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What women want: A class of their own

Most of us send our children to schools that hammer them out into assembly-line products. But some choose an education that raises their children as creative and perceptive individuals. The Waldorf, Montessori and Krishnamurti systems believe that fantasy and imagination should be childhood's anchor, and independent and idealistic thinking that of adolescence. And as a vote for women's rights alternative schooling methods have brought in millions of young girls across rural India into the shelter of schools. We speak to educators, parents and a student who are part of the process.

Developing life skills

An education that allows my daughter to grow up strong in body and mind, to live in harmony with people and Nature and gives her the opportunity to explore and develop her talents is what I wish for. This is the right of every child in our country. This is possible only if students and teachers are partners in an enjoyable process, and classroom learning becomes relevant to children's lives. Schools should provide the space to examine and discuss values and develop life skills, promote group work and alternatives to the lecture method. It should foster values of non-violence and non-discrimination, critical thinking and empathy. The Project focuses on these issues. Teachers in upper primary municipal schools in Mumbai use our Sangati kits as supplementary curriculum to children in Classes V through VII. It is a means of integrating all that a child learns in and outside school.

Deepa Balsavar

Core-team member Avehi-Abacus Project, Mumbai

Let the child choose

The Anugriha Charitable Trust runs the Shikshayatan Middle School, a mobile laboratory and library for schools that do not have those facilities. Our school is an 'elite school for the rural have-nots'. Our academic year is split into two: in the first, we do the prescribed texts; in the second children choose what they'd like to learn. We also offer short-term courses such as thinking skills and wood carving. I don't believe this is alternative education; this is what education should be about. We decided to home-school our daughter Niru because we were unhappy with the education scene. It is possible to manage home and work — consider both places an extension of one another and your children will learn to appreciate your work and you will find the time and energy to work with your children.

Aruna Raghavan

Founder Anugriha Charitable Trust

Sunshine at school

At Sloka, The Hyderabad Waldorf School the classroom is a mirror of the world. The Steiner curriculum is age-appropriate and follows the seven-year rhythm. We don't differentiate between boys and girls at school — everyone knits, sews, cooks and draws, besides academics. A single teacher accompanies a class for seven years. This enables us to see the child through close association and assess overall performance. Home visits, class meetings, open houses... all keep parents informed about their children. For my child and all children, I would wish they make a difference in the world — that they have the inner strength and motivation to meet their trust with destiny and help evolve human thinking. We must remember that children need joy, love and laughter at school, where they spend so much of their waking lives.

Nirmala Diaz

Founder-Trustee Sloka, The Hyderabad Waldorf School, Hyderabad

Making learning fun

We were to move abroad in September of 2007, but it did not materialise. Since it was the middle of the academic year, I decided to home school my kids till the next year. And, my kids learnt more without having to memorise. I did have the texts for the year, but when it came to subjects such as geography, history and science, I let them read up encyclopaedias and watch National Geographic, History and Animal Planet which dealt with the same topics. This brought alive the subjects in their mind. I stuck to the text only for Math. I wish we do away with exams based on how much a child can memorise; practical and fun ways need to be incorporated. Teachers should be less pressurised to complete portions and focus on ensuring that children gain practical knowledge

Rochelle Simon

Project English Administration Executive British Council, Chennai

Different strokes

The decision to home-school me was, technically, my parents'. But, I pushed to continue with it into high school, when my parents were considering placing me in a boarding school. Having a say in my learning process enabled me to have a clearer idea of my goals and ambitions. Though my base curriculum was fixed, I had the advantage of pursuing my own interests. I've chosen to study foreign languages intensively instead of attending college, so I'm still not in mainstream education! Contrary to expectations from home-schooled children, I found it remarkably simple to enter a more traditional learning environment and interact with those who had spent all their lives in it. And no, I never missed school; what I had was far too interesting. As a thinking

citizen of this country, I believe we need to move towards personalising education needs. As a country which prides itself on its diversity, we need to reassess why we feel the need to require the same academic achievements from everyone, and stigmatise those who cannot attain them as failures.