

## T-LAB: Dream Yard for Happiness

Pramod Maithil



‘When students were asked whether they have ever been bored in class, 83 percent of NAIS students answered that they were bored sometimes (50 percent) or often (33 percent), compared with 86 percent of public-school students (36 percent) were bored sometimes; 50 percent were bored often.’ HSSSE Report 2016.<sup>i</sup>

This statement is just to bring out the issue that a significant number of students are disengaged in schools. I believe that the problem is not at the student’s end. In fact, research suggests that children behave like scientists<sup>ii</sup>. Piaget claimed that children ‘construct knowledge’<sup>iii</sup>. Historically, schools are designed to keep children’s dreams, aspirations, interests out of the curriculum and the pace of learning and the background of the individual child are not taken into account.

Allow me to state the following:

1. Schools are not academically attractive places for children.
2. The fact is children do not enjoy the way their education is conducted.

In this article, I am making an attempt to respond to the above assertions with the wonderful insights and learning I have gained over the years and elaborate on the innovative pedagogy and insights that took shape from my experiences with children. The methodology evolved when I scaled down adult authority and let the children naturally learn and grow. I named it the *Natural Learning Model* (NLM).

In 2011, an innovative school named Anand Niketan Democratic School (ANDS) in Bhopal was started. After three successful years, the learning journey was documented in the book *School for My Child* (Penguin). Some innovative experiments in the pedagogy of language, science, mathematics and school assessment systems were discussed. Some of the incidents and arguments from the book have been chosen to make a case in this article. Also discussed is a space named T-LAB based on Natural Learning Model for schools.

### The background of T-LAB

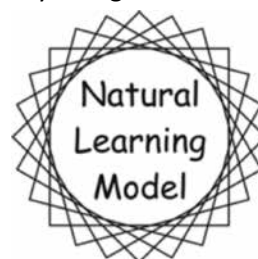
Our education process has been dominated largely by the linear method of science. To give an example, in the natural sciences, inanimate objects behave in the same way if the energy and method applied to them are the same. One can control most factors and objects do not have a say in the process. For example, if I wish to throw a ball to a spot, I can meticulously plan my strategy by calculating the distance, the force required and other factors and the ball would hit the spot. Just assume a bird in place of the ball. Many factors would be added which cannot be controlled, because the bird is a living being. We should not forget that in education we are dealing with children, who have their own minds and their own interests. The whole idea of pre-planned steps in a fixed sequence to achieve a uniform result cannot be applied to education. The planning must be of a different kind, keeping in mind that the child is an active agent and has a stake in whatever is happening in a learning process.

### The Natural Learning Model (NLM)

Quality education in the real sense can be achieved if the agency of children is given a role in their education. We need to believe in children and accordingly improve the design of the school and the education system. We need to develop activities, materials, processes so that the diversity among children becomes an asset and adds value in the learning environment to let the children learn and grow according to their interests and pace in an environment of trust, responsibility and freedom.

Can we evolve a system for schools in which each child can have her way of doing things and learning at her pace and interest?

My Insights from these explorations led to a method I named **Natural Learning Model**. The symbol can be created just by placing uniform squares at different angles while keeping the same centre. A



perfect circle emerges in the middle. The focus was on the centre and squares and not on the formation of the circle.

In terms of education, *aspired learning objective* relates to the bigger circle which is a by-product, and which would emerge later. We only need to focus on the centre which is the *happiness of the child* and the squares are *different explorations in an aspired domain*. In a way this is an inverted strategy compared to the method in contemporary schools where we usually begin with learning objectives and set a curriculum. Then we have a syllabus and lesson plan but while teaching focus on our interests whether the child is learning or not.

### How children learn

#### Language

Children have an unfathomable capacity to learn language. Take the example of any four-year-old child who learns her mother tongue. If her mother tongue is English, I do not think she would make any mistake in distinguishing between the sounds of the letters d and t. She is unlikely to say *tate* instead of *date*, or *dalk* instead of *talk*. No child would be able to explain how exactly she has twisted her tongue to pronounce these alphabets with the precise difference. This is self-learned and is true across languages. The child understands this complex system of sounds and how to reproduce them without being taught.

Children hear these sounds for most of their waking hours and use and play with them. In the early years after birth, it is only the affectionate responses of adults to their inchoate attempts that signal to them that they have successfully produced the correct sound.

So, what does this insight into learning tell us? It's simple. We should expose young children to language, giving them every possible opportunity to express themselves, and respond sensitively to their every attempt.

#### Curiosity encourages the urge to learn

One day, a six-year-old child stayed back after the story-telling session. She was curious to know something from her teacher. 'How is it when you tell a story from the book it's always the same, but when I tell the story from the same book it changes every time?' she asked. 'I read the printed text in the book, but you make up the story from the pictures,' responded the teacher. We observed soon after this the child was 'reading' a story. She learned to

read within a month. I suppose her conversation with the teacher had made her curious to know the mystery of the text, leading her to read.

#### Experiments with language

Children experiment with language in their attempt to learn. I would like to share some observations of their 'play and experiment' with language. I remember an experiment my daughter made when she was 4-5 years old. She had a ball and wanted to play catch with me. 'Papa, *main phenkungi aap kechna*,' she said (Papa, I'll throw, you catch). Her use of the word *kechna* took me by surprise. It was her creation, a mixture of the English catch, pronounced *kech* and the Hindi suffix *na*. As we speak Hindi at home, she was familiar with verbs like *doudna* (running), *koodna* (jumping), *khelna* (playing), *rona* (crying) and *nachna* (dancing). She figured out how and where to use *na* and constructed the new word by adding the suffix to the verb *kech*.

The school should encourage the urge to learn and create opportunities to experiment and make mistakes by ensuring both the environment and the resources to foster learning. In most schools, some teachers might label it a mistake and even punish her, forgetting mistakes are essential to the learning process.

### A few pointers for the Natural Learning Model

Recognise the involvement of children in their own education.

Learning is a by-product of a child's efforts- learning to communicate, not speak a language, is the objective of a toddler.

Learning is not a linear process, so instead of isolated content, create a comprehensive environment.

Three elements of effective facilitation: belief in children, shifting from an authoritarian to a facilitator role, allowing mistakes.

#### T-LAB: Dream Yard for happiness

We created T-LAB to translate the NLM into practice, by making it attractive to children. We learned from eminent thinkers and philosophers to develop its unique design.



Gandhiji's concept of education was an all-round drawing out of the best in the child – body, mind and spirit. *Complete development* implies, therefore, the education involving 3H's- Hand, Heart and Head. The present education and school only entertain the *head*, with very little space in the system for the *hand*, while no one talks about children's *heart* engagement! I believe that quality education with the idea of the 3Hs would certainly mitigate a few other issues which stop children from receiving an education.

The same idea is reflected in Ivan Illich's famous quote as well: 'Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting.'

### What is T-LAB?

T-LAB is a space inside schools dedicated to children's creativity where children work on their ideas and questions at their pace and interest. T-LAB gives children the latitude to validate and recognise their natural creative activities. We ensure the children's ownership of the space by making them partners in developing it.

T-LAB is a hub of children's dream and ideas with a variety of resource materials and aspires to give space to children to learn and grow in an environment of trust, responsibility and freedom. It consists of different work stations and an ever-growing repository of materials. Skilled facilitators are available to suggest various dimensions of the project children are engaged in. They also help the children to improve the design and processes.

### T-LAB Design

Here are some features of the T-LAB

#### T-LAB Currency

Children use the currency to buy material from the T-LAB and they sell their finished project/model back to T-LAB. This way, they earn a value for their efforts based on aesthetics, innovation and originality of their project.

T-LAB has a specially designed planning board on which children can show their projects, after discussing it in the group and the Ideas team. It has been observed that sharing with friends is the biggest source of motivation to work.

The T-LAB has organised sections to facilitate processes and divide resources according to the nature of work, such as the Electricity Lab, the Colour Lab, Chemical & Microscope Lab, etc.

### T-LAB processes

#### The election process

Children are the authority in T-LAB activity with no external interference. Elections are conducted for the creation of three teams: the *Ideas* team which ensures that ideas mooted by the others translate into action. The second team, *Bank*, manages the currency transactions of the T-LAB. The third team, *Material*, organises the items in the T-LAB according to project need.

#### Effective facilitation

We spend a lot of time with the T-LAB facilitators to help them unlearn the authoritarian role of a teacher. They need to be around for children to discuss the ideas they are working on. The facilitators may influence their thinking process by asking questions and, if required, handhold to achieve a higher level of understanding.

#### Execution and outcomes

Each child decides her own list of things to do and her own way of doing things. T-LAB works on an individual and personalised syllabus and complements *instructional* academics from the school with the concept of *practical* academics. Successes and failures add to the gradual learning process and attaining different levels of competencies. We believe that Experiential Learning truly complements school learning. It enables achievement, generates important personal and social values, such as self-reliance,

creativity cooperation, critical thinking, problem solving, observing and questioning. It also provides plenty of opportunities to develop motor skills.

### Conclusion

I would bring you back to the original issue and end the article with Ivan Illich argument from his book *De-schooling Society*:

‘The pupil is schooled to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is schooled to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care,

social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work.’

The present article is not merely a narrative of learning experiences. I question the assumption that we can fully understand the learning process at a cognitive level. Teaching is not possible, only learning happens. The learning journey may not trace the same trajectory for all children. But there is room to organise activities so learning happens with groups of children. I propose that we focus on activities with multifarious possibilities for open-ended and free exploration, such as the Natural Learning Model.

### References

- i [https://www.fcis.org/uploaded/Data\\_Reports/2016-HSSSE\\_Final\\_1.pdf](https://www.fcis.org/uploaded/Data_Reports/2016-HSSSE_Final_1.pdf) on 12 Nov. 18
- ii Alison Gopnik. What do babies think? TED talk as on 2 Nov 2015
- iii [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean\\_Piaget](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Piaget) as on 2 Nov 2015
- iv ‘Doing’ Academics—I have used language to stress that ‘doing’ does have a role in learning. ‘Doing’ complements theoretical learning and ‘Individual and personalised syllabus’ means that every child does a different thing in the Tinkering LAB.
- v <http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/ExperientialLearningReport.pdf> as on 2 Nov 2015

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**Pramod Maithil** has been an educator, researcher and entrepreneur for nearly two decades. He has authored *School for My Child* (Penguin) and is the founder of *Prakriti Initiatives* which has created T-LAB, a unique space for bringing back creativity in school and for children to explore their ideas freely. He is also a TEDx speaker. He may be contacted at [pramod.maithil@gmail.com](mailto:pramod.maithil@gmail.com)