

**Towards Holistic Education**

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## **Towards Holistic Education**

### **Abstract**

Most mainstream education institutions focus mainly on intellectual and physical development while emotional and spiritual wellbeing gets ignored. This does not allow holistic development and an individual's potential is not optimized. Process sensitivity (in adults) brings in elements that help bridge this gap.

Our experience in bringing process work in education (close to 2 decades) has given us the opportunity to look at the role of process work as an enabler for all stakeholders in this space. We engaged across age groups in schools and colleges and realized that a space that is non-threatening, dignifying, open and collaborative takes care of the wellbeing of the individual and offers holistic development.

This paper attempts to capture our first-hand experience in working on various learning spaces across age groups. The paper includes:

- Impact of the current educational paradigm on the spirit/psyche
- The processes and practices that enable a nourishing and nurturing space & a conducive environment for learning
- The role of process work in education – focusing on children, parents, teachers as well as their collective dynamics

We intend to share and elaborate on some interventions and processes and their impact on students as well as teachers.

### **Introduction**

We have been fortunate to be part of an education system where process work has been an integral part of all aspects of our work. The experience, close to two decades now, has opened up a whole new world of connecting dots, seeing perspectives, and getting a better understanding of ourselves as well as the human phenomena. Both of us have been a part of Prakriya's journey of growth and evolution. We have also been a part of the core group that institutionalized some of

the processes and practices for a conducive learning environment. This paper encapsulates how process work sensitivity in an educational space can make a difference in a child's life.

Seetha Ananthasivan founded the trust, KNA Foundation for Education and started Prakriya Green Wisdom School<sup>1</sup> in 1999 and subsequently Bhoomi College<sup>2</sup> in 2008 under the same trust.

Seetha also co-founded Aastha Foundation for Human Learning and Growth in 1996 with a focus on the education sector. Now in its present form, along with membership from the education sector, Aastha<sup>3</sup> draws its membership from diverse individuals across corporate and social sectors as well.

For a long time, there was a symbiotic relationship between Aastha and Prakriya. It was mandatory for all Prakriya teachers to attend at least one phase of internship at Aastha. All role holders had to complete their internship at Aastha. Now, there are many members who are holding roles and anchoring institutional processes in all the three institutions (Prakriya, Bhoomi and Aastha).

While working in the process space, we understood how childhood experiences impact the emotive map of a child and how it influences the sense of self in adult life. We also realized that some of the childhood experiences have a life-long impact. Therefore, the need for a sensitive and empowering environment for children in their early years was critical. The prevalent paradigm of success and achievement, that sets uniform expectations from all, which in turn disrespects the individuality and diversity, was questioned. These thoughts led to creating a space where wholesome development of children is possible and wellbeing of a child is taken care of. The intent was to humanise education, create a space for children where they feel a sense of belonging, have freedom to express their thoughts and feelings and a space where they can relate to the environment (people, nature and other beings) with ease.

With this intent, Prakriya was co-created and using the deep understanding of process work, some of the first principles for the school were laid down. Since then, it has been growing and evolving organically. From time to time, dialogue spaces are created to question the givens and to review the relevance of certain practices.

Learnings from many more like-minded thinkers and visionaries from across the globe were integrated. This added to the process sensitivity that we wanted to inculcate in all. Gandhi, Tagore, J Krishnamurthi, John Holt, Carl Jung, Eric Erikson - their views on living and education complemented and added different dimensions to our working. Above all, learning from nature's principles formed the core of learning processes at Prakriya.

### **Repercussions of the Current Education System**

The education system today focuses solely on securing employment. And in the process, ends up instilling **fear of authority, insecurity, and fosters unhealthy competition.**

Under the garb of making everyone a 'high achiever', pressure and competition are ever increasing; evaluations are becoming harsher and children are put through various coaching classes to perform better and better. Parents too, in their intent for their child to have a 'good life', put them under enormous pressure unwittingly. Children who are academically oriented manage to handle the pressure, however at a price. But there are some others who get caught between the education system and the aspirations of parents and often, pay a much higher price. Many of them get scarred in the process of the harsh evaluation and discrimination.

Some startling data points that throw light on the situation –

- India has one of the world's highest suicide rates for youth aged 15-29
- Every hour, 1 student commits suicide in India<sup>5</sup>
- Young people find it difficult to cope with failure in exams and their career
- 42.5% of corporate employees in India suffer from depression or general anxiety disorder
- 38.5% of corporate employees sleep less than 6 hours a day
- Students from "happy" families suffer from less depression<sup>7</sup>
- "The popular perception is that failing exams or inability to cope with academics is the primary reason for student suicides. This is rooted in a sense of helplessness or extreme frustration"

## **The Changing Family System**

Shifts in the family system - from **migration** leading to the **reducing size** of the family to **loneliness** -directly or indirectly have impacted children's wholesome development.

Reduction in time spent together, as well as a perceived and/or real scarcity of resources has brought in insecurities of various kinds. Very early in life, the child is sent to school away from home for a large part of the day. The remaining time at home is spent chasing targets created by school. With both parents working in many families, a child does not get enough non-purposive time to

- have conversations with people around, ask questions, listen to the stories
- just *be* and discover one's *being*
- be able to listen to one's own voice and be driven by one's own instinct
- foster relationships with people, things and spaces without too much external orchestration
- make sense of the world on one's own terms.

Working with young people gives us an insight into their inner world, which does not seem as perfect and happy as it may appear. We come across youngsters struggling with a **sense of alienation, emotional insecurity, loss of purpose and meaningfulness, lack of inner fulfillment** - all stemming from a low sense of self.

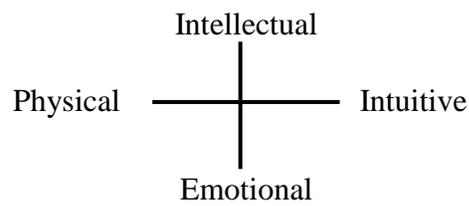
## **Role of Process Work in Education**

*"The fundamental need of the self is to relate and express itself to discover the existential wholeness."*

## **Understanding the Holistic Being**

In an educational space where process work is an integral part, teachers and other adults are sensitized to work with children in a wholesome manner, to look beneath the surface and to see the multiple perspectives before making a conclusion. At the same time, they are tough and firm when a child needs to break out of a dysfunctional pattern or need to come out of their comfort zone.

According to Carl Jung (a Swiss Psychologist and Psycho Analyst) a human being is inwardly whole, and that most of us have lost touch with important parts of our ‘selves’. The goal of life is individuation. If we realize our uniqueness, we can undertake a process of individuation and tap into our true self. Each human being has a specific nature and calling which is uniquely his or her own and that needs to be fulfilled through a union of conscious and unconscious. The self strives for unity, wholeness, and integration.<sup>10</sup>



Jung’s philosophy of whole self makes it simpler and easier to explain holistic development. We use his framework of four aspects of self to describe holistic development. We have adapted it to suit our needs.

In most formal school systems, the stress is on intellectual and physical development. There may be a few exceptions where some teacher may provide emotional support to children. The school system is not considered a place for emotional expression or psychic intuitive development. Children in today’s time miss out on the development of these two aspects that lead to perspective building and fostering wisdom.

### **Bridging the Gap**

Many times, people miss making the connection between the behavior of a child and their need for emotional and psychological security. The child is often labeled as lazy, difficult, distracted, disruptive or being a bully. We neither understand the context nor the reason behind such behavior. Also, we fail to see what gaps the child tries to fill by a certain behavior that’s not approved by others.

Process work sensitivity helps in bridging this gap, enabling adults to understand a child’s world better. An adult, instead of dismissing a child or labeling them, takes the responsibility of getting to the source of the behavior, handles them with sensitivity, and gives them the reassurances and

nurturing care they may need. Quite often, children respond beautifully just to unconditional acceptance.

## **Humanising Education**

Mainstream education is becoming increasingly mechanized, and there is a need to humanise education. To ensure that, one needs to review the relevance of the following:

- Objective of education
- Content of the curriculum
- Physical and psychological structures in educational institutions

To look at these objectively, one needs to break out of the comfort zone of working with what is familiar; to be in touch with feelings and to channelize those feelings towards positive action. This requires a deep level of working with self and understanding our role as a parent, as a teacher and as a thinking-feeling human being. School is a space that brings a community of adults together – parents, teachers, role holders and others – to invest in the development of a child and for the wellbeing of all involved. In our experience, Process Work has been an enabling factor in achieving this.

## **Meaning Making**

Process work, as we understand it, is man's eternal search for meaning. It is a way of life that provides a realistic and practical framework to enable individuals to make conscious action choices. This is also what we see as the larger purpose of education.

## **Navigating the Inner and Outer Worlds**

Human beings tend to live in two worlds - the outer world and the inner world. Our education, upbringing and learning mostly help us to navigate the outside world. The inner world remains largely un-touched and a mystery. Ironically, what happens in the inside world strongly impacts the action choices and relationships in the outside world. When the inner world is in balance one brings joy and stability in the outer world, and when the inner world is in conflict one projects the same in the outer world. Process Work provides us with the wherewithal to understand our

inner world. This helps synchronize the inner world and the outside world, which can then lead to a sense of wellbeing for the individual.

### **Processes and Practices – Integrating Process Work in Education**

*“Reading and writing develop knowledge, conversations foster wisdom.”*

Prakriya derives its core principles from the *Panchamahabhootas – Prithvi, Jal, Agni, Vayu, Aakash*. The principles of diversity, flow, energy, relatedness and infiniteness embedded in the five elements are lived out by ensuring that each of the processes embodies all these principles.

To enable the philosophy of the school to be lived out on a day-to-day basis, certain processes and practices are put in place. These are adhered to in a cyclic manner year after year. Following is a broad list of some of those:

S. No	Processes	Focus	Practices	For whom
1.	Admission	Partnering in the child’s growth - Ensuring that parents are with the school philosophy	Meeting with parents at multiple levels, spending a day in school	Parents
2.	Engaging and interacting with parents	Joining in the child’s learning	Parent teacher meetings (twice a year), need based meetings, workshops on parenting	Parents
3.	School Programs	Holistic development	Academics, sports, art & craft, gardening, field trips, annual functions, real time projects, circle time	Children
4.	Teacher Selection	Sensitivity, learning-unlearning processes	Written application, interview, demo, observation in class	Teachers

5	Familiarizing with school philosophy and culture	Co-owning the philosophy of the school	Induction, orientation, institutional meeting	Teachers
6.	Review and feedback	Investing in teachers for personal and professional development	Workshops through the year, mentoring, feedback twice a year, retreat	Teachers and role holders
7	Institutional meets	Co-holding& co owning institution	3 day meet at the beginning and the end of the year	Teachers

Some of these aspects are detailed below.

## **Processes and Practices in Working with Children**

### ***Conducive Learning Environment***

A conducive learning space is one that is non-judgmental, accepts children as they are, respects diversity, and does not evaluate a child based their academic performance alone. When children are given such an environment where they feel a sense of belonging and do not feel lesser than others, they generally grow and mature more holistically. Their sense of self remains intact when children are given a space to express themselves without the fear of being judged or humiliated.

### ***Physical Space***

Children, growing up in urban areas are losing touch with nature, leading to Nature Deficit Disorder<sup>11</sup>. Increasing number of cases of depression in young people is also linked to this fact. Being in nature also helps children to be more observant and learn from real things rather than learning from text books alone. Being outdoors in the natural environment helps expand their horizon.

Prakriya campus has over 108 species of trees, medicinal garden, sacred grove etc. Children learn to coexist with other beings such as frogs, bugs, insects, bees, cats and snakes.

Nature has great healing powers. Children learn to connect with soil and nature during the gardening or pottery sessions. Ravi Mantha in his book 'All About Bacteria' writes about a non-pathogenic bacteria *Mycobacterium vaccae* that is found in soil, cow dung and other organic matter. When this bacteria comes in contact with the human body, it helps release serotonin in the brain. Serotonin helps to uplift mood and spirit. Research has shown that serotonin acts as an antidepressant.

We have seen children and adults feeling relaxed and happy after a gardening or pottery session. It reduces stress and brings positivity along with the joy of creating something or watching a seed that you have sown grow into a plant.

*Gardening and working with hands by itself provide multiple perspectives. A teacher needs to have the ability to see the part and the whole and make connections between the underlying links. Make the invisible, visible to the child. Teachers who have gone through process work understand the meaning, making processes better.*

### ***Small Class Room Size***

When the number of children in a class is kept low, a teacher is able to understand and relate to each child. They have the time and energy to invest in each one of them. They are also in a better position to build rapport with a child and help them in moments of difficulty. This leads to a relationship of trust.

### ***Circle Time***

Circle time is a space where children bring issues and ideas to talk about. The objective is that, for children, a habit of circle time is inculcated from very early in life – a habit of respecting diversity, of considering different perspectives, to be in touch with the other's reality and also looking at one's own role in the larger scheme of things.

Circle time can be used for:

**Non-Purposive Interaction:** When School reopens when some children want to share happy or sad moments. For example – birth of a sibling, parent returning after a long tour, pets, birthday celebrations, or departures, death, separation, divorce at home etc.,

**Emerging Themes:** current happenings in the campus or the city, news, etc. For example, no medals for sports day, no junk food, or Nirbhaya case

**Conflict Resolution** – bully in the class, a fight between two children, etc.,

**Discussion** – issue of incontinence (? Discontinuity/absence?) of a child in class, a child with learning difficulty, brainstorm ideas for real time projects

Circle time is generally anchored by a student and each one is given time to share their viewpoints. Feelings are given importance over data. *A teacher, in the role of a facilitator, should be able to respect and have faith in the innate wisdom of the child; should be able to let go of control and allow children to take charge and make decisions. At the same time, the teacher needs to be ready to handle what emerges and intervene if required. This is possible if a teacher is secure from within and does not feel threatened. It also requires a teacher to empathize and be able to see beneath the facts and data, and not jump to quick conclusions. In our experience, a teacher who has worked on themselves is better equipped to handle such situations.*

### ***Feedback to Children***

Marks and grades do not define a child's intelligence or capacity. They need not be evaluated or labeled "good student" or "bad student" based on their academic performance alone. However, we believe that feedback is essential for a child to know their strengths and areas of growth.

At Prakriya, younger children do not get a marks sheet, and older children get a marks report but without any rank in the class etc., What is more important is that, at the end of the year, a letter is written to each child. In the letter, teachers try to capture the essential spirit and unique gifts of a child. The letter talks about a child's patterns, attitude and dispositions as observed by teachers; it is a teacher's experience of a child. The letter also talks about the shifts that the child may have made from the earlier years. It also reflects on some of the areas that the child may need to work on. The writing of this letter is a very significant activity at Prakriya as the effort is to be non-judgmental, non-labeling and sensitive as well as honest.

Children and their parents love to read these letters. For the graduating students, this is the most precious gift that they carry and most of them preserve it for a long time.

*This process requires a teacher to accept an individual as a person beyond all benchmarks. This significant process is possible only if a teacher has accepted diversity and incompleteness within. In order to be non-judgmental and non-labeling a teacher needs to work with the judge and evaluator within and accept and value multiple facets and shades – good, bad, ugly within herself/himself.*

### ***Sports Programme***

At Prakriya, Sports Day is held a little differently. Being a school that does not believe in competition, there was a need to maintain the energy, enthusiasm and joy of playing a sport without bringing in competition. Prakriya motto for sports day is “*Shram, Shraddha, Shakti, Santrupti*”. Children are encouraged to enjoy the game and give their best rather than trying to defeat the other. Very often, on a sports day we see the top two contenders in an event giving tips to each other on how to jump higher or longer, or throw the shot put farther without worrying that if the other gets it right, or whether they would be the winner. It has now become a tradition for class 10 students to run the last race of 200 mts where each one stops just before the finish line and waits for everyone to catch up, they hold hands and cross the finish line together. The entire school waits to watch this moment.

*It is a challenge for teachers to come out of their comfort zone and try new and innovative ways of playing sport which is as enjoyable without the single goal of victory and medals. A teacher needs to bring a balance between target and process focus.*

### ***Mixed Age Group***

The nursery and primary school children spend their day in mixed groups. The premise being that in a natural setting, all humans interact in mixed age groups rather than same age groups. Each child moves as per his/ her own pace of learning. This space runs more on collaboration

rather than competition or outdoing each other. Here, they learn from each other more than just from the teacher. The older children take charge automatically. There is space and scope for some younger children to work at a much higher level, if they wish to. Differing abilities get more inclusion and space as per their pace.

## **Processes and Practices in Working with Teachers**

### ***Sensitizing Teachers***

It is also important for a teacher to connect with children, to create a space of trust, and to understand the needs of a child. A teacher needs to be firm and gentle at the same time; to give that optimum pressure to a child so they are able to give their best without feeling burdened. Many of these qualities are not the ones that you can learn in a workshop. They require working with self. Only when we know ourselves deeply as individuals are we able to understand and invest in the child in the manner that we ought to.

Prakriya offers a five-day Retreat every year to all the teachers where they engage in a self-exploratory work. ‘Retreat’ helps in visiting and revisiting the process space collectively. It entails investing in self while investing in others, understanding one’s own patterns and beliefs and learning to take onus and initiative for growth. The Retreat helps teachers to understand each other personally and as a consequence helps in a deeper and a stronger alignment to the ethos of the institution.

### ***Feedback System for Teachers***

The focus of feedback is to highlight one’s strengths and open up opportunities for working with the ineffective patterns. Soul of the feedback comes from investing in the personal and professional growth of the individual. These meetings have the process elements of creating non-judgmental, non-threatening spaces based on trust and respect.

Giving and receiving feedback requires maturity to understand that the soul of feedback is to invest in each other’s growth (not to criticize), and to also know that it is important to express

and state with honesty what one is feeling and thinking, to clear out assumptions and maintain work environment hygiene.

### ***Mentoring***

Mentors handhold their mentees whenever they feel stuck or struggle with some issues. As the daily schedules are quite packed, mentor meetings allow for some time to reflect, review the issue at hand and work at the self-level. Mentoring also helps in culture-building processes and in ensuring that the philosophy of the institution is being lived out and getting transferred to the next generation.

It is important that a mentor creates a space of trust with the mentee, identifies patterns and helps the mentee find the source of it. This also helps the mentee to understand the consequences of their behavior. All the mentors are teachers who have been through many years of self-level work and are able to facilitate this process.

### ***Workshops***

Some workshops directly cater to the human element and group dynamics, while the academic and skill-based workshops are designed so that process sensitivity is ingrained in them. These workshops start during induction and continue at regular intervals throughout the year. In each of these workshops, the effort is to make the link between the philosophy and a practice evident to teachers. Given below is a list of workshops along with the objective of each.

### ***List of Workshops for Teachers***

**Multiple Intelligence** – Theory of Multiple Intelligence by Howard Gardner is explained to teachers to help them accept and respect diversity in children and not to judge children who may not be high on Verbal Linguistic or Math Logic abilities

**Learning Styles** – To understand the three learning styles – Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic, and plan the lessons such that all three can be addressed

**Discover Your Strengths** – To understand the diversity principle and provide opportunities for children to enhance their natural strengths

**Circle Time** – Understand the finer nuances of holding Circle Time and how to let children take the lead and offer perspective rather than being prescriptive

**Writing Feedback Letter** – To be able to observe a child closer to their true nature without being biased by one's own values and beliefs. To write a letter that is honest and encouraging, and captures the essence of the person beyond academic achievements. Also, to be aware of one's own filters and lenses while being with children.

**Active Learning Methodology** – ALM is a methodology where children take the onus of their learning. Teachers facilitate the process and just provide triggers for learning.

**Thematic Learning Classes** – Theme based learning helps a child in learning by associating and going from familiar to unfamiliar.

**Natural Learning** – From a very young age, children learn by imitation. So, when a teacher is teaching, they learn how to teach. When a teacher learns along with them, they learn how to learn.

Natural Learning provides an environment to children, specially the younger ones, where they learn in a completely unstructured manner, without any lesson plan or curriculum. Children enjoy learning by being in nature, observing the surroundings, wondering, questioning and making connections.

**Emergent Curriculum** – In a natural learning environment, where there is no pre-planning done, curriculum is emergent and based on children's observations and questions. A teacher explores along with children.

**Mixed Age Group Learning** – For the teacher to be able to work with multiple age groups, handle the dynamics of the class and design learning sessions accordingly.

## Processes and Practices in Working with Parents

### *Meetings and Workshops*

Parents are encouraged to journey with the school and attend meetings and workshops that the school offers. The meetings endeavor to sensitize parents to focus on the holistic growth of the child, and to ensure that the parents and school are on the same page. This is important to ensure that a child does not receive conflicting messages at home and at school, as this can create confusion and doubt in the child's mind.

Workshops for parents are offered on issues that emerge, and those we feel the need to address collectively. Through such workshops, we try to establish connections between success, fulfillment, societal benchmarks, finding one's inner calling, respecting the individual, etc.

### **Challenges of Integrating Process Work in Education**

Over the years, we have learnt a lot by facing emerging realities, looking at different ways of working around issues and moving on. As much as the possibilities would energize us, there would be challenges that would be draining and disheartening at one level, but also provide opportunity for additions and moving out of complacency at another level.

Given below are some of the challenges that we have faced along the way – with children, teachers and parents.

#### *With Children*

Growing up in a free environment with a sound sense of self, children feel very free and empowered. There are chances that they easily lose touch with a sense of **boundary**. There have been instances where boundaries have been broken and the fine line between expression and impertinence has been crossed; where freedom has led to disrespect of an adult be it a teacher or a staff member.

Adolescence being a stage where **autonomy** sets in, resisting outside control brings in authority issues.

Creating spaces that are non-threatening; spaces to delve into the inner world - demand more time. We face **shortage of time** in balancing these with fulfilling the important requirements of the ICSE Board.

### ***With Teachers***

On-boarding teachers with **process sensitivity** is the biggest challenge. This being a pre-requisite for joining the school, we find very few individuals who are willing to delve deeper.

With many practices requiring process sensitivity, it becomes imperative that the teacher has a deeper understanding of it. At the same time process work being a self-paced journey, each one can be at a **different level**. At times, an inexperienced teacher may find it difficult to handle a delicate situation.

We come across teachers, who, after experiencing a process lab feel that it does not align with their belief system and they have **other ways of working** with self. Some teachers find the self-exploration **threatening**, while some other teachers reach a point where they cannot go further in this journey.

The teaching community being dominated by women, with a majority coming with a world-view shaped by the prevailing social norms, find it difficult to open up, deep dive into the emotive world and work with their own emotions and acknowledging their psychological needs. Because of personal inhibitions, they also find it difficult to work with issues like sexuality, abuse, and so on. We struggle with many of them to tread a path that is unknown and ambiguous.

### ***With Parents***

We have come across some parents who consider the school as a transactional space and want **deliverables** in terms of performance of the child. We have faced resistance from them when asked to understand the grain of the child.

Quite often their **denial** in accepting their child's dysfunctional propensities comes in the way of working with the child.

When parents are too **enmeshed** with the child, they are not able to see things in the right perspective. It requires several meetings and a lot of effort for the school to help them understand the situation and to get them to cooperate with the school in working with the child.

We have faced challenges if there are **differences between the parents** of the child, or if one of them is non-co-operative in this journey. We have seen that if the parents are unwilling to work with themselves, their insecurities and fears get transferred to their children.

### **Case Studies**

Prakriya from the beginning has been an inclusive school. While we largely have students who are academically oriented and intellectually sharp, we also have about 10 percent of children who need special attention. There are children with dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and those who come from rural background and cannot understand or speak the language of instruction. There are many children who are going through emotional struggles too. There is a constant endeavor to integrate the child in the collective as well as sensitize the group to the reality of the child.

### **Conclusion**

At this stage, having seen and worked with this (integration of process work in education) at Prakriya Green Wisdom School and Bhoomi College, we are reassured with the results that we see and feel a sense of deep fulfillment.

After touching the emotive, intuitive universes, we have experienced considerable shifts at both personal and professional levels. We see in teachers and students - an increasing acceptance of themselves and others, a higher sense of ownership, seeing what part have they played in the problem, a renewed purpose in life which brings in a vibrancy in the individual as well as the collective that they are a part of.

We also are acutely aware of the fact that this is an ongoing process. School being a part of the larger eco-system, influences and gets influenced by the society. There is a need to continue to work with the processes that keep emerging.

Our interest in this area keeps us wanting to explore further and understand and engage with it as much as possible. Our experience has been very meaningful and enriching in our personal as well as our professional spaces. This journey has been exciting, challenging, rewarding and quite joyful. We hope that this kind of integration reaches out to more spaces and touches more lives.

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