
INTERVIEW

In Conversation with Prema Rangachary

V.K. Karthika

Prema Rangachary is the director of the school Vidyavanam. Trained at Oxford University to teach English as a second language, she has been advocating the necessity to initiate and sustain innovations in the curriculum. She has taken many initiatives in imparting education in low-resource teaching contexts. As the director of Vidyavanam, she has engineered many state-of-the-art programmes through which she has established that art can enhance the understanding of language and sciences. A promoter of holistic education and skill-based learning, Dr. Prema Rangachary fosters a new educational philosophy through her school Vidyavanam.

V.K. Karthika (VKK): Thank you for agreeing to talk to Language and Language Teaching readers. Could you please tell us what made you think of a school like Vidyavanam?

Prema Rangachary (PR): I think I should give you a brief background on how the school came to be to understand these ideas. In 2003, I started volunteering at the *Balwadis* (also known as *Anganwadi*) in the villages in and around Anaikatti near Coimbatore. Here I noticed that the teachers were occupied only in making midday meals, and the children would also come only for the meals and go back home. When I brought this up with the teachers, they said they had no idea or training about what they were supposed to do. I started meeting them every weekend to discuss these problems, and gradually realized that they were also quite anxious about the children's education. They pointed out that not every village had schools that were easily accessible. Often, students would drop out after the fifth grade because by that age they became a little more independent and realized that there was no connection between what

they were learning and what they were doing. The members of the tribal Irula community who lived in these villages were interested in sending their children to school but knew that what the government offered was not what they wanted. But, at the same time, they wanted their children to learn English. This is how the idea of setting up an English-medium school in this area came about—from their own demand.

Meanwhile, I was also reading about the history of the Irulas, who lived in the foothills of the Nilgiris. They were hunters and food gatherers and their nomadic lifestyle disappeared with diminishing access to the forests. The consequent loss of independence shattered their self-confidence and they became suspicious of people in general. Also, there is a general feeling prevalent in society that children from tribal communities are not capable of coping with schooling. I realized we had to start by creating an environment where the children did not feel threatened. To do this, I took ideas from Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and J. Krishnamurti.

VKK: Please tell us about how the school has accommodated transformations, in terms of teaching, syllabus or social and emotional learning aspects, over time?

PR: The Irulas are very artistic. Song and dance are an integral part of their community—they have a song for every situation in their lives. They are also very talented craftspeople. So I thought these practices should be at the core of their learning process. Just as Gandhiji's Nai Taleem methodology made the *charkha* a symbol of productive learning, something like basket weaving could become a productive skill for these children. Also, the learning of such an activity happens in an experiential way. Like how a potter's child learns pottery by observing, and playing with mud and clay and not through a formal process. Similarly, we thought experiential learning should be the focus at Vidyavanam as well. But, in a school environment, the learning has to have an added value, which comes through interdisciplinary means.

VKK: Could you please elaborate a bit more on this?

PR: Yes. Take the example of the pot itself. If the child is learning how to work with clay, then we can talk about characteristics of soil like colour and texture and nutrients for science. Concepts like ratio and proportion, measurement, volume and weight can be taught in maths. Social sciences can cover a vast range of topics, like ecosystems, the kind of life forms

clay supports, major landforms, conservation, atmosphere, topography, process of formation, archaeology and excavations. Languages can cover stories, essays, poems and debates around the theme. And in the arts, we can display sculptures, murals and models made of clay. So if we look at any object from the perspective of these different disciplines, then knowledge and understanding flows seamlessly. This connection is what children must grasp to understand the whole of what they are doing.

VKK: So, Vidyavanam fosters a multidisciplinary and experiential learning approach, doesn't it?

PR: Yes. To reinforce this point, we have what we call theme-based learning. Every term, we pick a theme around which all subjects are taught. For instance, if the theme is 'air', all the teachers, whether they teach science, geography, history, or arts, will plan and discuss how they propose to use the theme to teach their respective subject. The same theme moves through every class with extra information and extended competency. The teachers are given specific guidelines for each subject to ensure that the necessary skill sets are taught.

As part of this methodology, we don't have textbooks up to Class VI. Instead, we have a bank of textbooks from various publishers and other reference books for the teacher to cull out material and prepare lessons. Textbook-based teaching stifles a teacher's creativity. They tend to confine themselves to the exercises at the end of each chapter. This is not to say that every teacher is creative to the same level. What we are trying to avoid is total dependency on a single book.

VKK: How did the school and the students cope with the pandemic in terms of teaching and learning?

PR: The only alternative to classroom teaching during the closure has been online teaching. However, this transfer has led to a widening gap between the haves and the have nots. In cities, where children have access to multiple gadgets and the parents are invested in their child's education and can help by providing one-on-one learning facilities, technology-driven learning works.

At Vidyavanam, the problem is access to technology both for the students and the teachers. The latter are predominantly from the same environment as the former and are equally overwhelmed by this

technology-driven model. Students' parents used to ask us "How can I buy Rs 10,000 worth smart phone for each child?" Some of our students help their parents in the fields. When the teachers noticed that a student was absent from the classes for a long period, they met him and asked him. He then told them, "I don't have connectivity in the fields. So even if I have a phone, I cannot attend classes."

This made us realize that investment on smart phones and data costs are a source of monetary stress to parents, who are from marginalized communities and trying to stay afloat with reduced incomes and job losses. Also, they cannot afford to invest in any other gadget beyond a smart phone, and even that within a certain range. I have written about these challenges in many platforms.

VKK: You said the teachers also encountered issues related to technology.

PR: Yes, with the teachers coming from the same environment, they faced similar issues. In cases where the teacher was a parent, the dilemma was to prioritize the use of the instrument. While they are familiar with using a cell phone for communication, smartphones came into the picture with this demand for online classes. Therefore, they not only had to get used to the medium but also learn to use the instrument for things beyond answering calls. As I have written elsewhere, those who are economically well off will help their children fill the gaps and ensure that they move ahead. But, for children from rural and marginalized communities, this will be an impossibility. Online teaching provides access to privileged children. We need to find a democratic way to reach out to the last child in the learning curve.

VKK: The mission of this school reflects the holistic learning and global competence which are also emphasized in the National Education Policy 2020. What are the pedagogical aspects that you focus on to achieve this goal? How do the students respond?

PR: The methodology has been designed as a holistic learning process. The idea of an interdisciplinary theme-based approach takes into account the different ways of learning that a student adopts. We are aware that children learn through visual, auditory and kinaesthetic methods. The methodology adopted gives an opportunity to learn in these different ways.

VKK: How do you evaluate the importance of focusing on sustainability concerns in education?

PR: First, on hunger—our school provides nutritious meals to all children. Then, good health and hygiene—clean water, regular health check-ups, clean sanitation and separate toilets for boys and girls. Thirdly, clean energy—the whole school is powered by solar energy. And finally, gender equality—the number of girls to boys is 50-50 ensuring gender equality. We cater to the more marginalized communities offering them equal opportunities and equal access.

VKK: How important is it to address the social and emotional learning needs of the children? How is it addressed in your school?

PR: We have in place personality development programmes in school, conducted by our in-house counsellor. In case of any problem solutions are found by discussion with the students, teachers and the parents along with the school counsellor.

VKK: What is your take on promoting multilingualism? Does the school focus on it?

PR: Yes. The school is an English medium school under the CBSE board. The Irula Community, who are the major stakeholders of the school have their own Irula language, which they speak but the language does not have a script. The language of the state is Tamil, and because of the proximity Irulas are familiar with Tamil. Over the period of time the Irula language itself has absorbed words from Kannada and Malayalam which are the languages of the neighbouring states. The fact that they recognized the importance of English, as a passport to prosperity has made them request for the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, the students have to make a two-language jump to come to terms with English. The school does not believe in immersion of the English language and allows for students to use their mother tongue for communication and negotiating the understanding of concepts.

VKK: What do you think about the different approaches to language teaching, or for that matter what is wrong, if at all, with the language teachers that you would want them to work upon?

PR: English language teachers have to keep in mind and select material wherever possible that reflects the culture and ethos of the area. No doubt most of the material available on English language teaching, especially literature is British and American oriented. The classics are definitely from earlier times but now many Indian writers in English

have contributed to Indian literature. It is not necessary to avoid the classics but draw comparisons to human relationships, emotions that are common to all generations of people. In that way we can make it relevant as stories of human kind, though set in different environments and time.

VKK: In the context of language education and the question of English, there is a general perception that English as a medium of instruction is the way forward, and the expansion of English medium schools reflects this. What are your views?

PR: As already mentioned, English as a global language is looked upon as a communicative language for furthering higher education and job opportunities. This is true for students coming from the higher echelons of society. But giving this opportunity to all students, whichever background they come from gives them the power to aspire.

VKK: Is English medium education a barrier to equity and economic growth? How do we understand this?

PR: Cost of English education is definitely beyond the reach of students coming from low income and marginalized communities. Therefore, this does not provide a level playing field.

VKK: In the post method era, there are arguments for engineering social changes by incorporating social issues and matters of common concerns like climate action and gender parity into the English language 'pedagogy'. How would you respond to this?

PR: Learning a language or literature does not preclude the discussions and arguments made for social change or bringing to the fore social issues which thoughts and lives of people. Literature mirrors social issues of the times and suggests social changes to bring about a more equal society. Dickens for one has given us elaborate descriptions of the life of the poor, the trials and tribulations that they underwent. This is not merely a record of the historical background of the times, but a call for social justice.

VKK: How would you envisage ELT in India? I mean, what do you think it should aim at or further include?

PR: English language teaching definitely needs a complete overhaul. Language teaching as far as I have seen remains within the boundaries of grammar. Though this is a very important component of any

language learning, the idea that language is for communication only stifles the expanse of the language. Languages survive through its literature. Literature gives life to the language. It comprises the thoughts of innumerable people during different times. Whether it is children's literature or adult literature all of it has a thread of humanity and this is what makes it relevant for all times.

VKK: Thank you very much for your time.

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