



# The Rural Changemaker OUT-OF-THE-BOX!

**Published by**

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# The Open School Project

*Our Open School Project is an ongoing experiment – it's constantly running through iterations and is adjusted as we move forward. As the name suggests it is an open process and includes everyone who is interested.*

*It started in January 2019 and everyone involved has learned his/her fair share over the course of the last two years.*

*The pandemic was just another challenge on our way. This newsletter aims to give an understanding of the Open School idea and tells you what we have achieved so far!*

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# The Need For Something New



*Kajal standing at the teacher's desk*

Education in rural villages in India is still in a mess. No satisfying solution has yet been found. Even, in Janwaar we are still struggling. The main areas of distress are:

- the qualification of the teachers
- the school environment itself
- good teachers don't want to live in remote areas
- the curriculum

## Teacher qualification and school environment

We have two government schools in

Janwaar – 1-4th and 5-8th grade. The teachers' skills and capacities are extremely limited and many of them are not really interested in doing more or going an extra mile. It's a teacher-centric approach, top-down where respect is given by the system and not by actions, let alone by capacity. The student has to obey silently.

The school offers only a table and chairs for the teachers. The kids sit in long rows on the floor – pretty much left alone. The lessons are rather boring, neither the kids nor the teachers are engaged and therefore it's no wonder that the kids – once they finish 8th grade – can hardly read and write. Their Hindi skills are comparable to a first or second grader at a good school. Not to mention math or any kind of science. It just does NOT exist. It's mind-boggling. All the kids have ever known is "learning by heart". They've never learned to think, to understand, to work in teams and to find solutions. They never had fun at school.

It is not that the children don't want to learn. Over the past years we've had various workshops in Janwaar. In these workshops – held by Teach for India

fellows, by our learning partner Prakriti School, passionate learners and great volunteers – we've seen that the kids do engage, that they have fun while learning and even stay an extra hour.

They enjoy learning when it's set up in an interactive and responsive way. In these workshops the kids are encouraged to disobey, to ask questions and are allowed to fail. No one scolds them for a mistake. In contrary, mistakes are regarded as a source of learning. It's all about experimenting, exploring, understanding and finding your own passion.

## Good teachers don't want to live in remote areas

Unfortunately, passionate teachers won't stay in the villages for a longer period of time. They miss basic sanitation, entertainment and culture. In essence: they miss the city. The villages – Janwaar included – aren't attractive enough for them to stay.

## The curriculum

The last challenge is, that the kids don't necessarily learn at school what they need in the villages to make a living. The curriculum in the city is the same as it is

in the rural villages – it doesn't take the different circumstances and the future perspectives of the kids into account. It fosters migration and leaves the villages even further behind.

In the villages where almost 90% of the people live from agriculture, agriculture isn't even taught at schools. And even though villagers are facing so many problems in their natural environment, learning doesn't aim to find any kind of solutions. School catapults them into a world which is not at all connected to their environment. So, how is it supposed to work?

## Conclusion

The existing system

- keeps way too many children out of schools
- doesn't stop migration
- is not focused on the talents of the kids
- is completely detached from rural needs
- neither provides knowledge nor learning

# A Learning Experiment For A Rural Village



*Brajendra, Ajeet, Anil, Asha and Arun - the first time at their apartment*

Our learning experiment – we call it Open School Project – wants to tackle these flaws. No school we know of is offering an approach to tackle these issues, so we’ve created one. We’ve partnered with Prakriti School and our kids will pass their exams under the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS), an independent system with its own curriculum and examination leading to certification.

We have known the founders of Prakriti for many years. They’ve been to Janwaar a couple of times, and so have some of

their teachers and children – they know the environment. Our approach in Janwaar and the Prakriti way of learning are based on the same values and principles – we have common ground. Prakriti brings in the “school” expertise we need and is flexible enough to join an experiment and explore new possibilities. We are very happy to have them on board.

## What does OPEN in our Open School Project stand for?

- open for all kids, no matter what their passion or education level is
- open for all subjects, even for those

which are NOT part of the traditional curriculum

- open for everyone who can pass on his/her skill, not just “teachers”
- open for informal and project based learning instead of ex-cathedra teaching
- open for interaction and engagement instead of listening and obeying
- open for diversity and creativity instead of uniformity
- open for new learning spaces besides the classroom
- open for individual learning paths instead of the “one size fits all method”
- open for multiple perspectives and realities instead of rankings and scores

Open means being inclusive, explore, experiment and fail, reflect, find better ways of learning, achieve understanding and find meaning. And it means to progress / grow organically rather than linear (class 1, 2, 3 and so on).

## The first set up

The Open School Project began in January 2019. Its first phase lasted for two years, until December 2020.

We started with five kids – four boys (Ajeet, Brajendra, Anil and Arun) and one girl (Asha). Asha was the oldest at 18 and the boys were between 14 and 16 years old. We would have loved to include more girls but back then, culture and tradition – with an emphasis on marriage and giving birth to children – was still firmly set against their education and advancement. Asha was lucky, a couple of years before, we spoke to her parents for many months, trying to persuade them that it would be an incredible opportunity for their daughter to become involved with our project and eventually they agreed. So for her the doors were wide open.

The five were selected based on our experience over the last years in Janwaar including the feedback from the local teachers and an assessment designed by Prakriti. They formed the core, the inner circle so to speak, of the project. They went to Prakriti school in Noida. We rented an apartment right across from the school – it was a one-minute walk for them to reach Prakriti.



Our goals for the first two years were:

- to identify their gaps in core subjects such as Hindi, math and science,
- try to close these gaps as much as possible,
- find out about their passions and talents and
- introduce new ways / forms of learning,
- make the kids think how they can pass on their learning in the village and give back to the other kids back home.

Around this core team of five we selected seven other kids, this time mainly younger girls (10-12 years old), who would come to visit Prakriti school frequently. Each time they would stay for one week. The idea was to open the doors for the next generation so that they get a glimpse what learning could be.

### **What we have achieved so far**

The reality check was harsh. It quickly turned out that their level in Hindi, math and science was way below average. At home they were 9th and 10th graders – here their level ranged between 1st and 2nd grade! The gaps became obvious and the reality was shocking. Yet we had to face the truth and move on from there.

The kids took it easy and just followed what they were told. To me after all these years, it is still surprising how obedient they were. They accepted the



Workshop "conflict management" with Rina Singh at Prakriti School

facts and started from scratch. Which was a good thing. It was good to see that they took the steps from one grade to another faster than the little kids, meaning there were some "reserves" and obviously their age helped them as well to grasp things faster. The saturation level was achieved once they reached 5-7th grade – then the progress slowed down. Significantly. By then we had managed to get a much better understanding of how differently the kids engaged, acted and progressed.

The project was also challenging for the Prakriti teachers because they had never

come across children in their teens who had their very own thoughts and ideas of life, whilst at the same time had an academic level and behaviour of a little child. These five kids were "celebrities" and hyped all over India as The Barefoot Skateboarders, had traveled to Europe and China, were media savvy, self confident, proud and in real life challenges were more grown up than any of their teachers. Quite a unique situation! It required endless conversations and a lot of patience to make the teachers understand that these kids were different from the kids they usually teach (kids from upper-class city families).

For us, it was a revelation and another hurdle to overcome, how little the concept of teaching

- defining learning outcomes
- explaining
- assessment
- evaluation

was embedded in the teachers' daily practices. It appeared that many of them had never worked that way – which tells you again something about teacher qualification in general in India. Being a teacher is NOT a profession you study or learn in India. You simply become a teacher.

Nicola Claire, a member of our NGO and educational consultant in UK, helped us massively as we tried to explain our concept to the teachers.

In addition to the classes at Prakriti we conducted workshops to unlock the kids' passions. Anil started to take guitar sessions, Asha and Anil took dancing classes, Arun became the village photographer. Brejendra and Anil fell in love with computers and all of them became more or less tech savvy (they all have smart phones and notebooks). Anil started robotics. The kids' leadership qualities were enhanced by a theatre program, they took care of their spending and managed to stay within the budget and do the accounting. They learned to make their own schedules,

participated in media workshops (production and content), they took part in a farm program, did a learning excursion to Rajasthan, gave talks all over India and helped the Prakriti kids to learn skateboarding.

An important element of the program was that these five kids pass on their



*Kalpna, Priyanka and Suman on their way to school*

learning to the others in the village. Every week one of the “Delhi” kids would go back to Janwaar with a clearly defined project to make the village a better place. It was the kids’ job to come up with these projects. They focused on hygiene, waste and education. This kept the Delhi kids connected to the village, trained them in passing on their knowledge and raised

an eagerness to learn among the rest of the children. This was then bolstered by the Janwaar kids who came to visit Prakriti and returned with their learning.

The Rainbow Dream Camp was a true highlight for the village girls who participated in the exchange program. Lear-

ning became “hip” in the village. This went so far that even the teachers from the government school in Janwaar sought advice, especially from Asha. It also led – very unexpectedly – to a village event. One evening in November 2019 the five “Delhi kids” invited all the villagers to our Villa Janwaar to present their “first” learning from the program. They broke

their silence and spoke out in front of the village community. They demanded their safe space and freedom to grow, they demanded to stop discrimination – let it be gender or caste – and they spoke up against dishonesty and jealousy in the village. It became very emotional and left many villagers wondering.

The five kids’ social skills grew significantly during their time in Delhi. They lived and worked together as a team. It wasn’t always easy but in the end they managed to move forward. Yes, they had some fights but in the end they made their peace. They learned to respect and listen to each other – regardless of gender and caste.

Their team spirit has led to the Barefoot Skateboarders Organization – the kids’ own NGO. It serves the village of Janwaar. Two of the young leaders, Asha Gond and Karan Yadav, are directors and have taken the responsibility to make Janwaar a better place while at the same time becoming financially independent. It’s a direct result of all their workshops beyond the “classic” school activities. With the skatepark and the community center “Villa Janwaar” at its heart, this NGO will broaden the work which has been done over the past five years and transfer it to marketable services.

The Barefoot Skateboarders Organization will promote competitions with other skateboarders, it will run student ex-

change programs and skateboarding workshops. It will continue the Open School Project with the goal to improve education in the village – kids teaching kids – and make these young participants entrepreneurs. And with Asha at the forefront they will also actively address gender equality. This NGO understands itself as a true change maker. The young leaders have decided to take their future in their own hands and transform their village. They do not aim to make a career in the urban areas – they wish to focus on making their remote village a decent place to live in.

### **How the lockdown has changed the Open School Project**

After their 10 days Learning Excursion to Rajasthan – they visited the Barefoot College and attended the Unlearning Conference – the kids returned to Janwaar to celebrate Holi, the Festival of Colours with their families. That was in March 2020. Then the lockdown set in and the schools in India closed. They are still closed today.

Luckily the kids were tech-savvy enough so we could move most sessions online. We had to make precise schedules, just like timetables at the school, to keep them going. We introduced a daily evaluation report to see what they were up to and hired an additional mentor to help them with scheduling and evaluation. We also insisted that the teachers define their learning outcomes and lay out a



schedule as to how they are planning to achieve this. This wasn't a smooth transition, but we managed. It was an intense time.

When the kids are at home trying to do schooling, the level of distraction is pretty high: the parents will ask them to help in the fields or in the house, the skatepark is near, friends are around and of course the wider family demands a visit. The circumstances in the houses is not ideal for a child needing to find a quiet corner to study. So we upgraded the upper rooms of our Villa Janwaar. Pappu made a beautiful wooden table, we installed solar panels so that there is at least one spot in the village with 24/7 electricity, we renewed all the wires and fixed several new sockets in the rooms and we brought the furniture from the Delhi apartment to the Villa. It's quite comfy and cozy now.

The pandemic hit the village hard. The villagers were confronted with no more work (many of them are day labourers) as well as rising food prices at the markets. Hunger was just a question of time. Before Ulrike left India in early April, she started a food program together with the kids. Twice a week, 120-150 kg of fresh vegetables and fruits were brought by car from Panna (the next bigger town) to Janwaar. The kids had identified the 30 poorest family in the village and we included the single elders in this program as well. We ran this from late



Asha and Ajeet working with the kids at Villa Janwaar



Asha and Ajeet working with the kids at Villa Janwaar

March until the Diwali Festival in November. Now, since life is pretty much back to normal in India – except the schools are still closed – the food program is now just for the single elders

and the kids in the Villa to strengthen their bodies. Our Open School kids played a significant role in organising the program, distributing the food and getting the accounting right. They also

rose the awareness among the children of taking Covid precautions and wrote a little theatre play on this. The “Delhi kids” practiced the theatre play with the Janwaar children and at the end they performed it in front of their parents.

For the same families we got together a “winter survival package” – the kids bought blankets, warm clothes, shoes, hats, gloves and scarfs for 100 villagers. These two projects helped the kids to realise what “taking care of others” means in challenging times. The Delhi kids also intensified the work with the small children in the village – they run daily sessions with them. This includes explorative learning while they take a walk through the jungle, learning the alphabet and numbers in a fun way, playing the flute and of course skateboarding.

### Outcome so far

To summarise, the most important outcomes of these first two years are:

- the founding of a school at the Villa Janwaar
- the founding of the Barefoot Skateboarders Organization
- the kids have reached a better understanding of the village problems and potential solutions
- the confidence of the kids to achieve change has grown
- an eagerness to learn and an awareness that things can be achieved by anyone

## Where we stand today | Outlook

Currently all the Delhi kids prepare for their 10th grade exams in April / May 2021. Asha, Anil and Arun will pass theirs under the NIOS curriculum, Brejendra and Ajeet have opted to do this in a school in Panna. The latter is a bit unfortunate, but the pandemic has put pressure on their families and without Ulrike being there, we had no chance to convince them not to do so. The exams in Panna are much easier and therefore less valuable. Anil is the only one who has opted to pass the exams in English, Asha and Arun will do them in Hindi. The challenge is huge and we will see how it goes. They take coaching classes and online courses and we check on a weekly base with them. Six mentors/teachers are involved in their preparations. This is the main focus for the next four months. We've started a common lunchtime so that they have enough time to talk and exchange thoughts.

Once the exams are over there will be a one-month break for everyone. After that we will focus on the 12th grade exams or on repeating a few subjects for the 10th grade exam – depending on how they go.

Besides preparing for the exams the kids will continue their sessions with the village kids at the Villa Janwaar. We will start a “Love Night” on Friday evening at the Villa. At “Love Night” each kid has to say something nice about another kid. Whatever comes into their minds –



*Poorti preparing the set for the Covid theatre workshop*

the intent is to show that there is something nice about everyone!

Six of our girls – Dilasha, Durga, Suman, Kalpna, Priyanka and Poorti – under the guidance of Asha are preparing an application for the #ROARgirl Campaign of the Be That Girl Foundation. This would enhance our project possibilities quite significant.

Once the schools are open again – which will hopefully be the case by the end of February 2021 – then 4-5 of our younger boys (12-14 years old) will have a chance to pass some time in a more advanced school in Satna, which is 70 km from



*Lavkush (front) and Priyanka preparing the set for the Covid theatre workshop*

Janwaar. This is another attempt to enlarge our Open School Project.

## Budget

Over the last two years we've spent on average Rupee 70,000 (€ 800) per month for the Open School Project.

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