

Thirst for Learning

The story of VIDYA (a Sanskrit word that means knowledge and learning)

By Rashmi Swarup-York Region District School Board

This article is about the VIDYA School, a school in India which offers programs to children and adults. The school was founded by a Rashmi Misra, 28 years ago when she recognized the inequity of education in India given the great disparity due to socioeconomic status. VIDYA has created its own designation as a movement that serves the socially disadvantaged and combines excellence with equity. The school currently has about 500 students from nursery to grade 10. VIDYA serves students from underprivileged homes where the family income is less than INR 10000 (INR = Indian rupees) a month that is equal to \$170 (Canadian). The school enlists the help of a social worker to establish qualifying families based on the income criteria. Home visits are made by school teachers to learn about the parents' commitment and support for their child's education and to understand the social capital of the family. The parents are then invited to the school for an interview and conversation with the Principal as well as Board members. The VIDYA culture is to give, help, empower, build confidence and see the positive in every challenge. Every effort is made to provide a holistic integrated education and to empower students to take back the learning to their families and community to triple its effect.

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By Rashmi Swarup

Setting the Context – Understanding the Numbers

India is the 7th largest country in size in the world. It has the 2nd largest population of 1.2 billion people in the world, that is (17.5%) of total world's population.

More than 300 million children in India are under the age of 14. As per the constitution of India, the Government provides free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 years.

India is a land of many languages. Hindi and English, along with 22 regional languages are the official languages of India. To recognize the linguistic diversity of India, the 'three-language' formula was implemented by the Government. Students are required to learn three languages in school – English, Hindi and the regional language. If Hindi is the regional language of a state, then students learn a third language that could be Sanskrit or a European language such as French, German or Spanish.

Schools in India are either funded by the government (Central and State), known as government schools or schools that are run by the private sector, known as public schools. The public schools charge tuition fees and are able to provide better resources and programs than government schools.

The Indian Government has introduced The Right to Education Act in 2010 which requires public schools to admit 25% of their new students from socially and economically deprived groups. It is intended to be a platform to reach the unreached, with specific provisions for disadvantaged groups, such as child labourers, migrant children, children with special needs, or those who have a "disadvantage owing to social, cultural, economical, geographical, linguistic, gender or other similar factors." With the implementation of this act in its 3rd year, it is transforming the public schools.

Yet, there are many, many children that for a variety of reasons are not in schools. This is the story of one individual who re-imagined the possibilities of education for those who would otherwise not have access to it.

Creativity and Innovation - Realizing a Child's Dreams

In those lucid sparkling eyes, there was a thirst to learn; in the facial expressions there was a quiet acceptance of life. Something tugged at Rashmi Misra's heart strings as she saw five little girls, barefoot and playing in a dirty drain and seemingly resigned to their fate. Should she, an ordinary citizen, leave it to the government to fulfill their constitutional obligation of providing education to every child in India or could she do something, even if it were for a handful of kids? The question lingered and she wondered how she could give the gift of education, the gift of opportunity to little girls. So she invited them to her home to learn. "They were thirsty to learn, bright and enthusiastic and good at everything that you taught them!"

In that moment, 28 years ago, a seed was planted, a dream named VIDYA was born and a journey was undertaken by Rashmi Misra, the founder-chairperson of VIDYA. Rashmi humbly reflects "What started as informal classes for children of the neighboring slum, with a group of dedicated volunteers, became a full-fledged school. There was no looking back – VIDYA became a place where joyous giving took place and it soon became a learning centre for the entire community." As the number of students increased, Rashmi sought out schools in different neighbourhoods that would allow them to use their classrooms for 3 to 4 hours a day after school hours. She also recruited and trained a team of volunteers who taught the students. After several years of untiring effort and with the help of sponsors, individuals and organizations, VIDYA now has its own building and students are not dependent on the premises donated by others.

The sprawling city of Gurgaon is a part of the National Capital Region of Delhi. The VIDYA School stands symbolically on the cusp between the wealthy and the poor. The large social disparity is glaringly visible between the luxurious bungalows on one side and the village of Nathupur with humble dwelling on the other. The school is an embodiment of all the values that VIDYA believes in and stands tall with 75,000 square feet of covered area on 5 acres of land. The students learn in English and use SmartBoards. The school has science labs, a math lab, a dance room and a well-stocked library, a computer lab, a cultural centre, a lunch hall and a well-equipped kitchen.



The VIDYA School in Gurgaon

Integrating Equity and Excellence – “We Receive to Give”

Given the context of education in India, VIDYA has a unique place. VIDYA has created its own designation as a movement that serves the socially disadvantaged and combines excellence with equity.

The school currently has about 500 students from nursery to grade 10. VIDYA serves students from underprivileged homes where the family income is less than INR 10000 (INR = Indian rupees) a month that is equal to \$170 (Canadian). The school enlists the help of a social worker to establish qualifying families based on the income criteria. Home visits are made by school teachers to learn about the parents' commitment and support for their child's education and to understand the social capital of the family. The parents are then invited to the school for an interview and conversation with the Principal as well as Board members.



The Lunch Room



The Library

By developing respectful and collaborative relationships with

families and setting expectations for learning outcomes in partnership with them, VIDYA demonstrates its commitment to the “family path”. This is one of the four paths discussed by Dr. Ken Leithwood (2010), while explaining his theory of action for educational leaders. Dr. Leithwood posits that improving parental engagement and actively involving them in collaborative goal setting and student success initiatives, improves student achievement in consistent and sustainable ways. ([Family Path](#))

Parent-teacher meetings are held every two months. These are largely attended by the mothers. The conversations focus on educating mothers on how to support their child at home. One of the suggestions is around television viewing. Since the families mostly live in small, one-room dwellings, the staff helps parents understand that they should not be watching television while the child is studying. The staff encourages parents to limit television viewing for their child by asking him/her to choose one program that he/she will watch so that there is time for school work. This aligns with Dr. Leithwood’s theory that the biggest impact will come with how educators can influence learning for students at home by working with and supporting parents with strategies.

Equity serves as a foundation for the work done at VIDYA. It starts with understanding the background knowledge the students bring: the teachers are mindful of the examples they use, being cognizant that the students have not had the opportunity of family outings to different places. They are also aware that they bring with them many other experiences which the teachers may not have had.

The Principal mentors teachers to have high expectations of their students. They are reminded that although the students may be first generation learners, they have a keen urge to learn. Teachers engage in collaborative learning to create a learning environment that challenges students to reach and exceed their potential and encourages students to have high expectations of themselves. A visit to the school and conversations with staff made this apparent.

Teachers often use activity-based methods to engage students, for example, prime numbers are taught using the number mat designed on the floor of the math lab. The entire school participates in a Science Fair annually and students come up with innovative and creative ideas to demonstrate their learning.



The Math Lab

Teachers in grade 1 shared that they give circle time to their students at the beginning of the day where they then take turns to share something about their activities outside school. This enables teachers get to know each child and also develops oral language skills in students. In a grade 3 class, the teacher was fostering leadership and high expectations in students using a poster on the wall entitled Future Leaders where each student had identified their leadership goal beneath their individual photos.

With Rashmi’s vision of providing the best learning environment for all students, the school provides nutritious meals, books, stationery, uniforms and transportation at a nominal cost. With the generous commitment of a food company, the school provides a hot lunch to every student every day. Lunch is served to the kindergarten students in their classrooms before they leave for the day and to the other students in the school lunch room.

Students are taught to respect and care for the resources as they have been provided through generous donations by individuals and organizations who believe they can make a difference. Students are encouraged to develop a value system of learning to give because they know they are benefitting from someone’s giving. The school motto is “We receive to give”.

Community Engagement – Leading to Societal Impact

As the momentum grew, Rashmi recognized that while providing education to students and to their mothers was an important aspect, in order to have a long term sustainable impact, youth and women needed programs for skill building and self-dependency that would lead to increased self-esteem. She

believed that all those who are struggling with the label of 'drop out' needed a second chance to complete their education, and fulfill their dreams. So VIDYA expanded its work and diversified to include English language learning programs, computers and life skills training. The programs also engaged women in issues related to women's rights, health, environment, community and national festivals through discussions, creative activities and field trips.

Since the beginning of this initiative, many women and youth have benefitted from VIDYA's efforts to provide micro-level interventions in less privileged communities in urban slums. This multi-pronged approach is affecting positive social change and well-being.

As mentioned in their [website](#), the VIDYA culture is to give, help, empower, build confidence and see the positive in every challenge. Every effort is made to provide a holistic integrated education and to empower students to take back the learning to their families and community to triple its effect. For instance, in the English learning program, the students are also required to train in computers and life skills. They are then expected to teach these lessons for their mothers in the evenings. The potential of women is boundless – they come to learn and become entrepreneurs, highly skilled, educated, aware and very confident. The [video interview of Rashmi Misra](#) speaks for itself.

The journey of VIDYA is a story of people giving back to people. Who are the people who have made this possible? They are men and women who come from all over the world to contribute their time, skills and money to “teach and ignite young minds.” They plan and coordinate projects and tap fundraising potentials. They are true partners of change with their diverse points of view that adds enrichment to the work.



Explaining the science project

Looking Ahead – The Numbers and their Promise

Twenty-eight years ago, from the moment Rashmi had gazed into the sparkling, lucid eyes of the girls thirsting for knowledge, she knew something needed to be done for impoverished children. When stark poverty stares at families, they resort to reactive measures of survival in which each member of the family, child or adult has to pitch in their share. Through VIDYA, Rashmi offers a glimmer of hope and assists families in recognizing that education makes it possible to break away from a cycle of poverty and makes many dreams come true.



Reciting a Poem

What began as an effort of one individual to educate some girls has now grown into a movement of social change. It has become a symbol for realizing the dream of first generation learners who in ordinary circumstances would not have had this kind of formal education. Visitors to the school can expect quite a welcome which can look like little ones greeting you and reciting poetry for you, a boy from middle school explaining a science concept through his creation for the science fair and grade 9 girls sharing their project on environmental hazards.



Explaining the environmental project

In 28 years, VIDYA has touched the lives of approximately 200 000 children, youth and women from the poorest communities in three metropolitan cities of India - Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru.



Steps to Success

Over 20 rehabilitated slums with a population of approximately 6000 people each have benefited from VIDYA's integrated programs.

More than 5250 volunteers have helped VIDYA grow.

Optimism and passion resonate in Rashmi's voice. Through the trials and tribulations, the sanctions and sacrifices, her mission has not wavered and it reflects in the work of VIDYA, a work that provides wraparound support for the entire family. When a child comes to VIDYA so does his/her mother, siblings and father.

VIDYA is a people's movement: people helping people. It re-imagines public education and reminds one of Abraham Lincoln's definition of government. This definition is equally befitting for public education as defined by VIDYA – of the people, by the people, for the people.