To Revive the Spirit of Learning

Concept Note
OVERVIEW

The last several decades have been characterized by the emergence of strong democratizing forces such as the Internet due to which communities have been able to create and share knowledge, restore their rightful stake in discourses that affect their everyday life and create an environment of curiosity and access to information. Information is easily accessible with proliferation of media and Internet. The key is to be able to adapt and apply information in everyday life. While this is true for some sections of society, there are geographies that remain media dark and have been excluded from the current development narrative and influences of these democratic forces.

Kshamtalaya believes there is immense scope in working with these marginalized communities and with the current education system to help realise the full potential of children and young adults. They can become curious and capable adults who can take initiative, solve problems and bring about change. Schools can once again become spaces to explore what you feel, think, imagine and do. We firmly believe that schools in every local community can become spaces for exchange of knowledge, creativity and constant dialogue. The existing learning systems need to be reoriented to help children be in touch with their own selves and create agency to creatively respond to fast changing environment.

Kshamtalaya Foundation, initiated in 2016, a not for profit organization is committed to reimagining educational structure and practices within local communities. We realise the current education system and their circumstances, have rendered a lot of classroom learning obsolete and irrelevant. The work that we propose is aimed at establishing the significance of learning in the lives of children and the community owning this agenda of learning. Through the Learning Festivals (LFs) we hope to co-create spaces within schools and local communities that encourage children
and youth to become self-directed and life-long learners. The LFs are a way to demonstrate a revival of the spirit of learning for schools and the local communities. The vision is to build environments that facilitate ‘Joy of Learning’ that allow children to assimilate and reinforce positive ways of learning. The festival is a medium through which we aim to begin a dialogue on what a child needs best for her learning potential to be achieved.

We also believe that local communities have been progressively alienated from schools over the last many years. The wider the gap between local communities and schools, the more difficult it is to create a learning system that is in tune with the needs of the community and relevant. We wish to create spaces that are open and welcoming of dialogues between groups of people interested in their children’s learning and betterment of their own communities.

The following is a brief proposal on the main aspects of re-imagining the learning spaces within the school and community and to foster positive relationships between all stakeholders: child-teacher, teacher-communities and schools-communities.

• We aim to co-host 560 LFs across 3 districts of Rajasthan, 1 district of Karnataka and 1 municipality of New Delhi over the next 3 years, reaching out to over 56,000 young children and youth. We aim to create an environment that fosters curiosity and creativity, in turn helping individuals develop their agency to execute actions that lead to change.

• We intend on building a learning ecosystem that empowers teachers with enriching experiences to facilitate learning in schools; and build positive and compassionate relationships with children.

• We envision the community actively participating in building a learning ecosystem where all stakeholders
experience a shift in mindsets, attitudes and capabilities and become further invested in learning.

In the course of this document, we elucidate ways and actions through which we hope to revive the spirit of learning. The document will illustrate pathways that the Learning Festival (LF) will travel to work with local communities, across geographies, to create, actualize and build ownership towards a common agenda of learning for their children. Many initiatives in our nation today are working towards equality, peace and justice. In the education sector, we see motivated individuals and organizations committed to work for the media-dark geographies, urban poor and some specifically with girls, giving them all the opportunity to learn. Programs like vocational training, dream camps on self-transformation, maker-space labs run by communities are giving an agency to people to mark their presence and be heard.

We are here, learning and working together to help children and their families realize the significance of learning. With a systemic approach, the LF is an exercise in reimagining a better future for children and their communities.
NATURE OF PROBLEM
We conducted a simple research amongst our colleagues and friends of Kshamtalaya. We asked them their earliest memories of learning. They recounted their experience of learning to balance the bicycle with help of her mother, or the time they held that tiny wooden cricket bat, hand-held by their parent and demonstrating how to hit the ball, or the end of day playing the hopscotch game with friends, or reading a favorite novel during meal time. We mostly relate our learning to something our parents, siblings, grandparents or friends helped us with. When asked to revisit the classroom memories, most people recalled the homework, examinations, the stress they caused, talking to friends on the corridor, morning assemblies, or performing on special occasions, getting punished for coming late or not doing well in class or even mentioned the occasional teacher they liked. We believe education is an active process of learning which goes hand in hand with building relationships with your peers, teachers, parents and the environment that we live in.
Here it is important to investigate whether the current system is truly allowing for those relationships to be built and also empowering them.

Currently, learning in a school environment is looked at in a one dimensional approach. The teacher on one side of the classroom giving a discourse and the students as silent listeners seated, in rows in front of the teacher. The discourse is given based on guiding documents or textbooks that are created by the state or the national curriculum board. The school prepares for periodic assessments and final examination that decides the levels of children on the specific content provided.

This situation has led to processes within learning that is mostly repetitive over the years giving less space for creativity, self-directed learning and learning through diverse ways and mediums. If we focus on the current situation of the government schools in tribal-rural areas of our country, they are mostly visible physical structures
with a myriad of issues: such as skewed student-teacher ratio, lack of exposure to alternate mediums of learning, diminishing child centered environment, massive drop-out of children from schools and lack of opportunities for the learner to ideate and create based on her strengths or potential. The widening gap between the stakeholders -parents, teachers, local governance bodies, youth and other community members-and schools, perpetuates the already existing problems as there seems to be a lack of accountability and ownership within the community.

Schools have seemingly been established in the best interest of people, parents and communities as learning spaces but they have seldom instilled life-preparedness in children. The immediate environment of the child does not hold a major space in the curriculum, but is preparing the child for an ‘outer-world’ that holds high importance for white-collar jobs. The structure is rigid as it does not follow the child’s interests and choices. The teaching is one way and lacks peer engagement. There is little or no choices that the learner can explore before diving deep into what one wants to learn. The curriculum is fixed or pre-determined not taking into account every child’s distinct personality. With such an environment created, the spaces are not very inspiring for children to come explore and find their interest areas. There is less room for a child, to be a child.

We believe learning processes must be guided carefully to be able to make meaning and construct knowledge. The resources like textbooks are information based documents and do not have a space for both the learner and the facilitator to learn something new. The information and associated learning is finite. The examinations are based on these text books where thousands of papers are stored with identical answers written. The process of testing is rigid and limited. It does not allow for the child to express in her own way.
The most important goals in front of the Indian school education system today is to improve learning outcomes and enrollment of all children in schools. Through initiatives like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, the Indian school system has focused on measuring and delivering inputs, and in this, it has largely succeeded. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in 2015-16 for Grades 1-5 was 99.2% and for Grades 6-8 was 92.8%\(^1\). Pupil–Teacher ratio at national level for elementary schools was 24:1 and for secondary schools it was 27:1.\(^2\)

Unfortunately, this success in getting more children into schools with more teachers has not translated into more education. The proportion of children in Grade 3 who can read at least a Grade 1 level text dropped from 50.6% in 2008 to 40.3% in 2014, before increasing marginally to 42.5% in 2016 and again to 53% in 2017 (Pratham’s Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Data). The numbers show the status on how the policies...
and interventions are focused on increasing tangible inputs, such as welfare measures of mid-day meals or giving cycles to girl children may have increased the enrollment of children into schools but it doesn’t impact the learning levels of children in terms of the commonly assessed indicators.

We believe that education should be committed to understanding and creating values of empathy, equality, justice, freedom, secularism, respect for human dignity and rights. The National Curriculum Framework, devised by education practitioners of our nation have laid down the aims of education, one of which is that education must provide the means and opportunities to enhance the child’s creative expression and the capacity for aesthetic appreciation. Another aim that stands out is how the curriculum should emphasize on construction of knowledge by learning to learn, unlearn and re-learn. This framework raises a lot of room for discussion on schools as functional learning spaces.

We need systemic interventions that help build ownership towards school spaces in local communities. We need a qualitative shift in how learning happens in schools that will bring a purposeful experience to both the educator and the learner.

1DISE (District Information System for Education) Elementary Education Trends Data 2015-16
2MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development) Survey Data 2017-18
Bringing our focus on Rajasthan, which is under the radar for lack of development, has a population of 6.86 crores\(^3\), the situation is grim. Little more than half of the total 20 lakh tribal children in the age group 5-14 go to school. It is noted that around 9.2 lakh (46 per cent) children of this age group are not attending school. The ASER data shows that, in the age group of 14-18, 38% can read simple English sentences, 35.3% can do simple division problems and 72% of them can read only Grade 2 level of text of Hindi. This requires a strong need for working closely with children, teachers, community and the local governing bodies to bring back the significance of learning in their lives and enable them to be active citizens of the country. In the tribal-rural villages of Kotra and Gogunda\(^4\) blocks of Udaipur district in the state of Rajasthan the situation is more or less similar.

Kshamtalaya currently works across these two administrative blocks. It is characterized by picturesque landscapes, where the hamlets are tucked away amidst valleys and rivers, with a vast expanse of space. Children find much more meaning outside schools and learn significantly in natural settings. Schools with defined structure are not free spaces of expression and they lack contextual learning experiences that can build on the strengths and interests of the children. Teachers and community seldom come together and commonly own the agenda of learning. Innovative ideas like School Management Committees that can truly activate community ownership with schools has not been implemented and addressed to its full potential.

\(^3\)Census 2011  
\(^4\)20 schools in Kotra and 10 schools in Gogunda
To address this concern we at Kshamtalaya wish to work with local communities and their children in making learning a meaningful experience. We believe that education is an active process of learning which goes hand in hand with building relationships with your peers, teachers, parents and the environment that you live in.

School is a fundamental and significant unit that influences ways in which children learn. When the community and local institutions come together to own and resolve the concerns that the education institutions are facing, there are high possibilities of creating sustainable and everlasting changes. This also offers possibility to scale and reach out to other geographical areas.

At the heart of this approach is the child who is encouraged to build an in-depth understanding of herself- Who am I? What do I like? What can I do best? How do I relate to others? The LF focuses on the child’s individual self and the child in the system encouraging them to develop agency to execute actions that lead to change.
This initiative is to be owned and championed by community facilitators recruited from the local geographies. They in turn will form a cadre of grassroots educational professionals committed to bringing about qualitative shift in how learning happens in schools. Some are recruited from other states to provide a vibrant combination of perspectives and exposure to other cultures and contexts.

These community facilitators are the anchors on the ground, to re-imagine how schools can turn into inspirational spaces for children to explore learning and support the stakeholders in building an active and invested ecosystem. They are community facilitators who will undergo training that helps them build an in-depth understanding of themselves and develops their agency in facilitating change. This will, in turn, enable them to take this approach to children in their schools and communities. The community facilitator gets the opportunity to meet and work with the stakeholders—children, teachers, parents, youth of the village, sarpanch and the Block Elementary Education Officer (BEEO).

They anchor the LF in each of their schools as an act of celebrating learning. We aim to revive the spirit of learning within schools where a learner has access to people, resources and tools, which allows the child to explore and investigate based on their own interests, access to diverse mediums and their best expressions.

We visualize a space where they celebrate and share this learning involving teachers, community and local governance bodies who will eventually own this agenda of learning.

Celebration is synonymous to festivals and festivals create spaces where we experience joy and togetherness. The day is unlike other routine days. We are surrounded by our family and friends planning well ahead to prepare, clean, organise, dress up in our best and feast together. It is a collective act, where all members of the family come together enriching the family’s experience.
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

**WHY**
- Identify needs & aspirations
- Collaborate & gather support
- Help children realize creative potential
- Parental engagement in children’s learning
- Assess alternative approach to learning
- School transformational plan with teachers, community & local governance

**PRIMARY PROCESS**
- Dialogue
  - Local level planning
  - Learning Festival
  - Parental participation in LF
  - Map learning outcomes
  - Dialogue

**WHAT**
- Interviews through audio & visual
- Planning – time, space & roles
- Exposure to various learning mediums
- Dialogue on significance of learning in schools
- Data Analysis
- Community meeting
The Learning Festival (LF) is a bi-annual event conducted over 6 days in local government schools or local community spaces. The days are designed to explore diverse mediums, with a set of activities on each of the mediums. The activities are facilitated in a manner that allows the child to familiarize herself with the medium, in a natural progression. The child discovers new methods of learning and constructs knowledge of her immediate environment. Guided by the community facilitator, the child in a group moves from one medium to another. The children will use their learning from the exposure days and with the guidance of the facilitator, blend learnings from two or more mediums to create a production that helps them best express themselves. This is shared and celebrated with the local community’s presence.

The LFs will be equipped with diverse set of resources and methods (physical & people infrastructure) to encourage questions, curiosity and learning by doing. The community facilitators will be trained in theories and practices of multiple intelligences. The learner then deepens her understanding of her particular choice by investigating, doing, creating and sharing with support from the facilitator. On the last day of the festival, they celebrate the spirit of learning with all concerned stakeholders of the child’s life. The parents come to school and witness their children’s journey of learning over the week.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Joyful Learning: Our focus is to create a joyful learning space. This will motivate children to come to school with a purpose to learn.

Equality of Opportunities: All learners participating in the LF are given equal opportunities to learn, be heard and listened to carefully. No child/parent/teacher will be discriminated or favored excessively on gender/race/caste/class.

Collaboration: Collaboration in LF is fundamental, beginning by involving the parents, teachers and the government in an attempt to re-imagining learning within communities and schools.
A studio is a workshop set-up space where children come together to learn. The studio is designed keeping in mind the learner. The space enables movement, a dedicated section to store resources and their work area. They are physical spaces that host a range of learning medium - arts, science, sports, and environment and so on. The studios are backed with manuals that are designed keeping in mind a progression of activities and their purpose for each day of the festival. The activities are designed in a manner that takes the helps the learner familiarize herself with the medium. The manuals are guiding documents for the facilitator to create this experience. Some of the aspects of this learner centric model within the studios are -

- Creating a safe space for children
- Activities that range from basic to complex, allowing the child to choose one that is most relevant to her
- Learning by doing
- Using available resources to facilitating learning
THE LF TEAM

**Learning Festival Organizer (LFO):**
The community facilitator in whose school/community the festival will be organized will be the host or the LFO. The key responsibility of the LFO is to ensure a smooth functioning of the festival in terms of resource management, team and community relationships and documentation through video/photography.

**Studio Facilitator (SF):**
The SF is solely responsible for preparing and facilitating the designated studio. The SF is closely involved with the process of designing the studio activity manual and organizing the materials to run the studio. All SFs are responsible for directly working with the children.

**Group Facilitator (GF):**
The GFs are the first contact people in the festival for the children. They are responsible for orienting the children to the festival, taking them on a journey of exploration to all the studios and then guiding them to schedule their studio slots. The GF much like the tour guide will also assist the SF once the children decide to attend a particular studio.
OPERATIONALIZING THE APPROACH
Dialogue:
A week-long process driven by the community facilitators, through guided discussions or samvaad with local community members, to understand the people’s aspirations for their children and their relationships with the local government school. The facilitators will visit 10 to 12 households from each community to understand the current practices of learning within schools, the involvement of parents in school’s activities, the status of school management committee and mainly what their expectations from school are. The community facilitators will ask them simple questions like – What do you think your children do at school? How should a school be? What should the child learn in school? In the course of the discussion, the facilitators will share about the LF. The facilitators will also emphasize on ways that parents can contribute for the LF.

Collaborate:
All the local stakeholders- parents, teachers, local governance institutions will be oriented to the concept of LF. Each stakeholder will be involved and oriented with the design and execution of the festival.

Build Capabilities:
The facilitators are trained in an experiential format who will be ready to set-up and transform the school spaces as they experience similar simulations in the training. Their own transformation in the course of the training will help them support the children in the festival. The facilitators will also understand the need to work with local community stakeholders in reviving the spirit of learning in the communities.

Plan:
School and Village level plans will be created that map each and every stakeholder’s engagement and contribution. The facilitators then plan the set-up of learning studios and get at least one teacher on-board to support facilitators in the learning studios.

Set Up LF:
The learning studios create a space for children to investigate, try and experiment multiple mediums of learning. The studio gives ample resources to children to encourage them to learn and explore new mediums. The studios are fully driven by the facilitators daily and
create a safe joyful place to learn. They are designed and organized to be visually appealing.

**Conduct LF:**
The LF is a 6-day event that takes place in a school or community set-up. It is a celebration of learning within local communities. It begins with a journey of exploration for the participants that gives them time to investigate, play and build an understanding of various mediums of learning for the first three days. It then moves on to facilitating children’s groups to create a production combining 2 or more mediums. The children will then prepare to share their learning with their parents and local government leaders on the last day of the festival. They will also record their needs and demand what it is that they want to learn subsequently in schools.

**Document Impact:**
The outcome and impact of each part of the process will be collected regularly to understand the effect of the processes on children, teachers and parents. The children’s engagement in the studio, the engagement of drop-outs, participation and contribution of the community, the outcome of teachers involved in alternative methods of teaching and learning and the community’s vision for schools. This documentation will help us understand the impact of our work and help us think strategically for the future.

**Reflect (Dialogue):**
The end of the LF is marked with a community dialogue—a reflection—on the impact of the LF. Parents, teachers and local community members are urged to share their views about the festival and what can be done subsequently to keep the spirit of learning alive. Institutions such as the School Management Committee (SMC) can go on to organize a quarterly learning festival to revive the spirit of learning.
Kshamtalaya Foundation, is a non-profit, working towards creating a world where everyone has access to a vibrant learning ecosystem, which fosters holistic human development. Beyond the family the schools play a fundamental role in the children’s life. This is where we wish to focus our energies. We are aiming for transformation in how learning happens at local levels. We have initiated school transformation work in tribal-rural pockets of Kotra and Gogunda reaching out to over 1600 children of grades 1 to 5.

We imagine a world where all children have access to school education and acquire the ability to learn. We also envision that these schools become inspirational spaces for children to realize their true potential. Ours is a facilitator-driven model that works with young people of the local communities. Young people from other geographies were also recruited to allow for diversity and cross learning. Currently, we have expanded to Kundagol Block in Karnataka and two government schools in New Delhi.
OVERALL OBJECTIVES

1. To demonstrate a model of learning that is truly relevant and meaningful to children and their local communities. To create equal opportunities to learn; and demonstrate every child has creative potential and organize local contexts of infinite learning possibilities.

2. To build a cadre of young professionals as grassroots educators by enhancing their abilities to work with children, government schools and local communities. To develop an experiential methodology which focusses on their inner transformation as they seek to create transformation on the outer- children, schools and local communities.

3. To bring about school transformation by closely working with the teachers in impacting learning practices and processes in their classrooms and their relationships with children.

4. To establish meaningful relationships between teachers, students, communities on the premise of reviving the spirit of learning.
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES
(August 2018 to July 2019)

1. Reaching out to more than 56,000 children in 3 districts of Rajasthan, 1 district of Karnataka and 1 municipality of New Delhi, through 560 Learning Festivals conducted in 3 years.

2. To enhance abilities of over 3000 facilitators to experience and facilitate different possibilities of learning and adopting a stakeholder driven approach to re-imagining learning within schools. We aim for these community facilitators to eventually become grassroots professionals for the education sector.

3. We aim to bring about whole school transformation in over 320 schools by working closely with teachers and demonstrating the power of learner centric facilitation methods.

4. 320 communities will be reached out to and many of whom will be involved in the processes from the beginning of the festival, engaging themselves with the significance of learning in children’s lives and thereby creating a community owned agenda of learning.
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