

# Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

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Thinking and Learning Outside the Four Walls

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# Does Learning Happen only in Classrooms?

**W**hen we think about schools, we still mostly equate them with classrooms. Our interventions in learning in schools often tends to get limited to attempts at improving pedagogic practices in the classroom and the curricular frameworks necessary for facilitating such work.

What if we start thinking about the school as an institution beyond the classroom? If we do that, it may open up both new avenues of engagement with the school as an institution, and with students, teachers and staff as stakeholders. It can also deepen our understanding of processes related to learning, and has the potential to help us begin a journey of reengaging with classrooms with refreshed sensibilities.

There are many such spaces in schools, be they physical, social or temporal. Some already exist as learning spaces, but their potential may not be fully utilized. Some others will need focused effort for them to start working for this purpose.

A good example of the former are libraries. Although a large number of schools, especially in the government school system, function without libraries, many schools do have a library.

However, even schools with libraries are often happy with having a weekly library period and herding children into the space for some unsupervised break time. Libraries have the potential to radically transform children's engagement with learning processes.

The process of library work involving the curation of books, the development of a collection, and engaging with children with

read alouds, etc. can also help teachers and library staff hone their skills and build capacities.

Similarly, the way we relate to our bodies and nourish them constitute an important aspect of education. It is high time the training of the body is seen as being as important as training the mind.

The playground, sports, and physical culture in general, are much neglected areas of learning. These have been marginalized because of our disproportionate focus on the classroom.

The playground is also a site for children's socialization. Thus, it can become an important space for social and emotional learning as well.

However, it needs to be thoughtfully utilized for this purpose. Reorienting our interventions in schools in a way that see the playground as a vital site of learning will be an important step in this direction.

The school assembly is similarly utilized in a suboptimal fashion as a tool for passing on messages and notices. As a space, it can be used to develop a culture of learning and inclusion by encouraging students to speak and participate, especially those that come from marginalized communities.

Tools such as circle time can be introduced to revitalize the school assembly as a space. However, circle time can be used in a much broader way to facilitate social emotional learning and in developing an inclusive, learner-centered school culture as well.

Alternative schools across the country have demonstrated the importance of kitchens





Karunar Kheti Trust

and kitchen gardens as spaces where children can develop significant life skills, from cooking and team work to developing healthy relationships with nature and one's own body.

Learning how to grow and cook one's own food can also have multiple other benefits, such as lower levels of stress, and a greater confidence in one's own abilities. Doing this in government schools, especially, might be a challenge that is worth exploring.

Kitchen gardens are one way in which children in schools can develop a relationship with nature. The school garden similarly is a site for nature learning that is not often adequately explored.

Nature walks within and around schools, and closely observing how plants and trees in school gardens respond to seasonal change, recording these and learning from this process, is one set of methods that some schools and organizations are following to

great effect. The work of 'Nature Classrooms' in this space has been exemplary.

Teachers' commons rooms, PTMs, and other such spaces and meetings in schools, where adults gather for various process can also be used for capacity building and developing democratic school cultures.

It is also possible to use events that take place (or can potentially happen) in schools for learning related interventions. These include annual literature festivals, annual functions, FLN melas and science fairs, etc.

These events can be used to help promote experimental science, develop children's familiarity with theatre practice, and help them joyfully pick up the skills of literacy and numeracy.

While working in these spaces, it might be worthwhile to explore and try and restore a sense of joy and agency to both students and teachers.

# Key Learning Spaces in Schools outside the Classroom

## Why We Must Work in Them and How

Nandita Raval and Seema Sirohi

1

In the last three years, after the COVID-19 pandemic forced nationwide school shutdowns, students have faced extreme situations ranging from no classroom sitting experience to extreme focus on addressing the learning regression with classroom-concentrated efforts. During the pandemic, we were forced to explore every avenue of learning outside the school or the classroom, whether gardening, online dancing, children learning through radio and television - even in government schools.

After schools reopened, our goal has become 'back to the classroom,' where we want to recover from learning regression by concentrating our efforts towards classroom based learning. With the advent of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and the launch of the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Mission, most states are gearing up toward developing the state curriculum framework and modules for realizing the recommendations of NEP 2020.

2

**It is the right time to ask the first question, that are we doing enough to provide students a comprehensive schooling experience or are we just aiming to enhance their classroom learning?**

Students walking and exploring corridors without fear, students playing in a playground with or without supervision, are learning opportunities. Drawing freely to express

themselves, picking up a book of their choice from the library, and reading it independently, are also learning opportunities.

From participating in the school assembly, to sharing their favourite story, to developing a project for an environment sustainability mela and presenting it in front of their schoolmates in the school assembly, are varied learning opportunities. From learning dance and expressing through Mandala art... The list can go on...

Clearly, we all have witnessed and experienced these learning opportunities outside the classroom. Often these are termed as co-curricular activities, extra-curricular activities or co-scholastic activities, etc.

National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes that the *"aim of education will not only be cognitive development, but also building character and creating holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with the key 21st century skills"*.

In section 4.6, NEP recommends that *"experiential learning will be adopted, including hands-on learning, arts-integrated and sports-integrated education, story-telling-based pedagogy, among others to provide students different avenues to learn and build their capabilities beyond the regular classroom interaction"*. Thus, policies advocate and promote a well-rounded, comprehensive schooling experience for each child.

It is evident, whether it is NEP's recommendations, or parental expectations of children's holistic development, our schools are struggling to achieve it.

This does not mean that we should not value learning of subjects, and focus less on subject based competencies. Rather, the attempt of schooling and education must be to provide diverse opportunities for children to learn and expand their skills and worldviews as imagined in 12 skill sets of 21st century skills.

21st century skills are broken into three categories:

1. Learning skills
2. Literacy skills
3. Life skills

Learning skills (the four 'C's) teach students about the mental processes required to adapt and improve upon a modern work environment. The 4 'C's of 21st Century learning skills are:

- Critical thinking: Finding solutions to problems
- Creativity: Thinking outside the box
- Collaboration: Working with others
- Communication: Meaningfully talking to others

Literacy skills (IMT) focus on how students can discern facts, publishing outlets, and the technology behind them. There's a strong focus on determining trustworthy sources and information to separate it from the misinformation that floods the internet. The three 21st Century literacy skills (IMT) are:

- Information literacy (I): Understanding facts, figures, statistics and data
- Media literacy (M): Understanding the methods and outlets in which information is published
- Technology literacy (T): Understanding the machines that make the Information Age possible

Life skills (FLIPS) look at intangible elements of a student's everyday life. These intangibles focus on both personal and professional qualities. The five 21st Century life skills (FLIPS) are:

- Flexibility (F): Deviating from plans as needed
- Leadership (L): Motivating a team to accomplish a goal
- Initiative (I): Starting projects, strategies and plans on one's own
- Productivity (P): Maintaining efficiency in an age of distractions
- Social skills (S): Meeting and networking with others for mutual benefit

The current curriculum and learning scenario majorly focus on classroom and textbook centred learning, which is important, but not enough to facilitate the above mentioned 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

To build these, our children need a comprehensive schooling experience inside and outside the classroom and the school. Jobs in the future will be characterized by one's ability to develop these skills that need to be nurtured from childhood.

If learners are self-aware, ask critical questions, have a solution-oriented mindset, articulate and express themselves confidently and build supportive relationships, they can be potential drivers of change. And this kind of learning can't be nurtured within the confinement of four walls and textbooks. Learning within and beyond the classroom will help us realize this vision.

For example, as the 'Prime Minister' in the student parliament or Bal Sansad in the school a child is democratically elected, she identifies problems in her school and undertakes change initiatives to resolve them with the help of school administrators and community members.

Thus, tasked with overseeing key functions and activities around the school, children



will end up building initiative, flexibility, negotiation and presentation skills, and leadership and problem-solving skills. These 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are crucial for their future jobs, which regular classroom teaching might not be able to develop.

3

**The second question is, what are the key school spaces outside the classroom and what are the key attributes of school processes related to these?**

- **Library:** a space which provides free access to students and teachers to read books of their interests and expand their knowledge and develop a broader worldview. Libraries have a collection of materials, books or media that are accessible for use.
- **Assembly:** a gathering where the whole school community get together usually in a hall, a ground or a large space, for the purpose of doing things together, communicating matters of significance and to create opportunities for enriching the students' learning and development.
- **Building as Learning Aid (BaLA):** an innovative concept towards qualitative improvement in education, through developing child friendly, learning and fun based physical environment in school infrastructure. It is a way to holistically plan and use the school infrastructure.
- **Bal Sansad:** a platform of the students run by the students and for the students where they can have open discussions about their needs, rights, roles and responsibilities in the context of schools and communities, and participate in a range of activities from theatrical performances, to displays of craft skills, physical abilities, academic skills and knowledge.

## Library

To create opportunities for children to become lifelong learners.

- Students access books independently and in adult supervision
- Provide exposure of worldview beyond the textbook curriculum exchange
- Different reading related activities provide students chances to express themselves and understand others' perspectives.

Key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills which can be enabled through the library:

- Judicious and effective use of information is an important skill students need to develop. Libraries are the right place where students can be trained in the effective utilization of information available from both print and digital resources.
- Libraries help to create an enquiry-based and research-based learning process which nurtures self-learning and encourages students to ask questions and seek help when needed.
- Libraries help develop skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaboration to help students construct knowledge.
- To narrow down the digital skills gap and inequalities worldwide, students need to be equipped with strong digital literacy skills. Libraries can give them training in skills like ethical use of online resources, evaluation and authentication of information, understanding of cybercrimes, and security tips, etc.

**Present status:** Widely acceptable and recommended in school facilities across the states in India.

**Key gaps:** All stakeholders understand its importance. However, many lack resources, and the required shift in mindsets, to effectively use libraries for learning.

## Assembly

To develop a sense of community as well as the confidence to express and participate in large gatherings.

- Students come together to share space and participate in a large gathering.
- Provide opportunities to students to explore different activities to express themselves age appropriately.
- Provide opportunities for students to start their days with enjoyment, fun and witnessing talent, achievement and something new in schools.

Key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills which can be enabled through the school assembly:

- Collaboration skills, as students and teachers together plan and execute purposeful activities for the entire school
- Effective communication skills, as students are enabled to share their experiences, stories and anecdotes with others and empowered for public speaking and taking up the stage
- Creativity, as students showcase their talents in front of the entire school
- Critical thinking, as students discuss the problems of the school and think through collective responsibility and solutions

**Present status:** Considered as part of all school routine, at least for 30 minutes daily.

**Key gaps:** Present conduct is restricted to disciplining students, offering prayers and the sharing of school announcements. School stakeholders need capacity building to conduct this process for learning, and as a fun-filled, engaging process.

## Building as Learning Aid (BaLA)

To promote continuous self-learning and facilitated learning from school structures and environments.

- Teachers use their immediate school infrastructure and environment for experiential learning of students.

- Students develop capacities to self-learn from structure as well as from their environment.

Key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills which can be enabled through BaLA:

- BaLA aims to make the students curious about their surroundings and to help them explore new ways of looking at things and learn from the process. This builds creativity and critical thinking.
- In a BaLA-based learning set-up, students apply their understanding of literacy, numeracy, force, acceleration and circular motion to complete playful and practical activities.
- A BaLA-based classroom and school setting promotes team-based projects. Here groups draw on everyone's strengths to solve problems. This exposes students to new ideas and opposing viewpoints, while demonstrating the power of the collective mind.

**Present status:** Multiple states are developing school infrastructure considering it as a learning opportunity.

**Key gaps:** Most states still do not acknowledge the school building as a critical component to facilitate learning. Designing school buildings and spaces reflecting BaLA is a resource as well as capacity development issue.

## Bal Sansad

To develop interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and to experience active citizenship and the concept of democracy.

- One of the school processes that needs the least amount of capital resources to support students in developing many of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.
- Provide students an avenue to learn and participate in solving problems as well as to experience democracy.

Key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills which can be enabled through Bal Sansad:



- By taking up leadership role in the Bal Sansad, or by being a responsible student body that holds the Bal Sansad accountable, students reflect on the self and understand multiple dimensions to their personality.
- Being a student leader, they are pushed to locate, analyse and synthesize information, identify problems, take informed decisions, ask questions to challenge existing norms and move toward finding solutions and bringing change.
- Students collaborate, build enabling relationships, take responsibility for one's actions and become adaptable while driving change initiatives.
- The whole experience of running a democratic parliament nurtures an environment where students learn to articulate oneself clearly, comprehend others effectively and respond with compassion and sensitivity.

**Present status:** Multiple states have recognized the Bal Sansad as one of the school activities.

**Key gaps:** There is lack of know-how of facilitating Bal Sansad and its potential role in developing leadership skills among students. Teachers and head masters require capacity building for understanding Bal Sansad and its process to achieve its full potential.

4

**The third question is, do we value these opportunities enough to create systemic processes in the school, so that these learning opportunities or spaces are not 'sometime/ occasional/ event' activities or phenomena?**

It is a general practice that learning opportunities beyond the classroom are sparse and sporadic. They are hardly organized, and valued even less. Children

might be learning something or the other from spaces outside the classroom.

However, they are generally unable to connect these learning experiences with classroom learning. They are also not encouraged to do the same.

NEP 2020, and other policy documents, have some relevant recommendations on these, which we list in the next page. Despite all policies recommending holistic education and learning beyond the classroom, schools' administrative stakeholders' focus continues to remain on classroom learning.

There are two critical reasons for this gap. First, classroom learning is considered as 'fundamental,' and outside learning experiences are still seen as 'add-on activities.'

Second, budgetary allocations and teacher training focus on classroom learning. There is little focus on creating holistic learning experience for students. Additionally, there is a lack of infrastructure and resources for facilitating learning outside the classroom.

As a result, our last mile delivery agents in the public education system, head teachers and teachers, are either not equipped for facilitating learning outside the classroom or they are not capacitated for creating and using learning spaces outside the classroom.



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## Policy Recommendations for School Processes

### Library

Committee on National Policy on Library and Information System 1986: “Libraries are central to education and the only way that our education system can be freed from cramming is to build teaching around the library resources of the educational institutions. Children should be introduced to the pleasure of reading and importance of books at an early age”.

“No school or college should be established without a library and a proper qualified librarian. Primary schools where such facilities cannot be provided should share the resources of the community library. In areas where community library does not exist, the primary school should serve as the base of the village library”.

National Education Policy 2020 recommendations: In section 7.2, NEP recognized that “our school complex does not have facilities for music, sports and library”.

In the section on ‘Lifelong Education,’ the fifth recommendation states that “improving the availability and accessibility of books is essential to inculcating the habit of reading within our communities and educational institutions and promotes different forms of libraries within and outside schools.”

### BaLA

Right to Education Act, 2009: “Crucial parameters for school development through the infusion of new learning and ideas on design innovations, whole school planning and building schools that are child friendly. The parameters include an all-weather building consisting of at least one classroom for every teacher and an office cum store, separate toilets for boys and girls, safe and adequate drinking water facilities for all children, barrier free access, boundary or

green fencing, kitchen for cooking the Mid-Day-Meal, a library and a playground”.

National Curriculum Framework 2005: “The teacher must teach concepts using the child’s environment. The environment is familiar and can be understood. Young children learn only in concrete ways, using their senses. Language can be taught using familiar poems, songs, games and stories. Science can be taught using familiar plants, animals and food. Math can be taught using leaves, stones and seeds.

NCF suggests that the teacher use the textbook as a guide. If children must learn about a doctor, then take them to visit a doctor’s clinic.

If they are studying tools, it is best to study the tools of the local cyclewalla or shoeman or carpenter. We can even study tools used in the kitchen.

The world of the BaLA in your school is an aid to represent the understanding that children are gaining of the world around them.

### Assembly

National Curriculum Framework 2005: “Assembly time can be used for reading the headlines of the morning newspaper, performing some physical exercises and singing the national anthem.

“Other activities could also be added, for example, singing together, or listening to a story, or inviting a person from the local community or an outside guest to speak to the children, or hold small events to mark some significant local or national happening.

“Classes that have undertaken some interesting projects could also use this time to share their work with the whole school. If not every day, such longer morning assemblies could be planned once or twice a week. In composite schools, depending on the theme, a junior school assembly and a senior school assembly could be held separately”.

**The fourth question is, how do we develop systemic processes in schools, which organize these learning space outside the classroom to increase learning opportunities for every child in our public education system?**

We illustrate one possible answer to this question by discussing Piramal Foundation's work in this area. To address gaps in this intervention space, Piramal Foundation is committed to develop capacity of the state and that of other stakeholders (such as, teachers, headmasters, Cluster Resource Persons and District Institutes of Education Training) to enhance students' learning opportunities outside the classroom, by focussing on four school processes. These include those related to libraries, the school assembly, BaLA and Bal Sansad.

## Piramal Foundation's Approach

Continuous recommendations across different policies and Acts emphasize on the importance of these school processes. Yet, these are generally perceived to be 'good to have' rather than 'must have' school processes. Secondly, in different scenarios, the availability and deliberate activities conducted in these school processes vary depending on school resources, stakeholders' knowledge, skills, belief and mindsets.

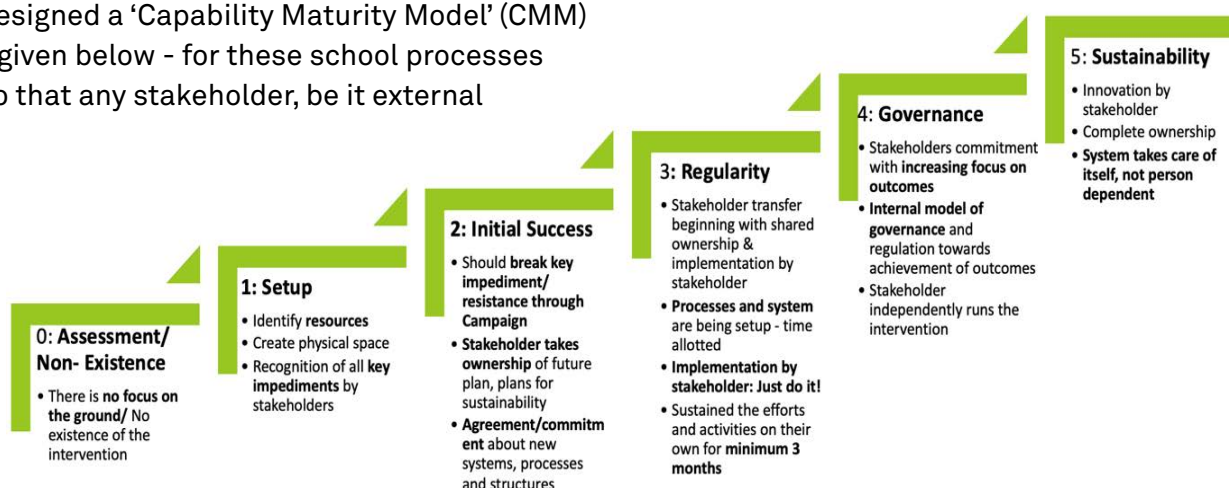
To address this gap, Piramal Foundation has designed a 'Capability Maturity Model' (CMM) - given below - for these school processes so that any stakeholder, be it external

organizations, school teachers, head masters, state and district education functionaries, can set up and execute these processes. This can address informal planning and implementation of school processes for learning outside the classroom.

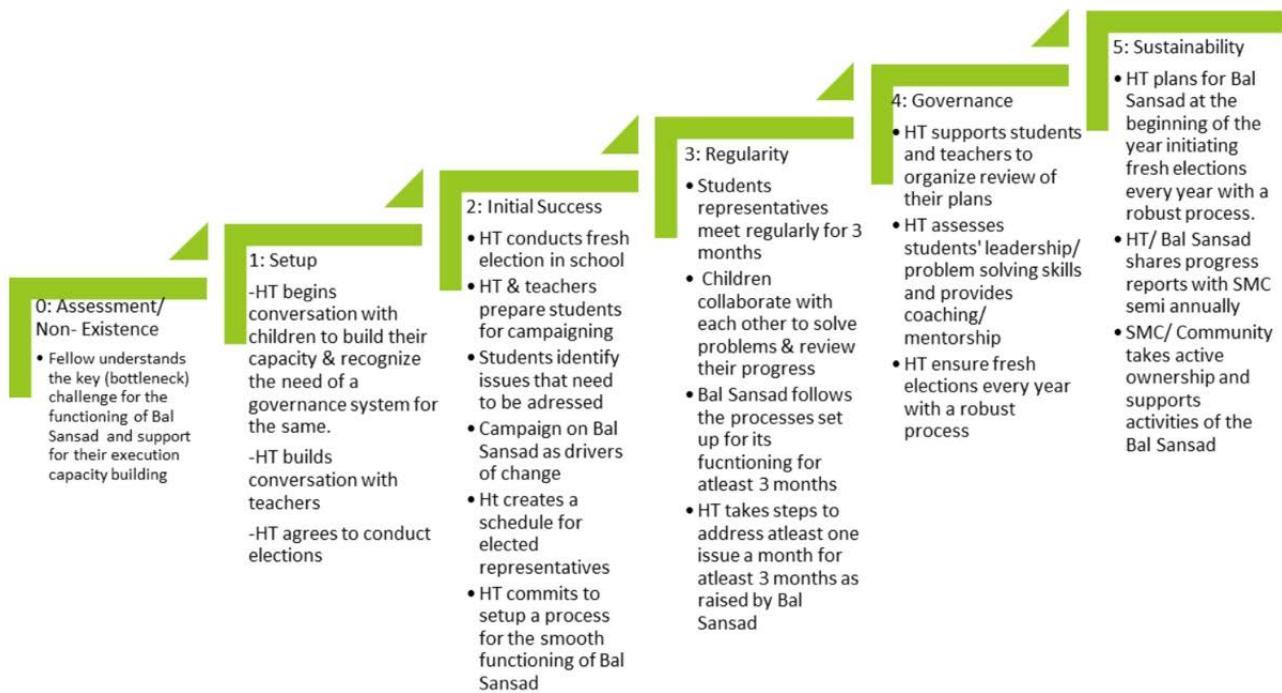
CMM is a 5-stage maturity model. For any intervention to reach its maximum potential, there are 5 stages which should be achieved in order to mature and move to the next level of the intervention. The five stages defines the journey from non-existent to a sustained phase, where students, staff and community, all are participating and contributing members in the process. The capability maturity model is designed considering three important aspects of Piramal Foundation's approach:

- **System driven:** To create a system-driven model that provides different stakeholders with frameworks to plan and implement solutions. Thus, this capacity maturity model has systemic milestones to be achieved at every phase. The next page carries the CMM model for Bal Sansad.
- **Ensuring community partnership:** School processes can't be sustained to provide continuous opportunities for learning outside the classroom, if they do not integrate community participation.

Thus, we actively engage communities in our intervention to create awareness







towards these must to have school processes, and collaboratively plan interventions to increase participation from community members and to establish governance mechanism to ensure accountability of schools.

The different categories of community stakeholders to be involved and leveraged for enabling school processes are youth, volunteers, Self Help Groups, Panchayati Raj Institution members, faith leaders, local media, etc.

- **Ensuring scalability:** The capability maturity model is designed to increase the scalability of these processes. The school process implementation journey, from the non-existence level to the sustainability level, broken down into micro-milestones, supports stakeholders to take key action steps to achieve that stage. Scalable products are defined as those that can be operationalized, implemented and internalized across cultural contexts by user communities





## Working in Schools outside the Classroom: Reports from the Field

1. [Kerala-Library: To promote literacy rate in tribal districts](#)
2. [Centre working on 'Bal Sansad' programme](#)
3. [NITI Ayog appreciated-Shravasti-Bal Sansad](#)

and organizations with minimal or no need for facilitation. Thus, with a step by step approach, these school processes lend for easy implementation, making them scalable.

It is important to reiterate that our students need all our combined efforts to support them in achieving the subject based competencies.

But as Dewey shares, "Society must have a type of education which gives individuals personal interest in social relationships and control and the habits of minds which secure social changes without introducing disorder."

Thus, we have to start looking outside the classroom, and encourage children to develop the habit of learning from their environment, peers and social settings. This encouragement has to be facilitated with deliberate efforts. Thus, facilitating these four school processes can be a good starting point.

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# Latika Vihar: More Like Real Life

Jo Chopra McGowan

*To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.*

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

1

Play is essential for children's development. Far from being a waste of time, or something children should only do after their homework is finished, play is actually how children learn. We scold them for 'playing' with their food or daydreaming when they should be studying, or splashing and wasting water when they should be taking a bath, but it is precisely at these times that children's brains are making connections and making sense of experiences. Without play, children's lives

are diminished and their development is impaired. The joy we associate with childhood is seen most vividly in the way children play.

Even in the most difficult circumstances – dire poverty, war, natural disasters – children find ways to play. In news reports of the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, it was amazing to see footage of children playing amidst the wreckage. A puddle of water, a pile of broken bricks, a stub of chalk – all were transformed into toys by a child's imagination and desire to have fun. While their parents understandably grieved for the loss of life and property, the children were already engaged in healing through the incredible power of play.

Unfortunately, here in India, many adults no longer understand this. For them, the



Latika Roy Foundation



purpose of childhood is simply to prepare for becoming an adult, and being an adult is serious business.

We all know about the insane and counter-productive demands placed on children as young as 2 and 3 to get into the best preschools, so that ultimately they can get into the best colleges and bag the best jobs. And yet, consistently, children foil our efforts by their stubborn desire to play.

They aren't being naughty or difficult. They literally can't help it. Children are hard-wired to play. It's how they learn. If we try and stop them, all we achieve is to make them less intelligent and less happy.

Limits on their play is a serious problem for all children. However, for some it can be catastrophic.

[According to the WHO](#), more than one billion people in the world live with some form of disability. Some 200 million of them are here in India. Children with disabilities are statistically more likely to be out of school and to have fewer friends. As a result, disabled children have extremely limited opportunities to play.

According to a [UNESCO report](#), in developing countries like India, as many as 75% of disabled children are out of school and largely stuck at home. Stigma, mobility difficulties and lack of access make getting out and about near impossible for many children.

Here in Dehradun, many families tell us their children are refused admission to school, ostensibly because there are no special educators, and teachers feel ill-equipped to teach disabled kids.

Yet the fact that these children are *also* made to feel unwelcome on playgrounds points to something deeper and more troubling. Parents of typical children say they fear disabled children may be contagious and they are judgmental about their behavioral

differences, while their children often tease and bully them.

At Latika Vihar (LV), our inclusive children's club in Dehradun, it's a whole different story. Admission at LV is open to all, regardless of income, ability, religion or caste. When we say everyone, we mean everyone. There are only three rules. Be Kind. Play Fair. Everyone's Included.

But we don't expect children to know how to follow those rules on their own. We make it easy for them by setting things up, so that everyone has a chance, and so the decks are stacked in everyone's favour. Our activities and games are designed so that every child can take part and have fun.

Some kids need help to run; some need help remembering where the finish line is. Some need to be reminded to be gentle and that everyone takes turns here while others need to be pushed a bit to try new things and to stand up for themselves.

The funny thing about Latika Vihar is that we weren't thinking about inclusion when we set it up. We were just thinking about how to ensure that children had fun and that no one got left out or bullied or made fun of. Word spread and soon we found more and more disabled children joining.

As one mother put it, "The stress and tension of the day fall away the moment I enter this gate. I feel like I belong here. The entire team—not just one person or two – everyone, from the caretaker to the manager, is so caring and friendly. Whenever I see a disabled kid anywhere, I want to walk up to them and tell them to come straight to LRF. The kind of services we have here aren't available anywhere else in the state."

We even have psychologists and counsellors 'prescribing' admission to Latika Vihar for children in their practices. Shy kids, anxious kids, bullies and aggressive kids are sent to us and somehow, they all thrive here.

## 2

I was standing near the office at Latika Vihar a few days ago when a young couple walked through the gate with their little boy. Even from a distance, I could see that he had some issues. The parents looked nervous and worried. I greeted them warmly and they told me they wanted to enrol their son.

I invited them in to the office for the formalities and, as they turned to go there, I suggested that they leave the little boy with us. “He can play while you fill out the form,” I said.

They looked alarmed. “He’ll stay with us,” the Mom said.

But while the parents sat diligently in the office, discussing the centre’s hours and programs, Little Boy was desperate to join the fun. The tighter his mother held him, the harder he tried to escape. Finally, I went to her again and gently suggested that she let him play with the other kids.

“Oh, no,” she said sadly. “He’ll just hit them.”

“Don’t worry.” I reassured her. “We know what to do.”

Finally she gave in and set him free.

Instantly, he raced over to the first child he saw and bonked her on the head, just as Mom had predicted. But before Mom could swoop in for the save, Hema was already there. (How did she see trouble brewing? I have no idea. Sixth sense.)

No big deal. That’s what we do.

Hema diverted Little Boy and he was immediately on to the next challenge. He darted from one child to the next, intent on a ‘whack and steal’ approach. He wanted whatever toy anyone else was playing with and he wasn’t shy about seizing it. His parents could hardly attend to the form they were filling out, so anxious were they about what he might be doing.

But as Hema anticipated his every move, shielding the other children while following Little Boy’s lead, they seemed to relax a little. Finally he spotted a swing on the other side of the playground and made a beeline to it. Along the way, he had to run across the badminton field whose net was just low enough that he had to duck his head to go under it.

Hema settled him in the swing with another child and left him there in the care of the sports teacher. Then she came running back across the yard calling out to other staff: “Did you see him? SO CUTE! And did you see how he ducked his head going under the net? SO SMART!”

The parents were flabbergasted and confused: *Their* little boy? Could she possibly be talking about *HIM*?

Would it matter if we told them that Hema – and all our staff – feel that way about each and every child? That we love them to bits? That we see each one of them walk through the gate with a rush of emotion and pride; of curiosity and anticipation: *Just what are they going to do next?*

And when, inevitably, one of them does something unacceptable (because they all do, every day, just like us) we accept it as a little diversion on the road. We gently steer the child back to where she meant to be and we ignore the slip-up. Because, and this is the magic of Latika Vihar in a nutshell: WHAT YOU PAY ATTENTION TO, YOU GET MORE OF.

Write it down, parents. It’s true.

Do you want a whiny, irritating kid? Give him lots of attention when he misbehaves and ignore him when he’s good. Or perhaps you’d rather have a cheerful, helpful child? Then follow Hema’s lead. Notice your child when she’s doing something good. Catch him doing something right.

We are so quick to pounce on all our kids’ mistakes. We love to correct them, to point

out their failings, and scold and lecture them when they stray. This is strange. I mean: Don't we hate it when people do that to us? Does it ever work? No. It doesn't.

The magic of Latika Vihar is acceptance. We simply take kids as they are and expect them to be even more amazing. They seldom disappoint.

## 3

Our aim is to hone and nurture children's talents, and find meaningful venues to showcase these. Our emphasis is always on fun, participation and creativity. Team building, problem-solving, social and communication skills help all of us. Remembering that **participation is more important than winning** makes our philosophy of non-competitive fun stress-free and exciting.

Our activities are many and varied and include crafts like pottery, painting, bamboo pottery, kite making, drawing, sketching and coloring and skills like Taekwondo, dance, music, cooking and sports. We have a well-stocked library, outdoor equipment, computers, nature walks, science experiments and frequent theatre projects. We also take children to nearby museums, restaurants and botanical gardens.

But for many of the younger children, especially on first joining, the hands-down favorite is the sandpit. And for the older ones, the chance to sit with their friends for long heart-to-heart discussions is why they keep coming. The secret to all these offerings, though, is that there is literally no pressure ever. Children are free to sample activities and leave them if they prove boring or too difficult. We never insist beyond the first gentle invitation. We genuinely believe that kids know what they like. We also believe it's their right to choose what they do for fun.

We need more Latika Vihars, places which don't try to force anything on children and

which allow them to simply be themselves. Most children's centres are focused on teaching and achievement. Competition is inevitable and the same kids who shine in school, shine at these so-called play centres as well. They get to star in the plays, get selected for the front line in all the dances and have their art work displayed. They're tidier than Latika Vihar and their Parents Day functions are definitely better organized. But disabled kids can't get admission and bullies are sent right home.

Latika Vihar is more like real life. It's a bit chaotic and there's plenty of trial and error. But there is an attitude of acceptance and respect underpinning everything we do and the humility to accept our weaknesses and work to correct them. We believe we're modelling for children what inclusion really looks like while giving them the experience and the skills to make it happen in the rest of their lives.

**Jo Chopra McGowan** is the founder and Executive Director of Latika Roy Foundation. Jo has worked on disability services, rights and awareness for over 28 years. She believes in the power of ordinary people to change the world, and she brings photography, love and passion to her work.

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Latika Roy Foundation



# Ingredients for the Recipe Called ‘KathaVana’

## Facilitating a Children’s Literature Festival

*Sonika Parashar and Umashanker Periodi*

*When we think of spaces in schools, we generally tend to think of physical spaces. For the purpose of learning, specific knowledge events can also become important ‘spaces’ for students, teachers and school staff to learn and to celebrate learning. Children’s literature festivals are one such space that we can create in our annual school calendars. These festivals can help us deepen the ways in which our learners interface with books and other reading material, and develop the toolkit to engage with literature as a site of education par excellence. – Editorial Note*

**V**ery recently we concluded the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of our annual bilingual children’s literature festival KathaVana 2022-23. If someone asks how it went, our immediate response is a big smile, a sense of satisfaction, and the words, “It was a huge success!” The present article will focus on the journey that has led to this response. In reflecting on this process, we will attempt to throw light on the ingredients that we feel have contributed to our ‘perfect’ recipe of a children’s literature festival.

### Ingredients

1. **Ownership:** For any initiative to be successful, it needs stakeholders who are interested and invested in the cause. Every year we have new members joining Azim Premji Foundation in the field and the University. KathaVana has a core team that believes in, and has been involved in, the work for a long time. However, each year we actively recognize people who may be interested in issues of education, language and literature and encourage them to join the initiative. As members voluntarily become part of the team, their intrinsic motivation and commitment play a huge role in taking the effort forward even when faced by challenges. Through dialogues and discussions, all the team members, irrespective of the roles they may be playing, take ownership of the initiative which is central to its success.
2. **Theory and Practice Connect:** The rationale for a children’s literature festival lies in sound theoretical ideas (Lynch-Brown, et al., 2014; Matulka, 2008; Putnam, 1964; among others). These show us that children’s literature nurtures imagination, creativity and language development. It builds an understanding of the self and empathy for others’ lives, along with giving exposure to different cultures and worlds.  
  
Meanwhile, the ground realities of education in India show us that teachers and children, especially in the context of government schools, hardly have access to children’s literature. They have only textbooks as learning material, which is not enough to develop foundational literacy and critical engagement with literature. Even when children’s books and rich literary traditions are available, teachers may not know how to make them a part of their classrooms. Theories that cannot benefit realities of the field are as unhelpful as practices that are not soundly and systematically based on theory and research.

## What is KathaVana?

Ideated by Dr Shailaja Menon, faculty at Azim Premji University from 2011-2022, KathaVana was launched in 2012. It was supported over the years by Azim Premji Foundation Karnataka's field institutes. Recognition of the importance of children's literature - oral, written and performative - in the lives of young children is at the core of KathaVana. The initiative attempts to introduce young children and teachers, especially in the context of government schools, to the power of children's literature and produce useful materials such as children's books and teachers' resources to support teachers' use of literature in schools.

For the last eleven years, KathaVana has slowly and steadily grown in terms of the audience it engages with, and the kind of literary activities it has planned and executed. Yet, the focus has always been on making children's literature accessible for young children and teachers. This is exemplified through the themes taken up in different years, such as 'Neem-Jaggery: Stories from the Time of COVID-19' (2021), 'Rejuvenating Children's Literature in Kannada' (2019), 'Understanding Writing for Children' (2017), 'Teachers as Readers' (2015), 'Children's Voices in Literature' (2014), etc.

## What happened in KathaVana 2022-23?

The theme taken up for KathaVana 2022-23 was 'Nurturing Children's Response to Literature.' The initiative was able to work with around 3,000 children and 260 teachers through four events planned for its 11th edition. The first event, launched on Children's Day, was a weeklong online children's literature festival. This was organized during November 14-18, 2022 over YouTube Live. The second event was a residential two-day teachers' workshop that took place on December 12 and 13, 2022. The third was a mega in-person children's literature festival organized for the first time in Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, on December 14, 2022. And the fourth event was a panel discussion organized on February 3, 2023. More details about these events can be found at <https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/kathavana-2022>

Thus, it is crucial for an initiative like KathaVana to have a theory and practice connect that recognizes the context within which it is working, identifies the needs of the field, and responds to the same with practices that are theoretically strong and have established research support.

3. **Visualization and Planning:** It is important to visualize the work-plan considering the possibilities and constraints that are bound to exist for any organization or an initiative. It may be useful to have a person anchor the initiative, who is effective at planning and holding it all

together, while there is decentralization of responsibilities and planning at different levels of work. Different stakeholders may have other parallel responsibilities that may call upon their time and energy.

The field sites and teachers may have their own academic curriculum, engagements and timelines to take care of, which may affect their participation. There may also be budgetary constraints, or the number of resource persons available may be limited.

Taking on too much or too less does not do justice to any initiative. Therefore,

a detailed realistic plan needs to be imagined. Additionally, having a theme can provide a framework within which one can plan the work. An example from KathaVana 2022-23 could be shared here for identifying resource persons for the festivals. A long list of resource persons was made, of which 23 were selected. Some of the factors for selection included the resource persons' expertise around the theme, ability to facilitate critical engagement with literature through high quality literary activities based on their knowledge of the field, field members and children in these locations, and the possibility of adaptation of activities for 72 teaching-learning centres (TLCs) led by TLC coordinators and teachers.

#### 4. **Facilitation and Implementation:**

It is important to not only plan the logistics but also plan for roles and responsibilities. Identifying who can take certain leadership roles and who can take the plan through in action makes it possible for stakeholders to work in ways that call upon their potential. What we mean by leadership here is akin to the role a teacher plays in facilitating learning in classroom situations.

Effective teachers know how to balance direct instruction along with self-directed learning by students. They scaffold the learners' every step of the way in making meaning. Similarly, a good leader does not simply distribute responsibilities. They are there to help people succeed in the responsibilities that are given to them. They should not try to micromanage everything and allow people to take autonomous initiative at different levels. At the same time, they should also be in close touch with what is happening at all levels, such that they are able to respond quickly in case of need. For KathaVana, different members took on leadership roles in different capacities, such as coordinating with the state education

department, field members, schools, teachers and children, working with student volunteers, coordinating with the resource persons, etc.

A team that is diverse in terms of backgrounds, context, skillsets and work is most likely to succeed, as each person brings in a different perspective, along with diverse capabilities that are needed for a large initiative. For example, the KathaVana team is composed of university faculty members, field leaders, District Institute and TLC Coordinators, Block Coordinators, Community Engagement Cell, Translations team, Infrastructure and Management Functions team, Media and Communications team, and student volunteers. Different team members take different roles of facilitation and implementation, and at different times may be playing multiple roles.

#### 5. **Collaboration and Coordination:**

An initiative like KathaVana can be successful only when there is collaboration and coordination amongst its different stakeholders. There need to be a shared understanding and shared responsibility every step of the way. In our experience, this can be achieved meaningfully by working consistently with integrity, discipline, openness and flexibility with each other. Almost like the dominos effect, each person's actions are interconnected to other's actions making it imperative that deadlines are followed diligently, follow-ups are done on a timely basis, loopholes are immediately responded to, and most importantly dialogues and discussions are made an integral part to keep everyone on the same page. This kind of discipline, collaboration and coordination does not happen overnight. Instead, several of the things become smoother along the way, only when people work closely together, open to learning from each other, with a readiness to appreciate the other.



- 6. Communication:** Effective collaboration and coordination is possible only with effective communication. Dialogue and discussion through regular meetings should become the norm. Right from thinking through a theme, discussing the ‘what,’ ‘whys’ and ‘hows,’ to sharing big and small successes, clear communication amongst the different stakeholders allows for shared understanding and responsibility. When everyone knows why they are doing what they are doing, and has a considerable participation in decision-making, they are more likely to take ownership and fill any communication gaps.

Good communication can take place when only ‘what’ is not the focus, but ‘how’ is deliberated upon as well. Different stakeholders need to have the people skills and humility to include everyone by keeping everyone in loop, actively taking in their opinions and experiences and focusing on collaborating rather than directing.

For instance, the KathaVana team began meeting in large groups from early September 2022 onward, to plan for events happening from November 2022 to February 2023. Immediately after the first meeting, several large and small group meetings of different nature such as brainstorming, planning, assigning responsibilities, problem-solving, sharing, reviewing, were held at regular intervals that made it possible to discuss and communicate the rationale, plans, logistics, challenges, resolutions and learnings.

- 7. Reflection and Review:** At every stage, it is necessary to pause and take stock of things done so far. Regular reflection and review have made it possible for KathaVana to learn from the past, grow every year, and work in systematic ways that are directly connected to the needs

of the field. Feedback is collected not only from team members in terms of what went well and what could be improved upon, but also from participants such as teachers and children. As much as possible, the feedback is incorporated in the next iteration, which has allowed for the initiative to grow manifold and formalize certain systems in place.

## Method

Mix the above-mentioned ingredients slowly and steadily with lots of love and passion for children’s literature, children, teachers and education. While we believe in the abundance of it all, the measures can be varied based on the context in which you are cooking the recipe.

## Recipe Review

Although in the beginning, we mentioned this to be a ‘perfect’ recipe, we acknowledge that it has taken us several iterations and deliberations to reach the result that we speak of today. At the same time, we believe there is a long way to go ahead, with our constant urge to do more and better. Some of the questions that we have begun thinking about are:

- Can we host the festival in not only Kannada and English, but in as many Indian languages as possible, starting from Hindi through Azim Premji Schools in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand?
- How can we closely track the impact children’s literature festivals and teachers’ workshops have on bringing literature and language to classrooms?
- Can we decentralize the in-person mela and organize it in at least 72 locations in Karnataka where we have a presence, to reach at least 36,000 children?
- Can we collaborate with other institutions and organize children’s literature festivals in different locations?

Based on our experience, we are convinced that initiatives such as KathaVana need to grow in numbers and size, as they are found to have a two-fold impact. The obvious outcome is for children and teachers who discover meaningful ways of engaging with literature and language.

Another benefit is for the organizers who build their skills and capacities in various academic, management and social domains. The key take-away for all, thus, is learning from each other through a constant engagement with children's literature.

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She has experience and interest in pre-service teacher education, curriculum development, language in education, pedagogy of different curricular areas and their integration, art in education, teaching children with specific educational needs and guidance and counselling.

**Umashanker Periodi** has been in the development sector since 1980. He has worked in different NGOs organizing dalits, tribals and the poor.

He was trained by Badal Sarkar on third theatre. He has been working with Azim Premji Foundation since 2003, in different roles.

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# Celebrating Science and Math through Fairs

Akshatha N. Tirumalai and Sandhya Gupta

## A Mela for Science and Math?

“*Hum mela karne aae hai*” (We have come to set up a fair). This is the standard statement we use every time Aavishkaar arrives at a school with a ‘dabba’ (box) or two filled with seemingly random things!

What’s the visual that comes to your mind when you hear the words ‘fair’ or ‘mela’? Fun? Chaos? Games? Our mela has got them all, and more. The concept was started by Aavishkaar to create a festive atmosphere around science and math, bringing joy to everyone.

Aavishkaar’s tagline is ‘Experiments in Math & Science.’ True to its philosophy, the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) mela is an experiment that aims at giving students the experience of fun and interesting ways of learning!

Just like the inflatable jumping castle in a fair, the mela inflates out of a box. People go to each stall, playing and exploring. Being a part of an Aavishkaar mela will give you an essence of what the organization stands for - Curiosity, Creativity and Critical Thinking.

## A Typical Mela Day

A team of 2-4 math and science lovers from Aavishkaar (called ‘Aavishkaaraks’) pack two plastic boxes full of math games and hand-made science experiments. They drive to a school anywhere between two and 30 kilometers from Kandbari, our village.

As they arrive at the school, the Aavishkaaraks start walking towards the principal’s chamber while mildly scanning

the atmosphere. One of them sparks a conversation with the school’s principal on how the day will look like, “We will need 30 students who will lead the mela and set up stalls.”

At this point the principal becomes very enthusiastic and calls for a teacher who shows us to the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms (in case of senior secondary schools) or the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in case of middle schools.

The natural instinct of any school is to present the ‘best performers’. However, the Aavishkaaraks very consciously ensure that the students are not handpicked.

Once the students are decided, the Aavishkaaraks enter into a dimly lit classroom with puzzled students. “*Aap kahan se hai?*” (“Where are you from?”) comes a voice, generally from someone sitting in either of the first two rows.

After introductions, the Aavishkaaraks divide the students among themselves and begin to break ice in their groups - while some use humor, others use math games.

One non-negotiable practice of Aavishkaar is that a facilitator must and should experience being a learner before they can hold a space. And hence, for the next hour these 30 students get immersed into the world of questioning and justification. Here they experience being a visitor of the stalls they will be facilitating.

Once the students have cracked the codes of experiments and understood the nuances of the math games, they prepare to set their stalls up, to challenge, question and leave





Aavishkaar

their visitors thinking. It is now time to spread the joy of learning to other students and teachers. The Aavishkaaraks, along with the students, pick an open and spacious location to arrange the mela with benches, posters and banners.

As the make-believe gates open, students come storming. They run towards a stall that attracts them the most and quickly get engrossed. At this point we would like to highlight that the games and experiments Aavishkaar chooses to have at a mela are not just for show.

If you are a mela visitor, you will be 100% invested and there is just no other way! You are absorbed in playing the games and you, the visitor, are doing the experiments.

It is not merely a mentos-volcano experiment that you witness. The magic begins after you have played, as your schoolmate helps you decipher the 'whys' and 'hows'.

For example, the 'Hole in the Hand' stall is a hit among the students. As you peep into the stall, you will see two students putting a plastic pipe at the visitor's eye and asking them to close the other. "Focus on that tree," says one of the two, pointing to a pine tree about 10 meters away. She then slowly takes your hand and places it next to the pipe and asks you to open the closed eye.

"OH MY GOD! There is a hold in my hand." exclaims the visitor in shock. With a gentle grin on their faces, the two students ask the visitor what they saw and why they think it is happening. After a solid to and fro of questions and justifications, the visitor, filled with fascination and curiosity, proceeds to the next stall.

## Where Stars Fly

While that was a story where students move to the next stall, I would like to introduce you to 'Udte Sitaare,' a game that does not

see any moving traffic. It was invented by a 10-year-old Aavishkaarak, Shamli Manavi, about eight years ago.

Udte Sitaare is a humble card game around the concept of arithmetic operations. Once you enter this stall, you will forget that there is a mela around you and that it has more things to explore! It is the definition of 'brain candy'.

If you have the cards open on a table, even a passerby will scan through and end up playing the game in their mind. This is exactly what happens with teachers in the mela.

They come as inspectors and end up becoming opponents of students. You will always see an Aavishkaarak standing at the Udte Sitaare stall, controlling the traffic and nudging people to move on... Oh, So hilariously wholesome!

## The Creative Chaos of a Fun-filled STEM Mela

In addition to the whereabouts of each stall, in the STEM mela you will get to see students in all sorts of actions. You will observe them arguing over a science topic, fighting to win a game, engrossed in decoding logics, running between stalls and confused which game to pick first!

Amidst this chaos, you will also see a handful of them silently picking up a book from our mobile library and sitting down to read.

Aavishkaar started the concept of Mela to create a joyful ambience around STEM. We have found it the best way to enter schools and showcase the sense of possibilities to students, teachers, principal and the parent community.

We have seen it spread the work of Aavishkaar by word-of-mouth. We get calls from schools of the area to conduct mela. It also serves as an opportunity to further deepen the engagement with schools.

Curiosity, creativity and critical thinking are at the core of everything Aavishkaar does.

True to this, a STEM mela aims to spark all the three in students. It empowers students setting up the stalls to believe that they are capable of exploring, understanding and articulating their understanding of math and science.

Through years of conducting and refining STEM melas, Aavishkaar has seen three major shifts in the school environment. The confidence of students sky-rockets during the course of these three hours.

Teachers begin to believe that their students are capable of holding spaces, especially in math and science. Both students and teachers share that for the very first time they feel that math and science can be fun and creative.

A STEM mela is a truly beautiful sight. It is as fun and democratic as learning can get - to the students, for the students, and by the students!

**Akshatha N. Tirumalai** is an Aavishkaar team member and India Fellow 2021-23. On any lazy day, you can find her binge watching 'The Office' or having a cup of coffee in the sun. She likes capturing moments through her words and eyes.

**Sandhya Gupta** is the founder of Aavishkaar, a STEM enthusiast and an educator at heart. You can find her doing a math discussion or solving a math puzzle somewhere at the Aavishkaar campus.

She aims to make every learner fall in love with math and to build an army of math educators who will change every student's relationship with math - from fear to love and joy.

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# Walls and Nature as Learning Spaces

*Nandini Shetty*

In most schools, we see that teaching and learning is usually restricted to classroom teaching. Teachers are not aware that the school's processes and the entire school's surroundings can be used for learning. It is important to make them realize the importance and effectiveness of non-classroom spaces and the related processes to make children's learning meaningful and joyful.

Though we spend significant years of our life in schools, the skills gathered are limited. The teaching in schools need not be restricted only to cover the given learning outcomes. Schools must become the most important source of learning. Teachers should continuously look for ways and mediums to maximize children's learning opportunities.

## Our Work

Along with our work with teaching and learning processes in classrooms, we at Azim Premji Foundation (APF) also work with teachers of government schools to create awareness on the use of school processes and schools' surroundings for meaningful learning.

Here, I will talk about a few of our attempts to use schools' surroundings in the learning process of class 1 to 7 students and the effects on children's learning.

## Walls: An Excellent Space for Learning outside the Classroom

We put white chart papers on the outside walls of the school in places that are frequently used by all students to write Kannada words. This was done at heights reachable to all students. We asked them to write simple words containing a specific

letter that generally children across grades find difficult, e.g., words with Anuswara, a few Kaagunitha and Ottakshara. These words could include names of their favorite fruits, trees, vegetables, etc.

We also asked children to write a few words or sentences about a displayed picture. Children wrote whatever they knew or felt like in their own way. We did not point out their mistakes. We changed these posters once in 10 to 14 days.

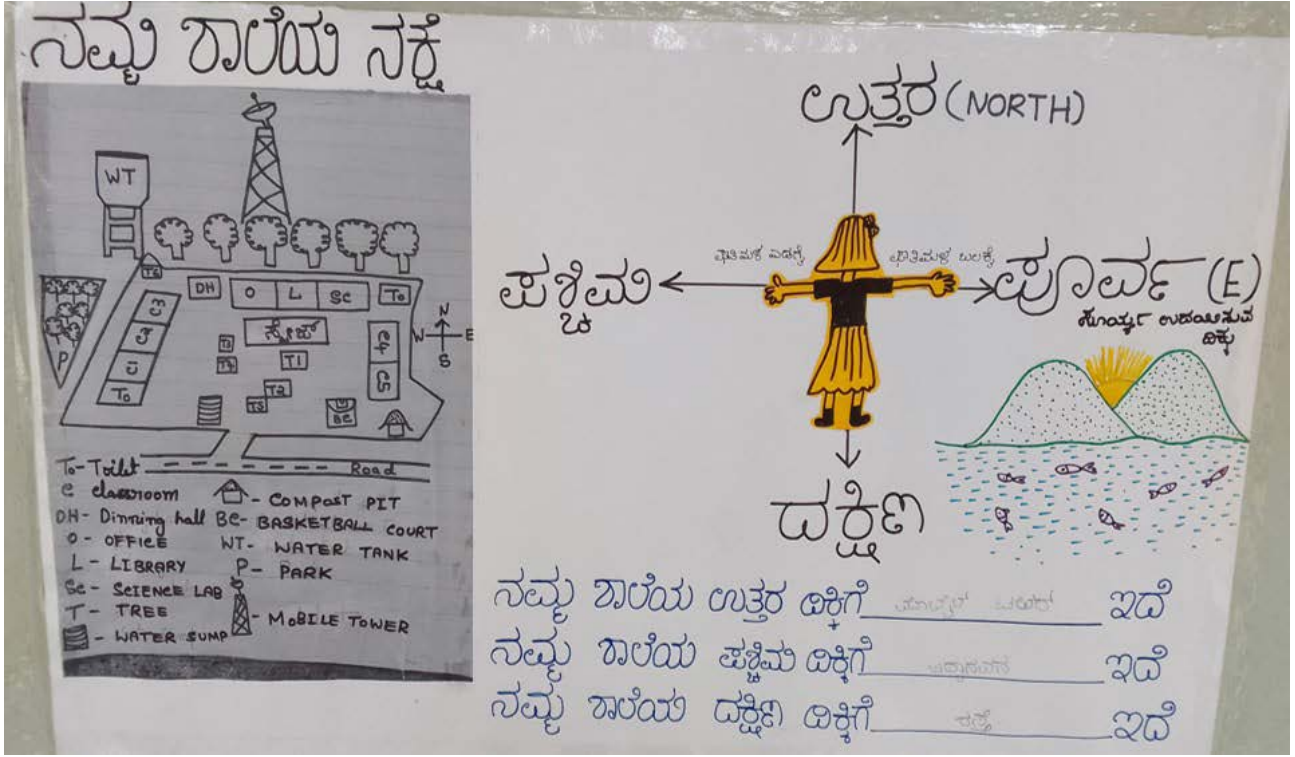
These activities serve the following objectives. They encourage free and independent writing. In contrast, classroom writings usually involves copy writing of words and lessons from textbooks. As children discuss among themselves while writing, they learn from one another, and they also teach others. They will slowly understand that writing is used to express themselves, to communicate their ideas. This will help in self-evaluating their mistakes and learning levels. Through this process they also gain the understanding that writing is fun.

These activities serve as informal assessment of children's language learning levels for teachers. They indicate areas and concepts that children find difficult or have



A few children's writings on the wall





Poster on directions

not fully learnt. Hence, these help teachers identify areas to focus on and to plan activities to improve children's learning.

We made posters related to trees, plants, leaves, birds' nests, animals, riddles and fill-in-the-blank questions. Children solve the riddles using pictures or drawings of the posters and write answers on the posters. These activities encourage children to think. They also learn something new about plants and animals.

We have put posters of simple, small Kannada songs with rhyming words for children to read. Rhyming words include slightly difficult ones. The selected poems are related to children's daily lives. For example, these may have grandmothers, schools or some famous snacks, etc. as their themes.

These activities help to achieve the following objectives. They help in learning the pronunciation of letters that need special emphasis, which we generally ignore while talking. Difficult words (like Ottakshara) can be easily taught and learnt through rhyming words. They also help to carry out informal

assessment of pronunciation of letters and in language familiarization.

We also used posters on difficult concepts like directions. We found that many children are unable to name the direction if you point towards a specific direction. As we observed, generally direction is taught without using the sun as a reference.

We pictorially represented how directions can be easily identified by using the sun as a reference and aligning their right side to the sun. We included fill-in-the-blank questions in the posters to understand children's learning. In this way posters can be used to teach difficult concepts across grades.

We used posters of trees in the school campus and other trees around them as well. We prepared posters of trees in the campus and a few common trees to help children identify the trees and remember their names.

## Learning from Nature

Nature is the best teacher. It teaches us to be curious, to wonder, to observe, to think, to

question, to seek answers, to hypothesize, to infer, to be amazed, and more importantly, to be peaceful and happy, and to learn with joy. We carried out many nature related activities to nurture children's curiosity towards nature.

**Nature walks, identification of trees and collection of seeds and fruits:** We took children for walks in and around the school and identified trees in the campus and 50 trees and plants around the school. We collected seeds and dried fruits. Children also collected seeds and fruits from their houses. We discussed the characteristics of fruits and seeds and how these help in their dispersal through different modes. We labeled the collected samples with their common names and displayed the collection in the science lab. Presently we have seeds and fruits collected from ~35 trees and plants.

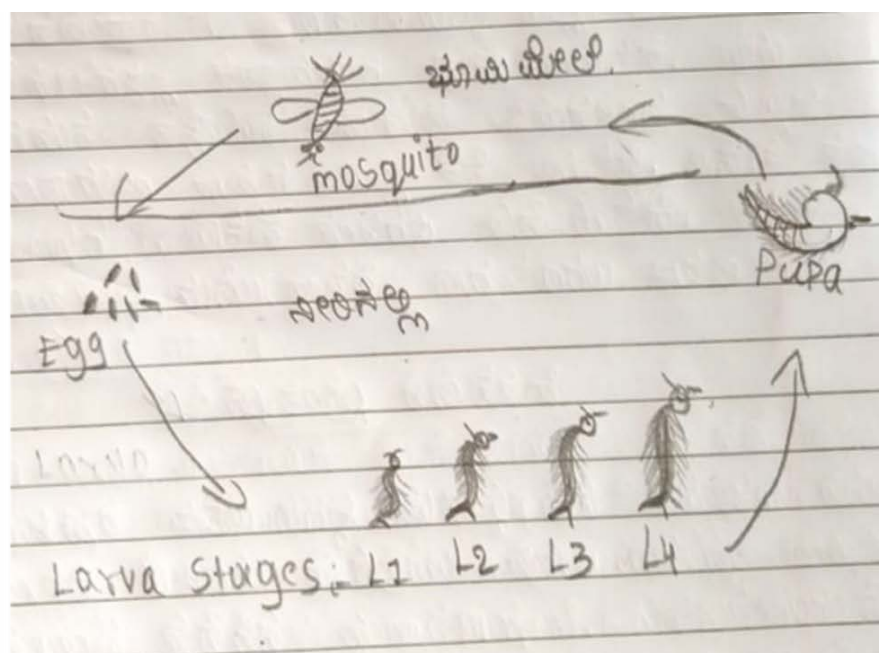
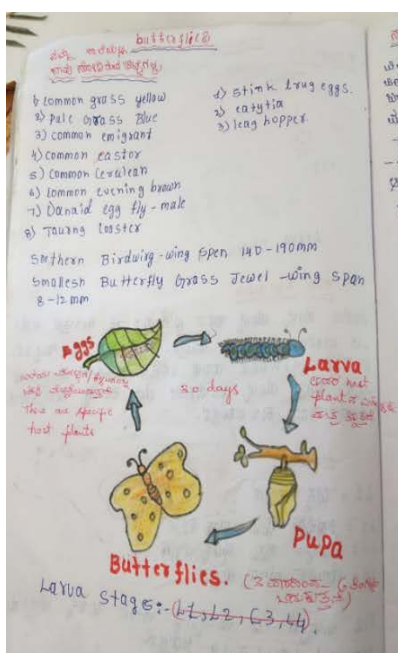
**Observing trees:** Children regularly observed trees of their campus and noted down details of phenology (timing of shedding of leaves, emergence of new leaves, flowering and fruiting) and biodiversity in and around trees. They drew diagrams of leaves, flowers, fruits and trees. They depicted length of leaves and flowers using bar graphs. We measured height and diameter (at breast height) of all the trees.

**Butterflies of the school:** With children we identified nine species of butterflies and four butterfly host plants in the school campus. We made a poster using a dried branch of the Mussaenda plant. It is a host plant of Commander Butterfly. Children drew diagrams of Commander Butterfly to include in the poster.

**Butterfly and moth life cycle observation:** We collected caterpillars of Common Castor Butterfly from castor plants and caterpillars of Oleander hawk-moth from Vinca rosea plants. Children reared these caterpillars in a cardboard box and observed adults emerging from pupae.

**Mosquito life cycle observation:** We collected water samples with mosquitoes' larvae and showed different developmental stages of larvae and pupae of mosquitoes to children. Children illustrated the life cycle through observations under the dissection microscope.

**Posters of leaves, flowers, roots:** We collected samples of leaves, flowers, roots and plants during nature walks. We dried these samples and with children's help we made posters. We have made posters on different types of leaves, roots, flowers and



Children's own illustrations of life cycles of butterflies and mosquitoes

## Students' Voices

Anitha, Class 6: "We did not know that so many kinds of trees existed. We did not know anything about trees. We learnt about them through these activities only."

Swathi, Class 6: "We feel like doing these activities all the time."

Reepu and Raksha, Class 4: "We want to do more of Season Watch activities."

Poornima, Class 6: "There is a tree with yellow flowers close to my house. It could be the Golden Shower tree we saw during our nature walk"

Keerthana, Class 3: "There is a big green caterpillar on a tree next to my house. Please come to my home. I will show you the caterpillar." After a week: "I saw a black and green butterfly emerging from the caterpillar. It sat on the leaf for a long time. It was wet. There was water in its covering." The author went to Keerthana's home to check the butterfly that evening. There was a torn pupal case on a leaf of a Madras Ashoka tree. With her explanations and the host plant, the butterfly was identified as a Tailed Jay.

Anitha Class 6: "I will draw diagrams of clocks showing different times to put on the wall for everyone to learn."

Dhanalakshmi and Sinchana, Class 7: "We observed an insect on a creeper plant. But we do not know what it is. You check and tell us its name."

dependence of insects on plants. We also wanted the children to have a few interesting observations like leaves (with semicircular parts missing) cut by leaf-cutting bees, and fruits like peanuts that grow underground, etc. Some of these posters also help to recall and remember already learnt concepts.

## Benefits of Nature Education through Activity Based Learning outside the Classroom

Through these nature education activities conducted outside the classroom, we have seen children ask questions about things they observed in their surroundings. Children spend their free time reading, writing or observing the collected material. They have prepared small posters and asked me to display on the wall.

Children across grades collected flowers, seeds, dead insects, feathers, shells, lizards' eggshells and birds' nests to add to our collection. They even collected samples from their native places during their visits.

Children collected the empty, molted exoskeleton of an insect from the bark of Indian Cork tree of the school. They spotted caterpillars of Oleander hawk-moth in the Vinca rosea plants. Teachers gave us ideas and suggestions to make posters related to concepts of language. A science teacher collected an old nest of weaver ants to display in the science lab.

A student of class 6 collected seeds of Fever Nut plant when she went to fetch firewood. Their class teacher helped us to identify the plant, as this species was found in her native village. Thus, through these activities we can achieve the following objectives. We can get children interested in nature. By knowing about plants and animals living around them, and how everything is interconnected in nature, children will develop love and respect for nature and all living beings. Children will understand that science is the study of nature and the study of its various phenomena. We can develop observation, thinking, questioning,





Azim Premji Foundation

Wall posters made with children's help, using materials collected during nature walks

data collection, classification, analyzation, illustration and independent writing skills in children. For children to understand the daily life application of mathematics, it can be integrated into many of these activities.

We can connect learning of the school to children's daily life experiences. Children become active participants in the learning process. They generate knowledge by themselves and hence learn better. These activities help to clarify children's doubts and reinforce learning of concepts taught by teachers. Active participation and working with friends ensure their happiness and well-being. They learn to work with friends, to share, to help and to seek help from friends. They provide ideas for teachers to incorporate into their teaching.

## In Conclusion

As teachers see children enjoying being part of these activities, and spending time reading the posters, they have slowly realized

the merits of such learning spaces. Any knowledge gathered through meaningful and joyful ways will always stay with the children throughout their lives. Such experiences make them happy, and encourage them to continue education. These also have significant positive effects on their future career choices. Let's try to make children's learning a memorable experience that they cherish throughout their lives, by including more of these learning activities outside the classroom.

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# Play and Playgrounds

## Learning that Precedes the Classroom

*Akansha Yadav and Sharon Thomas*

**O**ur first image of a classroom is often of a teacher who conducts a class, and a blackboard, duster, table, chair and a room of still students. Or what else do we imagine apart from all the above-mentioned things? What makes a school space loved by students or what comes to our mind when we reminisce about our school days? We asked the same question to children during our field visits in Bathinda. And the response was not a surprise. Playgrounds topped the list of children's favorite places in the school, followed by the library, kitchen, and so on.

What makes these spaces outside the classroom loved by the children? Do such spaces provide learning opportunities and experiences any different from a rudimentary classroom? Or is there something more? As a sports development organization, we have always taken a greater interest in understanding the role of playgrounds in children's learning processes. During one of our training sessions, we asked a group of teachers, "How much time should a child spend on the playground in a day?" All of them agreed that it should be at least an hour.

But then the same question was put a bit differently, forcing them to think about how much time children spend on the playground in our schools. Most of them realized that it was 30 minutes or even lesser. And that would be organic playtime by children without any structured games, hence without enough formative physical education sessions.

It is [recommended](#) that young adolescents spend at least an hour on moderate to

vigorous physical activity to stay physically fit and healthy. But in schools, children spend less than one-fourth of the time they spend in the classroom for physical activities.

A recent [study](#) found that over 80% of Indian school-going adolescents aged between 11 and 17 years did not meet WHO's recommended levels of physical activity. The study also found that physical inactivity levels were higher among girls compared to boys.

Hence, there is a need to understand that these spaces beyond the classrooms where children love to spend time will also cater to their various needs for learning and growth.

Beyond the leisure games that are played by children on their own, when structured well by a facilitator, these games can help cultivate both physical and life skills. Let's explore how the playground offers learning opportunities to children. Games and play-based activities conducted on the school playground are not separate from learning within the classroom but are an extension of it.

Engagement in exploratory play becomes an essential mode of learning and can enhance the development of a child, especially at a younger age. The diverse benefits of play, especially for young children, have been cited for decades (Barnett, 1990).

The focus should be on creating more learner-centric transactions. The relationship between play outside the classroom and learning needs to be understood properly. When a child is outside the classroom, they engage with their environment. This is a





ELMS Sports Foundation

Boys teams compete in Kabaddi during the inter-school competition, 'Khel Utsav,' organized by ELMS Sports Foundation in Bhatapara in Chhattisgarh.

relevant space to nurture student agency and prepare our learners to become active citizens.

“Playgrounds create an environment that is democratic in the sense that it fosters a safe, inclusive learning space where children are skilled to demonstrate democratic values, of equality, fair play and taking responsibility for their actions and of their teammates,” says Hemanta Mahanta, Program Manager at ELMS Sports Foundation.

Academic learning processes in a conventional classroom are generally individualized. And peer support and teamwork are abysmal. Just like in the case of subjects like math or languages, where children compare each other based on grades, it happens on the ground too.

Children select teams or co-players in terms of their assumed caliber to win. This can boost or break the morale and confidence of children.

This is where a structured, organized game and the role of a facilitator become crucial. Creating an inclusive environment, therefore,

is imperative in actualizing the right of every child to stay physically fit. In our sessions, we encourage children to consider everyone equal, making them realize that every co-player can contribute. They also learn to create a balanced all-rounder team, which is something that children might not do if asked to do inside a classroom.

Now suppose you ask children to make a team for a math quiz competition, they will only make a team with the ones who are good at math, because that is the only way to win the quiz. So now, when we take sessions with children in sports, the facilitator creates a team that includes everyone in the game irrespective of their skills.

By now children realize that each member of the team contributes in different capacities. Some hold the team together with their leadership or decision-making skills, while others are quick on their feet. Nonetheless, everyone is made to realize that each one of them is playing towards their own growth.

“When children are on the playground, they play and participate in activities based on their pace, and learners of all types get to



play irrespective of their skill sets,” says Bharati Odedara. She is a team member who works closely with children on the field.

“Most young children have an inherent aspiration and capacity to play. Therefore, no external incentive is required to make them play,” she adds.

According to Bharati, who facilitates games for children with disabilities (Autism Spectrum Disorder - ASD), games help in improving their social and emotional skills. Integrated and structured communication and cooperation patterns in the games help in these.

The play on the playground is mainly either structured, which is Physical Education class on any given day, or it is free play which happens during the break time or lunch hours in schools. Break time in schools provides an opportunity for children to engage in freely chosen play and physical activity.

While children are on the playground, they engage with their imagination and socialize with their friends extensively. Free play offers children with many learning opportunities. These include making teams, which allows them the liberty of choice, decision-making,

and negotiation. It provides them with opportunities to reflect on their individual strengths and weaknesses. They also figure out how they can contribute to the collective efforts of the team.

The playground becomes a site of socialization, which is very critical to educational experiences. It also helps in building a school culture where children can interact and communicate effectively with their peers, which in turn leads to boosting their confidence level.

The games we design through our Physical Education Curriculum consider learning on the playground as facilitative. This takes place most of the time when children tell each other about what to do and what not to do during playtime. They collaborate and also become self-reflective, where they debrief and share the strengths and weaknesses post the game time. This helps children to form self-improvement and team-building goals.

We have seen that this creates a bond between peers, which helps them in classrooms too. While children hesitate to reach out to a teacher, frequently they help each other out.



Children playing the 'Pick the cones' activity at a school in Kapadwanj, Gujarat.

when younger children play with older children, they are more comfortable asking their peers or their seniors on the playground.

“The younger children enjoy the sessions as they are more comfortable practicing skills with their older peers. The senior children learn to operate independently and take ownership of the learning of the younger ones playing on the ground,” says Kalpana. She is one of the educators at our Foundation. She is also a national-level Frisbee player and a PE educator, who conducts PE classes with children at Swami Sivananda Memorial Institute and School, Delhi.

In addition to this, the core of our program design involves the development of physical education practices that are based on making classrooms more gender-equitable. We have seen gender-segregated practices being enforced in schools in India, especially in the rural areas where we work.

Girls and boys play separately or even play more gendered games. Boys often take whatever sports equipment that may be available in the school and run to the field. Girls play games that take up less space in a playground or play indoors.

Through our program, we make sure that the physical education sessions and games are structured in a manner that is mixed. Up to primary grades, all the teams are coed. For upper primary schools, boys’ teams are not allowed to participate in events, until and unless there are girls’ teams as well.

With an extent of internalized gender bias, our attempts are a work in progress. These involve constant dialogues and workshops with students and physical education teachers.

When children have access to the playground, they explore it exhaustively by playing whatever activity they wish to play without any outside interventions. They form groups and create rules and games on their own.

Children face challenges when they share playgrounds with another school or have common spaces that are not attached to the school but belong to the community. These spaces end up being informally claimed and used by adults.

These places also often become gendered. Younger men use these spaces to play games like cricket or football. There is often no systems in place to maintain these spaces as commons.

The freedom that children get on the playground to express themselves is something that makes them develop their abilities such as taking initiative and decision-making by themselves.

There are several spaces in schools beyond the classroom, like the playground, that can play a critical role in the holistic development of children. As educators, it is important to realize this and make these spaces more accessible to all children.

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# Only Teachers Can, with Talking Circle

Janani Iyer

**T**alking circles can create cohesive communities, enhance perspectives and aid in mental well-being of children. Yet, so few of us are doing it!

It is judgement time... 24/5 X 365.

We are living in a world where each one of us is a judge and jury for others. It also implies that we are also being judged by others. And children are not immune to judging others, and at the same time being judged.

Surviving in the fast-paced digital era is having an impact on our children across urban and rural settings. The Covid-19 pandemic only added to the misery, as everyone was forced to go digital. We are witnessing increasing cases of cyberbullying, social comparisons, addiction, lack of

physical exercise and sleep disruptions resulting in anxiety, depression, and related well-being issues. Compounding these, is the stigma associated with talking about mental health issues.

In UNICEF's global flagship publication 'The State of the World's Children 2021' titled *On My Mind: Promoting, Protecting and Caring for Children's Mental Health*, it has been highlighted that India was the only one of 21 countries where only a minority of young people indicated that they are comfortable reaching out to others in case of mental health issues. In all the other countries, most young people (ranging from 56 to 95 per cent) felt that reaching out was the best way to deal with mental health issues. As India accounts for one-fifth of the world's



Pratigya



adolescent population, such a sorry situation can have global implications.

## **We are the change agents!**

As educators, we are uniquely positioned to play an important role in promoting mental well-being and in creating a supportive environment for our children. We need to leverage our long hours spent with children, our authority and trust, and our ability to make the changes in our classrooms and in schools to create conducive, safe spaces for them. These have to be spaces where they will not be judged, and which will help them to empower their narratives.

## **Talking Circles**

In this context, I think Talking Circle should be seen and used as a powerful tool that can be used to create safe spaces for children, inside and outside the classroom. With consistent usage of Talking Circle, I have time and again been a delighted witness to children experiencing themselves as active, creative agents of change within their own world and around them.

One of the most significant benefits of Talking Circle is that children learn to form and respect perspectives. In a world of social media and fake news, it is essential that children learn to see things from multiple perspectives and develop this skill at an early age.

With a dedicated forum and time to share one's perspectives and listen to others' perspectives without judgment, we can see the compounding impact on children, as they expand their horizons and start feeling confident about their views and opinions.

I remember the day when two girls of my class frantically came up to me and posed a simple question, "Why do we not have sanitary pads in the class?" They had searched the entire school for the pads and hence this request. I sensed an opportunity to have a conversation around this. I told

them that it needs to be taken to the class community for its agreement, if we have to implement the idea. We decided that before we take it to the entire class, we will have a meeting with the girls to assess their comfort with the idea.

In the Talking Circle with the girls, the two pitched the idea. While the majority agreed, we saw discomfort raised by two-three students, and they were categorical that they will not be comfortable taking out the pads in the presence of the boys. The idea had taken roots and I was seeing the tiny seed starting to sprout. The girls took it upon themselves to convince the three girl students about the concept. And they did it!

Next step – taking the idea to the boys. Another talking circle was dedicated to this. In the talking circle, girls took a box to the class. A few boys looked a little stunned, some were giggling, few looked away and a handful were looking at the box and the contents inside. In the end, the battle was won as the boys agreed to have the box in the class, even as the three girls who were earlier not comfortable joined in to articulate the need to have the box.

Now the class as a community understood why it was important to have the box in the class. We also ensured that the box should remain relevant for the boys in the class.

It was decided that the boys will take the responsibility of restocking the box, and they took to this task with enthusiasm. I have had parents writing to me mentioning that taboo topics like menstruation have been discussed with ease and comfort at home after the class community sessions.

I have seen such transformation Talking Circle brings to a space where children learn how to regulate their emotions and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. This emotional regulation is essential for children to develop healthy relationships with others and to cope with the challenges of life.

Regular Talking Circle sessions for children enable them to find solutions to multiple problems as a community. Talking about individual problems helps create solutions for the entire class. As we all know that exams are always stressful for children and during one session, a particular child mentioned about his fear of math and the stress for the exams. We took the fear of math back to the class community with a session, as we invited 'Math as a Person' to the classroom.

Reactions to this were insightful. One child mentioned that math is like a block of ice on her head, which numbs everything. Another said that it is like a Russian movie with no subtitles. "It is an exciting game to be played," mentioned another. As we discovered the relationship with math, it was decided to form math buddies in the classroom. Through this process, children good in maths agreed to support others to practice five sums on a daily basis.

I think Talking Circle is a magical tool that can have a profound impact on children's lives. It is essential that educators and parents alike recognize its importance and incorporate it into their daily routines.

## Safe spaces and cohesive communities

Consistent sessions of Talking Circles create safe spaces for children in the classroom. This in turn is the source behind creating cohesive communities. I cannot emphasize the importance of communities in our lives, especially in the lives of teens, as they are grappling with issues at multiple levels, including academic pressures, social media, parental expectations and interpersonal challenges. All these have the potential to lead to increasing cases of loneliness, anxiety and other mental health challenges for them.

The words of Helen Keller, "Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much," reaffirms my belief of the significance of the role that educators can play in the lives of our children. We can create cohesive

communities for children. Of course, I cannot stress enough the power and importance of communities for children as they can provide a sense of belonging, support, socialization, and exposure to diversity, which are all essential for their development and well-being.

The other ignored aspect of the classroom, is related to parents. Each parent will have a set of expectations from the school, teachers and her ward, beyond the academics. Here too Talking Circle can play an important role in understanding the expectations during the parents' orientation at the beginning of the year. This equips the teacher to have a starting point in understanding socio-emotional goals of each child in the class.

Beyond the starting point, I have seen the class community taking up parents' issues and finding solutions. In one of my classes, a few parents mentioned that they cannot keep track of homework and are not aware of what is happening in the school, as their teens were not communicating much at home.

I took the problem back to the class community during my Talking Circle session. After conversation, the class came up with the idea of an eLog book where an update on daily work that was done, and homework due for submission, was put up. It was created and managed by the children with access to all the parents.

## The Three 'I's: Intent, Ignorance and Initiative

So, what is stopping educators across the country to start their own consistent Talking Circle sessions? In my multiple workshops with various schools, I find, time and again, the 3 'I' - intent, ignorance and initiative - themes running amongst my fraternity members.

Let's look at 'Intent.' While no school, its senior leadership, or teachers, will deny the importance of children's mental well-being and the need for safe spaces, in reality, there

is a serious lack of intent in creating safe spaces for children. I think most schools have got into the 'numbers' game, and for valid reasons.

Hence, the focus is largely on academics, winning inter-school competitions, showcasing how many people got into reputed national and international universities, etc. These are things which are tangible and quantifiable.

In this numbers game, which is also sought by the parent community, where is the time to have conversations about mental well-being, developing perspectives and pursuing happiness?

Next on the list of reasons for schools not practicing Talking Circles as an children empowering tool is 'Ignorance.' Even if we think that the school and its senior leadership have the right intention around Talking Circles, I see that the teachers themselves are not aware of the power of the tool, given that they do not have much understanding of the hows and whys of Talking Circles.

Finally, the delivery of Talking Circles will happen in the classroom. And the teacher must be aware of her role during Talking Circles (see the box item on 'Talking Circles: Things to Remember' on this page).

I strongly believe that schools with intention must invest in teacher training and equip them to bring the change in the classrooms. This will bring enormous benefits for children, teachers, schools and parents.

Finally, is the 'Initiative' aspect. This has multiple layers to it. First and foremost, the big misfortune of the teaching community is that many of us get into this profession by 'chance.' Unlike other professions, it is not a 'choice' for much of the teaching fraternity.

Another layer is the pressure of the modern schooling system. Given the time constraints, our focus is, first and foremost, to complete

## Talking Circles (TC): Things to Remember

- The teacher is only a facilitator during a TC.
- A non-judgemental environment is extremely important. Personal opinions and references are a big 'no'.
- Group rules need to be designed and agreed upon by the class community.
- Avoid using Talking Circle sessions for reprimands and coercions.
- Talking Circle sessions should not be treated as filler activities.
- Conducting Talking Circles will differ depending on the students' age.
- Topics for Talking Circle sessions should emerge from the participants. The teacher can offer topics after observation and understanding the needs of the class.

the syllabus. Talking Circle sessions do not fit within this focus.

Some of the top private schools may have a better teacher to student ratio. However, for many schools with large class sizes, it is difficult to effectively manage Talking Circle activities.

Finally, a teacher might be keen to do Talking Circle sessions in the classroom. But she might still find it difficult to lead, due to lack of training and understanding.

Being a regular practitioner of Talking Circle, and now as an advocate, I know its power and potential to create magic in the classrooms and to make the school experience a truly worthy one, not only for the children but for each teacher as well.

**Janani Iyer** is a leading proponent of Talking Circle.

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# Learning Spaces Beyond the Classroom

*Aastha Maggu*

## Kshamtalaya Foundation

 **Udaipur District, Rajasthan**



Students in their morning assemblies during six-day long learning festivals start the day with energizing songs. A couplet from one such song is “mu to mela me hikwa ne aayo, mela ko rang to ghano ghano bhaayo” (I have come to learn in this festival, and I am in love with the energy of this learning festival).

 **Samastipur District, Bihar**

Students enrolled in the home science course, as part of the assessment, are required to cook together. Prince Kumar, an eighth grader came into the kitchen and joyously supported his younger sister Sapna for assessment.





## Jhamtse Gatsal

 Tawang District, Arunachal Pradesh



At Jhamtse Gatsal, children are encouraged to build a meaningful relationship with nature. Children learn about the varied sizes of plants and trees by touching the smaller plants and by hugging huge trees.



Beginning the day with a calm and intentional mindset helps children be more present to their learning. If the weather permits, the Jhamtse team conducts pre-class meditation sessions under open skies.



## Varitra Foundation

 Karnal District, Haryana



The Varitra team creates reading corners in schools to facilitate access to a diverse range of bilingual reading material and literature.



Building as Learning Aid (BaLA) is used to develop school spaces as a child-friendly learning resource for all students. The goal is to integrate the school building into the learning journeys of children.



## Patang

 **Bargarh District, Odisha**



Patang showcases its teaching-learning materials and reading material by putting stalls on a school campus. Creating a fearless and fun environment in schools, they believe, will enable children to develop language competencies.



The kishora-kishori mela organised by Patang educates children about child rights, education, health and nutrition and other issues through exhibited materials and facilitating activities in the school campus.

Photo credits: Kshamtalaya Foundation, Jhamtse Gatsal, Varitra Foundation and Patang

# Thinking and Learning Outside the Four Walls

*Samuhik Pahal Team*

When we think about schools, the iconic images that seem to dominate our imagination perhaps all involve children sitting inside classrooms in an orderly fashion, either listening attentively to teachers or doing some classwork. For most people, the orderly classroom is in some sense the school space par excellence. Yet, if we just close our eyes, and reflect on our own schooling experiences, the catalogue of images suddenly becomes a lot more diverse. We perhaps remember the first time we were able to sing the school prayer in tune in the assembly, or when we learnt to lose gracefully on the football field, or encountered an author in the library who went on to become a favourite, or picked up a new joke while watering plants in the school garden.

We perhaps did learn in the classroom. However, what seem to stick to our memory a lot more tenaciously, are our interactions in all these spaces outside of classrooms, where our bodies had a lot more liberty to move around, where our minds roamed outside of the grooves of textbooks and syllabi, and our spirits recognized the joys and sorrows of working together, and failing and succeeding, with other spirits who are just as unique and wayward as ourselves.

In this piece, we talk to four organizations from across the country whose interventions in spaces outside of the classroom are constantly renegotiating their understanding and practices of learning.

## **When Life Becomes a Classroom**

The work of Marudam Farm School (MFS) illustrates this process in a stark way. When

you talk to Arun Venkataramanan from MFS, and discuss about the school's work, it is not immediately clear whether the school is located in a farm, or a farm has become the school, or the farm and school have expanded into the world outside to threaten the boundaries we have created between living, learning and being.



Marudam Farm School

Marudam Farm School is an innovative learning institution (that is a formal school as well) located in the vicinity of Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu. This city is famous for the Arunachala hill, which is considered holy by a large number of people. Despite being an object of veneration, it has been denuded for around a hundred years now.

The Forest Way, an organization dedicated to conservation and ecological restoration, joined hands with Arunachala Reforestation Society to battle the scourge of deforestation on the Arunachala, and to conserve its biodiversity and vegetation. The group associated with the organization started work on the hill in 2003.

Many of the people involved in The Forest Way are active in Marudam Farm School



## How the Children in Marudam Farm School Learn outside the Classrooms

**Ecological Regeneration:** In an effort to improve the vegetation of the forest on Arunachala Hill, the team has reintroduced over 200 species of native plants and trees over the past 20 years, planting around 15,000 trees during the monsoon months. This is premised upon the understanding that the forest will continue to emerge on its own without the need for further planting. Children have been integrally involved in this work of ecological restoration. The organization has also been involved in creating parks - one that was created over 20 years ago and is being run by the Trust for the use of the townspeople, and a new one which has been in the making for a few years, and is nearing completion. Additionally, the school's campus has been extended over time and new buildings have been built. Children's involvement has been an important part of this process.

**Weaving Centre:** The weaving centre at the school is a place where children complete projects starting from harvesting cotton. They go through all the steps in the weaving process, including tie and dye, using natural materials, and embroidery.

**Crafts:** Another important aspect of children's education in MFS is their interface with the crafts. Children who are interested in these activities participate and make friends while doing so. Once a year, craft week is celebrated at MFS. Here students from the school, and from elsewhere, get together to learn artisanal skills on many aspects related to the crafts. Increasingly the school needs less and less field artisans to come and teach. This is because they are capable of running many of these things in-house, as now everyone has learned one craft or the other.

as well. Marudam attempts to work on the principle of democratic learning. Students are encouraged to pursue their own interests. They come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are from nearby villages or from the city of Tiruvannamalai. Others are from families who live on the farm, including some from non-Indian origins.

The children and the faculty of the school grow around four fifths of the food consumed at the school in a good monsoon year. They take part in as many aspects of cultivation as possible. The Marudam community tries to grow its food in a sustainable way. By participating in agricultural process, the children learn basic life skills and develop an understanding of many of their academic subjects.

The Marudam children are not only involved in growing their own food, they also help cook it. Children are an integral part of the various activities on the Farm including the kitchen,

cleaning the classrooms and toilets, watering the trees planted on the campus, feeding the cows etc. These activities are not chores for the children. These are joyful activities that engender a feeling of being responsible for the school, farm and community as a whole.

When some baking enthusiast adults became a part of the Marudam community, the children also picked up the craft. Soon baked goodies became an important part of the school's, and the larger community's, diet. Baking is not the only craft the children are involved in. They learn many others as well, all from master craftsfolk who come and share their art.

The children and faculty from MFS are also engaged in reforesting the Arunachala. They help collect seeds of local tree species, raise saplings, and then go and plant these on the hill. This helps form a deep bond with nature. It is also an integral part of their botanical learning. Therefore, conservation,



and a certain relationship with nature (both external and internal), has become a part of the DNA of this learning institution.

Learning processes in MFS seem premised upon building linkages between the body, the mind and the heart. Collecting seeds, raising saplings and growing crops through one's hands, learning the basics of botany through this process, and teaching one's heart the fundamentals of empathy and discipline, all seem a natural part of the dance of life that is Marudam Farm School.

An important aspect of this process is learning martial arts (like jujitsu), which are also a focus area for some of the adults involved in the school's work. The use of one's hands and bodies is, thus, an important aspect of learning for the Marudam children, which happens outside the classroom.

As Arun shares, "Embodied learning, learning through the body, is a major component of the school's learning process. So above a certain age, everyone has physical education. By the time most children are 15, they would know some self-defence. Rather than calling it self-defence, it might be better to call it a mechanism of being able to fend for oneself, be aware of one's body, and have confidence in one's abilities. It is a very programmed way of learning.

"So physical play, I would say, is there for a minimum of one hour every day. But, for many classes, it could be two to three hours a day. Children come and play early in the day. They'd play at lunchtime, they'd play in the evening. And we very much encourage it. We feel children should be playing. For children, playing is learning."

## Mastering the Activities of Daily Living

This grounding in the body is evident in the work of Sahyog Sangharsh Program, an initiative of Chehak Trust, as well. It works with children and young adults with disabilities in the age group of 0-22 years. The



focus of the centre run under this program is to help children and young adults with disabilities get ready for learning institutions such as regular schools, special schools and vocational training centres. It also trains them for independent living. The goal is to help them integrate into the mainstream.

A key aspect of the work of Sahyog Sangharsh Centre (SSC) is ADL or Activities of Daily Living. For many children and young adults with disabilities, tasks of everyday living, which adults and regular children take for granted, are especially challenging. These include apparently simple tasks of personal grooming, such as brushing one's teeth, taking a bath, putting on pants, and feeding oneself.

When a child from the community comes to SSC, the team prepares a plan for the child with in-house assessments. While making this plan, it takes into account the family and home environment, and the consultants' assessments as well. They ensure that all the aspects of a child's development such as motor play, social, language, etc. are covered.

ADL is perhaps the most important part of this plan. The goal of ADL is to enable the child to learn the tasks of daily living and pick up the ability to do these on their own.

The SSC team takes into account the parents' availability, and the home infrastructure and materials, while making this plan. Supporting the parents is a key part of this process, so that they can teach these things to their

child, even when they are doing their work at home. Tools such as sequence cards, picture cards, etc. are used to facilitate discussions with parents and develop their skills. The parents are provided with a home program by SSC.

Let's illustrate ADL with the example of bathing. Parents are trained to help their child develop familiarity with her body parts by naming these. They are encouraged to teach their use, while they are bathing the child. After assessing the child's level, the SSC team tries to figure out what is the first step a child can take.

Let's say the child can walk, then she learns the objects associated with bathing. Then

the child is encouraged to carry the items for a bath, and to keep them in the bathroom. After this the next step is to be able to pour water over the body. The child's learning is facilitated by using stuff available at home at low cost, and some accommodation are provided if needed.

Learning how to eat is an important part of ADL. Many parents tell the SSC team that their child can eat chapatis, but is unable to eat rice and dal. If the child is unable to eat dal rice with her hands, then she is encouraged to use spoons.

As Gulshan from the team shares, "But the important thing is that whatever the activity be, we ensure that it is taught and

## Sahyog Sangharsh Centre

The beginning of Sahyog's work, involving a community-based model of education, was in 2003 onward in the Jari Mari area of Kurla in Mumbai, in the form of a survey. The beginning of Sahyog Sangharsh Center (SSC) also lay in a survey. Through this process Chehak Trust located the children they work with now. SSC now serves 76 disabled children and young adults.

The children whose needs Sangharsh caters to come from working class, migrant communities in which the parents often do not have enough time to help their disabled children learn basic life skills. For this very reason, SSC is located in a slum in Ghatkopar, so that parents find it easy to reach.

It provides learning support to children for a period of three years, preparing them for integration. It also meets their therapeutic needs by providing consultations with specialists and the actual therapy involved. The centre helps the older children and young adults find jobs in the community, and trains others so that they can join vocational training institutions in order to get job ready.

It conducts workshops with other stakeholders in the community, such as factories, companies and businesses so that they are sensitized towards the issues of disabled children. This kind of outreach work has a twofold purpose. First, it helps raise the general level of awareness regarding the issue. Second, it helps in creating a potential network of recruiters for SSC's children.

When a child is about to graduate from Sangharsh, the team helps them find an appropriate school they can attend. First the child is assessed by the team and the consultants. Then a suitable institution is found. The suitability of the institution itself is decided upon by an independent assessment of its facilities and processes. The work of Sahyog Sangharsh Centre does not stop with just finding an appropriate institution for the child. The team creates a plan for the children and the young adults. This is shared with the school. Follow ups are also undertaken by the SSC team.

learnt by task analysis of its parts. Let's say brushing. Brushing as a whole might be too complicated a task for a child to master. First we assess and find the child's level. If the child can hold the brush, then we teach the child to pour the paste. Then the child learns how to put it in the mouth, and then to brush.

"When a child learns a specific part of a task, then she goes on to the next level. Another method is backward and forward chaining. We need the parents' support for this. We also put in our own efforts."

Using the task analysis technique, the skill is broken down into its constituent tasks. The child is then encouraged to do either the first or the last step, and accordingly progression is made depending on how the child grasps it.

The SSC team also tries and does accommodations in this process. If the child is having difficulties in holding a tooth brush due to physical difficulties, then a cloth is wrapped around the brush to provide a better grip. Or a brush from the market is obtained that is easier to hold. Thus, accommodations with different instruments are attempted, so that it becomes easier for the child.

The team helps the child master an activity through a step by step process. It has created other learning aids to assist in this. The team tries to incorporate some of the actions needed in other task as well, so that the learning is firmly established.

Sandhya from Chehak shares, "We have also created material like books for ADL. For each activity we use a booklet meant for it. These booklets have all the tasks related to the activity laid out in sequence.

"They are visual in nature and carry relevant images. To help the children learn through a multi-sensory experience, we use relevant textures in the booklets as well."

Thus, SSC's work expands our idea of what education is, and shows how the activities

of daily living can in themselves become a site of learning for children and young adults, especially for those with disabilities.

## Democracy in Schools: Fulfilling the Promise the Pratigya Way

If the work of Sahyog Sangharsh Centre in Mumbai is demonstrating the importance of activities of daily living as a site for learning, then Pratigya's initiatives in Jharkhand show the vital contributions that children's participation in school processes can make to their education.



Pratigya

In Jharkhand, there is this concept of Bal Sansads – or children's parliaments – that is mandated by the government. The governmental regulation is that all Bal Sansad members must be elected. However, more often than not, elections are not held in schools. Who the teachers feel is a good student and a fluent speaker, gets nominated as the PM. Similar is the case for all the other positions in the Bal Sansad.

So when the Pratigya team started intervening in schools in this space, it first started working with the teachers. In discussions with them, the team explained the value of intervening with students through a democratic process for the Bal Sansad. So with the teachers' support, now proper elections are held through a democratic process. The Pratigya team ensures children's participation through this method, as this is also a citizen making process.



### The Story of the Learning Fairs

Sometime in the recent past, Pratigya was arranging fairs on promoting foundational literacy and numeracy with children's participation in ten of their intervention schools. The CSO tried to gamify this, so that children can learn to read while playing. In a school in Khunti, it was envisaged that the organization would send eight children and the school's Bal Sansad will send eight students (from classes 7 and 8).

The teacher in charge there put up quite a bit of resistance. He went on to say that, "If you want to take these children, please do so. But they won't be able to do much. We have tried working with them. But nothing much happens."

So the Pratigya team told them that they will come back to the school a little later. This teacher, along with a couple of others from the same school, were then invited to a foundational literacy and numeracy fair in a nearby school that took place after some time.

In each stall in this fair, there was a Bal Sansad member and a Pratigya team member. The games were designed by the students. The relevant explanations were also being provided by the Bal Sansad members managing the stalls.

Seeing this, these teachers thought that if the children in that school can do it, so can their students as well. This has had an interesting result. The final fair ended up happening in the school with the resistant teacher. Now he has changed the method of constituting the school's Bal Sansad from selection to election.

Chandan from the team shares, "Teachers and other adults do not have much confidence in these processes related to the Bal Sansads and in the children's abilities. We invite sceptical teachers to observe our processes. They come and see how children constitute an election commission on their own and frame rules and regulations for conducting elections. They themselves collect the nominations, and decide on the date of voting. They count the votes and declare the results. This is only an example of student's participation in the election process."

When children get elected to posts, they also start taking ownership of the process. They start thinking that, "Now as I have been elected, I need to perform my duties for my friends." In the community learning centres being run by Pratigya, the democratic process runs even deeper.

In these centres, every month, a general body meeting consisting of all the children is called. The last month's work is presented by elected body members in front of this

assembly. Children then raise issues and discuss problems. These meetings are an important way in which they develop the understanding and practical skills related to democratic processes. These practices include, raising questions and ensuring one's participation in a democratic method of running schools.

A teacher from one of the schools Pratigya works in has gone on record and said that out of 195 total students enrolled, the attendance is now 185. This level of attendance has not been achieved by the school earlier. This is the experience of other schools in which the CSO works with the Bal Sansads as well.

Elected members in schools have tried to regularize school assemblies and to ensure that they take place in time. Now many students have started coming to school on time.

The organization sees these as indicators of children's increasing interest in school's activities and processes. Children have come

to feel that their issues are being discussed and that they have a voice now. This is not all. Wherever Pratigya has activated Bal Sansads, parents' attendance in PTMs has gone up as well.

In intervention schools in rural areas, parents see the benefits of their children participating in such processes. They can see that their children are starting to lead processes.

They see the importance of their children standing in front of the school assembly, and developing the ability of speaking in public and engaging other children.

School management committees in schools in Jharkhand are supposed to have student members as well. Even if students are members, they never participate in these meetings. In three of Pratigya's intervention schools, students are being now called to SMC meetings for participation.



Karunar Kheti Trust

Thus, Pratigya's work is opening up an interesting site of learning outside the classroom. As children get elected to Bal Sansads and start participating in school processes, the institution then starts functioning as a nursery of democracy.

Learning about democracy is not only about knowing facts about how the larger system of governance works. It is essentially about learning how to function as a citizen. Toward meeting this goal, Pratigya's interventions in Bal Sansads in schools is filling an important gap. It is helping children learn the nitty gritty

of democratic functioning involving dialogues and discussions.

## **Learning from the Heart: Circle Time in Selenghat Valley School**

When Selenghat Valley School (SVS) was started deep in the tea region of Assam's Jorhat district, the teachers would often just arrive and get into the classroom. As SVS is envisaged as a community school, the people involved with Karunar Kheti Trust (KKT), the CSO that has initiated the school, started thinking that something needs to be changed to transform this emerging classroom focus. For Arjun Trivedi, one of the co-founders of KKT, the answer to this lay in the practice of morning circles.

For the people associated with the organization, education and learning are beyond the physical infrastructure, the textbooks and the systems. Learning is about the yearning for freedom and the search to find and recognize one's own and others' humanity.

This has been one of the imperatives to start SVS as a community school to serve the people of Selenghat, a typical rural community of Assam that comprises of tea plantations and traditional villages, and with whom KKT now works.

For Arjun, the opening of hearts and minds is a critical part of processes related to learning and education. Pondering about ways of strengthening the school's community and building an environment of trust and joy, his thoughts went back to his own practices of holding hands and hugging others to feel connected. He then started forming the idea of a circle.

One day in the morning in the year 2020, Arjun called everyone before the school started, and requested to make a circle. He just started singing and holding hands. When he sang, the students naturally held his hands and others'. Some teachers also started joining. The morning circle was, thus, born.

As Arjun shares, “In the morning circle, one circle is a circle of trust. It tries to develop the non-linearity of the heart to not feel afraid, to feel like you are present with everybody, you are listening to everybody, you are connected to everybody. You are warmed up. After the morning circle, you are now conditioned to study, to go into the classroom because you are now trustful and hopeful of loving but honest relationships with everybody in the school. There, everybody comes together - teachers, students, even parents. So that’s the general idea and practice of our morning circle.”

The morning circles happen outside, in the open. When it rains, children, teachers and staff just stand in the corridors, and in other open places like the veranda. It happens standing. If it is sometimes difficult to do this in the open, then people do it in their classes.

SVS went through a process of organic experimentation involving responding to changing contexts, with respect to the functioning of the morning circles. Initially, the school experimented with each class getting its own circle time. For a while,

everybody in the school also did it together. The school learnt that in order to give children a very spontaneous and unbound time, it is necessary for the groups to have a certain homogeneity, but not too much. So, it makes sense to have one morning circle for nursery to UKG, and another from classes one to three.

The morning circle has no permanent leaders and followers. In this context, Arjun added, “We wanted to break the linearity, that one person is the leader. So every class gets a turn to lead. One day it is the nursery class and then it is the UKG, and then back again.

“There’s a teacher in the morning circles who is in charge as a facilitator. She encourages everybody to take the lead around very loose parameters. The idea is that everybody learns to lead, everybody learns to follow, everybody learns to speak, and everybody learns to listen. So there is no particularly designated leadership.”

The teacher then asks the children what they would want to do that day. Sometimes children would say something. Or if they are

## Morning Circle and the Fountain of Songs

“Earlier language learning was just techniques. Now from techniques, we are reaching closer to natural language learning methods involving the spoken language, the oral language, and storytelling.

“Children are getting very confident. They are seeing adults listening to them, they are seeing other children listen to them. Now you see the children’s body language is relaxed. They are smiling at the teachers. They are not afraid of them. They don’t think before speaking. It is very important for a child to lead from their heart.

“SVS has children of Adivasi communities in our school. Their culture is not known to, and often not accepted in, the mainstream, dominant, traditional Assamese culture. So Adivasi people, folks who came from states such as Odisha and Jharkhand to Assam to work in the tea plantations, have been marginalized.

“When I hear the songs coming out from a morning circle in the tribal languages, I am overwhelmed with joy. To see children of the tea plantations lead all the children of SVS in an Adivasi song and dance, and the latter excitedly following, is actually very, very meaningful. Schools do not encourage them to use their own language. And here they are singing loudly and proudly songs in their own tongues, and everyone is listening, learning, and singing along.” (As shared by Arjun Trivedi)



too shy, the teacher would suggest stuff. As Arjun shares, “Sometimes they do a song, and then they do a dance. Some child might want to have a riddle time. So, they ask riddles, they ask questions. It is very popular in schools over here to ask riddles. And it’s nice how our children are just making up their own riddles. This process seems to be giving a child acceptance, confidence, and a sense of community.

“It also seems to be particularly good for teachers. It helps them to lose a little bit of their inhibition and to get warmed up. Earlier teachers were under this pressure. They had the idea that – ‘This is my class, I need to be in control,’ and control means orderliness, like, ‘I tell you what you do.’ Now teachers feel like they are a part of the team. They are a little bit more trusting of their students. I have seen teachers who came in very tight, loosening up, smiling, and singing.”

## In Conclusion

As the work of these four organizations from across the country shows, exploring non-classroom spaces as sites of intervention

can serve multiple purposes. It can help reimagine our schools as laboratories of an emergent socio-political democracy. Such interventions can help us discover new sites of pedagogy, such as activities of daily living. The work of these organizations also helps us rediscover hitherto neglected sites, such as the kitchen and the kitchen garden as important educational spaces.

This discussion has shown us how tools such as morning circles can help us build school cultures that can even positively impact classroom transactions. It is, thus, important that we explore these new sites, methods and mores, to enrich both our orientation to learning and pedagogical practices that takes place in institutional settings such as schools.

## You can reach out to the organizations featured in this story at:

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