

Cover story of 'The Week' Magazine, February 9th 2003: 'I-school, my school':

I-SCHOOL, MY SCHOOL

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“Children are engines of learning; they can motor away fast. Teachers must touch base with them.” says Suzanne Buckley, [S]AMS

How we wish to be children again! Just for the thrill of getting off the school bus and deciding for ourselves what to do for the day. No timetable to follow, no whistle for summons, no punishment, no homework and no beastly school bags to shoulder. Our classrooms would have no walls, our teachers we would address not as 'Miss' or 'Sir' but 'aunty', 'didi', 'akka' or 'anna'. No detentions, no grades, no raps with the ruler. 'Bestest' of all, no EXAMS in primary!

Is this school or Utopia? Or an educational revolution called Innovative schools (I-schools) where children get to smell the flowers? There is a burgeoning number of parents who feel their children are losing out on the best years of their childhood in the melee of competition, tuition and examinations. They would rather have a child like Rahil, 6, who protests when he is dragged from mathematics class to attend karate. “Can I finish my maths and have lunch later, aunty?” he asks. The trade-off seems unreal: delayed lunch for the love of maths? “Aunty” Shammaa Ashok, principal of Roots school in Chennai, says Rahil isn't the only child ecstatic about maths, science and school. Scores of students have enrolled in I-schools where they are assessed through daily worksheets and surprise tests. When 'others' work under a heavy syllabi, they have no homework. They even get to mess up the floor in the school, in a unique floor work programme!

The offshoot of this system - children walk away with a rock-solid foundation, brimming confidence and a certainty about who they are. All that parents must provide is an unshakeable faith in the system and, in some cases, spend a little more.

At Sri Atmananda Memorial School, (SAMS), in Kerala, a little boy ran away from home and slipped in through the school gates to avoid going to his grandmother's for the Onam break! Parents of Nath Valley School in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, have a problem. Children go on outstation trips only if parents promise they will not miss class. It is as if the school has cast a spell on them. “The approach is different, and that makes all the difference”, says Latha Rajnikanth, principal of The Ashram, Chennai. “We space out the syllabus bearing in mind the age and ability of students. The focus is on the wholesome development of the child.”

Rishi Mohan went through the grind of a 'regular' school before his mother, Sana, put him in Pragyana, Delhi. “In the previous school, there were exams every Wednesday,” says Sana. Rishi is now part of a small class, receives individual attention and gets to keep his bag in an American-style locker. He has no homework.

I-schools are a parallel stream in the education system where the quality and content are the same as formal schools but innovative teaching methods are employed. Take the 'HEG' (history, English and geography) system at SAMS. The children of class 8 are taught Renaissance in a three-subject combination. History lessons cover costumes, language, art and politics of Florence, Italy. The English class explores Shakespearean drama and the works of other poets of the era, and geography tracks the range and depth of the movement. Children make artifacts, jewellery and masks of the period as well as copy paintings of masters. "These schools force a child to think in different ways, develop independence which stand them in good stead for 'real life'," says Dr Poonam Batra, lecturer at the Central Institute of Education in Delhi University.

Integral to the success of I-schools is the role of the teacher who is more a friend, guide and mentor than say a Mr. Higgins. First graders at The School, Chennai, are on a nature walk conversing rapturously with their amiable teacher. "Teachers need to foster learning to enable students to decipher, discern and develop a mind of their own," says principal G. Gautama. "Teaching subjects isn't the only criterion." At SAMS, newly appointed teachers are put under a one-year training programme to 'unlearn what they had learnt'.

"The kindergarten years are when the relationship with the teacher will have the most impact on the child," says Suzanne Buckley, joint secretary of Atma Vidya Educational Foundation which runs SAMS. The school won the KANFED 2000 award for Best High School for Innovation. "Teacher training takes place in the KG and lower primary because young children will automatically express their feelings to the trainee teacher, while older children may be polite and disguise their responses. We prefer that the child comes to us in KG."

The teacher-student camaraderie rooted in esteem, not fear, ensures that students develop a love for school and education. Moreover, the teachers have to be creative and generate ideas from the children. "You get to teach anyway you want," says Sreekumar K. who joined SAMS 10 years ago, leaving a good government job. "All your dreams of teaching are realized. We have a most rewarding relationship with children. They feel free to express themselves. Our greatest job: to teach the parent... but parents never get taught." At Aksharnandan, Pune, and at SAMS parents have to pass a test for admission because what they need are innovative parents who have faith in the system.

At Sri Aurobindo International School, Hyderabad, the children are a happy lot because "where there is no fear, there is freedom to learn, develop and progress." They follow the Aurobindo Ashram ideologically, looking at the physical, mental and emotional growth along with the psychic and spiritual growth. As principal Challamayi Reddy put it: the system takes a back seat and the individual is at the fore.

Through the multifaceted I-school approach, the thrust is on educating students for life: career and examinations play a small part. "The formal set-up determines whether a child is intelligent or not, based on what he produces on paper. But appraisal – like the

learning process itself – is phased out and holistic,” says Sudha Mahesh, founder-principal, Headstart, Chennai, who has banned teachers from using red ink (the root of student’s blues!). The notion is that examination systems do not test ability, creativity or understanding and only generates negative images in the child’s psyche.

Parents eager to check on the progress of their wards get a comprehensive report with observations of academic progress and remarks on personal growth. In a unique departure, The School requests parents to send a report to school about their children based on observations made at home. And at Subodh Public School, Jaipur, teachers quake in their boots, not because of the cold: students evaluate their teachers and give them report cards. An old staff member said that far from degrading the teachers “it encouraged students to be frank with their mentors and improved the teacher-pupil relationship.”

I-schools develop their syllabus (in keeping with board standards) bringing in fresh innovations at various stages. Formal lectures (at the lower classes) are a no-no. Students are generally placed, not in classes based on their age, but in mixed age groups (MAG). Fear of failure, or criticism, and pressure of performance, are alien to them. “If I perform badly in a test, I go back to my learning material and correct myself until I get it right,” informs Aarti, 10, of Roots.

But it is not all play and no work! While students may not be regimented, demands are made in terms of creativity, originality and willingness to learn. “Students are encouraged to work based on individual capacity, while teachers only facilitate the same,” says Shammaa.

Girish Ravi of SAMS refused to write even in class 6. But he loved dinosaurs and since he wanted to learn more about them, he realized he had to learn to read and write. At the end of the school year, Girish had made a file on dinosaurs with his own sketches. Today he is studying to be an engineer. “We don’t expect immediate results and it takes a lot of patience,” says principal Tarla Nanavati. “We give them the freedom so that they feel they are in control, they are not daunted by anything. We teach time management in KG.”

Innovative teaching is not difficult in overflowing classrooms like Children’s Garden School in Chennai, which caters to students from poorer homes. “Even if you have 40 students in a class, you can achieve your goal of teaching differently,” says principal Sakunthala Sharma. “My teachers do it.” Follow the dictum of principal R.K. Dass of Nath Valley School, and you can’t go wrong: “The teacher should interact with every child in the class so that there is nobody who is just another brick in the wall.”

Instead of juggling with 40-minute periods like their contemporaries in formal schools, I-school students are allowed to plan their lessons for the day. The management spells out the syllabus at the beginning of the term, leaving the students to decide how they want to space their learning. Impromptu tests conducted by the staff show up the laggards. A word of encouragement here, a note of caution there, is all that is needed to spur them on.

What might bother parents with children in I-schools is the child's adjustment to a formal set up in college. "Individual attention at a young age enables them to develop the qualities needed to cope with any environment," says Sheridan Wilson, secretary of the foundation that runs SAMS. "When children from a very young age make their own decisions and plan their own activities and feel confident, this confidence lasts throughout their life."

The sylvan and protective environment at Rishi Valley School, Andhra Pradesh, could spoil the child who has to face the rigours of real life, is a common refrain. "We are an austere place and the general culture does not encourage fashion, cosmetics, accessories," says Dr. Sailesh Shirali, principal. "This might act as a barrier at a later stage, but academically they never face a problem." S. P. Bakshi, principal of Pragyan, is emphatic: "Do you think that a conventional school which forces students to depend on one exam to determine their future prepares them better? It is important to take the wins with the losses in life."

Mangala and Swarnalatha, founders of an I-school called Inner Harmony, Chennai, say non-academic activities bring out the best in each student. The annual drama and dialogue festival, the mixed basketball league tournaments and the annual symposium boost creativity. "In the basketball tourney, teachers analyze the game and comment on the team's performances," says Gautama. "We give the impression that rewards and punishment are the same thing." Vidyodaya School, Kochi, held an inter-school camp in January to foster group activities. "We wanted to provide a chance for schools to be together, rather than pitting one against the other," says principal Pushpa Balan. Using Harry Potter as the theme, participating schools were divided into Hogwarts' teams and there was a hunt for the sorcerer's stone and a Quidditch water game. At the Heritage in Anandpur, Kolkata, the thrust is on honing life skills. "Kindling competition is detrimental to the development of a positive mind," says Sudha. "Children unable to top may develop personality conflicts and an inferiority complex."

What prompts the rush to I schools? "The promise of a strong foundation, emphasis on holistic development and individual attention," says Mallika whose son Arun studied at Headstart. A schoolteacher herself, Mallika says that I-schools are not a question mark on the credibility of formal institutions. "Innovative teaching methods evoke interest and prevent children from looking at academics as drudgery." Arun's transition to the formal set-up was a "total success". "With a little help from parents the child can be groomed into accepting the new system," she says.

Not all parents, though, buy the I school idea. True, the fees are high, but fee waivers are possible. "We had a motor mechanic's child with us," says Mangala.

Choice. That's where the future lies, say educationalists like Gautama. "The future [in education] will be driven by three elements – choice, flexibility and depth. Will what institutions deliver add up to more than content and skills? What processes of empowerment and inquiry will institutions nourish?"

At the graduation ceremony at SAMS, children were asked to talk about their feelings on leaving school. One girl's presentation shattered hearts. She said: "I feel like a bride leaving her home." Such nostalgia needs to be earned.