



02 Freedom from Teaching

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Introduction

I am no expert at anything and I would like to say right at the beginning that I am still learning. My ideas on what a school should be like are based on my memories as a school teacher. To be frank, when I started Puvudham learning centre I did not know how children should be taught or what kind of an environment children needed, but I did know that, as a student, I had not learnt anything of value in the classroom. So I presumed that all children do not learn in such environments.

Based on this presumption, I looked back on my experiences and realized that most of the memories were of anger and resentment at the school and teachers. It was then that I felt that I wanted to be different: I did not want any child to look back on her school life and remember me with such negative feelings.

It was then that I came across the words of a famous teacher. *A young monk once asked him, "Tell me master, what masters are for?" He had smiled and replied, "Well! They're for nothing at all! They teach you what you already know and show you what you have already seen."* This stuck in my mind.

I was further educated by my children as I observed how they learnt without being taught! I observed that the child uses its body to learn. The body is the first tool for learning. The body teaches the mind and the mind builds a world of pictures, experiences and actions that the body is involved in. The body experiences are instrumental to construct the outside world inside the mind. Trust, self-confidence, co-operation, honesty, truthfulness, sensitivity, autonomy and other

positive (and even negative) attitudes stem from personal experiences. I also observed that anything was learnt fastest and best when the child decided to learn it. Learning is full of challenges for the mind, even when the will is its own. This being the nature of learning, the role of the teacher was an enigma to me.

The child's mind is very active and inquiring. I was surprised by my daughter's perception when she was around three years old. She was able to deduce where our cows were grazing by observing the egrets flying around. She knew that the egrets liked to perch on the cows. She sucked all the grasses and flowers and knew which ones had nectar or sweet sap in them! She could recognize the differences in the grasses just by looking at the blades. If I gave her a stem of grass that did not have a sweet sap she would say, "No, not this ma!" Even before my son, aged two years then, could voice his questions, I had observed him doing an experiment. We had a lot of small triangular pieces of Cudappah stone lying around. One day I saw him make a triangular piece of stone stand on its base and then he pushed it down. It was interesting how he touched it to make it fall. After a lot of trials he knew that if he wanted to use very little effort he must touch it at the tip. And what followed was an even more surprising. He picked up some stones and went and sat down a little far away and then threw stones at the tip to make it fall. In this activity he was engrossed for more than an hour! *And there are studies that say that the attention span of a small child is only about six minutes!*

Slowly I came to the conclusion that I did not have to teach anything, but had a lot to learn. The only use my children had for me was my reading skills.

To read them stories and sing songs, and find answers for their questions in the encyclopedia, that's all I did!

The philosophy

When I decided to start the school, I wanted to give the same kind of freedom to move, inquire and learn to all the children. But the children who had already been to school and dropped out were very afraid to ask questions. At that time I decided to make some of the Montessori material.

The idea of working independently with their hands in the safe environment of the classroom was very appealing. Alongside making vegetable beds, composting, mulching, herbal sprays and seed selection was very interesting and appropriate for all of us since we were all farmers first.

Now I was beginning to have a clear philosophy for our school. The purpose of education is defined by our way of life and the purpose of our life. What is the purpose of man's life? Many philosophers have tried to answer this question. They have all arrived at their conclusions through different theories. But the fact remains that purpose was born before man – so to speak. The purpose of continuity of life, the purpose of harmony of living beings in any biosphere, the purpose of one life feeding another, the purpose



Observing insects

of the Sun, the Water, the Sky, the Earth and the Air. Evolving from this the only purpose of man's life would be to support all these other purposes within his limited means.

The term development is very controversial. Development as it is generally understood stands for accessibility to roads and electricity and a whole lot of comforts and products that come along with these two. But such development generally brings with it a pollutant called greed.

When we look at the tribal societies which have not got corrupted with this development, we find a level of contentment and happiness that we can not see in the most developed parts of the world. In early societies, before all this confusion about development clouded the common man's view, each society was aware of its collective dependence on the surrounding landscape and the flora and fauna therein.

Organic agriculture or farming was the basis of all great civilizations. It was the first art, craft, science and economics that man learnt. Farming was the foundation of the evolution of all the other specializations of work and study. Yet farming is now forgotten and lost in machines and spacecrafts that can do no good to anyone without the basis of farming and food production. Farming is the most important occupation on earth for nothing can survive without food. While this simple fact has not changed, the attitudes of society have shifted drastically. Farming is now left to the people who are considered incapable of doing anything else. Farming is not considered a worthy occupation. It is felt to be the lowest of occupations. Education plays a key role in this distinction. For example, most farmers cannot read what goes into the things they use in the farm. Most people cannot read the warnings on the pesticide packs. Nor can they read the instructions of self-protection. Farming is done by people who have no notion of pollution of the soil, water and air, by people who can never be expected to understand the phenomenon

of global warming, open market economy or even the importance of planting trees.

In our school we treat farming as a very important activity. Amongst career options like doctor, engineer, teacher, 'farmer' is included with pride.

The genesis

I was born and brought up in Mumbai. 20 years in Mumbai opened my eyes to the various facets of the urban life and the realities behind these. After finishing my degree in Architecture from Sir J.J. College of Architecture, my search for an alternative brought me to Auroville near Pondicherry where I worked with low cost eco-friendly construction technologies. I had always been interested in children and schools and often went to Isai Ambalam where I met Umesh who was doing Organic farming. Being disillusioned in the same way after finishing his B tech in Mechanical engineering from IIT Chennai he was also looking for an alternative way of life.

After working with a few organizations for some years we decided to settle down on our own and practice the various alternatives in farming, construction and education. In 1992 we bought a completely degraded 12-acre piece of land in a drought-prone area of Dharmapuri District in Tamil Nadu. There were about two acres of arable land where we could grow dry land crops and 10 acres of eroded hill slopes on which we could only hope to regenerate the land by creating a forest. For the first 3 years there were good rains and we were able to do farming and a lot of soil and water conservation work. Numerous indigenous species of trees and grasses regenerated. We also planted forest trees and sowed fodder grass. The completely barren brown piece of land was slowly coming to life when the rains became erratic and undependable. In 1997 the rains failed completely. Our crops all dried up in the fields. We then understood the plight of the farmer.

That year we decided that we could not completely depend on rain-fed agriculture to support us and so

we bought some land in a valley with a dependable source of water. But due to prior intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides the first two years of organic farming failed to produce good yields in the irrigated land. In the third year natural balance began to establish itself. We were careful not to apply even herbal sprays when we noticed beneficial insects. By the 4th year the land had regained its health and our outputs improved. Around this time we decided to work with local people to convert to organic methods of agriculture, through their **children - the future farmers**.

So we started a school in 2000 based on the ideologies of Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and E.F. Schumacher using methods demonstrated by Maria Montessori, David Horsburgh, Rudolf Steiner and Janet and Glen Doman. We had 7 children in 2000. Now we have 90 children in our school. The school charges a fee based on the occupation of the parents and the economic situation of the family. We also run a hostel for children of migrant labourers. There are 30 children in the hostel. The children live and learn with us. The day scholars are children of nearby farmers. All of them are first generation learners.

But we faced a problem. The parents were keen to have their children to learn English and asked us to educate them in such a way that they could find a job



Puvidham children gardening

quickly and leave the village. They did not want any ideas about their children continuing to farm organic or otherwise. Now there was the dilemma- what do these children need to learn? Who will decide?

The environment

Someone has said, “The only person who is educated is the person who has learnt how to learn; how to adapt and change; who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Reliance on process rather than on static knowledge is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the present circumstances.”

With these basic perceptions we went about designing our school environment and content. The total focus of all that we do in Puvudham learning Centre is to try to create an environment where the inherent sensitivity and intuition of the child is sharpened and encouraged rather than demoralized and snuffed out. Sensitivity to animals, to plants, to nature as an entity, to other people and to the inner personality or the self is kept alive through working with nature. We try to understand the child. We completely trust the child. Our empathy and confidence in their good nature is reciprocated by the children. We are all individuals who are imperfect and who have shortcomings. But we are open to sharing our fears and learning from our mistakes.

Each of us is accountable for our actions and any one can challenge any action. There is a great sense of



community and we share the work of maintaining our campus and toilets. Cooking, cleaning, laughing, teasing, we all have a great time together.

Sensitivity makes space for creativity and scientific discovery and is the door to the formation of a philosophy of life and the guiding hand for self-discovery.

In conventional schools learning has become fragmented, removed from life and has been made very abstract. It is rarely that a child can make connections between what he/she learns at school and what happens in real life.

Our intention is to **integrate life and learning** and help children to synthesize knowledge through the observations and experiences made available to the child in the school environment or the real life environment.



Telling time with the sun's shadow

The content

Keeping all these requirements in mind, we decided to classify our learning into five basic modules:

Five elements: The Sun, Earth, Water, Air and Space.

The five elements are essential for survival. The children learn the physical properties and experience

these elements through their five senses. The adult just draws the children's attention to certain aspects of the element that they are relating with the concepts to be learnt. The teachers write stories and songs based on the concepts the children need to learn. Our curriculum has evolved on this foundation but has included the story telling and singing tradition as a means of passing on ideas effortlessly.

The basic essential concepts deemed necessary by the educational boards and institutions we incorporate in stories and songs which are repeated and recited in class. The children make concept drawings to express what they have understood from the stories and songs. There is a lot of talking among the children and with the teacher. The children are free to move in and out of the classroom and as long as they do not disturb the others, they can participate on their own terms. Emphasis is placed on reuse of paper, proper use of learning material, respect for other living things in the environment. Mathematical activities like counting, sorting, classifying, measuring, measured drawings, scaled drawings and geometrical drawings like the traditional rangolies are all used to include mathematics in the class activities.

Drawing is an important expression of the children's inner worlds. The children are happy to draw and we are happy to learn about their inner most dreams and troubles through these pictures which they share with us. A lot of emphasis and time is given on making drawings of plants and trees, flowers and insects, sceneries and buildings. The children learn a lot of details about the object by observing it and drawing. A lot of questions are also generated and there is a lot of discussion among the children as they observe what others have observed and they have missed.

Discussions, walks, observations and questions are a part of everyday classes. Children are guided to speak about what it is they know about the element or the concept and then the teacher helps them to build on their existing knowledge of the same.



The children are divided into groups. On an empty plot of land they decide and mark the part they want to grow plants in. They measure the plot and draw it to scale. They design the rows and decide what they want to plant. They calculate the quantity of seed they will need. They mulch, water and watch their plants grow. They measure the rate of growth, count the number of flowers and compare with the number of fruits. They observe and sketch the plant parts and the insects and birds that visit. Finally they compute the time they spent gardening and the quantity of vegetables they could harvest and make a cost analysis of their activity. They also learn to make natural pest control extracts and vermi-composting. They learn a lot about the plants, herbs, and trees, creepers that are found in the region. They learn to identify them and use them for medicine or food or composting or mulching. They are connected with the surroundings through these experiences and all their knowledge of physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, language and drawing is evolving from this experience. The knowledge is changing and growing all the time and is ready to be used.

Since the emphasis is on generating wonderful experiences which will help the children build a wonderful, loving, trustworthy and honest world inside their minds, we make sure that the children have enough chances to meet many visitors and interact with them. They also travel to other parts of the

country and spend around 15 to 20 days in different cultural and climatic regions. Travel does open up their horizons and they bloom and their fragrance fills our lives.

This type of knowledge synthesizing process, we believe, will empower the child and make him/her feel that their methods of learning which helped them acquire so much knowledge till they got to school is a valid method.

This approach has two main aims: firstly, to make the experiences that students have at the school relevant to the student's lives. Secondly, the method gives value to the children's own knowledge thereby helping them to continue in the same vein without any negativity.

Children have a lot of experience outside the school while helping out at home, while socializing and playing. This knowledge of theirs is generally

brushed aside as useless. In our school these experiences can be discussed, validated, and used to build positive responses. The children can bring up any of their concerns and they will be taken up as seriously as any concept to be learnt.

By celebrating and using the knowledge that children have about the environment, and by presenting farming as a positive choice socially, the children from our school will have a more balanced perspective.

We do hope that the fact that they have had so much time to dwell on it will help them resist the universal pressure to make money the sole object of their work and maybe a few years down the line they will find ways of living a simple, dignified, economically satisfying and fruitful life based on farming and the values they have imbibed from our school.



Born and brought up in Mumbai, MEENAKSHI has a degree in Architecture from Sir J.J. College of Architecture. She has worked with low-cost, eco-friendly construction technologies at Auroville, near Pondicherry. For several years, she, along with her partner, Umesh, has practiced various alternatives in farming, construction and education in a drought-prone area of Dharmapuri District in Tamil Nadu. In 2000, they started a school based on the ideologies of Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and E.F. Schumacher using methods demonstrated by Maria Montessori, David Horsburgh, Rudolf Steiner and Janet and Glen Doman. They now run the Puvudham Rural Development Trust, that works on developing effective organic farming techniques and providing a humane and child-centered education environment for children in the Nagarkoodal area of Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, India. For more details, visit www.puvudham.org. She can be contacted at puvidham@gmail.com