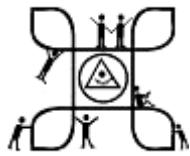


MICRO CULTURE AND PROCESSES IN EDUCATION**SEETHA ANANTHASIVAN**

“Culture hides more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.”
Edward T. Hall



In this article I will share our experiences at Prakriya Green Wisdom School at Bangalore, India, where for the last seventeen years my colleagues and I have co-evolved (and continue to co-evolve) curriculum and processes for what we believe is holistic education. The belief that what affects us unconsciously is at least as important as what is learnt consciously for education to be holistic, has led us to focus also on building a micro-culture that coheres with our vision.

To start with, the name, ‘Prakriya’ means process in Sanskrit; Prakriya also means prakruti + kriya, (Nature + action) which can be interpreted as acting according to Nature’s wisdom. The name also articulates our basic conviction that working with processes is much more important than working with content in a school setting (or elsewhere). Prakriya could also mean unfolding – a word that we believed was more apt for the school than development.

Today Prakriya is a small school by Indian standards, with 550 students and more than 80 facilitators and coordinators. We work largely in four different and fairly independent sections, in order to work in a community size that allows us to work with more flexibility and ease.

Owning up Roots, Looking at the Future

The legacy of Macaulay and of British rule in general, has made India a blind consumer of western ideas and frameworks. Hence we have to contend with the realities of an English speaking urban population who often have mixed feelings about Indian knowledge systems. The compulsions of modern development is what drives the education system and they have led to the non-negotiability of educational aspirations of people when it comes to the exam system and degrees.

However at Prakriya we have persisted with our belief in the immense value of many aspects of Indian culture, transformed essential concepts and ideas by synthesizing them with current day needs and now many of our practices have become acceptable to the parents of our students.

School text books today focus much more on the past, than the present or the future. We believe that a greater focus needs to be given to children learning about the future, with what will become ecological imperatives in their lifetime – from conserving water to connecting to the land, from reviewing food habits and consumerism to understanding climate change and the consequences of runaway corporate power.

Education Today

When thinking of education, we generally shut out of our minds the culture in which we are embedded; and we shut out our connections with Nature even more. We seem to be largely preoccupied with curriculum and pedagogy, and the macro-culture is accepted unconsciously in whatever way it enters the school space. Similarly micro-culture, if it is noticed, may be what ‘happens’ and nothing more. If we focus on school level education, we are mostly stuck with only these as basic questions - what should children learn and how do we teach them?

There is a huge body of work on pedagogy – but most of it seems to be based on a Newtonian view of the world. We study and ‘teach’ various parts of pre-digested knowledge and certain skills and we expect that these will somehow be put together by the student to make sense of the world or to plan their future life. A holistic pedagogy, at least in India, is often interpreted as using a variety of methods of learning – using games, theatre, the Montessori and other methods. Pedagogy usually focuses almost exclusively on the methods used by the teacher. For us it is like teaching tricks to the fish without bothering about the water it swims in. Basically, it appears that in our modern civilization, we seem to collectively disregard our context, not only in education but in all human endeavours at a societal and global level. Many of the crises facing the world, including climate change, seem to have been created by a habitual disregard of contexts – both of nature and of culture.

Most of the work on culture and pedagogy seems to have been done to understand how to use certain pedagogies across cultures. Paulo Friere's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' and ideas of critical pedagogy are the works that stand out. There is hardly any work on the need to build the micro culture of the educational space. Perhaps it is because, as Edward Hall says, we are simply not conscious about the power of the culture that we live in.

A significant aspect of holistic education is that it needs to be aligned to its bio-region and culture. So I present this story of Prakriya not as a model but merely as our journey of exploration in education; I must say that many aspects of process based learning that we have worked with, have been practiced by many others as well – I include them here to attempt to present the whole picture about our journey.

The Unfolding Processes

The processes which helped in the unfolding of the culture, the work and learning in the school have included a mix of trusting our intuitions, deep sharing between the core anchor people, expanding the group of anchors, inclusive processes with children, parents and other members of the school, engaging in research and connecting with nature through our organic garden, nature walks and trips to wilderness areas. We deliberately did not have a very clear 'road map' but we gradually defined our direction and learning processes as we went along. This was part of our belief in organic unfolding and learning. Conventional ideas of curriculum and pedagogy did come in but we often transformed them to what made sense to us. Critiques of the prevailing education system threw up a few streams to work on – de-Macaulisation, and owning up Indian roots; engaging in conscious micro-culture building and not focusing on pedagogy alone; addressing the split between theory and practice, teacher and taught etc., through a more holistic approach. Two national conferences – on Holistic Education (1997) and Indian Knowledge Systems in Education (1998) helped to link up and learn from many others in India.

We began the school with about ten children, 6 to 9 years of age and five of us facilitators, who were supported by a group of very brave parents. We tried to live and act from a belief in focusing on our relationships to our selves, others, Nature and the man-made world. As we went along we articulated concepts and ideas meaningful to our journey – some which seemed intuitively obvious, some which were part of our ancient heritage and some of which were frameworks by other educational thinkers. Our struggle was to share our journey with others who joined us. As we explored, our community gradually grew.

By the end of the first year, it seemed that we needed to articulate better to ourselves what our guiding principle would be. The theme that was intuitively right was "Aham Brahmasmi", and we put it down in the second year's brochure of the school...

Aham Brahmasmi – The Guiding Principle

What is the direction in which Prakriya wishes to unfold?

We would like to hold "Aham Brahmasmi", one of the 'mahavakyas' or great sayings of the Vedas as a guiding principle for our journey. It means-the microcosm is as the macrocosm. But Aham Brahmasmi also opened up a world of meanings for us:

Of spiritual search and the immense potential in every being

Of the interconnectedness in life and ecological wisdom

Of the plurality and multiplicity of life and a deep respect for all creation

Of the eternal process of evolution – ever synthesizing the new from the old.

Of a way of life that is holistic and gives significance to the whole and every part that makes the whole.

Intuition plays a big part in the unfolding of the school space. Most parents found it difficult to have faith in our ways which were not 'tried and tested' like those of other schools. Those parents who liked what we talked about intuitively seemed to join in.

Many of the processes used in the school were again accepted intuitively by many of the facilitators. Perhaps the fact that all of them were women in the early years made our path workable - although many issues were

threshed out and fought over, when practicality and rationality ruled. The visioning workshops we had were mostly about processes, our beliefs and living them out and never about where we wanted to reach.

In 2012, persuaded by Satish Kumar, I attended a course at Schumacher College where I participated in Philip Franses' classes on Complexity. I was fascinated with what I heard and read about holistic science – because there were so many parallels and similarities in the underpinnings of our work back home. Later Philip visited us at Bhoomi College, a sister institution of Prakriya, which offers courses on holistic education and sustainable living. He echoed this thought - that we had taken an experiential route to live out our holistic enquiry, explore a 'holistic pedagogy'. The whole and the parts find their identity by being left in a free space of association. His statement has only strengthened our belief in a holistic pedagogy.

How we work with the part and the whole

Intensive self exploration as well as ongoing conversations are a part of our practice to invite and support personal unfolding and growth of all facilitators. Within these programmes, the sharing and exploration of feelings is essential. We did not talk of 'oneness' as an intellectual idea much, but experientially the connecting through feelings and personal stories invariably creates a sense of oneness. We don't attempt to idealise it or hold on to it, but it does form a backdrop to our working together and our creative expressions. We also find that these processes make it easier for people to collaborate closely with each other. Some of the ways in which we work with the part and the whole are outlined below:

Building Institutions of Wellbeing

By this we mean building institutions of wellbeing 'in our minds', which to us is another pillar of creating a holistic learning space. Some of these are institutions of togetherness and rejoicing, which are common in many if not all human organisations. A sense of togetherness is fostered through our retreats for self-exploration and our festivals; but most significantly through avoiding a strict bifurcation of the personal and the professional in conversations across the school. *Simultaneity* rather than 'Either-or' has become a template we use to avoid the many polar opposites modern life has imposed on us.

What we normally do not find in modern schools and organisations are *institutions of catharsis* – ways in which we view and respond to conflicts and emotional intensities within and between individuals in the space. Rather than labelling them as problems, we look at events that sometimes happen that can shock or trouble the community as 'emerging reality' that we need to embrace, address with as much wholesomeness as we can muster and learn from. Sometimes if we feel that there is something simmering beneath the surface we deliberately hold meetings to bring the catharsis to the surface.

We also work on institutions of regeneration through our retreats and 'Institutional meets' which become spaces of reviewing and renewal; we also do this through encouraging and taking up fresh ideas for implementation.

Some of the processes and frameworks we use both for the personal growth workshops as well as for culture building were derived from the work of Prof. Pulin Garg, who was an amazing holistic thinker. He was a professor of Organizational Behaviour at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India from 1973 to 1992. Innumerable students took his extremely non-traditional courses and found them inspirational and transformative; many developed the "identity-based process work" further, which was co-evolved under that banner of Indian Society for Individual and Social Change (ISISD) that Pulin Garg founded. We added more frameworks and practices of learning from Nature during the years before and after Prakriya was started.

Connecting with Nature

We hoped to make connecting with Nature a way of life – through planting trees, organic gardening, nature walks, visiting wilderness areas and making voluntary simplicity a way of life. Mind-mapping, the Multiple intelligences approach, engaging in crafts that need the use of both hands and learning from mythological stories address the inner nature of the child. However we felt the need to integrate the ability to connect with and follow principles of nature through what is learnt formally in classes as well.

In many Indian knowledge traditions such as Yoga, Ayurveda, Tantra, Sankhya and Buddhist philosophy, the constituents of the universe, both material and non-material are supposed to be five elements – Ether, Air, Fire, Water and Earth. These can be interpreted in simple ways that little children can understand, but they also have deeper layers of meaning. It made sense for us to design the curriculum for the primary school children based on these five elements. The Earth was obviously made of these elements and our bodies too were made of them.

The Earth in Sanskrit is 'Prithvi', a composite of the landscape, the flora and fauna. For us the psychological counterpart of Prithvi was diversity and interdependence, a fundamental principle of Nature. Similarly Air stood for interconnectedness, Water for flow of energy and resources, self-regulation and cyclicity, Fire for energy and Aakash (Ether) for infiniteness.

The principles of Nature are not learnt in a merely theoretical way. Many activities are connected with these elements and we have trees symbolizing these elements too. Much of the content learning is arranged in themes of these elements, in music, art and physical activity, giving a strong sense of integration for children; these themes also lend themselves to improvisation of the curriculum and pedagogy by the facilitators. Facilitators are active co-creators of the teaching-learning process, which too we consider as essential for holistic education.

Chants (or *Shlokas*) intoned in a rhythmic way evoke a sense of wholeness – and to this day this practice is common in India. The school *Shloka* was composed on the theme of the five elements – and is chanted on many occasions. These spell out the psychological counterparts of the elements which turned out to be principles of Nature in ways that everyone could understand. An example of the first verse is given below:

Aham Brahmasmi - The Prakriya Shloka (Chant) – the first verse on Aakaash

*The Universe is infinite, Aakash is infinite
May I experience this infiniteness
again and again – to fill my soul,
to feel the magic of the whole and the parts.
May I experience this infiniteness of my self
to let my being unfold in its wholeness
and its parts, touching humanness in myself and the world.*

Redefining what is heroic

Joseph Campbell has explored the journey of the archetypal hero magnificently. Being heroic, ambitious, aspiring for 'more' seems to be natural for human beings, yet it is one of the strands of self-destructiveness of our civilization. In Indian culture, the greatest hero in earlier times was the rishi, the sage, or the king who *renounced worldly goals the most!* Conversely today, the high achievers in the corporate sector and those who *possess the most* are considered heroes! It did not make sense to us to celebrate high achievement in studies, games etc. and create heroes who do not question. What are they being heroic for? Such a relentless celebration of what is considered 'big achievement' brought unconsciously into schools from the macro-culture certainly needs to be reviewed, particularly the divisiveness it creates through overvaluing certain abilities and undervaluing others.

We attempt to point towards various avenues for fulfillment rather than worldly success through encouraging creative work and the very processes of learning and living; particularly through conversations during circle time and our classes on 'Ecology, reflection and communication'.

Valuing the Sacred

What is considered sacred in most cultures has been embedded in religion. Modern civilization and its focus on rationality has thrown out the baby with the bathwater. In India religion is still very much alive but in the name of secularism, schools do not think it is their business to foster a sense of the sacred in children, except in a limited ritualistic way.

In a school setting, the passion we hold for our work or subject, being in the wilderness and connecting with Nature, sacred chants, music and dance or the way we respond to others' concerns and vulnerabilities – all these may help children experience the sacred. Perhaps the only way we as educators can integrate the sacred with the school culture is to keep the need of it alive in ourselves.

I have tried to present some major aspects of our journey at Prakriya and our attempts at making education holistic in these times when there are so many fragmenting forces at work. It seems that much of our micro culture building work is about fighting for a holistic way of living and trying to work against the linear logic that is prevalent in the macro-culture. The power exerted by the macro culture consciously and unconsciously is huge. We do not know to what extent then our students who go into higher studies and work systems will find our holistic education processes meaningful.

How much can we change the system from within the system? There is always a helplessness about impacting the macro culture. All that can be said is that it is empowering for everyone in the school space to work to foster a micro culture they believe in and apart from making learning processes more meaningful, it is extremely nourishing to the being.

***Seetha Ananthasivan** has a deep interest in understanding how we can build communities which are coherent with Nature's principles. She is passionate about the development of eco-psychology, holistic education as well as organic food and farming. She is the editor of the Bhoomi magazine and the founder-trustee of the Bhoomi College and Prakriya Green Wisdom School.*



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