and organizing parent counseling sessions so that they start seeing education as an investment,” adds Uttam.

Samridhhi recruits Community Mobilizers, who are educated persons from the community and act as an interface between the community and the children on the one hand and the program on the other. The mobilizers identify children who have stopped going to school and work with them to address the challenges they face.

If a student lacks a positive environment at home to study, Samridhhi considers providing hostel accommodation for such learners. Samridhhi’s learning centers

go beyond academics and encourage participation in crafts, music, dance, painting, quizzing, and drama. The center has come across many students with natural talent in sports, dance, or acting, which the team has encouraged to be honed further.

Libraries as Learning Centers

Learning activities that encourage creative thinking are said to increase the academic-social competence of children. Assam-based North East Education Trust’s (NEET) program mainly focuses on enabling children to connect with their lived experiences through their Community Library initiative in Guwahati. The library’s rich collection of age-appropriate contextually-suited books has opened up a new world for children from underserved communities in the region who are primarily first-generation school-goers.

Risha from NEET says, “We used to introduce our library program and do workshops in several schools in the region. A lot of children from schools eventually started visiting our



North East Education Trust (NEET)

Career Counselling Workshop for Girls

library center. To engage them, we started with some small workshops on story-telling, read-alouds, and book games to enable children to think critically. But we also learned that many of those children couldn't read or lacked basic numeracy skills. So, we started offering support in Math, English, and Assamese."

More than 200 students from nearby areas participate in NEET's library center activities. They receive support for their academic needs from this library-cum-learning center. NEET's community library is set up as a vibrant child-friendly space that is open throughout the year with an open area for children to play. It is designed to allow for easy access to books for children, organized according to their age. The team organizes various activities and workshops at the library in collaboration with artists and other resource persons from different fields, supported by multiple corporates and individual donors.

"We put a lot of emphasis on the material that we give to children to enhance their learning experience. Many of the books and TLMs have been specially translated to Assamese to ensure all children get an opportunity to engage with reading and learning materials in a language they can understand," adds Risha.

Learning centers like the one run by NEET require sensitivity and understanding of different cultural nuances and understanding how children engage and respond. Early on, the NEET team participated in a series of capacity enhancement training programs such as the Library Education Course and the Foundation Education Course to understand what kind of resources and capacities the team would need to enable children to have a meaningful learning experience. Founder Risha and co-founder Parismita became the recipients of Wipro Education Fellowship 2018 onwards and continue till date.

Risha, says, "The fellowship provided us with financial support with which we could implement our ideas. Every year we got access to different capacity building enhancement workshops and that helped us in gaining clarity about our work. It also gave us an opportunity to connect with a network of like-minded organizations and individuals and we could learn from their work as well."

Interestingly, NEET's Community Library Program model has expanded to a few government schools in Guwahati and Kamrup. The team now engages with government schools in Assam on aspects like organizing their library spaces and making existing reading and learning resources accessible to children.

While the focus for non-disabled children at learning centers is mainly on academic and all-around development, in the case of children with disabilities, it is about addressing their day-to-day functional needs in addition to making learning spaces more inclusive or disabled-friendly.

Centers that Ensure that the Disabled Learn

Karnataka-based Association for Persons with Disabilities (APD) focuses on two models to promote inclusive education through their programs – a school model and a community model. For the school model, APD has been setting up learning centers at schools having more than ten children with disabilities. The process begins with assessing how many children and with what disabilities are there in a particular school. After evaluation, the school administration is engaged in processes of setting up a therapy center at the school and in converting the entire school into a disabled-friendly space with suitable access audits.

Nakkina from APD says, "The therapy centers act as spaces for children to get access to experts, take therapy, and engage in activities that can support their development. Since the children we work with are often



Learning Innovations for Children with Disability

neglected, our larger goal is to sensitize headmasters, principals, and the teachers involved in the classes on how they should deal with children with disabilities.”

Along with education and therapy services, APD provides opportunities to participate in summer camps, *dasara* camps, adventure camps, sport meets, and creates space for children with disabilities to exhibit their talents. Building peers in mainstream schools is another activity of importance; this process helps peers understand the needs of children with disabilities and assists them in curricular activities.

Getting buy-in from the school administration requires time and effort, especially for children with disabilities. To bolster their case, the APD team often takes their previous beneficiaries to the headmasters, teachers, and the students to make sure their work is communicated effectively.

In the case of Community Learning Centers, APD groups children with disabilities from 4-5 schools and provides them with the same resources as they do for school-based centers. In addition to psychosocial support, the APD team also provides hearing aids, orthotics, and prosthetics for children custom-made at their manufacturing units in Karnataka.

One of APD’s key focuses is on advocacy and on bringing parents on board with the education of the children. The organization empowers parents to access social security

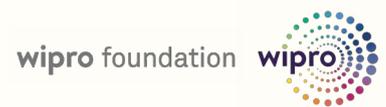
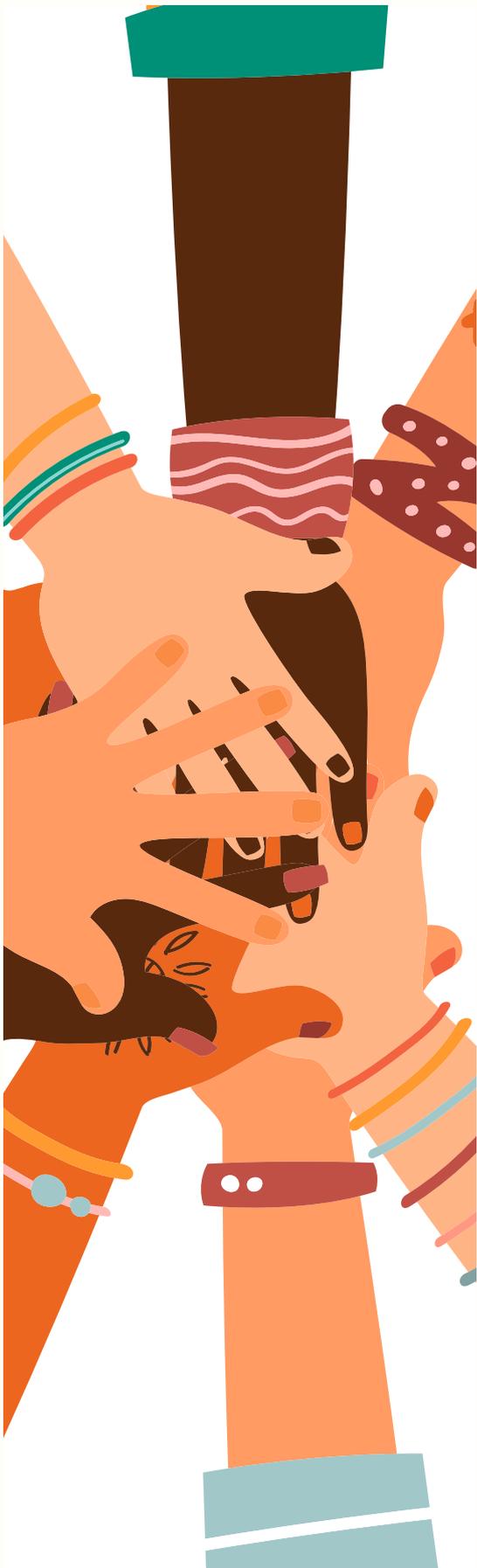
schemes for their children. Nakkina from APD says, “Children enrolled in the learning centers come from challenging backgrounds. In most cases, the father and mother go to work. But we insist on parents meeting us as it helps in orienting the child. Often our staff also visit their homes to sensitize them or to give worksheets to children.”

APD has developed a streamlined tracking system for each child that captures details after they are on board. Each child gets an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and an Individual Rehabilitation Plan (IRP) besides periodic assessments and internal reviews to track progress.

“We raise funds for learning centers on an ongoing basis, and the donors are informed about our collaborations with schools or communities. At places where we cannot operate with the APD team, we collaborate with other organizations working on disability in the region and provide them with technical support and expertise or subgrants,” adds Nakkina.

India has over two million registered education NGOs, and most of them are focused on one or the other way of achieving children’s learning goals. Learning centers have evolved to become an essential instrument for achieving these objectives, to track learning outcomes, and to undertake advocacy. Most organizations have developed their learning center models through trial and error, based on the needs on the ground. Regardless, the overall experience has helped organizations build expertise in different areas, such as collaborating with the government, developing inclusive learning centers, or meeting the education needs of a particular group or community.

You can reach out to the organizations featured in this story at: contact@apd-india.org (APD India), info@vikramshila.org (Vikramshila), northeasteducationaltrust@gmail.com (NEET), and uttambanerjee@samridhdhi.org (Samridhdhi Trust)



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