Integration of work and education

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Learning through work

The environment in which we live in India seems to prioritize a specific relationship between work and education. This relationship is essentially an instrumental one, in which education is supposed to lead to jobs/work, preferably those that do not involve physical labor. Education and work have come to be seen as completely separate. Education is seen as 'mental.' It is perceived to be happening in the 'academic' environment of classrooms. It is not seen to involve productive work, especially physical work.

Our current popular and dominant understanding of education in the country ignores the fact that good education – learning that truly stays with the individual and become a part of their being and skillsets – often allow for the involvement of 'the whole self,' involving the intellect, the emotions and the body. The dominant understanding also does not cognize that there are some things which are learnt only when one engages in live, actual work or projects. And these can never be learnt in purely academic settings. This is as true for learning about sustainable agriculture and ecosystems, as it is true for learning science or robotics. It is ironic that while this is commonly understood in higher education – which is why we have internships and apprenticeships, etc. – it is completely ignored in school education.

This has had many problematic consequences. Because the thrust is almost exclusively on mental and academic learning, it is only a certain category of students who find an 'instrumental' value in school education. This kind of learning and the jobs they lead to, are seen as having great prestige, and as being aspirational, etc. In comparison, learning that requires productive work, and especially physical labor, are seen as second grade. However, other students, who seem to be the majority, find education alienating and/or worthless for practical use. This gets reflected in high dropout rates and poor results. Through this process, school education itself has come to be devalued. This is especially true for marginalized communities. It is often perceived by them to be not leading to well-paying jobs in the formal sector. It is seen as either a mere gateway to college education or to some short-term professional training that, more often than not, leads to a low-paying job in the service/ manufacturing/automobile sectors. The middle /upper middle classes still know/have faith that 'good' school education will lead to 'good jobs' though.

This simplistic understanding of education as training for a specific job seems especially flawed in our times, which are characterized by rapid changes in the economy and society. Such an approach does not address the fundamental objectives of education. These goals relate to individual flourishing, maximizing potential, contributing to society in one's unique ways, and preparing for citizenship in a democratic society with competing priorities, etc. On the other hand, it carries the threat of rendering most of the people so narrowly trained, redundant pretty soon. Yet another problem with such a way of relating education with work is that it sees a human being as being neatly divisible into a body, a mind and a soul/heart, and it prioritizes the training of the mind over anything else.

Our present system – there are some exceptions – consigns those that it sees as academically underperforming (hence with underperforming, supposedly below-average, minds) to vocational training/education programs. They are supposed to get trained, pick up the skills necessary to get a job, and become 'socially useful.'

As an antidote to such a state of affairs, some people advocate holding on to, and acting upon, a liberal understanding of education, which sees institutional, formal learning as a way of training the mind, and as an end in itself. The advocates of this position argue that the goal of education is simply to impart a love of learning and the mental attitudes that Western Enlightenment sees of value, such as that of reason. What the blind adoption of a liberal approach to education in a country like India misses out on, is the colonial context in which such a system was introduced in India, and the existing inequities it can, and does, accentuate in the country. Thus, the liberal antidote is problematic.

However, in India itself, we have seen the development of multiple alternative approaches that can perhaps provide a counterpoint to both the liberal and the 'instrumental' relationship between work and education. We just mention two traditions here. We mention these two not only because of the importance of the ideas contained in the approaches, but also because the influence they have had on the practices of many schools and organizations across the country.

The first is Mahatma Gandhi's Basic Education. In this framework, productive work is itself seen as a pedagogic tool to learn academic subjects. However, in this tradition, work is not reduced to an instrument for learning subjects. It fulfils multiple roles. These include relating to the community with productive work, developing the capacities of the body, and perhaps the most important one, internalizing the dignity of labor. Central to this process are both the learner's labor and the facilitator's contributions. The resource section of this issue of Samuhik Pahal contains three documents which try and grapple with these Gandhian ideas in some detail.

One can contrast this Gandhian formulation with Aurobindo Ghosh's conceptualization of education, central to which is the idea that nothing can be taught. What the process of learning does in this framework is to aid the learners in the unfoldment of the potentialities that already exist within them. Consequently, a key way in which the human child can effectively learn is by doing bodily work - especially by using the body through play, exercise and craftwork, to know themselves and their environment better. Both these approaches have the potential to radically alter the ways in which we can look at and think about the relationship between work and education. Both of these bring the idea of the whole person into education, Gandhi with his idea of training 'the hands, the head and the heart' and Aurobindo with his concept of integral education. And both of these approaches make bodily work a central element of the learning process.

We already have a long body of practice in 'work and education' (almost across three generations) using the ideas of Gandhi and Aurobindo. It is high time we started actively learning from these experiments in a systematic and systemic manner. This is especially because the challenges in front of us are many. We live in a country that arguably suffers from all the ill effects of industrialization, such as pollution and erosion of the natural resources base, and alienation of individuals and communities, with relatively little of its redeeming features, such as mass employment, and development of scientific rationality.

Making work-based education one of the central pedagogic methods, if not the only one, in our schools might be one good way to bring work to the center of learning processes for our children. This allows for other positive processes to emerge, for example, bringing community members into the classroom, especially those engaged in skilled, productive work. It can also help children develop important life skills and a deeper relationship with their bodies.

In fact, work-based education has the potential to transform our workplaces and the space learning has in them as well. There

is a movement towards de-credentialization across the globe, which strives to open up opportunities for work, especially in the formal sector, by removing the need for credentials such as post-school academic degrees and diplomas. The workplace then itself becomes the space where the required learning take place to ease into the job role in particular and subsequent career/ work-life in general. This especially helps those from marginal backgrounds, who find it difficult to pick up credentials.

One can get work into institutions of learning. One can also get opportunities for learning into the workplace in radical ways. Organizations across the country and the world are innovating and experimenting with multiple modes of exploring this space. Many of these experiments are to do with the teacher-student relationship.

In the conventional workspace, this often translates into fostering mentor-mentee relationships, in which learning happens through a process of apprenticeship. In the average school, this can take the shape of the conventional teacher-student relationship morphing into a learner-facilitator one.

Combining work and education makes better pedagogic sense in itself. The instrumental view of using education as a mere tool for training our children as future workers is not a very wise guide for practice in the current times. This is because we can't even predict what jobs the next generation will have. Thinking that purely academic learning will prepare them may be flawed. Exposure to productive work might allow them to better pick up the general skills which seem much more important now. Closer integration of the two – work and education – will also help reduce the artificial 'prestige' gap that has been created between the so called manual and cerebral work.

Keeping work at the center of our learning experiences may also help in democratizing our work spaces and learning institutions by making our engagement with marginalized social groups, who have been kept out of formal spaces for long, a meaningful one. It can aid us in expanding the sites of learning as well, and in opening up the horizons of what we mean by education.

Kabir Bhavan, Nai Talim Samiti, Sevagram

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An inclusive and effective higher education

Nidhi Anarkat

A pedagogical approach to simultaneously solving for inclusion and effectiveness

Rani grew up in rural, tribal Maharashtra. Imagine Rani at her place of work. What did you imagine her doing? Could you imagine her working on a laptop, typing away lines of code, creating marketing collaterals, and contributing to the knowledge economy? Is she able to participate in high-aspiration jobs and careers that can help level the social and financial inequities of the world where she was born?

Usually, the answer to these questions is a no, because the pathways to this life are inaccessible to people coming from marginalized communities, especially women. Can we design an inclusive and effective higher education system which changes that?

To answer this, let us first answer what the purpose of higher education is. When can we say that an individual has received an effective higher education?

- Is it when their education enables learners to gain skills that empower them to be gainfully employed/self-employed?

- Or is it an effective education only when it imparts skills and mindsets that enable people to continue to learn on their own, to keep themselves relevant in an ever-evolving world of work?

On the one hand, we are talking about education's shifting goals and mandates. Yet, how we are doing on the existing goals of education is still a question. When can we say that a nation has an effective and inclusive higher education system?
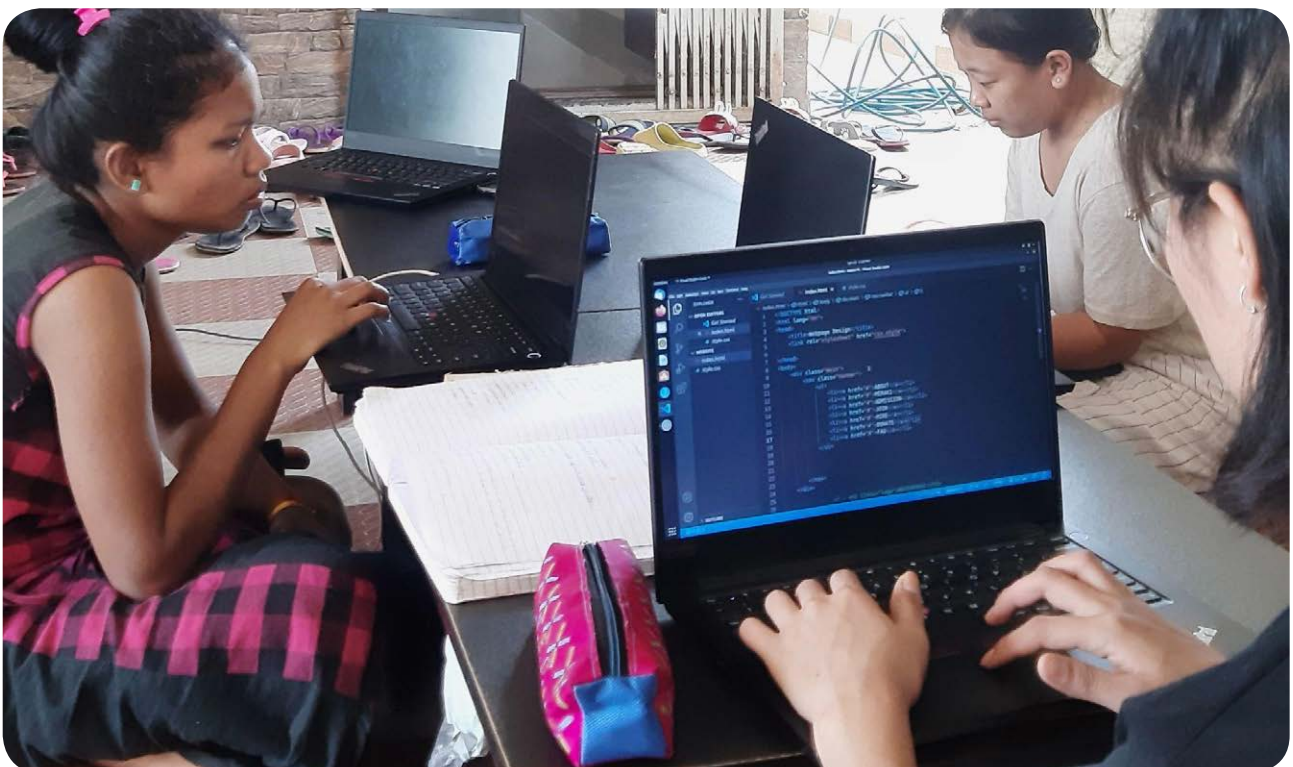
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'Learning to learn' and the growing challenge of AI

Recently, AI technology has made significant strides, revolutionizing various industries, including programming. Previously, programmers faced the challenge of mastering syntax and understanding coding logic. However, with the rise of the internet, the reliance on resources like 'Google' and advanced tools like IDEs have allowed programmers to shift their focus from memorizing syntax to comprehending coding concepts.

Now, with the introduction of AI tools, the landscape has evolved further. The comprehension aspect has become more abstract, requiring coders to communicate the desired outcome effectively rather than executing tasks directly. These advancements in AI are shaping all professions, emphasizing the importance of articulation and problem-solving skills in conjunction with technical expertise.

What AI can and cannot (yet) do will fundamentally shift a human's role and what they will be required to do. Organizations will now look to hire those who can collaborate well with AI and learn new things quickly, as what humans will be needed to do will shift continuously and faster than ever.

While the importance of twenty-first-century skills like communication skills, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity have been discussed since the turn of the century, the advancements of the last few months have put the need to focus on them with an urgency like never before. As AI consumes the more mechanical aspects of work, these humane aspects will remain the domain of humans, and humans will be expected to do more of these.

Even these skills may not be eternally safe from being made obsolete by AI. In this scenario of uncertainty, only an educational response is not sufficient. We will need a political and economic response to the challenges that will come up due to these shifts. However, it is also certain that there is a pressing need for education to adopt 'learning how to learn' as a fundamental goal to be effective for the individuals receiving it.

- Is it when a large percentage of its population can access higher education?

- Or Is it when its citizens can also be problem solvers and innovators who can and want to solve the challenges their communities and society face?

On the access front, India has done a lot of work in the last two decades. A higher education system is considered elite when the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is below 15. It is regarded as an egalitarian, massified system, when it crosses 50. In the last 15 years alone, India has almost doubled the number of people accessing Higher Education. India's GER in 2008 was a little less than 15. We increased our GER to close to 28 in 2023. And we are targeting a GER of 50 by 2030. In absolute numbers, at India's scale, this is a significant achievement in itself.

However, is this rapidly massifying higher education system of India effective? Most of us probably know someone with a college degree or higher, who could not secure a job that can pay them even a starting salary of fifteen to twenty thousand rupees per month, when they finish college. Research has validated this, as multiple reports are talking about the abysmal employability rates of Indian graduates.

While we increase the reach of higher education, is this education preparing people

for today's careers, let alone preparing them to learn independently or be problem solvers? Excluding the top 1 to 10 percent of college graduates, the answer is usually an unfortunate but clear no. The remaining students spend precious time, money, and energy going through the motions of higher education, in the hopes of upward social mobility and financial agency at the end of the exercise. Still, they are often left disappointed at the time of graduation.

In this scenario, is it prudent to keep increasing the reach when the scale leads to further loss of quality? The logical answer would be no. However, can we as a society afford to not increase the reach of higher education to those communities who might need it even more now, given their current line of work might be the most vulnerable to being made obsolete due to advancements in AI?

This dichotomy arises when we see inclusion only as a function of access rather than design. In such a scenario, the two objectives - effectiveness and inclusion - always have to compete for resources. It might be time to reinvent higher education processes that are effective and inclusive by design and hence lend themselves to scaling well. It might be higher education's moment to do the equivalent of "inventing the car as opposed to keeping trying to make the horses go faster."

At NavGurukul, we have reimagined a learning model designed to be inclusive and effective. Through this model, we have trained girls from marginalized communities who have just finished 10th grade to learn to code and get a guaranteed job in tech through just a 12-15 month-long intervention with them. A key ingredient to making this happen has been to switch from a classroom-based model (usually followed in education) to a self-paced, peer-led learning environment.

To better understand what we mean by this, let's look at the journey of Rafat (name changed to allow anonymity), an alumnus of NavGurukul.

Review of an alternative, simultaneously inclusive and effective, approach to learning

Rafat grew up in rural Odisha and attended a government school in her village.

Soon after she finished 10th grade, her family started considering her getting ready for the tailoring trade (what her mother knew and did). Once set up as a tailor, her family planned to get her married soon after, as they genuinely saw that as the best possible outcome for her.

Studying further required money that they did not have, and time that she could better use to learn to tailor and start working as a tailor, and get married. There was no clear pathway to a better financial or social outcome through education that they could see. Hence, they saw little to no point in continuing her formal education.

Rafat was associated with a not-for-profit through her school. She found out about NavGurukul through them. She learned that NavGurukul offered a 12-15 months-long residential program that she could attend for free, learn to program there, and get a guaranteed job in tech with a minimum starting salary of INR 20,000 at the end of the program. The program was accepting girls who had finished just 10th standard and didn't require any further formal education. Rafat decided to apply for the program.

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The first step was to take an online test that she could easily take whenever she wanted. This allowed her to start immediately, instead of waiting for next year. If she had to wait till next year, she might not have been able to apply. By then, it would have been too late for her, as she may have already become dependent on her tailoring income or be already married and may even be expecting a child. The fact that the program was free, accepted students with just a 10th standard certificate, and allowed them to start on a rolling basis, were all needed for her to be able to participate.

Rafat cleared the cut-off for the online test, which tested her on only 6th-grade English and 8th-grade Algebra. She then had two more interviews on a video call with the NavGurukul team and students, which she could take from her phone as well, without needing any permission or extra support from her family. The test allowed her to retake it (still free!) in case she failed the first time. This also encouraged her to try without it being high stakes and without fear or repercussions of failure.

When she got selected, Rafat could decide to go to NavGurukul's campus in Pune, even without full support from her family, as she didn't need them to pay any fees for her. She believed that if she succeeded, her family would come around. However, right now, she needed to be able to bet on herself.

Once on the NavGurukul campus, she learned that the students lived like a community, and self-governed all aspects of campus life. There were elected councils to care for different parts of campus life, such as kitchen management, facilities, discipline, etc. Participating in community meetings and working with peers forced her to learn to speak, speak up, negotiate and create friendships (and alliances!). She gained empathy, learned to understand and appreciate varying perspectives, and to live and collaborate with people from across the country.

We found that this community living provides the learners with ample opportunities to learn and practice twenty-first-century skills in a practical hands-on manner, that no other classroom experience could replace. Even after many years of graduation, our students feel and express gratitude for what they learned through this experience and how it has helped them tremendously in their careers.

Rafat also learned that the learning style on campus differs significantly from what she has experienced in school. There are no regular 'classes' at NavGurukul. Instead, she received a laptop and some basic instructions on how to get started learning on her own. The curriculum started from the basics, and allowed her to move through it at her own pace.

She was assigned a peer mentor who would spend some time with her every day to ensure she had not gotten stuck anywhere and used her time well daily to move forward in her learning journey. She found out that the peer mentor was a student just like her, who started her learning journey just a few months before her. Since her mentor seemed to have been able to learn through this system, and came from a similar background as herself, it allowed her to trust the process and go with it, even though she was skeptical about how she could learn without classes and without someone teaching her everything.

She also saw that there were team facilitators who solved doubts, as needed, in a personalized manner, for each learner on campus. They also ensured that each learner was moving forward in the curriculum week by week. The technical curriculum enabled her to learn programming, starting from the basics of math, logic, fundamentals of programming, and Javascript.

In parallel, the life skills curriculum enabled her to improve and practice her English,

communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills. There were sessions that were designed to get students to gain confidence and understand gender, environment, financial planning, and other crucial life skills. She also got exposure to a world of inner work practices that helped her peers, and herself, manage stress, emotions, trauma, and other limiting belief systems and behaviors they may carry with them. Through it all, she forged friendships, which have become her support system and network for personal and professional things.

Since she was not learning through a classroom, but through a self-paced learning model instead, she could take time to look up words in English that she did not understand. Hence, English did not become a blocker for her to be able to learn to program, while still enabling her to improve her English in parallel.

Seven months into her time at NavGurukul, Rafat got ill and had to go home for bed rest after a surgery she had to undergo. When she had fully recovered after three months, she could come back to NavGurukul's campus and get started from where she had left. While she had initially struggled with self-paced, peer-led learning, she was now grateful for it, as it was because of self-paced education she could continue her course, instead of having to drop out or come back next year and start again.

Once back, she finished her learning journey, traveled a little to other NGOs in Udaipur as a part of an exposure trip, and received an internship offer from an IT MNC, which paid her a stipend of INR 22,000 for the internship and a salary of INR 30,000 per month post the completion of the training.

She has been working with that MNC for four years, earning a salary of INR 11 Lakh per Annum. She has learned many things while on the job, and continues to upskill herself to stay relevant. She has successfully pulled

her family out of the financial crisis they were stuck in, when she first joined NavGurukul. She is not married yet, and she and her family are in no hurry to change that. She is just 22 years old, after all.

In more ways than one, the flexible, self-paced learning environment enabled policies that could cater to Rafat's needs ensuring that she could sustain and finish her learning journey, while ensuring that what she learned was meaningful, relevant in the industry, and learned with understanding.

Challenges in doing free, self-paced learning

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The mentor-mentee system works best only when the pair is emotionally aligned and is deeply committed to each other's success. There are challenges in pairing and keeping these relationships solid and ensuring that the learning momentum doesn't get hurt when there is a rupture in some of these relationships because of practical reasons like, say, the mentor had to go home or got placed and left campus or when there is a misunderstanding of sorts between the pair.

We have found that the answer lies in keeping everyone rooted in a community of support systems rather than working just in pairs. Even the periodic changes in the primary pairings and learning to adapt to that change is a necessary learning experience when preparing for the real world, where situations like this arise in abundance.

However, managing this is indeed critical and not trivial. Still, we have found that these are worthy challenges to pick up, when solving for designing a system that is both inclusive and effective. The domains of behavior science and pedagogy have great recommendations to make that can help tackle this, if one commits to the process.

Another question we get asked often is whether students value this when it is free. Even we as a team, when sometimes unable to get some students to take ownership of their learning, have ourselves wondered if charging for this will make them more serious about their education.

However, we have collectively arrived at the answer that there are ways in which we can design policies and culture on campus that encourage sincerity and dedication, irrespective of whether they have paid for the program or not.

Charging money, while it looks like an easy answer sometimes, is not always the best answer. Motivating someone to do something, not just because they have paid for it, tends to be real, intrinsic motivation.

Even if it is true in a small percentage of cases, where fees could have encouraged more sincerity faster, we currently choose to keep it free because a residential structure does allow us to work on other ways of maintaining sincerity, while enabling us to serve those who genuinely can't pay.

Instead of charging upfront, if we encourage a culture of pay forward, it has several benefits. It makes our students and, by extension, our society, more giving-focused. More importantly, in this model, educators and institutions must focus on delivering quality learning outcomes.

Using this pedagogy and model, NavGurukul has placed more than 600 students, such as Rafat, in high aspiration tech careers. We have already scaled up to 7 centers across the country, 4 of which are in partnership with state governments. We are in the process of opening more centers.

In addition to programming, we have also started piloting management, design, and education courses. We have found that this pedagogy can be applied not just in learning programming, but across many, if not all, domains in higher education.

Can we scale this model of learning?

The question is not whether NavGurukul or even these residential centers as an idea can scale or not. Should we and can we scale the pedagogy of self-paced, peer-supported learning to more higher education spaces across states, domains and levels of educational institutes - at ITIs and in IITs? Will it help improve the effectiveness and inclusiveness of our higher education? What will it take? What costs shall need to be paid?

First and foremost, we will need to have a paradigm shift in what we see as the role of the teacher. Right now, a teacher is supposed to be a subject matter expert, a pedagogical expert, a social-emotional support system for the learner, and an assessment expert. In many cases, she is sometimes an administrator as well, who has to shoulder responsibilities in infrastructure, HR, Finance, parents management, etc., as and when needed. Not a teacher; we expect them to be magicians.

The pedagogy of self-paced learning allows us to unbundle all of the above responsibilities and distribute them amongst peers, mentors, and external/ volunteer subject matter experts, to reduce the burden on the teacher, who can now be thought of as a facilitator instead. Their role then can be reenvisioned as ensuring that all of this comes together for the learner, to be able to have a conducive learning environment.

This is not a trivial shift for India's scale. However, it might be a welcome one. The lack

of well-trained teachers who can be SMEs and good educators simultaneously is one of the top challenges in increasing the reach and quality of the existing higher education system. Similarly, we must shift how we conduct assessments and what counts as outcomes.

What about the cost? Is this model expensive? Can it scale at a country level?

Given that it is self-paced, and has peer support, the model allows much more frugality than the existing learning models. It also allows engaging the industry in a volunteering/ paid engagement model in a structured way, as they can come in for the subject matter expertise, enabling learning to be practical and relevant, while still keeping the costs frugal. Once they get into jobs, the amount the learners pay in taxes alone can be a massive bonus for the economy. Hence, there is an incentive to invest in this.

Additionally, we can bake in pay forward as a part of the culture, where each student supports someone else's education, once they have achieved some financial security. Instead of upfront and exorbitant fee structures, these models can make institutitions accountable for learning. They can make education accessible to India's most vulnerable communities. They can enable India to unlock its tremendous potential to be the global talent capital.

Going down this path will require much more thought and rigorous research. Still, we submit that this learning approach be considered to free up access to quality learning from the constraints of location, economic and pedagogical barriers it is currently caged in.

Imagine a world where any person, coming from any caste, class, age, or region of the country, has access to clear pathways to high-aspiration careers and skills, which allows them to start from where they are and are designed keeping their constraints

An Invitation

If you have any comments on the article or would like to partner with NavGurkul in any way, you may reach out to Nidhi at her email id given at the end of this piece. NavGurukul works with girls from marginalized communities to get them to learn digital economy skills such as programming, design, etc., and place them in guaranteed jobs in tech at the end of the intervention.

The NavGurukul team would love to hear from you, if you can help them reach out to girls from marginalized communities, who would like to take advantage of their free residential program, or if you want to join NavGurukul (people are everything!), or if you or someone you know would like to hire NavGurukul's students or alums.

in mind, and will enable them to learn and succeed, at their own pace.

Nidhi Anarkat is an educational professional with experience working in various roles in India and the US. Her education work has primarily focused on triangulating pedagogy, people and product. Nidhi is the co-founder and CEO at NavGurukul, and has studied Computer Science from Gujarat University and Education from Harvard University.

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Lessons from learners

An integrated learning program for rural youth

A. R. Vasavi

"Our relatives will see us working on the land, that will embarrass us," "I did not know that I also have to do this along with the girls," "Is this one hour of Bhu-Seva compulsory?".

These are a few of the objections and resistance that some of the youth, who joined the 'Integrated Learning Program' (ILP) or 'Samagraha Kalika Karyakrama', expressed to us. Since one hour of land work was compulsory for all the students, we were taken aback to find that some of the young men (all from rural and agricultural backgrounds) were resistant to doing this as part of the learning program.

Reconnecting rural youth with their roots

This, the resistance to physical labor and to agriculture in general, has been only one factor in which the alienation from rural India, and the imprint of several dominant cultural priorities, have played out in our attempt to conceptualize, initiate and institute an alternative learning program for rural youth.

Based primarily on our observations about the disjunction between rural and agrarian economies and societies and the mainstream education system, we had conceptualized the ILP as an alternative learning program that would enable rural youth, especially those who had dropped out at high school or college, to have an opportunity to learn a range of knowledge and skills that would enable them to lead holistic and meaningful lives in their villages.

Initiated in 2012, we had started with a very small batch of 12 students who had received stipends to attend the course, spread over 6 months, with ten days of non-residential contact lessons each month. Since then, we have completed 8 batches of the ILP, with an average of only 20 students per batch, and consisting primarily of youth from SC, ST and OBC backgrounds from the Chamarajanagar district area in Karnataka.

In developing the course, we had hoped to challenge not only the dominant education system's anti-rural and anti-agriculture orientation but also the oversight of the knowledge and skills that rural youth needed. Hoping to facilitate new learning that would build on the knowledge and skills of rural India, we had identified 'place-based education' and 'social transformative learning' as key pillars in which a comprehensive learning experience could be made possible.

Learnings from the ILP experience

Over the past ten years, there is much that we have learnt from our learners. I sum up these learnings here. The imprint of the dominant education system is much more intense and significant than what we had anticipated. Aspirations in rural India have shifted significantly.

Many youth see life and opportunities as being in the non-rural and non-agricultural space. The abilities of the youth to internalize and implement the new knowledge and skills for rural livelihoods and life would require much more time and support than a mere course spread over a few months.

While there have been a few students who have been able to engage with the ideas,

implement them in their own lives, and emerge as social catalysts, the overall impact indicates that such a course requires a much more long-term engagement with the learners, with periodic reorientation, and emotional and economic support. It also needs a network that reaffirms the possibility of becoming engaged individuals in their own societies.

The course consisted of four key modules, deployed on an experiential learning pedagogy. These included: 1) Sustainable Agriculture and Ecology; 2) Active Citizenship; 3) Social Issues and Personal Growth; and, 4) General Skills of Basic English, Computers and Accounts.

Over the batches and years, even as we continually tweaked the content and teaching-learning pedagogies to suit the largely first generation learners, there is much that we learnt about how such alternative learning also needs to be carefully crafted so as to address the following challenges. In sum, these were the lessons that we learnt from our learners.

Unlearning: Mainstream education based on rote-learning and the exam-oriented system meant that most of the learners were not able to comprehend and engage with ideas, concepts and practices that were new or that required creative and critical thinking. Putting in place discussions that challenged accepted mainstream ideas (e.g., chemical agriculture is inevitable or required for productive agriculture) and cultural constructions of self and others, was key to get them to reflect on their own personal journeys. Getting the youth to respect their own social backgrounds as children from 'working' (and, therefore, dignified, honest and valuable citizens) families and not as 'poor' from disadvantaged rural and agricultural families, was one of the key issues. The other was to get them to recognize the worth and dignity of manual labor as important in many ways and not as a sign of indignity and failure.

Learning as a Continued Endeavour: We had to continuously emphasize that this course was not based on exams and tests

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and nobody would be assessed a 'pass' and or 'fail.' Instead, a process of submissions of papers, projects, notes, etc., would entail corrections by resource persons or mentors and these were to be noted by the learners. Such an open system took longer to be recognized by the learners. They needed much urging to complete homework assignments.

Integrated Learning: Breaking disciplinary boundaries, the course entails learning in an interlinked manner. Practices of making agricultural inputs (compost or insecticide) and then noting down the process and the costs meant that writing and accounts can be included in this exercise. But, more importantly, integrated learning required learners to see that learning went beyond books and classrooms, and included questioning, understanding and comprehending their own everyday worlds. Reflexive exercises meant that received ideas about gender, caste, class and religious practices were to be questioned and new ideas of democracy, justice, equality and rights were to be the new lens with which their own and others' lives were to be related to.

Recognizing Voice and Agency: A central part of the pedagogy and orientation of the course was to enable learners to be able to voice their ideas and views and to engage in public and open discussions. This was done primarily through role plays, mono acting, singing and individual activities of presentations and writing.

Challenges of Decision-Making: Another issue that needed addressing was the need to enable learners to learn to make decisions and to plan for the future. Both these issues seemed to be problems as a sense of dependency on parents, hesitation and procrastination marked many of their behaviors. Through discussions and activities, several of these issues were sought to be addressed.

Submission to the Dominant Model: The imprint of dominant societal values, and of the media generated new consumer culture, were issues that emerged as key barriers to recognizing their own capabilities and identifying possibilities. Most of the youth wanted jobs in the urban sectors, especially in the retail industry, as sales persons or as assistants in shops. Consumer habits that included purchasing goods through EMI payments and falling into debt were issues that were discussed in the course.

The experience of alumni in practicing ideas and knowledge from the course

Barring about 14 youth learners who have managed to implement some of the ideas, especially being engaged in the public life of their villages or practicing sustainable agriculture, most youth have not been able to implement ideas from the course. This largely stems from the fact that as youth (and unmarried in most cases), they do not have access to resources or to decision-making in their families. Hence, they are not able to implement many of the practices.

Lending them support through the network that includes all alumni from all the batches, meeting periodically where they shared their experiences, periodic short programs and workshops with updates on issues were ways in which we sought to keep the youth engaged. As some of the youth grew older and set up their own homes, they were able to initiate some changes in their own homes.

Girls were typically subjected to norms of closure and lacked mobility and access to the larger world, especially after marriage. They had to be counselled in handling the pressures and tensions in their new homes and families. That two girls managed to convince their spouses and in-laws about the need to work and to also participate in public issues (such as attending the panchayat meetings) were some of the more positive cases that we have had.

Punarchith

Reviving the course in 2022, after a gap of three years (primarily due to the restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic), we have now remade the course in a modular format. After three weeks of a foundation course, we now offer modules on specific themes (e.g., democracy and leadership; producing organic manure; home gardens and seed saving; etc.). Identifying youth who are older and between the ages of 24 to 34 years, and facilitating their enrollment, has enabled us to have more participative and engaged youth.

Reflecting on the experiences over the years, it is now clearer to us that any knowledge, even alternative knowledge, needs to be situated within the interstices of local societies. For us, it has been the need to locate knowledge and skill transactions within the ambit of addressing issues of hierarchy and power, knowledges old and new, knowledges local and external, to see social awareness as the fulcrum that makes for new forms of social capital, and for youth to recognize that their own labor and its power will triumph over temporary income.

The travails of implementing the course do not deter us from continuing to offer it. This is due to the fact that the course has acted as an eye opener for many of the youth. Over a period of time, they recognize the value of 'integrated learning' that goes beyond performance in examinations and the assurance of urban jobs.

Review comments from the youth learners where they have articulated that this course "Enabled me to speak in the public," "Made me realize all the work that women do in the household", 'Found out that all people have rights'' or that "I came in very afraid but now I am afraid to leave this course," have become guideposts for us to keep working on the course. Learning from the learners has itself become a way for us to rethink many of our own received ideas about rural youth, society and what learning can be.

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Connect On:

The journey to Alivelihoods

Manish Jain and Kalashree Sengupta

"What is your package?"

We have interacted with thousands of youths and have found the most common and important question asked by young people in their education today has nothing to do with the syllabus or with what is happening in the world. It is related to, "What is your package?" This seems to be the measure of not only one's educational purpose but also of one's self-worth. Sadly, most young people go through 12-16 years of formal education and still have no clear idea of what work is needed in the world, what their talents are, and what they want to do with their lives.

The choices of work are still seen as very narrow, with the average government school student only knowing about 6-7 careers, such as teacher, army, doctor, lawyer, coder/IT professional and IAS officer. Even teachers have very little idea of new careers that are emerging. But the world is changing. Many leaders describe it as a VUCA world (short for, Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, and a catchall for "Hey, it's crazy out there!"). Many new innovative careers are needed to deal with the complex challenges facing humanity.

The journey to finding one's Alivelihood can be seen as essentially a spiritual-material one, where the work that we do is nothing less than a form of worship (in the best of the Gandhian tradition). It is not simply a means to making money or a skill-training program. 'Alivelihoods' represents a conscious movement towards caring for the greater good and a regenerative culture, far beyond the narrow consumerist mindset of building one's own bank balance, and satisfying individualist egos' needs.

'Alivelihoods' are careers where our soul comes alive and our sense of Self is expanded, as we unlearn and up-learn, to work with our heads, hearts, hands and homes. These are careers that benefit not only us but also the local communities and the natural ecosystems that we live in. These careers replenish and restore our sacred covenant with the rest of nature, rather than exploit and pollute.

What is the difference between 'Deadlihoods' and 'Alivelihoods'?

A 'Deadlihood' is any work that is soul-sucking, violent, exploitative and separate from our spiritual life. It prioritizes hyper-individualism and greed. It promotes, finances, subsidizes, incentivizes and protects extraction of natural resources, war and waste. It centralizes power in the hands of a few.

The global economic system has been working on the limitless growth model for decades now. It has no regard for our community life, commons and natural ecosystems. Wealth has been defined as the hoarding and accumulation of money, leading to excessive competition, loneliness, waste, violence and disparity. The accounting and legal systems are designed to hide this. Most of the jobs that the mainstream schools and universities prepare and train us for are Deadlihoods, as they seek to convert us into *homo economicus* (economic slaves).

On the other hand, 'Alivelihoods' build on and re-contextualize the Gandhian concept of Constructive Work. These involve work that brings us joy and involves the regeneration of natural ecosystems, where the focus is on spiritual inner growth, social trust bonds, good health and local natural resources.

Real wealth gives us a sense of abundance rather than a feeling of scarcity. Alivelihoods are built on the paradox of having less giving one more happiness. It has been expressed by social movements such as Gross National Happiness, Buen Vivir, Decluttering, Degrowth, Localization and Voluntary Simplicity.

How do Alivelihoods look on the ground?

In Swaraj University and the Ecoversities Alliance, we have been exposing khoji-learners to people working in Alivelihood careers over the past decade. We have identified more than 50 Alivelihoods. These range from creative therapists and natural healers, organic farmers, nature conservationists, natural fashion designers, slow impact investing, healthy chefs, community-building facilitators and eco-architects. The focus is on healing, reimagination, localization, conservation, traditional knowledge, seva, regeneration and transformation of existing systems.

There are many growing examples of people who have walked out of mainstream careers (in IT, for example) to pursue Alivelihoods. Alivelihoods is not their side charity work. They are able to merge their *Dharma* and *Dhandhaa* to earn their living and take care of their families with what they earn through their Alivelihoods career. Pursuing one's Alivelihood is not some romantic notion or non-achievable fantasy. It is very much a reality, as seen by many pioneers who have taken up numerous and beneficial Alivelihoods as their careers.

One such prominent example is Rohit Jain of Banyan Roots, who works on organic products. Rohit visited a village where he came across its kids who knew a lot about organic farming. From there on, he was inspired to start his social entrepreneurial venture and hasn't looked back since. He is now trying to work with tribal farmers to convert an entire district in Rajasthan to organic and natural farming. Another example

is eco-fashion designer Namrata Manot, who works with natural dyes and sustainable clothing as her Alivelihood. In her company Biome, she aims to produce clothing that is friendly to the skin and health, as well as to the environment. She is, thus, creating a sustainable clothing brand, whilst following her passion.

Swaraj University

Four circles of Alivelihoods

It is important to note that Alivelihoods are not the same as green jobs, social entrepreneurship or the Sustainable Development Goals. These are essentially add-ons to the status quo system. Alivelihoods seek to examine the roots of the crises, rather than just the symptoms. It encourages us to ask deeper questions about the global system and institutions. The four primary circles of Alivehoods are as follows.

Sense of Purpose: This is work that brings us joy, passion and meaning. It gives our life meaning, while giving back to the communities and physical places we come from. A large majority of the people who work a 9 to 5 job hate their jobs. We keep taking on more debt and EMIs to find more happiness. We are living in an environment where accumulating more debt has become the norm. Debt is one way the system uses to trap us. It is time to change that to truly seek what makes our hearts sing.

Regenerating Real Wealth: Alivelihoods involves work that replenishes various forms of real wealth, such as health, social capital,

nature and local knowledge. It is work that goes beyond measuring success and impact based on the typical financial pay packages and GNP. It is work that takes us beyond our fears and scarcity, by revaluing and re-building a collective field of trust, dignity and a sense of real inner fulfillment. It is from this place of creative abundance that we can start to imagine and make different choices for ourselves and our planet. As American biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer says, "Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away."

A Shift in Power: Alivelihoods constitute work that focuses on benefiting communities rather than mega-corporations. The growing economic wealth and power of mega-corporations, from airlines to pharmaceuticals to high-tech companies, have raised concerns about too much concentration of power in the hands of decision-makers who are not accountable to the public. For decades we have focused on work that makes the rich richer, hence increasing the disparity we see around us. The disparity in our country is astounding. Alivelihoods support more grassroots multi-partisan forms of political organizing and local investments. These also restore decision-making power to the local communities.

Changing the Game: Alivelihoods involve work that shifts our worldview towards regeneration, restoration and inter-connectedness. These make us question narratives such as competition, survival of the fittest, nationalism, hyper-individualism, retail therapy, and the god of money. This involves reconnecting to ancient wisdom traditions that promote deep connection with the rest of nature and invoke the understanding that, "What we do to nature, we do to ourselves."

What learning and preparing for Alivelihoods look like

Most available career guidance and counselling processes are all geared towards

Deadlihoods careers. There are some good online resources for youth to explore basic career questions and to know that they don't have to get stuck in a cookie-cutter Deadlihood. In India, for example, organizations like Alohomora and GnaanU provide career exploration videos for youth, so that they start reflecting more on career choices vis-a-vis their gifts and talents. These initiatives are especially geared toward youth from marginalized populations. They are key in gaining traction from a consumerist job to a more meaningful vocation that serves personal and societal well-being. There still needs to be more opportunities for both learning journeys and apprenticeship learning, where learners can actually go and find out what the work is actually like, and why individual Alivelihoods leaders are driven and deeply committed to the work that they do. Jagruti Yatra and Vimukt Shiksha Yatra provide some good examples of this.

To go deeper into Alivelihoods, educators can start by asking more fundamental questions around many of the basic things we use and the systems that are around us. Questions like where does my food and water come from, or where does my clothing come from, or where do the materials to build my house come from, or where does my waste or my faecal matter actually go?

Most 'educated' young people (and their parents and teachers) do not have any idea where these things actually come from, how are they made, and what is behind them. As our friend Jinan often says, "Children nowadays grow up seeing final products; they no longer see the processes behind these." We have been totally disconnected by the modern education system from these basic questions of life. Ironically, a so-called illiterate person would have much more answers to these questions, than a so-called educated urban person.

In Swaraj University, we often start this conversation by sharing a powerful YouTube video called the Story of Stuff. We also pick up random everyday products such as a pen

or a plastic bag and ask learners to imagine and describe the entire lifecycle of these products, i.e., how were they 'born' and where do they go when they 'die'?

Another area for educators to explore for Alivelihoods is, how do we learn to re-connect to, and fall in love with, our local places? We are taught about the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, New York City, and so many places far far away. But we aren't encouraged to learn much about our local neighborhoods, local stories or local sacred sites. If we do not know them, how and why will we ever bother to conserve or take care of them? Much of this can only be accessed through knowing local languages.

When learners come to the Swaraj University campus, each of them, as part of their learning program, is invited to adopt a tree, water body or a mountain spot. Over the course of the program, they keep revisiting and speaking and listening to this being. This helps learners connect to the place in a very different, slower, more sacred way. It also reminds us that we are not the only intelligent beings on the planet. Such pedagogies stimulate a curiosity to know more about a local place.

The modern education system has locked us into wanting to interact with only people of our own age. Peer group culture, which is very powerful, can have lots of supports for our learning in very deep ways. But intergenerational learning is being ignored quite a bit. Schooling does not encourage us to talk to elderly people, grandparents, neighbors, local artisans and farmers, or listen to their wisdom and their perspectives, as it oftentimes labels them as 'uneducated'. But these people have a lot of stories and experiences to share about local places, how they are changing, and the challenges facing them.

And then obviously, we need more focus on design thinking and local entrepreneurship from early on. The whole focus of education a generation earlier was that you study well,

you get a degree, then a job, and then retire. But that's not the case anymore. And so, we need more spaces for people to design their own products or solutions, to creatively learn how to make things with their hands, and build their own local markets around it. Design for Change, Project DEFY and Creativity Adda are good examples of this at the school level.

At Swaraj University, we do two things. Learners are invited to prototype small products and explore how to make money from these. With each of them, they ask, "How does this serve the people, place and profit – the triple bottom line?" And then we have a lot of projects to explore gift culture, which are interventions in building a culture of kindness, compassion, collaboration, care and trust.

There is a more fundamental design problem with modern education, which also needs to be addressed. We have an education system that is built on extrinsic motivation. We haven't created the time and space for young people to organically figure out and connect with their own intrinsic motivations. This is one of the main factors for the mental health crisis and drug-escapism epidemic.

In Swaraj University, learners are invited to explore what inspires them, what makes them sad, what makes them angry and how do these connect with the big challenges of our times. Based on these, they design and build projects in real time, without any externally imposed rewards, punishments or deadlines. Importantly, they have ample time to explore and experiment, and find their own gurus. Experiencing the world is given more value and importance, than just reading textbooks about it and getting marks. And we encourage the learners to operate outside of the conventional disciplinary boundaries.

We have set up cohorts of learners with cross-disciplinary backgrounds. This helps in deep peer-to-peer learning. Somebody is looking deeply into water or native species forestry or eco-architecture or

The Alivelihoods journey of Kalashree Sengupta in her own words

My 'Alivelihoods' journey began when I was seventeen years old. However, it was met with a lot of friction from my family. I was an only child and was raised with tremendous career pressure. My parents wanted me to have a spectacular career with an MBA from Harvard followed by taking over the family's recruiting business.

However, I had very different plans. From a young age, I wanted to help my community and work towards a cause. When I was seventeen, I was attuned to an ancient form of energy healing called Reiki. This shifted everything for me. I realized then that there was something called universal energy and that we were a microcosm of that energy.

Being a clairsentient, someone who feels energy on a tactile and physical level, I decided to become an energy healer. However, I had to graduate from Boston University first in Economics and Finance. Upon graduating college, I started training in shamanism, energy and bodywork.

Afterwards, I worked alongside a chiropractor, primarily doing energy work and womb healing to combat women's trauma. The work was deeply fulfilling. I continued the practice in India, where I saw many cases on mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder.

I have taken up the Alivelihood of a writer for change-making platforms, after my Alivelihood as a healer, to continue to make an impact in my immediate community. I believe I can utilize my creative and cognitive skills, while making a difference through the power of the word.

solar energy or community theatre, and they are all together. This creates very exciting kinds of cross-pollination learning possibilities when you are able to bring people of different interest areas together. In contrast, our current education system keeps people of certain disciplinary categories bounded in echo chambers. In addition to building more holistic understanding of life and Alivelihoods, we are also creating an opportunity for them to be expansive parts of each other's journeys and support each other's projects as well. Learning to collaborate and work as a team is critical.

The inner resilience of young people is another important area which schools and learning centers need to become open to. Often when one is doing something, there are failures and mistakes involved. How do we use these as essential parts of our learning process, rather than hiding, or feeling guilty or shameful about them? We need to make it a point to take time to celebrate and reflect our 'failures' and 'mistakes.'

These are some of the fundamental shifts in values that are needed in modern education, if we are to nurture more young people towards Alivelihoods.

Towards new beginnings

It is interesting to note that (despite the education system), we are seeing a conscious shift from Deadlihoods to Alivelihoods, and from a consumerist to an altruistic, sustainability and community-oriented mindset in young people. 'Conscious quitting' is a term used to describe people leaving jobs that do not align with wholesome values.

Sadly, there are almost no formal degree courses for most of the emerging Alivelihoods in the country. Modern universities are virtually ignoring Alivelihoods. And there is of course a deeper question, whether they can actually be taught sitting in classrooms. One of the most important ways to pursue Alivelihoods is to work alongside those who have already created a profession in doing so. Delhi-based urban farmer Kapil

Mandawewala talks about shadowing other organic farmers across the country for a few hours each day to learn the tricks of the trade. Taking a gap year from school, college, or job is also a very good option for exploring Alivelihoods more deeply. The Ecoversities Alliance of alternative universities supports learning Alivelihoods across 50 countries around the world.

One can have numerous skills and have multiple Alivelihoods in one's lifetime. Mahatma Gandhi had thirty different careers. Many young people are working on several Alivelihoods which complement each other. A human being is multi-faceted with numerous interests and one size does not fit all. As psychologist Gabor Mate says, "The time has come to let go of the myth of 'normal'."

We live in overwhelming yet exciting times. The global system of capitalism is broken and structurally unsound to the point where human presence and impact on planet earth has become destructive on a large-scale. Alivelihoods provide us with an opportunity to redesign our human systems and our lives with greater consciousness. What could be not only more urgent, but more rewarding, than working together to solve the greatest challenges of the 21st century?

Manish Jain is co-founder of 'Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for Re-thinking Education and Development' in Udaipur. He is deeply committed to regenerating our diverse knowledge systems, and is passionate about masti yoga, urban organic farming, filmmaking, simulation gaming, bicycling, ultimate frisbee, trekking, compassionate clowning and slow food cooking. He may be contacted at manish@swaraj.org.

Trained in various energy modalities such as Reiki and shamanic practices, **Kalashree Sengupta** is a writer, who has also been an energy healer for over a decade, having worked on women's trauma in the U.S. and in India.

She has a dual degree from Boston University, and a degree from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Dance Movement Therapy. Over the past few years, she has been writing on mental health, her own healing journey, and various articles on education, radical career changes, mental health, Analytics, and healing. She may be contacted at kalashreee@gmail.com.

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Connect On:

Empowering people with disabilities through creativity and skill development

Vidhya V

Embracing equity and inclusion, Ashray Akruti, has been working in the area of education and healthcare for the hearing-impaired community in Telangana. We aim to empower people with disabilities and the underprivileged with our services.

Our journey began by serving five hearing impaired children. Over the years, we have witnessed the growing prevalence of hearing impairment in India. This has propelled us to expand our services and cater to a wider audience.

Today, our organization has grown, and we offer a range of services to individuals of all ages, from new-borns to adults. As a stepping-stone, we have launched the Multimedia and Animation Training Centre for Divyangjans in 2010.

The goal has been to empower hearing impaired youth (18-30 age) in the field of Multimedia and Animation, to foster their skills in graphic designing, visual effects, animation and financial management. This free residential training program aims to instil creative expression and inculcate valuable skills.

This training program is unique and one of its kind in India for hearing-impaired youth. The initiative supports and nurtures young minds. The goal is to help them explore their creativity and gain skills for careers in the fields of design and animation. We believe that their potential creativity is a powerful tool for their personal and professional growth. The motivation to start this centre came from our experience of working with people with disabilities. We observed lack of opportunities for them in the mainstream job market.

Our training program has a team of experienced technical faculty, expert Sign
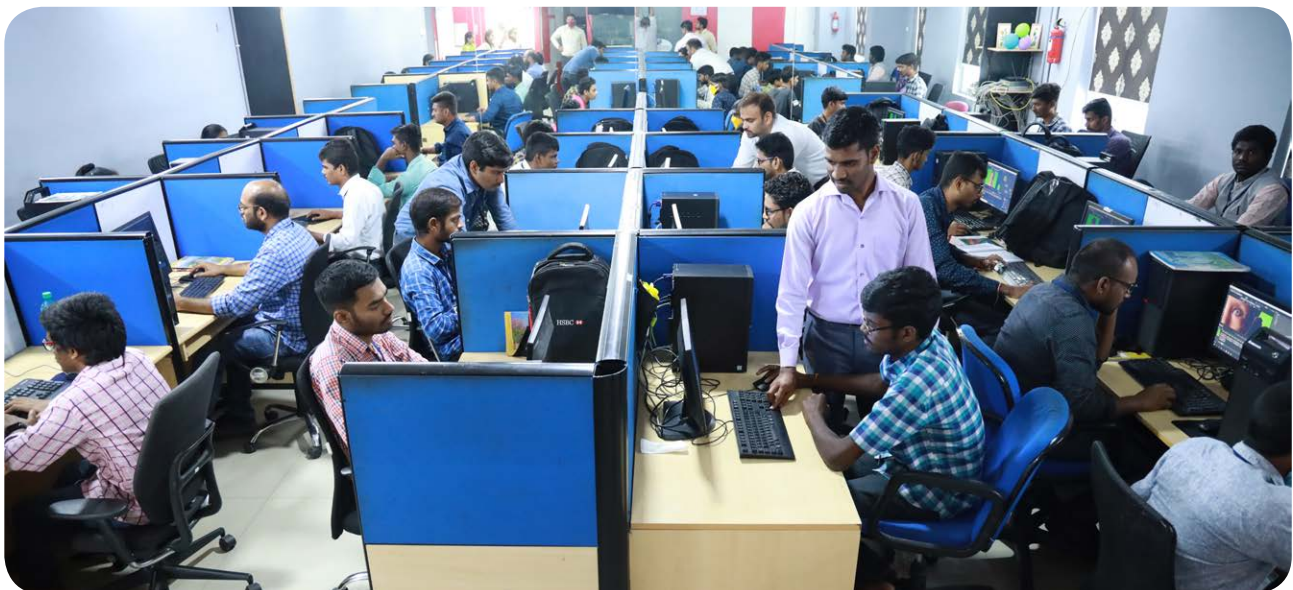
Ashray Akruti

Commitment to the global goals

The initiative of 'Multimedia and Animation Training Centre for Divyangjans' aligns with several United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Goal 1: no poverty

Through our multimedia and animation programs, we empower aspiring individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. By equipping them with industry-relevant skills and knowledge, we provide them with enhanced economic opportunities.

We have successfully trained and placed talented students who previously faced financial hardships. This has enabled them to break the cycle of poverty and build a more prosperous future.

Goal 8: decent work and economic growth

Our work in multimedia and animation contributes to decent work and economic growth by creating job opportunities for our students. Upon completing our programs, they gain access to a diverse range of employment options as graphic designers, animators, visual effects artists, etc. They become financially independent. This enables them to contribute to the country's GDP.

Goal 10: reduced inequalities

We are dedicated to reducing inequalities by providing equal access to education and employment opportunities in the field of multimedia and animation. We prioritize inclusion by welcoming students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. We actively contribute to reducing income and wealth disparities.

We firmly believe that everyone should have an equal opportunity to pursue their passion and excel in the multimedia industry.

Language Interpreters, a project coordinator and a placement officer. The whole team contributes toward creating a supportive learning environment for our students.

Multimedia and Animation Training Centre for Divyangjans provides training in software such as Adobe-Photoshop, After Effects, Illustrator, Premier Pro and Silhouette. It helps the students learn graphic designing and visual effects. Additionally, it offers classes in Indian Sign Language (ISL), as not all hearing-impaired persons are aware of it, and often have their own sign languages. By teaching them ISL during the training, we help them with continuous learning, and skills related to communication and interpersonal relationships, with respect to communicating with their peers.

During the course, students also learn financial management, English, MS Office, and skills related to motivation, personality development, interviews and resume writing. This operation commenced with a modest group of students and trainers. However, over the years, we have been able to scale up the program.

By the end of the training, the students are placed in relevant sectors with the help of the placement officer. Alumni have been able to obtain gainful employment with many visual effects & photo studios.

These include organizations such as Gemini FX, Sri Sarathi Studios, Prasad Effects, Janata Digital Lab and Colors Digital Press. They have also been able to obtain jobs with

Ashray Akruti

the graphic designing departments of many e-commerce giants.

Till date, we have trained 750 hearing-impaired students, and placed 345 of them in relevant job roles. This training program also bridges the communication gap between prospective employers and our hearing-impaired students. We do this with the help of our Sign Language Interpreter (SLI) through regular follow-ups and counselling.

It is heartening to learn that companies are now eager to hire more students from our centre for their workforce. Companies have shown their support by providing funding and mentoring.

Our students have become high performers in many companies. Take, for instance, our alumna Habeeb, a 19-year-old girl who hails from an underprivileged family. She has secured a position as a Roto Artist at Sri Sarathi Studios after completing our program. She is now financially independent, and supports her family as well.

Similarly, Stevenson, one of our students, was orphaned and has hearing impairment and night blindness. He has defied the odds. He is now a successful Graphic Designer at Photo Express.

Our approach to multimedia and animation training has changed the lives of our students for the better. It has been able to challenge conventional notions about what is possible for individuals with disabilities.

Through this commitment to breaking down barriers and promoting equal opportunities, Multimedia and Animation Training Centre for Divyangjans has become an example of what can be achieved when creativity, passion and dedication come together.

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Connect On:

Review of 'Turning the pot, tilling the land'

Supriya R Menon

Land-relations, caste-system, gender and social justice are topics that don't come immediately to mind when talking about children's books. However, these are issues that are inescapable for millions of children across the country. Their everyday lives are stories of struggles, and in some cases, of triumph over these struggles.

These narratives can fill several volumes of books. Despite this, these are not issues that are generally considered apt for children. Therefore, they do not find their way into children's literature too often. These also do not get discussed enough in spaces of learning.

The beautifully illustrated book *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land*, focuses on these very fraught topics. It has been written by Kancha Ilaiah, a prominent Indian scholar, writer and anti-caste activist. It has been published by Navayana, and illustrated by Durgabai Vyam, an artist belonging to the Gond tribe.

In the book's introduction, Ilaiah alludes to the 2006 protests by medical students against caste-based reservation for seats in central educational institutes. Some forms of these protests (that struck the author) included students taking to the streets and sweeping roads, polishing shoes, etc. They did this as a mark of the 'lowly' nature of these jobs and what the students would have to turn to if denied seats.

Ilaiah calls out how deeply embedded the notions of caste, and the lack of dignity of labor associated with the so-called lower castes, are within our society. *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land* tries to introduce frameworks that enable children to appreciate the dignity of labor, the embodied knowledge that one acquires while performing productive labour, and its development through history. The book also illustrates how these processes intersect with social structures of gender and caste in India.

Each of the book's chapters deals with different communities and occupations. Throughout its eleven chapters, Ilaiah highlights how the caste system in India has relegated communities engaged in life sustaining tasks such as the tilling of land, leatherworks, pottery, farming, etc., as 'lower' castes. In contrast, those born into the so called 'upper castes,' and revered, are often those engaged in non-productive occupations.

For example, chapter 7 of the book focuses on the irony of the caste group of the *dhobis* (cloth washing community). These communities, who discovered soap, cleaned clothes, and helped maintain hygiene, have been branded as an 'unclean' caste under the backward/other backward caste groups across different states in the country.

This thought-provoking book provides a critical analysis of the social, political and economic conditions of different 'labor caste groups' and the 'non-productive' upper-caste groups, as Ilaiah refers to them. He argues that currently Indian society is structured in such a way that the caste system is deeply embedded in every aspect of life. It structures everything from education to economics, politics to religion.

Ilaiah discusses how the denial of education to the laboring castes, has limited scientific advances in this country. He also emphasizes

the importance of challenging the caste system and promoting a more equitable food and labor system that values the contributions of all individuals regardless of their caste or social identity.

For children who remain unexposed to these issues, this book provides ample opportunities to delve into these ideas. It can also help them understand linkages between the ideas across different chapters. It is simply written. Different sections within chapters carry small nuggets of facts and questions, which can be explored further.

However, the ideas being dealt with are not simple or straightforward. These would need appropriate guidance and support from educators, parents and facilitators. This would help younger children navigate and critically engage with the book's ideas.

For example, the chapter on farmers includes two sections that can be explored further by children. One of these revolves around understanding seasonality and cultivation. It has multiple questions that can enable the facilitator to introduce different concepts. These include seasonality and climate change, political economy of farming covering either one or multiple themes, such as caste and land ownership, focus on cash crops, need for multi-cropping etc.

However, the facilitator would need to set enough context before delving into critical discussions. They will also need to provide access to other resources, such as, additional books, videos, articles and experiential processes, for children to meaningfully engage in these discussions.

Another way to explore the intersectionality of caste, labor, gender, etc. is through the beautiful illustrations that accompany each chapter. For example, in the chapter on potters, some of the illustrations showcase men and women engaged in different activities in the process of making pottery. The facilitator can perhaps decide to focus on

the concept of gender roles for further study through this chapter.

Another possibility for further exploration for students could be the artform itself. One could understand more about the Gond tribes, their spread across the country, the development and evolution of the Gondi artform, the focus on nature in most paintings/illustrations, the uniqueness of the use of dashes and dots in the illustrations, etc.

Introducing these ideas to children with appropriate guidance and sensitivity, providing spaces for experiencing and engaging in relevant work, whether it be cleaning, gardening, working with clay, etc., and critically discussing and questioning the connections between food, labor, caste and gender, would perhaps provide a better understanding of how systems of oppression pervade all aspects of life in the country. It can also help our children develop an understanding about how promoting social justice requires a comprehensive approach that addresses these interwoven systems of inequality.

Bibliographic Details: Kancha Ilaiah. 2007. *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land: Dignity of Labour in Our Times*. New Delhi: Navayana.
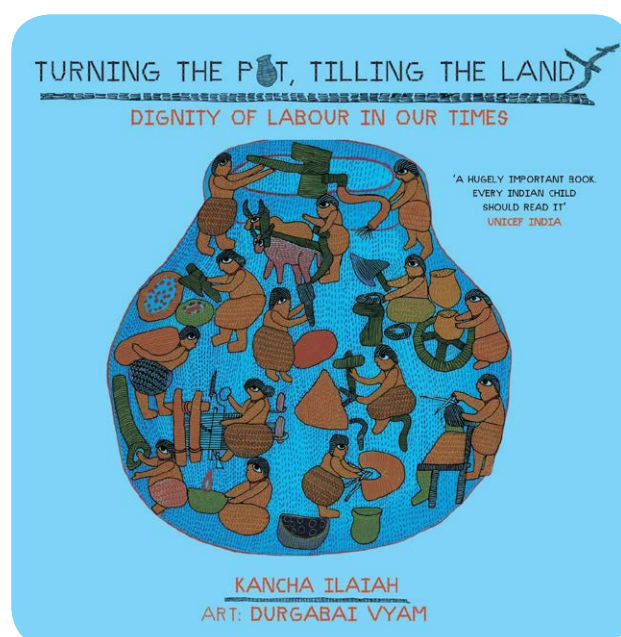
Work and education: some aids for thinking and practice

Samuhik Pahal Team

The relationship between work and education is multilayered. In this section, we have put together three books/ documents that explore the interface between these two domains. All the three highlight elements of practice.

Nyla Coelho. 2012. *Our Land Our Life: A Curriculum for Children of Rural Communities in India*. Mapusa, Goa: Organic Farming Association of India.

This book is the result of an engagement with a large number of stakeholders with the goal of preparing a land-based curriculum for children in rural India. All national and state-level curricula tend to focus on urban areas. These often do not address rural communities' needs, and generally ignore the local, rural context. They are also usually based on a 'chalk and talk' pedagogy.

In this context 'Our Land Our Life' fills in a critical gap in our thinking about education. It genuinely tries to think about alternatives in education, and how these can be reimagined through the process of recovering and revitalizing our agricultural traditions.

It contains a curricular framework for land-based education in rural India for children aged 6-16 years. However this curriculum is quite flexible with respect to the age factor. This curricular framework has been developed with two foundational concepts. The first is that of 'living systems,' which sees everything as living and as part of systems that limit, organize and perpetuate themselves in an interlinked yet autonomous manner. The second concept is that of 'learning by reflecting on experience.'

The curriculum contained in this book has multiple goals. The first is to provide children with a system of well-rounded education that helps them become reflective citizens. The other goal is to support them obtain the skills and knowledge needed to create sustainable livelihoods for themselves, which are either land-based or are related to local industries and services dependent on agriculture.

As a result, the curriculum contains both academic subjects and modules related to agriculture. The framework of pedagogy envisaged by the curriculum, and the book, is centered on the learner and is activity-focused. It is also sensitive to the contexts of rural India. It brings in the so-called 'extra-

A curriculum for children of rural communities in india
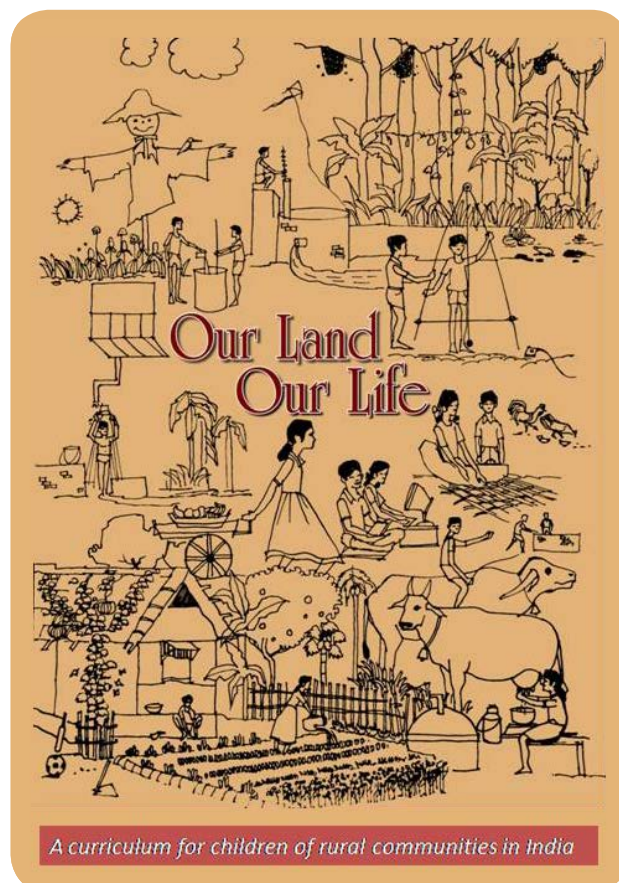
curricular activities' in as an important part of learning.

The activities are so designed as to facilitate an interface with the local living systems, farming communities, and neighborhoods. However, the book does not contain activity guides, or teaching resources/manuals.

These are perhaps best developed locally. This is because of the importance of the role and the autonomy of teachers/facilitators in the teaching-learning process.

Hence, it is perhaps for the better that activity guides and teaching manuals are not included in the volume, as the activities are best developed and executed locally with teachers/facilitators as active agents.

This note is essentially a reworked version of the 'Summary' provided at the beginning of the book. A free copy of the book may be downloaded here.

Sangram Gaikwad (Editor). 2010. *Selected Essays of Dr. S. S. Kalbag on Education, Technology & Rural Development*. Pune: Vigyan Ashram.

This is a collection of essays by Dr Shrinath S. Kalbag (23rd October 1928 - 30th July 2003), who was a scientist and educationist. After completing a PhD degree in Food Technology in the University of Illinois, Chicago, USA, he returned to India. At first he worked at Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) at Mysore as a scientist.

Later he joined the Research Centre of a major MNC's Indian operations, as head of the Engineering Sciences Department in Mumbai. He worked there until 1982. Then he took voluntary retirement, and started working on establishing an institute of non-formal education for the rural youth. It was to be modelled on an ashram, with the goal of working for rural development. This was the genesis of Vigyan Ashram (VA) set up in 1983
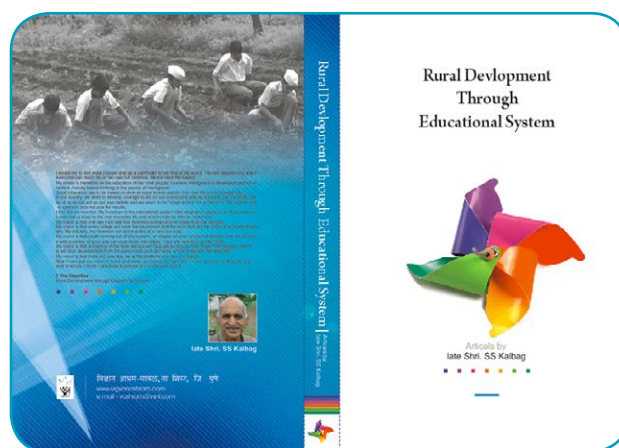
in Pabal, Taluka Shirur, in the Pune district of Maharashtra. VA has made important contribution to the field of work-based education in India. The work of the ashram survives the demise of Dr Kalbag in 2003.

The essays collected in this volume are important for multiple reasons. First, they help break the narrow 'vocational' focus of a large number of discussions surrounding work and education in India.

At the same time, the essays collected in the book highlight the relevant of foregrounding the need for an education system in India that is relevant for the needs of its rural areas.

In this context, the book brings in important considerations related to science and appropriate technology into discussions surrounding education. The essays contained in the volume bring home the idea that education can be intrinsically related to the work and lives of students, instead of just training them to become cogs in a pre-existing system.

Some of the essays in the book also directly deal with the work of Vigyan Ashram. They provide important learnings for other organizations who may want to work in the interface of rural development, appropriate technology and education.

The book deals with a variety of relevant topics. These include 'Construction Alternatives,' 'Information Technology Can Make a Breakthrough in Education,' and

'Science through Technical Education' to 'How to Use Technology for Rural Development.'

For anyone who wants to explore the linkages between work and education in rural India, *Selected Essays of Dr. S. S. Kalbag* provides enough food for both thought and practice.

A free copy of the volume may be downloaded here.

Anil Sadgopal, et. al. 2007. *Position Paper of the National Focus Group on Work and Education*. New Delhi: NCERT.

This position paper explores the pedagogic role of work in education. It focuses especially on how marginalized children, consisting of more than fifty percent of India's child population, can learn, drawing from the context of their own natural and social environments. It also grapples with the way children from privileged backgrounds are increasingly alienated from their socio-cultural roots and how work-based education can address this issue.

The position paper identifies the separate silos in which work and knowledge are put, as a crucial pathway through which practices of exclusion work in the Indian context. This is exemplified by the fact that social groups working with their hands are denied access to formal education. On the other hand, most of those having access to formal education learn to denigrate manual work and generally lack any productive skills.

The position paper identifies Gandhi's Nai Talim (Basic Education) as an important challenge to such practices of education and knowledge making. In the Basic Education framework, children are expected to work in real-life like situations.

Their work in such contexts, reflections upon this process, and the teachers' inputs together constitute ways in which knowledge is obtained, values are cultivated and skills

are learnt. All this is supposed to take place in a holistic manner, integrating 'the head, the heart and the hands.'

The paper critiques policy frameworks and practices in Indian education to show how the pedagogic role of productive work has never been given the importance it deserves. It reaffirms the point that the pedagogic role of work in education must not be conflated with vocational education.

It recommends the reestablishment of our whole pre-primary and K12 education system, with work as the central pedagogic method. It envisages both productive work and social engagement as part of this process.

The position paper also shares the enabling conditions necessary for institutionalizing a system of education across the country based on work. Some of these include a common school system, and a system of process-based assessment.

The position paper calls for the implementation of work-centred education in the school system across the country in a time-bound manner. It also makes the argument that Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) in India would not be possible without a system of common, neighbourhood schools, and it sees work-centred education as the key to creating such a system.

This note about the position paper significantly draws upon its 'Executive Summary.' A copy of this document may be downloaded here.

We hope that the three volumes shared here help you to relook at the relationship between work and education in a meaningful manner. These are very good guides indeed as gentle nudges to reflect upon our own thinking and practice in this very important space.

Integration of work and education

Aastha Maggu

The dialogue surrounding work has often been limited to vocational training and skill development. However, larger questions on how work can serve as a pedagogical tool, and foster the inculcation of values, have been overlooked. In this ground zero piece, we explore the perspectives of three organizations that shed light on the importance of viewing work in a holistic manner within the educational context.

Learning through crafts

After the havoc caused by the Gujarat earthquake in 2001, Khamir was established in Kachchh with the aim of repositioning and revitalizing the crafts of the region, and to ensure their sustainability for future generations of artisans. It serves as a platform for encouraging and preserving traditional handicrafts, allied cultural practices, and community and local environments.

Khamir advocates for a crafts-based curriculum inspired by the Nai Talim pedagogy advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. This is based on the idea that knowledge and work are not separate, but can be integrated to enrich each other. According to this philosophy, a child's education should be holistic, involving the use of his head, hands and heart. This can be achieved by teaching them a useful handicraft as a medium of their holistic development.

Khamir

Rushikesh from Khamir emphasizes, "The current education system is plagued by problems of rote learning, with little focus on skill development and practical learning approaches. Through our crafts-focused curriculum, we aim to integrate the craft knowledge system into the modern education system. We envision the crafts to provide a practical context, which enables and integrates the learning of all subjects such as history, science, mathematics and more.

Khyati from Khamir adds, "We have realized that many children in Kachchh are unaware of the different crafts practiced in other communities. Craft learning is often approached from a market perspective. We need to explore the social, historical, scientific, cultural, ecological and livelihood interconnections inherent in crafts through a systemic approach."

The crafts curriculum is designed for children between grades 5 to 8, aged between 10 and 15 years, who attend rural and urban schools in Kachchh. Khamir believes that children in this age group are receptive to learning and curious about new concepts. The crafts curriculum puts children's learning needs and their social, cultural, economic, and the political and environment context, in primary focus.

The implementation of the curriculum in schools involves collaborations between school teachers and artisans as resource teachers, with the support of Khamir.

School teachers receive training of crafts and support from Khamir resource persons through craft workshops. The team also collaborates with teachers to create content and resources for experiential and contextual teaching.

In developing the curriculum, Khamir's plan has been to incorporate the perspectives of all stakeholders, including artisans, teachers, school management committees, panchayats, educational institutes, designers, educators, and government education departments, including DIETs.

The Khamir team has defined the scope of concepts in mathematics, science, environmental sciences, language, and social sciences. Each concept is mapped by the team to its corresponding craftsmanship, real-life experiences to be gained, and desired skills and values.

For example, in the weaving curriculum developed by the team, various concepts are interconnected. If a child is learning how to measure the amount of yarn needed to weave a fabric, mathematical concepts such as two and three-digit arithmetic operations applied through the unitary method, as well as measurements and units of weight and length, can be taught.

Children can gain experience by making their own small loom for weaving. Through these activities, children will develop skills in analytical thinking, problem-solving, measurement and estimation.

For teaching language concepts, the curriculum includes introducing children to local poetry and music in Kachchhi and Gujarati. This allows them to listen to poems and bhajans performed by local artists in their native language.

Furthermore, children are encouraged to write poems in their own language, fostering a deeper connection with artistic expression and an appreciation for diverse forms of creativity.

Developing the curriculum has presented the team with several challenges. Rushikesh and Khyati highlight that it is difficult to implement the approach in the present school structure and its timetable, which is quite inflexible.

The activities do not necessarily fit in a single period in the timetable. It requires a freer and more flexible environment to function. Consequently, the team aims to

adopt a participatory approach, encouraging teachers and the school administration to take ownership, create dedicated spaces, and facilitate flexibility for the crafts curriculum. Through regular communication, the team also addresses any opposition faced from certain parents, who view crafts solely as vocational skills for livelihood, rather than recognizing their potential as a means of learning and enhancing the quality of education.

Through a crafts-based curriculum, and the integration of traditional practices into education, Khamir aims to ensure the sustainability of these crafts. This process also situates artisans as teachers and bearers of valuable knowledge. This approach has the potential to transform the educational experiences of children in schools.

Educating the heart, the mind and the body

Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community was established in 2006 in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, by a former Buddhist monk, Lobsang Phuntsok. Jhamtse Gatsal is a home and a learning community for orphaned and abandoned children from the Monpa tribe of northeast India, which has its roots in Tibet. Jhamtse Gatsal means "the garden of love and compassion" in the local language.

Vasudha Wanchoo from the team shares that the analogy of a garden represents the essence of their work. She explains, "In the lives of our children, we are the gardeners shaping their environment. Just as plants and flowers are inherently equipped with the resources they need to grow and bloom, so do our children. Our job as caregivers and educators is to provide a conducive environment so that they can learn, grow and flourish on their own."

As part of their education model, they interweave the education of each child's heart, mind and body. The mind is believed to provide children with the wisdom to guide their actions. The heart will help them treat everyone with compassion. And the body will

Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community

enable them to acquire the skills to serve. Their pedagogy focuses on the pillars of learning, reflection and engagement. Vasudha explained that after a child receives a lesson, the focus shifts to providing the space for the child to reflect on their learning and come up with sustainable activities from within the community to engage in.

With educating the heart, the mind, and the body, and the 'learn, reflect and engage' pedagogy as the bedrock, the overarching goal is for the children to become self-reliant in the near future. The children are encouraged to participate in all aspects of community life, such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of their siblings.

Rashmi from the Jhamtse team recalls, "There was a child in kindergarten who was given the responsibility to clean a certain part of the community. There was no one supervising her, and she did it with such dedication." Encouraging the children to actively participate in various aspects of community life instills a sense of responsibility.

By integrating real-world experiences into their lessons, the children acquire practical skills and develop a deep understanding of the concepts, which stay with them. For instance, when the children were taught the concept of perimeter, the Jhamtse team came up with an activity where the children worked with the construction team to help them with their measurements and calculations.

Vasudha added, "When the children are in the kitchen cooking, they can see the concepts of chemistry come alive, such as the changing of colors when we add turmeric to our food or higher acidity from sour ingredients like tomatoes. When the children learn concepts in their classes and observe them in action, those learnings stay with them. For example, participating in the sustainable farming practices at Jhamtse Gatsal helps our children eat nutritious and healthy food on

Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community

a daily basis. It helps them understand the complexities of the environmental and socio-economic impact of the food supply chain. It makes them see the benefits of building a strong community and social connections by farming together as well."

Jhamtse Gatsal's goal is not to mould children for specific careers but to empower them to make meaningful contributions to the world in their own unique ways, through their holistic approach to education.

By nurturing their innate abilities, and fostering a strong sense of compassion and self-reliance, the children of Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community are provided with the tools they need to lead fulfilling lives and positively impact their communities.

Learning by doing

Vidhyalay Udhyam Association - School Enterprise Network - aims to unleash the entrepreneurial capabilities of children in rural and remote areas of Udaipur, Rajasthan. The Makers Labs initiative, started by Vidhyalay Udhyam in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (governmental residential schools for girls), envisions a space where children can create product prototypes to solve community problems.

These labs provide children with the freedom to experiment and learn through perseverance. Moreover, the labs offer resources for learning coding, physical computing and robotics.

Ashwani Tiwari, co-founder of Vidhyalayam Udhayam in Udaipur, Rajasthan, explained, "Work cannot be looked at in isolation from education. It is through work that children can gain skills, attitudes and values to live meaningfully. For instance, the children learned to build an LED bulb on their own. Firstly, they understood the concept of paper circuits and explored various applications. These children observed the differences between series and parallel circuits. Then they sought our assistance in soldering, and successfully built a bulb. That is the beauty of these maker spaces—they allow each child to learn by doing."

The team draws inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobha Bhave regarding their inclusion of work in education. They believe that these maker labs will serve as spaces where children can acquire 21st-century skills like coding and computing, and a solution-centric mindset that promotes entrepreneurial development. The team also organizes hackathons periodically, where students build innovative solutions on specific themes.

Within the makers lab, children have built localized solutions. Ashwani recounted one child realizing that adding a pulley to the well would make it easier for their mothers to draw water, and by adding gears, even less

effort would be required. Another child tried to figure out using the Global Positioning System (GPS) to track their sheep, in case they got lost. The team believes that all these solutions, where children apply what they have learned in their textbooks, will foster a culture of learning by doing, innovation, and reduced fear of failure.

However, parents are often nervous about their children's prospects and insist on them preparing for government jobs. Ashwani shared that equating the value of education solely with career prospects places an unfair burden on children, overshadowing the joy of learning.

Teachers also tend to prioritize certain skills. For instance, mechanical skills may be undervalued. Often computer operating skills are highly regarded.

Vidhyalay Udhyam believes that for a meaningful learning experience for children, the mind and the hands need to be used together. The team is attempting to build spaces that allow children to understand things in a hands-on manner.

In conclusion

In the ever-evolving education landscape of the 21st century, it is imperative to approach work and education in a more integrated manner for the holistic development of children.

Education should be approached comprehensively, incorporating work to cultivate skills, attitudes, knowledge and values, which equip children to lead lives of purpose and significance.

You may reach out to the organizations featured in the story at:
ghatit.laheru@khamir.org (Khamir); vasudha@jhamtse.org (Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community); and pfelashwani@gmail.com (Vidhyalay Udhyam Association - School Enterprise Network).

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