

It's curriculum that matters, not stellar teachers

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New Delhi, 18 August

Pankaj Jain, an engineer from IIT-Roorkee and a doctorate from IIM-Ahmedabad, had a dream: he wanted to provide quality education to out-of-school slum children even in the absence of quality teachers. Gyan Shala, the organisation he set up in Ahmedabad in 2000, aimed to do just that. Today, from just a few centres in Ahmedabad, Gyan Shala has spread to nine cities, including Surat, Kolkata, Patna, Lucknow, Kanpur and Muzaffarpur. Since its inception, it has touched the lives of as many as 250,000 children.

Gyan Shala teaches children through a well designed curriculum and material that compensates for the quality of teacher and teaching. The teacher supports the learning but is not the primary factor in determining the quality of the education.

Before starting Gyan Shala Jain

had taught at the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) for 14 years, and subsequently, spent some time working in the fields of micro finance and education. He realised that people were approaching education in the traditional way — making it dependent on a team of good teachers headed by a good leader or principal.

However, he was convinced about two things: First, India simply did not have enough numbers of good teachers to solve the problem at a macro level. And second, even if a teacher was good to begin with, they often became demotivated and disinterested.

The Gyan Shala model works on the premise that if the content and design of the curriculum is innovative and interesting, the teacher can support the learning and outcomes

can be improved. Jain decided to restrict his focus to urban areas. He figured that reaching large numbers of children would be a challenge in rural areas where the population is more scattered.

The programme is tailored to benefit children whose weaknesses cannot not be compensated by their parents. In middle and upper middle class families, for instance, parents or tutors often support weaker children, which is not the case with those whose parents are poor and uneducated.

Gyan Shala uses hired spaces in slum areas. It also hires the teachers.

The model is cost effective, with the cost of educating a child varying between ₹3,000-5,000 per year per child. Currently, 30,347 children are being getting educated at Gyan Shala centres. It has grown as an

organization too with a total of around 250 employees not including teachers.

The good news is that external evaluators have repeatedly confirmed Gyan Shala's operating principle — that learning outcomes can be improved even without stellar teachers. In 2004, MIT's Poverty Action Lab evaluated Gyan Shala centres and found the children performing better than those in government schools at the same levels.

Similarly, Educational Initiatives, an organisation that does student assessments, found Gyan Shala's students to be doing better in studies than those in municipal schools. In 2012 it found that on an average, its Grade 3 and 5 students performed as well as children in CBSE schools, although the Grade 7 students didn't come up to the CBSE standard. "At this level, our students had some catching up to do," says Jain.

Bikram Singh, manag-

ing director of Central Square Foundation, a non-profit focused on improving the quality of school education, says that Gyan Shala has a strong model which has shown very good results. "It is based on prescriptive resources and lesson plans for teachers, which seems to be working if one looks at the learning outcomes," he adds.

In the past, Gyan Shala has been funded by organisations such as the DFID, Qatar Foundation, Michael and Susan Dell foundation, ICICI Trust, Bajaj Trusts, Tata Trusts, SBI Trusts, Shroff and Nalanda Foundation, among others. Several HNIs have also contributed to the cause.

However, owing to a decline in funding in 2017 and 2018, Gyan Shala has had to cut down its number of centres. Further expansion to other states will depend on future funding. But with a model that has achieved what it set out to do, the founders are hopeful about the future.