

'The long-term benefits of education are not enough to persuade marginalised families to commit to regular schooling for their children'

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At one school in India, educational ambitions are manacled to a commitment to improve the material lives of the parents, communities and children it serves. England's schools could learn from this, says a university teacher trainer

I am sitting in a row of invited guests at the Annual Day celebrations that mark the end of the academic year at Parikrma School. Music plays, the seats are filling with gleaming and beaming children and their families. It is a familiar end-of-year school scene.

Parikrma is a non-governmental foundation that runs four mixed, 5-18 schools in Bangalore. Students come to the school from across a number of the 800 slums areas of the city. Some pupils have been abandoned or orphaned, and all come from homes where the average income is less than £30 per month.

Parikrma aims to support the all-round development of its children and families. In addition to a balanced and high-quality curriculum, delivered in English, all pupils are fed and uniformed.

I have travelled to Bangalore with a party of a PGDE students from the University of Sheffield. For the past week, our trainees have been teaching mathematics (<https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/mathematics>), science (<https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/science>) and geography (<https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/geography>) sessions to mixed-age groups of pupils in Parikrma. They've been firing rockets from the playground, exploring tessellations and geometric shapes and undertaking a village study in a nearby community (<http://www.sangamprojects.com/>). Our trainees have been amazed and inspired by the pupils' eagerness to learn: by their knowledge, use of English, ambition and idealism.

Hectoring of parents

While we wait for the formalities to begin, a stream of pupils come to the front of the playground to talk to our trainees: to know more about them, to thank them for the lessons, to shake their hands, hug them and wish them well.

The proceedings begin with an address from Shukla Bose, the founder and CEO of the Parikrma Humanity Foundation (<http://www.parikrmafoundation.org/>). I settle down in anticipation of the customary notes of encouragement and general back-slapping that constitute these events back home. But this is different. In a hectoring and over-amplified delivery, Ms Bose begins her presentation with a direct challenge to the parents.

"How many of you have opened bank accounts since I spoke to you about this last year? Put your hands up!"

We wait. I keep my eye firmly focused on Ms Bose. I really don't want to see the hands or the faces of the parents behind me.

Ms Bose continues: "How many of you are saving for your children's higher education costs? Let me see your hands."

I'm determined not to look round.

A final question from Ms Bose: "And how many of you will not allow your daughters to be betrothed at 14 years old? Show me your hands!"

There is a low murmuring and a long, long silence. "Good," says Ms Bose.

Eagerness to learn

The evening continues with presentations of music and dance. Environmental and global themes are to the fore. A group of four, small, junior-aged children perform a Christina Rossetti poem (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43197>):

"Who has seen the wind?

Neither you nor I.

But when the trees bow their heads,

The wind is passing by."

Our minibus is quiet on our journey home. Each of the trainees is reflecting perhaps, and comparing. In a week's time, they will be back in their placement schools. Will they encounter at home the same eagerness to learn that has characterised pupils in Parikrma? The same sense of vision? Of possibility? Of belief in the power of education? Of ambition and identity? Will their pupils at home share the understanding – so evident within the confines of this haven among the slums – that education is the best and perhaps the only opportunity for advancement and happiness?

Demanding and binding contract

It is pointless and frustrating to make facile contrasts between the attitudes to education of families and children who face difficult and challenging lives (<https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/pastoral-care-and-pupil-matters>) in Britain and in India. The societies, cultures, expectations and values are so different.

However, what we can learn from the Parikrma experience is that the promise of the long-term benefits from education is not, of itself, enough to persuade marginalised and poor families to engage with and commit to regular schooling for their children. The educational ambitions of Parikrma are manacled to a commitment to improve the material lives of the parents, families, communities and children it serves. Parikrma knows that a hungry child will not learn, that a distrustful and suspicious community will not embrace the opportunities it offers. The education of the children of Parikrma is the result of a demanding and binding contract negotiated with the families and the communities of the slums of Bangalore. The school expects and demands the support of parents; the parents need to trust the school and its teachers.

Expectations, mutual respect and trust are strengthened in a faithful delivery on promises made on both sides: promises to work with parents to provide an all-round care and education for their children and promises of commitment from parents to support their child's schooling. Are there pointers here for ways in which schools serving challenging community contexts in the UK could build these relationships, these commitments and these results for our most needy children and families?

Dreamers of the day

I recall a conversation I'd had the day before with a young Parikrma girl student.

"What would you like to be when you leave school?" I asked.

"I shall be a doctor, sir." She started to walk away but, stopping and turning, she added: "And I shall make India healthier."

At one point during Annual Day, there were presentations to two parents who had made outstanding contributions to the life of the school. The mother is a redoubtable single parent who has contributed to the community-development programme. The other is announced publicly as a father whose life has been transformed by his commitment to the transport service for the Parikrma children and his victory over his previous drug and alcohol addictions. His slim figure on that stage, head bowed, his left hand touching his heart in gratitude, is burned in my memory.

In almost every possible way, we have been humbled, inspired and transformed by our encounters at Parikrma. On one thing only would I take issue. We have seen the wind. It is visible, tangible. It is in the dreams and aspirations of these remarkable children of the slums and in the vision of the remarkable people who teach them. And it is blowing through India.

As I settle to sleep, I remember the words of TE Lawrence (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/T._E._Lawrence): "Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their mind, wake in the morning to find that it was vanity. But the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible."

For more information, visit the Parikrma Foundation (<http://www.parikrmafoundation.org/>) or Sangam Projects (<http://www.sangamprojects.com/>) websites.

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