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Rethinking Education

“Intelligence is the capacity to perceive the essential, the what is; And to awaken this capacity, in oneself and in others, is education”

- J. Krishnamurti

“56% of Class VIII students in India can't divide a 3-digit number with a single-digit one; 27% can't read” - ASER Survey, 2018

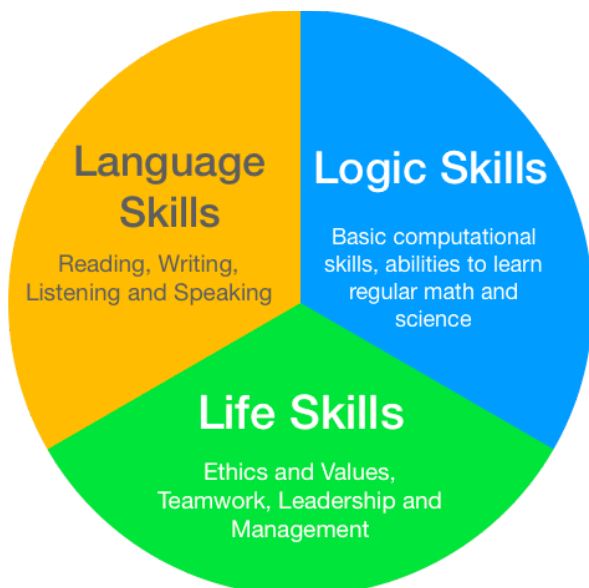
Labelled the “dullest” of his class, 12-year-old Shiva, was sent to Akshara Vanam, a school based in Kalwakurthy, Telangana with little hope of getting by, let alone showing improvement. Today, less than 18 months after joining the school, Shiva can comfortably multiply two compound fractions, most of the calculations done in his head. Located seemingly in the middle of nowhere, Akshara Vanam is a school run by Vande Mataram

Foundation¹, with less than 50 students and hardly any teachers. Yes, you read that right - it's hard to locate any teachers in the premises of the school, as the model followed here is based largely on peer-learning. From reading textbooks, to solving problems, to even setting their own question papers, the students do it all in Akshara Vanam.

¹ Vande Mataram Foundation,
<https://vandemataramfoundation.in/>



The main premise of the school's functioning is based on two simple facts - every student has a different pace of learning, and each one has a different set of pre-existing abilities. Students then, are divided into groups, based on their current learning levels, and are allowed to learn on their own and help each other. There exists a facilitator to guide them, in case no child is able to figure out a solution. Children are expected to acquire the following three skills.



“Writing can be learnt by reading, and speaking can be learnt by listening” - is the mantra followed while allowing students to learn a language. Thereby, the only way kids learn English, for instance, is by reading English story books, and watching English movies.

Logic skills are learnt, and not taught. Simple concepts such as multiplication and division, are discovered by students instead of being thrust upon them. Worksheets act as testing methods, and they are designed not just to assess the performance of students, but mainly to aid learning.

Assessment is continuous - students take these tests every week, and are “promoted” to the next level if they are able to solve a question paper with 90% accuracy, 3 times in a row. At the same time, promotion isn't permanent, and a student could be demoted if he/she is failing to keep up. One of the most

remarkable qualities displayed by these children, is their lack of fear of examinations, and by extension, of failure. This is heartening to see at a time when the childhood fear of the dark is being superseded by a fear of examinations.²

There is no dearth of surveys and reports indicating a clear lack of soft skills among Indian graduates.³ When school children are taught to stay silent in classrooms, and merely obey teachers' instructions, it is but natural for them to never learn how to speak up. Giving children their space to grow and learn, without imposing unnecessary restrictions on them enhances their creativity. Encouraging them to learn from one another builds a sense of team spirit, and equips them to handle

interpersonal relationships in future.



At Akshara Vanam, students are made to assess their own performance and award marks to themselves, before their papers are checked by teachers. Assessing oneself is given more importance than actually performing well. Today, pass percentages of class X students in the Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are touted to be 94.9% and 92.4% respectively, while the glaring results of ASER surveys, conducted by Pratham every year, put us to shame. It is no secret that most students today make their way through board examinations by rote-learning and/or mass copying. It is truly worth questioning ourselves,

² Children used to be scared of the dark, now they fear failure, Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/may/29/children-used-to-be-scared-of-the-dark-now-they-fear-failure>

³ National Employability Report, Aspiring Minds, <https://www.aspiringminds.com/sites/default/files/National%20Employability%20Report%20-%20Engineers%20Annual%20Report%202016.pdf>

what is this “success” we speak of?

What stood out most about Shiva was the confidence in his eyes, the enthusiasm one yearns to see in children his age. Whatever he knew, whatever he learnt, one thing was certain - he

is ready to face life. He discovered the joy of learning, and learnt how to learn. The only question he asked me was - “Why don’t others see that we kids learn this way? It shouldn’t be so hard for them to see!” Shiva’s question is right, why don’t we?•

- Gayathri Meka