



**“We are
working
to propel
change”**

Having grown up and studied in the enormous city of Mumbai, India, Meenakshi Singh and Umesh Chandrasekhar were looking for an alternative way of life. After spending eight years farming organically in the district of Dharmapuri, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, they decided to work with local farmers to help them convert to organic agriculture – through their children. They started the Puvudham Learning Centre, a school for children of nearby farmers and migrant labourers that aims to make the experiences at school relevant to children’s lives and to give value to the children’s own knowledge. Starting with seven children in 2000, 95 are now enrolled in their school.

Interview: Laura Eggens

While food can be seen as our most precious possession, farming and the production of food is seen as a last option, carried out by those considered incapable of anything else. Education plays a key role in forming this attitude, both among consumers and farmers themselves. “Interventions in rural areas such as our school may be able to make future generations see things in a better perspective. It can teach them that farming can be an educated option for those who decide to stay in the village in spite of the glamour of the city.”

Meenakshi wanted to give children in the school the freedom to move, enquire and learn. In contrast to conventional schools, she aims to sharpen and encourage the “inherent sensitivity” and intuition of the child. “Sensitivity creates space for creativity and self-discovery”, Meenakshi says. She talks about sensitivity to animals, plants and nature. In contrast, in conventional schools learning has become fragmented into different subjects, and removed from life itself. The Puvudham Learning Centre integrates life and learning, to help children synthesise the knowledge they gain in and outside school. Focusing on “experiential learning”, school activities include drawing, discussions, walks, observations and questions. In groups, children plan how to grow plants on an empty plot, learn about natural pest control, measure their progress, and learn to make a cost-benefit analysis. Children are encouraged to speak about what they already know, and the teacher helps them build on their existing knowledge.

Why was it necessary to start this school? To be frank, the decision to start the school came from my own need to reach out to children. I wanted to allow at least some of them the freedom and happiness I would have appreciated in my school. You see, during my own school years in Mumbai I was unable to understand why I had to go to school at all when I could learn so much more outside the formal educational system. I remember an incident in primary school, when I was wrongly accused of stealing and the teacher did not think it necessary to apologise to me, making me feel worthless. Occurrences like these, in the same way as the existing examination system, made me start questioning whether the school existed to turn me into a good person or only into someone who fitted someone else’s ideal. School distanced me from my mother because she was not able to share what I learned and I was not able to explain it in the language she knew.

Yet education is more than a transfer of knowledge to children and young adults. It plays a key role in personality development and self-esteem. It can give you a very warped picture of yourself and the world. Unfortunately, the schooling system in India, and probably in much of the world, is designed to make children remember exactly what they have been told, giving very little thought to the social and psychological effects. The individual is given too much attention while the wholeness of the human consciousness and consideration for others is hardly touched upon. Often in the rural areas, education tends to disregard local resources and the pride of the local people. The farmers’ children



“We are working to develop a collective conscience and thereby propel change in individuals.” Photo: R. Senthil

experience the same kind of disjointedness with their families as I did with my mother. They do not belong to the village any more. They can see themselves only as future technicians or labourers living in cities and towns. This is facilitated by the media showing the city as a better place for opportunities and good life.

What do you hope to achieve? It is very difficult for anybody to survive completely on farming at present. We hope that by getting the kind of education we are trying to give, young farmers can engage in activities alongside farming and not have to sell their lands and move to the city completely. Farmers can find ways to pool their efforts together without the assistance of outside forces. They can make more calculated decisions that may help them to stay out of debt and become prosperous.

In practice, what effect does this have on students' lives? Our first batch of students has just graduated, so we cannot say much about how their future lives will be affected. We must also keep in mind that many other factors are at play and will determine whether young people can stay in rural areas, such as the family's wishes and needs. Some of our graduates, for example, are goaded into the city by family debts or the lack of land,

working in construction to be able to repay family loans. Nonetheless, we find it gratifying that these children have not been spoiled by a system that forces them to think that white collar jobs are the only ones worth doing. They experience dignity in their labour, whatever it may entail. They respect and care for their families. They co-operate with family decisions and want to keep alive the traditions of farming and living as a family.

And what do the children's parents think? Parents of the children in our school have not been resistant to the school's curriculum, since from the beginning it has included “regular” subjects such as language, science and maths. These standard subjects are part of the school as well, although we don't teach them as separate subjects but combine them as a whole learning experience up until the 6th grade. Thereafter, standardised text books help the children bridge gaps to enrol in government schools after the 8th grade, the last year they spend in our school. Parents see that their children are helpful on the farm and read and write English. In a later stage, when it comes to choosing livelihoods, I think that, deep down, parents also know that farming is a noble occupation.

Do children influence their parents? We tried working with the parents through a farmers' group, but other natural and economic forces made this difficult. But we have seen that working with children helps them have a more pragmatic view of their family situation and their society. It helps the children take on the challenges of farming along with their families. In some cases, students are convincing their parents of the harmful effects of pesticides and are persuading them to do part of their farming organically.

Who are the teachers at the school? Currently, we have five teachers looking after 95 children. The teachers are local young people who have taken a two-year teacher training course after 12th grade. As at first they were not confident in English or in other subjects, they were invited to observe classes for about a month, give feedback and ask questions. I personally tutored them in specific subjects. They are given the basic framework to teach, and then they are given a lot of freedom to experiment and develop their own ways of dealing with difficult and challenged students. Our curriculum was prepared bilingually to facilitate the teachers' understanding of the concepts. It is also delivered to the children in both English and Tamil because we believe that children learn concepts best in their mother tongue. This also facilitates sharing of their learning with their parents back home. The

English terminology and the writing skills are developed alongside.

You are part of a network of alternative schools... Yes, we are part of two networks: a conservation network and an education network. Both of these are informal groups of individuals who are doing their best to make a difference in their world and share their experiences with each other in an informal way. It is a great advantage to meet people from diverse backgrounds. I often feel inspired by their lives and experiences. It is heartening to know that there are others like oneself who are doing as crazy or crazier things with their lives. We have copied ideas from other schools we have visited and seen, and some of our ideas may have been picked up by others. The *Vikasana* school in Bangalore, for example, has been a great source of learning for us about how to teach language, and attending workshops by the Rudolf Steiner group of schools has influenced our attitude towards art. We are open to sharing and have occasionally provided teacher training opportunities for other schools that heard about our work, both through the networks and beyond.

How can policies or politicians help? I believe that policies can do little without people becoming change agents themselves. Our school aims to influence individuals to come forth and build a community of people who are concerned about the environment and about social and cultural values. We are working to develop a collective conscience and thereby propel change in individuals. Perhaps teaching people about the value of agriculture will help them see, for instance, the skewed ways in which different products are valued. The price of a kilo of rice will be negotiated for a bargain, while the

price of a litre of Coca Cola is non-negotiable. We are demeaning the value of healthy food, while junk food is promoted at a fixed price. Education may shed light on many such reasons for the continual poverty of the farmer.

To encourage initiatives that build an alternative way of looking at the world, governments must give these types of schools special consideration and support their initiatives. Rather than forcing us to continuously go through approval procedures, it would be much more beneficial if the authorities would make it a point of regularly visiting schools like ours to see if we are following our own principle and statutes with sincerity. Our approach makes us very different from private schools!

Can your approach to education be scaled up? Personally, I am very much influenced by Schumacher's idea that "small is beautiful". I guess our kind of school has to be a small personal initiative to be successful. But there could be many small personal initiatives of this kind, since there are many young people interested in education in rural areas. The problem is that it is becoming more and more difficult for children to go to a small school in a world where education has become a big business. It is almost an industry in our country now – a robot industry of sorts where they try to smooth out the differences in individuals and mass produce people that think similarly and act in ways that they consider proper.

In the light of this loss of human intelligence and its shameful subjugation to random acts of memory, it becomes imperative to have many more small individual schools that strive to work to help the human intelligence to blossom, and the individual to be a harmonious part of a community.



Education is more than a transfer of knowledge to children and young adults. Photo: R. Senthil